Object Loss, Renewed Mourning, and Psychic Change in Jane Austen’s *Persuasion*

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Summary

Austen’s extraordinary realism in depicting the dynamic internal processes which follow on the heroine’s loss in *Persuasion* becomes clear in the light of a psychoanalytic understanding of mourning. *Persuasion* dramatizes the effects of a mother’s death in adolescence as these come into play at the time of the heroine’s separation from her fiancée and her later mourning. The thesis of this paper is that despite falling in love with the brilliant hero, an unfinished mourning and an unconscious identification with her dead mother helped to persuade the heroine Anne Elliot to break her engagement, to create a “final parting” as her mother had done to her in dying. The heroine’s internal monologues show that she has projected some of the darker feelings of mourning, her anger and resentment, onto the hero and that she reopens a complex mourning process, partly through the displacement of affect, showing how traumatic effects of loss can be worked through in deferred action, effecting positive psychic change.
Introduction

Austen’s *Persuasion* is a study of rejected lovers, widows, widowers, children bereft of parents and parents who have lost a child (Wiltshire, 1992; Deresiewicz, 2004). Austen’s narrative takes up the subject of mourning in all its complex dynamics in this most lyrical of her works. The novel brings to life the raw and conflicted emotions of the mourning process in the free indirect narrative style. Austen’s place in Western literature is based both on her consummate artistry and on the greatness of her central theme, the family’s struggle with incestuous impulses, dependency, aggression and guilt.

“A final parting”

For two hundred years, critics have debated why Austen portrayed Anne Elliot, heroine of *Persuasion* with great strength of character, intellect, and learning as having been persuaded to give up her fiancé Frederick Wentworth in what the narrative calls a “final parting”, even given the inexperience of Anne’s nineteen years (Litz, 1975; Pewitt Brown, 1979; Molan, 1982; Tanner, 1986, Wiltshire, 1992; Galperin, 2003, Deresiewicz, 2004, Knox-Shaw, 2004). The critical controversy has persisted because Anne Elliot is of all Austen’s heroines the most perceptive, strong minded, and balanced in judgment. Yet,
Austen also shows Anne Elliot as emotionally dependent, with a tendency toward depressive affect and a self-sacrificing attachment to her god-mother, father and sisters.

The initial love story of Anne Elliot and Frederick Wentworth is briefly told in a narrative retrospective:

Captain Wentworth was, at that time, a remarkably fine young man, with a great deal of intelligence, spirit, and brilliancy; and Anne an extremely pretty girl, with gentleness, modesty, taste, and feeling.—Half the sum of attraction, on either side, might have been enough for he had nothing to do and she had hardly any body to love; but the encounter of such lavish recommendations could not fail. They were gradually acquainted and when acquainted, rapidly and deeply in love (p.55).

He made “declarations and proposals” and she “accepted” them. But Anne is persuaded to break off her engagement to Wentworth, dissuaded from the engagement by her mother’s best friend, her god-mother, Lady Russell, who gives advice Anne learns to regret (Tuite, 2002). The novel opens long after these events which form a prehistory to the novel. The third chapter concludes: “More than seven years were gone since this little history of sorrowful interest had reached its close”. Yet the prospect of Captain Wentworth’s return to the area brings a flush to Anne’s cheeks; “many a stroll and many a sigh were necessary to dispel the agitation of the idea”.

The historical frame allows Austen to study loss, denial, return of the repressed, memory, and mourning as *Persuasion* opens at the end of the Napoleonic Wars in the fall
of 1814 with the dates of the death of the heroine’s mother, Lady Elliot, when Anne was fourteen and the time of her broken engagement with Captain Wentworth seven to eight years prior to the opening scene of the novel. Freud (1917) described the mourner as one who has lost the capacity to adopt a new object of love until the work of mourning is completed. Psychoanalysts have reached a virtual consensus that adolescents, themselves engaged in something like a mourning process, cannot fully mourn a lost parent (Laufer, 1966; Wolfenstein, 1969; Nagera, 1970; Menes, 1971). The further stage of separation from parents which an adult sexual love can establish is unaccomplished. The resurgent oedipal feelings of adolescence, including the remnants of childhood incestuous and aggressive impulses cannot in the case of a parent’s death be well worked through, which can result in anxiety and the inhibition of the capacity to invest in new love (Krupp, 1965).

This paper makes the hypothesis and offers evidence to suggest that Austen’s Persuasion can be interpreted as dramatizing the effects of a mother’s death in adolescence, as these come into play at the time of the heroine’s later giving up of love and still later mourning that protracted loss. Understanding the complex vicissitudes of mourning (Freud, 1917, 1926; Abraham, 1924; Pollock, 1961; Laufer, 1966; Nagera, 1970; Menes, 1971) can help to demonstrate Austen’s extraordinary realism as she brings to light the internal processes which follow on loss as revealed in a series of deferred actions, projections, and displacements in Persuasion.

When a love object is lost, we not only have the loss of the object in its own right, but also the loss of the object-complementary aspect of the self and the affective
state of well-being which is intimately bound up with it. In such a state of object loss … attention is focused almost exclusively on the object because it is the key to the reattainment of the lost state of the self (Joffe and Sandler, 1965).

Loss and mourning

The first chapters of *Persuasion* introduce the Elliot’s, Sir Walter and his eldest daughter Elizabeth, recount Anne’s tale of love and loss, and bring Captain Wentworth back from the Napoleonic wars. He spends the autumn with his sister and brother-in-law Admiral and Mrs. Croft, who have coincidentally rented the Elliot’s estate Kellynch Hall, while the Elliots repair their fortunes by removing to Bath. Captain Wentworth, now rich and still brilliant, spends his autumn, or from chapter 5 to chapter 12, implicitly rejecting Anne Elliot by “accepting the attentions” (p.105) of her sister-in-law, Louisa Musgrove, sister-in-law to the third Elliot sister, Mary, who had married a neighbour Charles Musgrove Esquire of Uppercross. Critics have pondered not only Anne’s motives in sending Wentworth away but also her seemingly pessimistic passivity on his return (Molan, 1982; Pewitt Brown, 1979).

This paper will explore the plot as it is driven by the complex processes of mourning in the heroine and hero which result in psychic change, and by a failure to mourn in other members of the Elliot family which entrenches an avoidance of painful emotion (Freud, 1918; Bonaparte, 1928; Deutsch, 1937; Klein, 1940; Mahler, 1961;

One hypothesis of this paper is that Austen shows Anne Elliot as having formed a particularly strong identification with her mother, which both precedes and is deepened through her death in Anne’s adolescence. Identification with the loved and hated lost object is a central dynamic in melancholia (Freud, 1917), and a factor in all mourning (Freud, 1933; Klein, 1940).

The opening page of *Persuasion* announces Lady Elliot’s death when Anne was fourteen and also Lady Elliot’s loss of a “still-born son” when Anne was two. The mother’s loss of the still-born son represents an early loss for the heroine because of what is implied by a mother’s complex mourning of the only male child and heir when Anne was two (Green, 1980): a sudden loss of maternal attention and of narcissistic equilibrium which further accounts for Anne’s depressive character, notably different from her sisters’. Anne is powerfully identified with her mother, “her mother’s self in countenance and disposition” (p. 172), identified in a way that seems to work to keep ambivalent feelings toward the mother out of consciousness (Krupp, 1965). In chapter seventeen, the reader learns of Anne’s grieving at the boarding school to which Sir Walter sent her after Lady Elliot’s death: “Anne had gone unhappy to school grieving for the loss of a mother whom she had dearly loved, feeling her separation from home” (p.165). Feelings of abandonment, anger, disappointment, resentment, depression, and remorse, along with loss of self-esteem, unresolved oedipal feelings, and defenses such as denial, idealization of the dead parent, are some of the disruptive affects and dynamics which this paper explores as attributes of the heroine either owned by her or displaced onto other mourners.
in the novel. “There are a number of other features of the anger following loss that have proved puzzling. Among them are its bitterness, its persistence, and its frequent selection of inappropriate targets, including its tendency to turn against the self” (Bowlby, 1963, p. 509).

We can interpret the plot of Persuasion as dramatizing the results of an incomplete mourning displayed in Anne’s recurrent depressive thoughts and self-sacrificing acts which are the natural sequel to a repressed unconscious anger towards her mother linked also to feminine guilt in the Oedipus complex (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1970). This is not to go beyond the text to an imagined psyche, but to focus on the psychological logic of Austen’s plot and language which makes sense if we can understand Anne’s unintegrated adolescent anger as projected onto Wentworth in the provocative “final parting”, angry feelings to which Anne pays attention as Wentworth expresses his anger and resentment through the first half of the novel.

…the developmental task of adolescence …may interfere with the work of mourning the lost object and result in such well-known pathological solutions as depression; flattening of affect… and disturbances of sexuality due to the guilt feelings attached to the death of the object (Laufer, 1966, p. 291).

When Anne and Wentworth become engaged again at the end of the novel, the narrator blithely comments,

Who can be in doubt of what followed? When any two young people take it into their heads to marry, they are pretty sure by perseverance to carry their point, be
they ever so poor, or ever so imprudent, or ever so little likely to be necessary to
each other’s ultimate comfort. This may be bad morality to conclude with but I
believe it to be truth (p. 250).

This idea of the “perseverance” of young lovers no matter what difficult circumstances
exist seems to cut through all the reasonableness of a god-mother’s influence in Anne’s
excuses for breaking the engagement in the first place. Something other than the
persuasion of family and friends or the idea that Wentworth would be better off without
her was going on in Anne Elliot when she insisted on what the narrator calls a “final
parting”. “Had she not imagined herself consulting his good, even more than her own,
she could hardly have given him up. –The belief of being prudent, and self-denying
principally for his advantage was her chief consolation, under the misery of a parting—a
final parting” (p. 56). Psychoanalytic theory suggests that Anne’s prudence and self-
denial is rooted in a masochistic over-scrupulousness that is part of her unfinished
mourning for her mother, the unexpressed anger and disappointment turned round against
the self in an excessively strict conscience (Freud, 1919; Loewald, 1962; Glenn, 1984).

Austen brings into Persuasion the language and action to represent oedipal guilt
as well as repressed aggression at the pain of loss.

Lady Elliot had been an excellent woman, sensible and amiable….and though not
the very happiest being in the world herself, had found enough in her duties, her
friends, and her children, to attach her to life … (p. 36).
Lady Elliot’s not being the “very happiest being in the world herself” (p.36) and not being “highly valued” by her husband Sir Walter (p.172), would have added pressure in Anne’s renunciation of Wentworth (with his “spirit, intelligence and brilliancy”), for how could Anne, with her unconscious guilt, grasp a happiness beyond what her mother had had? “The essential universality in children of unconscious death wishes toward their parents is believed to commonly give rise to feelings of guilt when a parent dies” (Menes, 1971, 704). Reawakened oedipal conflict will be repressed again in the “too-much ness” of adolescent mourning (Nagera, 1970). To move beyond her mother might be unconsciously perceived by Anne Elliot as to kill her again (Loewald, 1962). Anne’s intensified identification with her mother is underlined by Austen; she becomes almost exclusively what her mother had been, sensible, amiable, dutiful, suffering her losses stoically (Blum, 1986). The peculiar course of Anne Elliot’s love for Wentworth can be interpreted as rooted in prior loss and unfinished mourning.

The oedipal ambivalence which is normally re-experienced in adolescence may … be kept under repression by the idealization of the lost object, resulting in further compromise formation and further defensive measures and ego (character) deviations which otherwise might not have occurred….If intrasystemic changes are to take place during adolescence a person must have the freedom … to experience oedipal aggression in a new and less frightening context….The normally expected changes will not take place because of the idealization of the dead object and total repression of ambivalence and feelings which represent anger or disappointment with the object” (Laufer, 1966, 291).
Renewed mourning

In a famous passage, at the climax of Persuasion, Anne Elliot argues with the warm-hearted Captain Harville about whether men or women love with greater constancy. As she speaks she is half aware that she is overheard by Captain Wentworth and that she is indirectly declaring the constancy of her love for him, sending messages of love to him, but as she speaks we also hear of a past failure to mourn a lost object which can also be called “constancy” in love:

I believe you [men] capable of everything great and good in your married lives. I believe you equal to every important exertion and to every domestic forbearance, so long as—if I may be allowed the expression, so long as you have an object. I mean, while the woman you love lives, and lives for you. All the privilege I claim for my own sex (it is not a very enviable one, you need not covet it) is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone (p.238).

Anne claims for herself, and for women, the “privilege…of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone” adding that it is not a “very enviable” privilege. Anne says that men love only so long as they “have an object”. But we would say that Austen characterizes Anne Elliot as loving too long without an object. Literary critics have long discussed this issue, the most traditional position being that Anne displays virtue in being
constant in love. However, recently a critic quotes from Wordsworth to show that Austen, even without her acute powers of observation, could well have understood a mourning process as being pathologically prolonged (Deresiewicz, 2004). Austen’s text suggests that with the earlier traumatic loss of the mother partially unprocessed, Anne Elliot suffers a severe depression after sending Wentworth away: “Her attachments and regrets had for a long time clouded every enjoyment of youth; and an early loss of bloom and spirits had been their lasting effect” (p. 5). Anne became passive and self-effacing and the free indirect narrative explores her loss of self regard: “her word had no weight; her convenience was always to give way;—she was only Anne” (p. 37). Thus Austen portrays the situations in which Anne calls a depressive attachment, “loving longest”.

When Anne meets Wentworth at her sister’s house in Uppercross after years of separation, she is surprised by her feelings:

Eight years, almost eight years had passed, since all had been given up. How absurd to be resuming the agitation which such an interval had banished into distance and indistinctness! What might not eight years do? Events of every description, changes, alienations, removals, --all, all must be comprised in it; and oblivion of the past—how natural, and how certain too! It included nearly a third part of her own life.

Alas! With all her reasonings, she found that to retentive feelings eight years may be little more than nothing (p. 85).
When Anne speaks to Captain Harville about Captain Benwick’s eventual recovery from the loss of his fiancée, she says philosophically, “we know what time does in every case of affliction, and you must remember, Captain Harville that your friend may yet be called a young mourner—.” Anne goes on to reflect internally: “he has not perhaps a more sorrowing heart than I have. I cannot believe his prospects so blighted for ever. He is younger than I am; younger in feeling, if not in fact ….He will rally again and be happy with another’” (p. 118-119). Anne’s internal language of absolutes, “all having been given up”, her not recovering for these eight years to be “happy with another”, her sense in the present of the novel that her prospects were “blighted forever”—allows Austen’s text to indicate an unsuccessful adolescent mourning for the mother lingering behind Anne’s parting from Wentworth (Laufer, 1966). The details of Austen’s plot portray Anne as very experienced with loss, suffering from her mother’s mourning at the age of two, grieving at fourteen, renouncing love at nineteen, and actively mourning in the novel’s autumn at twenty seven.

When Wentworth enters Anne’s neighbourhood again, he takes his revenge on her for her rejection of him, without being fully conscious of what he does. The free indirect narrative opens to Wentworth’s disappointed and angry feelings: “It is the worst evil in too yielding and indecisive a character, that no influence over it can be depended upon” (p.110). He believed Anne had refused to believe in him, had been influenced by snobbery. Anne’s sister Mary, who knew nothing of the engagement, reports to Anne that Captain Wentworth said, “‘You were so altered he should not have known you again.’ … ‘Altered beyond his knowledge!’ Anne fully submitted, in silent, deep mortification” (p.
85). With this language of mortification and submission, Austen portrays melancholia in Anne’s identification with her unconsciously loved and hated mother (Bonaparte, 1928; Laufer, 1966; Blum, 1986).

During the autumn at Uppercross, Wentworth regularly refers in Anne’s presence to the year of their engagement in his conversation with the Musgrove’s, Mary Elliot’s in-laws. “‘That was in the year six; That happened before I went to sea in the year six’” (p. 88). Anne knows that Wentworth is remembering their love and engagement. “Once so much to each other! Now nothing! There had been a time when of all the large party now filling the drawing room at Uppercross, they would have found it most difficult not to speak to one another” (p.88). But Wentworth treats Anne with great coldness. He sat down at a piano Anne had been playing and as she approached again, “he saw her and instantly rising, said, with studied politeness, ‘I beg your pardon Madam, this is your seat’”. The narrative moves into Anne’s consciousness seamlessly, “His cold politeness, his ceremonious grace, were worse than anything” (p. 96). “Now they were as strangers; nay, worse than strangers, for they never could become acquainted. It was a perpetual estrangement” (p.88). The reader listens to the narrative of Anne’s internal thoughts and feelings during these episodes of “estrangement”, which critics have called strangely bitter and passive (Litz, 1975) but we can also hear evidence of a renewed mourning process, half projected, half experienced. She is grieving and mortified; he is angry, even vengeful (Wolfenstein, 1966, 1969). If “the relevant objects are absent, especially during certain stages, it is the nature of many of these developmental processes to recreate the object anew: to make them come to life in fantasies or to ascribe such roles as the
developmental stage requires to any suitable figures available in the environment”
(Nagera, 1970, 364). Thus, while Anne first projected the angry aspect of her mourning onto Wentworth, she now must suffer abandonment while another is preferred.

**Loss and traumatic intensity of feeling**

In the circumstance of adolescent loss a renewed identification with the loved and hated mother can help to quell the threat of too sudden a release of feelings of traumatic intensity (Wolfenstein, 1966). Austen describes Anne’s feelings as “very agitated” several times, and as “between pain and pleasure” when she begins to be in love with Wentworth again. Slowly through the weeks at Uppercross, Wentworth’s feelings of angry resentment and his revenge impulses begin to ease as Anne’s feelings of agitation increase. In a well-known episode, Anne’s two year old nephew is more or less choking her in his grasp. “There being nothing to eat, he could only have some play….he began to fasten himself upon her….she did contrive to push him away, but the boy had the greater pleasure in getting on her back again directly” (p.103). Suddenly, she found herself being released, Wentworth performing this “kindness in stepping forward to her relief”.

However, this kindness instead of creating emotional relief for Anne, produced in her “such a confusion of varying, but very painful agitation, as she could not recover from” (p.103). In the context of the two-year-old child’s excited aggressive pleasures, the agitation may well represent the return of sexual and ambivalent feelings in Anne which
had been repressed since early childhood and re-repressed with “the anger and reproach that are felt toward the object for its desertion (Bowlby, 1963, p.505).

Critics (Wiltshire, 1992) have noticed Austen’s depiction of an intense physical awareness between Anne and Wentworth. During the fall at Uppercross, the color returns to Anne’s cheeks. Anne had not lost her bloom after her mother’s death when she returned to school; she was then a “blooming, silent, unformed girl of fifteen”. But she had lost her “bloom” after sending Wentworth away, as if the somatic effects of the first loss were experienced in a deferred action with the second loss, as “experiences, impressions and memory traces” were “revised …to fit in with fresh experiences” (Laplanche, 1970, p. 111).

From the first sentence about Wentworth’s return (“many a stroll and many a sigh were necessary to dispel the agitation of the idea” (p.58)) till the reunion of the lovers, Austen almost insists on the reader’s paying attention to conflicted feelings and physical distress in Anne. Anne overhears Captain Wentworth ask Louisa intently about the exact dates that Charles Musgrove had first wanted to marry Anne, who had refused him, and she feels “extreme agitation”. After a long walk, perceiving Anne is tired, Captain Wentworth “quietly obliged her to be assisted into the carriage….his will and his hands had done it….Her answers to … the remarks of her companions were at first unconsciously given. They had traveled half their way along the rough lane, before she was quite awake to what they said” (p.113).

Anne sees Wentworth again in Bath before he sees her, now aware that he is free, that Louisa Musgrove is to marry Captain Benwick. 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, something between delight and misery” (p.185). The reader tends to pass quickly over the phrase “the overpowering, blinding, bewildering first effects of strong surprise” as being “over”, but Austen uses very precise language to suggest a potentially traumatic release of strong affects and sexual impulses. Describing emotional turmoil after adolescent loss, one analyst writes, “The traumatic effect seemed related to the overwhelming affects …experienced” (Nagera, 1970, p.394).

**Projection in mourning**

Austen’s portrayal of the use of projection in Anne’s internal monologues is particularly complex on the occasion of Wentworth’s handing her into the carriage. Within the free indirect narrative, Anne begins imagining Wentworth’s feelings:

He could not forgive her,--but he could not be unfeeling. Though condemning her for the past, and considering it with a high and unjust resentment, though perfectly careless of her, and though becoming attached to another, still he could not see her suffer without the desire of giving her relief….It was proof of his own warm and amiable heart, which she could not contemplate without emotions so compounded of pleasure and pain, that she knew not which prevailed (p. 113).
The reader can hear this passage on two levels, Anne’s imagination of Wentworth’s feelings, and also the projection of Anne’s internal relationship with the mother onto Wentworth’s imagined way of relating to her. Anne imagines Wentworth expressing the “unjust resentment” which she had been unable to feel towards her mother for dying. Anne projects a contradictory image of the mother who has a “warm and amiable heart” but who is nonetheless “perfectly careless” of her, onto Wentworth. She feels the pain again at loss of her mother in the loss of him, and pleasure in loving her and him still.

For a strangely long time Anne dwells on a rejecting but highly valued Wentworth and on her permanent loss of him without protest or attempt to re-engage him with herself. After Louisa Musgrove falls from the Cobb at Lyme, and the party breaks up, Anne returns to Uppercross on her way to Lady Russell’s and Bath. She thinks of the moments of silent reconciliation with Wentworth but retains a certainty that all is past which is true with respect to the fact of her mother’s death but neither to her own internal relationship to the loss, nor to her relationship with Wentworth.

Scenes had passed in Uppercross, which made it precious. It stood the record of many sensations of pain, once severe, but now softened; and some instances of relenting feeling, some breathings of friendship and reconciliation, which could never be looked for again, and which could never cease to be dear. She left it all behind her; all but the recollection that such things had been (p.139).

The interpretative approach to Austen’s complex text presented by this paper is that as Anne works through her anger, through attending to Wentworth’s anger, her guilt begins to lessen and her conscience gives some “breathings of friendship and
reconciliation”. Thus, Austen’s text shows how ordinary life situations can facilitate a complex mourning process and allow for the working through of the traumatic effects of the initial loss, effecting positive psychic change. In ordinary language, Austen examines the dynamics of projection, “the process by which specific impulses, wishes, aspects of the self, or internal objects are imagined to be located in some [person] external to oneself” (Rycroft, 1961, p.126). Austen may be portraying Anne as taking courage from Wentworth’s ability to get over the loss of her in order to get over her guilty loss of her mother.

In the closing pages of the novel, Austen’s narration continues its remarkable exploration of Wentworth’s psyche. He “had been constant unconsciously, nay unintentionally… he had meant to forget her and believed it had been done. He had imagined himself to be indifferent when he had only been angry; and had been unjust to her merits because he had been a sufferer from them” (p244). The free indirect narrative reveals how Wentworth’s love for Anne and his knowledge of her character had been made unconscious, “overwhelmed, buried, lost in those earlier feelings which [he] had been smarting under year after year” (p. 246).

**Failure to mourn**

Critics have debated why Austen opens the novel presenting Sir Walter Elliot as almost a “caricature” (Harding, 1965, p.19) of the narcissist, “a representative figure …of
his own vanity and snobbery” (Wiltshire, 1992, p.159). Austen’s text shows that Anne’s adolescent struggle to mourn a mother is made more difficult because of the failed mourning in the narcissistic father. Examining a “so called heartless behaviour” in a child after loss of a parent, one analyst hypothesized that “the ego of the child is not sufficiently developed to bear the strain of the work of mourning and that it therefore utilizes some mechanism of narcissistic self-protection to circumvent the process” (Deutsch, 1937, p.13).

Sir Walter Elliot, of Kellynch-hall, in Somersetshire, was a man who, for his own amusement, never took up any book but the Baronetage; there he found occupation for an idle hour and consolation in a distressed one; there his faculties were roused into admiration and respect, by contemplating the limited remnants of the earliest patents; there any unwelcome sensations, arising from domestic affairs, changed naturally into pity and contempt ….this was the page at which the favourite volume always opened:

‘ELLIOT OF KELLYNCH-HALL’.

The reader is left to imagine that even such “domestic affairs” as the death of a wife were changed to “pity and contempt” as Sir Walter clung narcissistically to his “Baronetage”.

The narrator continues in a chilling tone: “Sir Walter had improved it [his Baronetage]… by inserting most accurately the day of the month on which he had lost his wife” (p. 35). This “improved” and “most accurately” gives a hint of the “heartlessness” which characterizes Sir Walter in Austen’s portrait. The denial of grief and loss implicit in
“most accurately” is the opposite of mourning (Loewald, 1962). The affects of pity and contempt for others comprise a defensive position in the narcissist.

Late in the novel, Sir Walter and Elizabeth Elliot walk into the White Hart Inn in Bath, where the Musgroves and their naval friends have gathered, at last recognizing Captain Wentworth who is wealthy after his years in the navy, and present him with a card of invitation, because Elizabeth thought he would “move about well in her drawing-room”.

Anne felt an instant oppression, and wherever she looked saw symptoms of the same. The comfort, the freedom, the gaiety of the room was over, hushed into cold composure, determined silence, or insipid talk, to meet the heartless elegance of her father and sister. How mortifying to feel that it was so! Her jealous eye was satisfied in one particular. Captain Wentworth was acknowledged again by each (230).

Austen depicts a complex situation, in which Anne shows a continuing attachment to her father and sister’s opinion despite a growing capacity to see the grave limitations of their “heartless elegance”. “The lack of real mourning in the family and the lack of support during his own mourning” made the mourning process impossible for the child (Nagera, 1970, p.397).

Despite a growing capacity to see her father’s flaws, Anne is shocked to hear the dismissive language applied to him in a letter sent by her cousin Mr. William Elliot to her friend Mrs. Smith. “Give me joy: I have got rid of Sir Walter and Miss…. My first visit to Kellynch will be with a …hammer. The baronet, nevertheless, is not unlikely to marry
again; he is quite fool enough….He is worse than last year” (p.210). The reader glimpses
the surprising degree to which Anne retains an idealization of her father though he has
shamefully dismissed and neglected her: “Anne could not immediately get over the shock
and mortification of finding such words applied to her father” (p. 210). “Shock” suggests
that Anne has known and not known the limitations of his character. Since Lady Elliot
had “softened, or concealed” the “failings” of Sir Walter while she lived, her death would
have left his character exposed. Austen shows some denial at work in Anne’s subtle
continued adolescent idealization of her father and sister, a denial which protects her
investment in them (Altschul, 1968). Austen also shows her heroine gradually mourning
the loss of the over-valued father and sister.

Disappointment in mourning

Austen explores several variations on the complex workings of memory in the
delayed mourning processes. On hearing Captain Wentworth’s name, for instance, Mrs.
Musgrove suddenly remembers her son Richard, who had died in the navy shortly after
serving on Captain Wentworth’s ship two years earlier. She begins to mourn him afresh:
“that Mrs. Musgrove should have been struck this very day, with a recollection of the
name of Wentworth, as connected with her son, seemed one of those extraordinary bursts
of mind which do sometimes occur” (p.77).

Austen’s free indirect discourse moves the narration close to the sensibility of the
Musgrove family in this episode, reproducing the conflicted feelings of a difficult
mourning process over the loss of someone toward whom feelings had been chiefly
disappointment. The narrator puts it very bluntly in a passage that has produced repeated criticisms of ruthlessness in Austen’s narrator:

The real circumstances of this pathetic piece of family history were, that the Musgroves had had the ill-fortune of a very troublesome, hopeless son; and the good fortune to lose him before he reached his twentieth year; that he had been sent to sea, because he was stupid and unmanageable on shore; that he had been very little cared for at any time by his family, though quite as much as he deserved; seldom heard of, and scarcely at all regretted, when the intelligence of his death abroad had worked its way to Uppercross, two years before (p.76).

The narrator continues, “He had, in fact, though his sisters were now doing all they could for him, by calling him ‘poor Richard’, been nothing better than a thick-headed, unfeeling, unprofitable Dick Musgrove, who had never done anything to entitle himself to more than the abbreviation of his name, living or dead” (pp.76-77). More than one critic has regretted Austen’s narrator’s language on Dick Musgrove and questioned whether her point of view is the same as the narrator’s. Two chapters later, the narrator makes what has become an infamous comment in Austen criticism, that Captain Wentworth “attended to [Mrs. Musgrove’s] large fat sighings over the destiny of a son, whom alive nobody had cared for” (p.92). One critic (Deresiewicz, 2004) writes that “Austen herself seems to have been ashamed at this breach of decorum, following it with a paragraph of not very convincing justification”. Whatever the author’s feeling, the free
indirect narrative discourse moves between various characters’ thoughts and feelings dramatizing conflicted and ambivalent attitudes, in a renewed mourning.

Persuasion’s lyricization of novelistic prose inheres in its delicate free indirect narrativization of the process of recollection. It is this sophisticated representation of memory in *Persuasion* that Virginia Woolf celebrated in her reading of Austen as a ‘forerunner’ of Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*” (Tuite, 2002).

**Displacement of anger in mourning**

The complexities of mourning can help to account for another of the puzzles presented by *Persuasion*. Austen devoted almost two chapters (much of chapter 17 and all of chapter 21) to the heroine’s old school friend, Miss Hamilton who became Mrs. Smith. Sir Walter had sent Anne away to school after Lady Elliot’s death and “Miss Hamilton, three years older than herself … had been useful to her in a way that had considerably lessened her misery” (p.165). In the light of Austen’s study of delayed and complicated mourning with all its “misery”, these episodes dramatize the difficulty of facing disappointment in the loved one during the mourning process. Mrs. Smith’s husband “had left his affairs dreadfully involved” and she “had been afflicted with a severe rheumatic fever, which finally settling in her legs had made her for the present a cripple” (p.165).
What strikes Anne about Mrs. Smith, given her physical pain and financial loss, is the elasticity of her spirits, “a disposition to converse and be cheerful beyond … expectation” (p. 165) and then, given this elasticity, the intensity of her anger towards Mr. Elliot. One critic speaks of the “melodrama of her unmasking” of Mr. Elliot (Wiltshire, 1992, p.166). After years of generosity on the part of the Smith’s, Mr. Elliot had coldly refused to help them. Recognizing his “ingratitude and inhumanity”, Anne nonetheless sees that Mr. Elliot’s behaviour “did not perfectly justify” Mrs. Smith’s “unqualified bitterness” (p.214). Austen’s text thus suggests another source, and we can hypothesize that some unbearable anger Mrs. Smith felt toward her much loved and grieved for husband is unconsciously displaced onto Elliot: “he is black at heart, hollow and black” (p. 206). But while Mrs. Smith may displace some feelings of anger, she is on the whole more realistic about human nature than Anne is. When Anne speaks the “ardent, disinterested, self-denying attachment, of heroism, fortitude, patience, resignation” to be found in nursing the sick, Mrs. Smith responds that “generally speaking it is [human] weakness and not its strength that appears in a sick chamber; it is selfishness and impatience rather than generosity and fortitude, that one hears of” (p.168). Thus, Austen depicts the notion that human kind cannot bear too much reality in mourning.

**Oedipal conflict in mourning**
Lady Russell had made a strong opposition to Anne’s initial engagement to Wentworth, and Anne, who had always loved and relied on her, was “persuaded to believe the engagement a wrong thing”. The reader learns eventually that Anne has kept the full extent of her regret over the broken engagement with Wentworth hidden from Lady Russell for nearly eight years. When Anne and Lady Russell meet after Louisa Musgrove’s accident at Lyme, Anne has to tell her of this event in the extended family but can only speak Wentworth’s name after telling Lady Russell of “the attachment between him and Louisa” (p.140). Austen’s language now suggests surprisingly raw feelings in the usually calm, intellectual Lady Russell:

Lady Russell had only to listen composedly, and wish them happy; but internally her heart reveled in angry pleasure, in pleased contempt, that the man who at twenty-three had seemed to understand somewhat of the value of an Anne Elliot should, eight years afterwards, be charmed by a Louisa Musgrove (p. 140).

Why does Austen have Lady Russell who is in “the place of a parent” for Anne, who has “almost a mother’s love”, revel “in angry pleasure, in pleased contempt” that Wentworth seems to be proved unworthy of Anne. Austen indicates that Lady Russell represents “a mother” who is jealous and possessive when it comes to Anne’s marrying, who is narcissistically invested in being “right”, more than in Anne’s welfare. In Lady Russell, Austen reveals a mother’s reverse negative oedipal possessiveness in her ambivalence to her god-daughter’s lover (Rothstein, 1979).
Anne becomes aware how much Lady Russell is narcissistically invested in dismissing Wentworth and in fostering Anne’s becoming engaged to her father’s heir and namesake, Mr. William Walter Elliot. Riding in Lady Russell’s carriage in Bath, Anne sees Wentworth with a group of friends down the street. When Lady Russell looks long his direction, Anne “could thoroughly comprehend Lady Russell’s mind, the difficulty it must be to withdraw her eyes”. “At last, Lady Russell drew back her head…. ‘You will wonder’, said she, ‘what has been fixing my eye so long; but I was looking after some window curtains….Anne sighed and blushed, and smiled in pity and disdain, either at her friend or at herself (p. 188-189). Either Lady Russell takes a good long look at Wentworth and decides to lie to Anne because she wishes to exert her influence against Wentworth, or Anne has projected her inability to take her eyes off the “remarkably fine” Wentworth onto Lady Russell or both. Whichever version is truer (and the narrative suggests this is not important), Anne’s internal questioning indicates that her mind is growing more independent of the figure who replaced her mother after the loss in adolescence. After the death of a parent, “especially during certain stages, it is in the nature of many …developmental processes to recreate the objects anew: to make them come to life in fantasies, or to ascribe such roles as the developmental stage requires” (Nagera, p.364). In the course of Persuasion, Austen shows Anne de-idealizing the “godmother” of her adolescence, loosening the power of her influence, in order to have a separate mind and heart. In the passages of open ambivalence between ‘mother’ and daughter Austen dramatizes the strenuous demands of mourning.
When Anne is courted by her cousin Mr. William Elliot heir to Sir Walter, Lady Russell makes a strong attempt to influence her to accept him, seducing the oedipal child in Anne through an imagined scene in which Anne will take her mother’s place to gratify her god-mother who will not then have to mourn her loss so much:

I own that to be able to regard you as the future mistress of Kellynch, the future Lady Elliot-to look forward and see you occupying your dear mother’s place, succeeding to all her rights, and all her popularity, as well as to all her virtues, would be the highest possible gratification to me (p.172).

“For a few minutes her heart and her imagination were bewitched. The idea of becoming what her mother had been, of having the precious name of ‘Lady Elliot’ first revived in herself; of being restored to Kellynch, calling it home again, her home forever, was a charm she could not immediately resist” (p.172). As Anne’s mourning is successfully re-engaged, this scene suggests a resurgent oedipal competitiveness represented in Anne’s momentary regressive longing to “take her mother’s place”, to marry her father’s namesake Mr. Elliot, and to return to her childhood home forever, to be her mother rather than to further mourn her loss. But Anne turns down Lady Russell and her “bewitching” portrait of oedipal triumph which would have repeated the denials of a failed adolescent mourning (Menes, 1971; Laufer, 1966). Instead she returns to Wentworth.

There they returned again into the past, more exquisitely happy, perhaps, in their re-union, than when it had been first projected; more tender, more tried, more
fixed in a knowledge of each other’s character, truth, and attachment; more equal
to act, more justified in acting (p. 243).

Conclusion

Psychoanalytic thought on mourning can bring new perspectives to some old
controversies over Persuasion. With respect to the long-standing critical debate about
how Anne could have been persuaded to give up Wentworth, Austen’s plot can be seen as
consistent with the pressure of unconscious conflict in the face of new love which follows
the adolescent loss of a mother (Nagera, 1970; Laufer, 1966; Menes, 1971).
Psychoanalysis adds a viewpoint on Sir Walter and Elizabeth Elliot as “caricatures” of
narcissism rather than fully developed characters, through understanding that a failed
mourning can entrench rigid defenses in a narcissistic character (Deutsch, 1937). With
respect to the narrator’s seemingly cruel disregard of “poor Richard” Musgrove who died
at sea, psychoanalytic ideas on mourning suggest that the narration reflects a typical
oscillation between the negative emotions of hatred, anger, and dismissal and the more
sympathetic feelings of guilt, respect, and grief. The critical view that there is a flaw in
Austen’s portrayal of Mrs. Smith’s “melodramatic” rage in her exposure of Mr. Elliot’s
“black heart” can be answered in understanding that Austen’s text points to an excess
anger displaced from a much loved husband in a mourning complicated by multiple
losses.
To trace the vicissitudes of the mourning process in *Persuasion* is to bring to light Austen’s extraordinary realism concerning the complex dynamics evoked by loss. The main thesis of this paper is that despite falling in love with the brilliant hero, an unfinished mourning and an unconscious identification with her dead mother helped to persuade Anne Elliot to break her engagement, to create a “final parting” as her mother had done to her in dying. In setting up Anne’s renewed mourning, Austen depicts Wentworth as making his way from an aggressive response to loss, toward forgiveness and greater self-understanding, a progress which permitted Anne Elliot’s re-mourning of her adolescent loss and a return to Wentworth in love. Austen’s realism in portraying the human struggle with aggression and narcissism within the love and grief of mourning lends added resonance to the novel’s closing lines which suggest an element of continuity in her characters as well as psychic change:

Anne was tenderness itself, and she had the full worth of it in Captain Wentworth’s affection…the dread of future war was all that could dim her sunshine. She gloriéd 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 (pp.253-254).
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