Persuasion: The Non-Communication of Open Secrets

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The "open secret," proposed by Anne-Lise Francois in her *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience*, is defined as "a way of imparting knowledge such that it cannot be claimed and acted on."[1] Using this concept, Francois seeks to investigate a peculiar mode of communication which allows for the transfer of knowledge but simultaneously "permits a release from the ethical imperative to *act* upon knowledge."[2] Her argument highlights the distinction between knowledge and acknowledgement: while knowledge centers around cognition, acknowledgment extends beyond cognition in calling upon the subject to not only recognize the knowledge but also to bring it into some form of active expression. Although some philosophers have argued that knowledge acquires moral worth only through proper acknowledgement, Francois takes on a different perspective in suggesting that "there are truths, or knowledges between humans, that do not ask to be so met."[3] Such knowledge without acknowledgement is precisely what the open secret represents. It serves as a conservative mode of communication that intentionally leaves sentiments hovering in the air, with no spoken words or physical actions to keep them grounded.

Francois's argument can be particularly illuminating when applied to Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, which presents as an open secret the past relationship between Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth. Although the knowledge of their former engagement is shared by multiple people, none of them has addressed it publicly. Their "perfect indifference" and "apparent unconsciousness" thus place the knowledge into the realm of open secrets, which in turn relieves

[1] Anne-Lise Francois, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2007), 1.
[2] Ibid., 3.
[3] Ibid., 82.

from Anne the burden to claim and to act upon such information.[4] *Persuasion* does not fully support Francois's argument, however. Although the open secret does influence Anne's perception of her relationship with Captain Wentworth, Austen pushes back against Francois's claim regarding its communicative capability, suggesting instead that it ultimately fails to achieve mutual understanding between the young couple.

As Francois has argued, the open secret provides Anne with a safe haven which she could withdraw into whenever she is confronted with the anguish of her failed romantic experience. It removes from her the weight of acknowledging her past, and it allows her to sink into the protection of passivity and inaction. Such passivity then enables Anne to conceal her agitation at her encounter with Wentworth at Uppercross. This brief meeting between them, the first after eight years of separation, is characterized by interactions so subtle that they can barely qualify as interactions: "Her eye half met Captain Wentworth's; a bow, a curtsey passed; she heard his voice."[5] It seems that despite her physical presence, her consciousness has withdrawn into herself and away from the conversation taking place. She sees, she curtseys, she hears, but her physical engagement is completely detached from any engagement of her mind. In particular, the bow and the curtsey "passed" with no reference to their subjects, as if the physical actions have performed themselves mechanically with no conscious involvement on the subjects' part.[6] Indeed, Anne's mind seems to have drifted out of her body into the air, where it stands aloof, observing the scene as a mere onlooker. Under such peculiar passiveness, Anne is able to at least maintain a façade of composure.

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[4] Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, ed. Gillian Beer (London: Penguin Books, 1818), 30.
[5] Ibid,. 56.
[6] Ibid.

Protected by the layer of seeming composure, Anne could then indulge herself in the whirlwind of passions and emotions on her mind, but without any moral responsibility to acknowledge any of them. She is able to freely observe and ruminate over her relationship with Wentworth, but as her contemplation exists only behind the opacity of her subjectivity, she is not held accountable for any of her reflections. When Captain Wentworth "quietly obliges" her into the carriage with Admiral and Mrs. Croft, her thoughts begin: "Yes,—he had done it."[7] The affirmative "Yes" is enforced by the brief "he had done it," while the suspensive dash in the middle takes on the weight of all her disorderly thoughts that for sure have crossed her mind in an instant.[8] Crammed into the five words of this sentence, the actuality of the situation has collided with the potentiality that Anne has injected into it, and the little carriage teems with the effect of its blows. Anne's inner monologue continues: "She understood him. He could not forgive her,—but he could not be unfeeling."[9] In her attempt to extricate his intention from the confusion of the moment, she is persuaded that his actions are motivated by the lingering remembrance of their shared past, and that his care for her uncovers in him "a remainder of former sentiment" and "an impulse of pure, though unacknowledged friendship."[10] In the tiny space of the carriage, her inner rumination has taken on the role of spoken words, expanding and filling up the air, but unlike spoken words, her thoughts do not demand that she assumes an active responsibility. She has obtained some knowledge regarding Wentworth's feelings, but just like the "unacknowledged friendship" between them, there is no moral imperative for her to acknowledge its presence.[11]

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[7] Austen, *Persuasion*, 84.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.

However, it is important to note that we only come to such knowledge through Anne's perspective. This is a natural result of the novel's use of free indirect style with a narrator who identifies the most intimately with Anne, but since it prevents us from witnessing Wentworth's inner activities, it does cast some doubt on the capability of the open secret to establish understandings that are truly mutual. The question here is, how much is actually communicated between them, and how much of the seemingly mutual communication is merely a projection of Anne's personal sentiments? The narrator has revealed early in the novel that Anne's attachment to Captain Wentworth has not subsided, and that the prospect of meeting him again has not only "flushed" her cheeks but also caused in her "a revival of former pain."[12] Given her emotional bias, it seems natural that she would tend to interpret his actions under the shadow of their past relationship. When Wentworth decides to have breakfast at the Great House instead of the Cottage, "Anne understood it" as his attempt of avoiding to meet her, without even considering the possibility that he is just "afraid of being in [Mary's] way, on account of the [injured] child."[13] When he places her into Mrs. Croft's carriage, she once again "understood him," this time convinced that "a remainder of former sentiment" has motivated his "resolution to give her rest."[14] The repeated verb "understand" refers to the intake and perception of information, but like any form of perception, it represents a subjective mental activity susceptible to the influence of personal prejudices. So do these understandings accurately reflect Wentworth's inner thoughts, or are they merely a result of her feelings for him? As the novel fails to portray the two characters with equal transparency, the credibility of Anne's subjective interpretations must be put under questioning.

[12] Austen, *Persuasion*, 30.
[13] Ibid., 55.
[14] Ibid., 84.

Of course, Wentworth's letter towards the end of the novel seems to confirm that Anne's interpretations have been correct all along, but the fact that we can only reach this conclusion through his written words is rather ironic in itself. Indeed, Wentworth's letter brings to culmination the doubt that *Persuasion* casts on the communicative power of the open secret. It represents the first instance in which Wentworth directly communicates his feelings to Anne, but ironically, it is not a result of the open secret but rather stems from Anne's spoken words in her conversation with Captain Harville. "All the privilege I claim for my sex," Anne tells her companion, "is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone."[15] She does not address Wentworth directly, but the implications of her words are certainly clear enough for him to grasp. Although just earlier in the conversation, she has emphasized that she cannot fully depict the nature of a woman's love without "saying what should not be said," she has nonetheless spoken the unspeakable here as she, fully aware of Wentworth's presence, willingly grants him a glimpse into her own inner emotions.[16] It is this brief moment of open revelation on Anne's part, rather than the passivity of the open secret, that directly drives Wentworth to put his thoughts into written words.

But Wentworth's written words further reveal the failure of the open secret as a means of communication. He begins the letter by professing his frustration: "I can listen no longer in silence."[17] In a literal sense, the "silence" here refers to his silence during Anne's conversation with Captain Harville, but to interpret it within the whole context of their relationship, it can also allude to the continued passivity and lack of open communication between them. Rather than allowing for mutual understanding, the open secret has prevented him from recognizing her

[15] Austen, *Persuasion*, 221.
[16] Ibid., 220.
[17] Ibid., 222.

feelings, and the anguish and confusion that it has thus engendered lead him to the exclamatory questions with an outpour of emotions: "Have you not seen this? Can you fail to have understood my wishes?"[18] The use of the verb "understand" echoes its usage in "She understood him," but here, instead of highlighting Anne's successful extrapolation of his feelings, it is used to convey the exact opposite—her failure to understand him.[19] This misreading on his part, a direct result of the lack of open communication, fills him with agony, and in order to bring his pain to an end, there is only one solution: he "must speak to [her] by such means as are within [his] reach."[20] This is the only course of action that will solve his problem; only by breaking away from the passivity of the open secret can he finally cross the chasm of silence and reach into Anne's heart.

With the letter delivered, the young couple finally wrenches themselves free from the passive silence that has engulfed them both thus far. The open secret, which has persisted through most of the novel, ultimately gives way to words explicitly and directly expressed. Such open communication then transforms the uncertain potentiality between the two characters into definitive actuality, and as the narrator says, "Who can be in doubt of what followed?"[21] Indeed, given the heterogeneity of individuals, only the open expression of oneself can bring any shared understandings into human relationships. Open communication thus provides the primary driving force for not only the plot development of literary works but also the growth of individuals within social relationships.

[18] Austen, *Persuasion,* 222.
[19] Ibid., 84.
[20] Ibid., 222.
[21] Ibid., 232.

Bibliography

Austen, Jane. *Persuasion*, edited by Gillian Beer. London: Penguin Books, 1818.