

*Social Minds  
in the Novel*

ALAN PALMER



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result, she is not open with her about the differences in their views on other people generally. It is hardly a friendship of equals.

The Croft marriage is an interesting attributional case study. On the one hand, the strongly intermental nature of the relationship between the Admiral and Mrs Croft is frequently emphasized. In Uppercross, “The Admiral and Mrs Croft were generally out of doors together . . . dawdling about in a way not endurable to a third person” (97). In Bath, they “brought with them their country habit of being almost always together . . . [Anne] delighted to fancy she understood what they might be talking of” (179). Anne responds to them as a couple, not as individuals: The Crofts “were people whom her heart turned to very naturally” (174). While thinking about her earlier engagement to Wentworth, she pays them this heartfelt tribute: “With the exception, perhaps, of Admiral and Mrs Croft, who seemed particularly attached and happy, (Anne could allow no other exception even among the married couples) there could have been no two hearts so open, no tastes so similar, no feelings so in unison, no countenances so beloved” (88). In addition to her emotional response to them, Anne is also aware that they function as a cognitive unit. She watches the Crofts “with some amusement at their style of driving,” which involves their taking joint decisions on the steering, and “which she imagined no bad representation of the general guidance of their affairs” (114). There is only one occasion on which they are of different minds. When the Admiral warmly praises the Musgrove girls as possible objects of Wentworth’s affection, Mrs Croft refers to them “in a tone of calmer praise, such as made Anne suspect that her keener powers might not consider either of them as quite worthy of her brother” (114).

On the other hand, much is also made of the Crofts’ regular attributional breakdowns involving others. At one point, Admiral Croft talks to Wentworth “without taking any observation of what he might be interrupting, thinking only of his own thoughts” (92–93). When Anne wishes to be reassured by the Admiral that Wentworth is not grieving over losing Louisa to Captain Benwick, he is not sensitive enough to pick up on her emotional needs and “Anne did not receive the perfect conviction which the Admiral meant to convey” (183). To do him credit, he is sensitive enough to wish to convey the reassurance, but not sufficiently attuned to the workings of other minds to do so successfully. In addition, there is an enjoyably comic example of Mrs Croft’s solipsism. When she is insistent to Mrs Musgrove about not referring to Bermuda or the Bahamas as “the West Indies,” “Mrs Musgrove had not a word to say in dissent; she could not accuse herself of having ever called them any thing in the whole course of her life” (94). It is an interesting question whether it is a coincidence that the two individuals in the

tightest intermental unit in the novel are also the ones who are among the most solipsistic in their relations with others. It is also worth comparing the centripetal nature of this unit with Anne’s and Wentworth’s centrifugal relationship as described at the end of the novel in the long quote (see page 156 below) with which this discussion of social minds in *Persuasion* concludes. The older couple are, in their cognitive relations with others, rather sealed off from them by their absorption with each other, while the love between the younger pair includes a heightened awareness of other minds.

### *Anne and Wentworth*

The key to the novel is the construction of Wentworth’s mind by Anne and by the reader. The central question posed by the text is: What does he now think of her? He appears at first to have no feelings for her and it then slowly becomes apparent that he does still love her. Anne experiences intense feelings of anguish toward the end of the novel when she is not sure what Wentworth is thinking. Her record in this respect is patchy. Sometimes she does know: “When he talked, she heard the same voice, and discerned the same mind” (88–89). And when he talks lightly of being ready to make a foolish match: “He said it, she knew, to be contradicted” (86). At other times she does not know. It is odd that this is a unit that does not function particularly well. As I said, though, when discussing *Little Dorrit*, this is consistent with the default assumptions contained in the cognitive frame for lovers, by which we assume that the course of true love never runs smooth and misunderstandings can often arise.

Anne’s knowledge of Wentworth’s views on others is generally accurate, but it is much less so when he is thinking about her. When he is listening to Mrs Musgrave becoming sentimental about her useless son, “there was a momentary expression in Captain Wentworth’s face at this speech, a certain glance of his bright eye, and curl of his handsome mouth, which convinced Anne” that she knew what he was thinking, “but it was too transient an indulgence of self-amusement to be detected by any who understood him less than herself” (92). Anne can always discern his views on her family. When Mary makes an excessively snobbish remark to him about the Hayters, she “received no other answer, than an artificial, assenting smile, followed by a contemptuous glance, as he turned away, which Anne perfectly knew the meaning of” (19). When Sir Walter and Elizabeth ostentatiously offer him a visiting card because they know that he will “look well” in their drawing room, Anne “knew him; she saw disdain in his eye” (231). And when Anne sees Elizabeth snub Wentworth in the shop in Bath: “It did not