



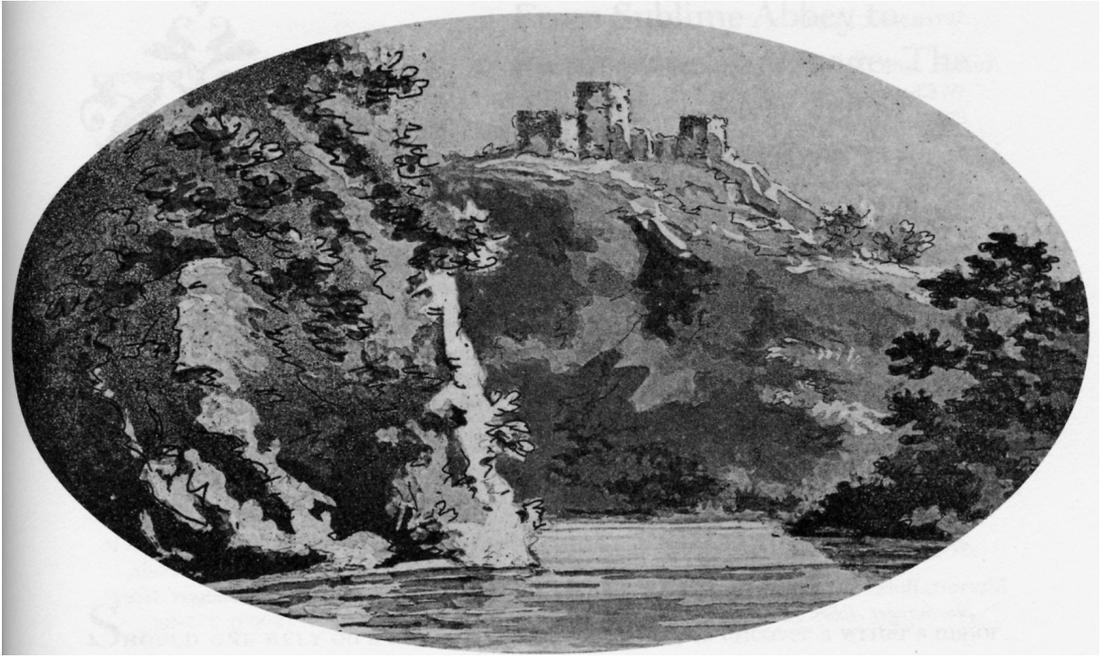
From Sublime Abbey to Picturesque Parsonage: The Aesthetics of *Northanger Abbey* and *The Mysteries of Udolpho*

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SHOULD ONE RELY on a brother, however devoted, to uncover a writer's major source of inspiration? Henry Austen, in his "Biographical Sketch of the Author," published posthumously alongside Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* (1818), informed readers that William Gilpin had formed his sister's tastes (7), and critics have seen no reason to doubt his word since the scenery in Austen's novels seems aptly to reflect the reverend's aesthetic preferences. However, a reader of novels might question the extent of Gilpin's influence on Austen's creativity, given that the work of the two authors displays different strengths and priorities. Austen is a virtual master of character portraiture, to which natural beauty and sublimity form a mere backdrop, while Gilpin focuses on picturesque settings and only provides brief sketches of their emotional effects on the onlooker. By contrast, Austen is able to spin entire psychological narratives out of personal responses to a painterly bit of countryside, as is evident from the excursion to Beechen Cliff undertaken by Catherine Morland in the company of Henry Tilney in *Northanger Abbey*. Since Austen in this work pays a smiling tribute to the (gothic) novels of the eighteenth century, in which issues of identity formation similarly take precedence over the depiction of nature, it might be more conclusive to look at the writings of these peers, rather than at those of Gilpin, when exploring the ways in which the aesthetics of landscape inform Austen's stories of personal development and maturation.¹

The Hollywood biopic *Becoming Jane* (2007) invents a scene from Austen's



View of Goodrich Castle. Proof for William Gilpin's Picturesque Scenery on the Banks of the Wye (1782). © Trustees of the British Museum.

life in which she visits Ann Radcliffe to ask the bestselling author to share the reason for her success. While in reality no such encounter took place, one could speculate whether Austen might indeed have had respect for the older woman's popularity, even though she elected to lampoon Radcliffe's oeuvre in *Northanger Abbey*. There can be no doubt that the plots of Austen's novels emulate those of her gothic forebears. Like Radcliffe's, Austen's stories revolve around the *Bildung* of a female protagonist, told by means of her passage through various architectural structures, culminating in the discovery of a secret, the revelation of which teaches her an important lesson in self-understanding. In *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic* (1995), Anne Williams suggests that the gothic genre partakes in the philosophical achievements of the Romantic movement in that its authors created a system of codification enabling their heroines, in the device of uncovering a hidden truth, to experiment with various epistemological options and to achieve a sense of selfhood (1-24). Austen realized ahead of Williams that the gothic blueprint could successfully be applied to the novel of growth so as to lay out the progress of a female protagonist's passage into self-awareness. As a child of the Enlightenment, Austen naturally eschewed the

practice of disclosing the mystery at the heart of the story of self-realization as supernatural. Rather, the secrets in Austen's books are of the social and moral variety: a seduction ending in extramarital pregnancy and a marriage made for financial gain (*Sense and Sensibility*), an elopement with a girl beneath the age of consent (*Pride and Prejudice*), an affair with a married woman (*Mansfield Park*), a clandestine engagement (*Emma*), or a change of heart and situation (*Persuasion*).

In *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Radcliffe anticipates Austen in that her novels lift the veil of narrative enchantment to supply natural explanations for seemingly metaphysical events. Radcliffe's books, on the whole, bridge the gap between the "traditional" gothic, which maintains the inscrutability of the occult mystery at the center of its plot, and an "enlightened" gothic, which insists on a logical elucidation of such a phenomenon. Despite the major differences between Radcliffe and Austen—Radcliffe's geography is exotic and continental, Austen's, familiar and English; Radcliffe's plots are complicated and contrived, Austen's, simple and realistic; and the same applies to their respective narrative styles—the two authors have in common a rational perspective.² Radcliffe and Austen also share a proto-Romantic belief in the importance of a "natural" education: a child's experience of the sublime and beautiful aspects of the countryside serves to elevate and inspire its mind to thought and creativity.³

Critical interest in Radcliffe's influence upon *Northanger Abbey* has typically focused on the sublime horrors prevalent in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. However, the opening of Radcliffe's novel shows that, as a girl, Emily St. Aubert encounters different variations of the sublime: in the Gascony landscape of her childhood, "La Vallée," and in the work of Latin and English poets (9-10). Akin to Gilpin's picturesque, this sublime has its beautiful aspects, exerts a beneficial effect on Emily's reasoning and feeling capacities, and hones her moral awareness. When as a young woman Emily journeys through the Alps, she enjoys her ascents into sublimity and her returns to pastoral beauty, intimating that it is only in *sum total* that these natural scenes have their lesson to impart. As Emily is in turns transported by the magnificence of nature and enchanted by its loveliness, she learns to distinguish between contrasting aesthetic tastes *and* the ways of life they represent: aspiration versus moderation, the pursuit of greatness versus the achievement of personal harmony. Emily's forays into the mountains and valleys of Europe thus lay the foundation for the decision that will eventually allow her to reach a personal equilibrium between these alternatives of existence. Radcliffe, in conjoining the sublime and the

beautiful aspects in her description of ideal settings, comes across as a proponent of the picturesque in literature, which, in affinity with the picturesque in nature as described by Gilpin, for example, in *Observations, relative chiefly to the picturesque, made in the year 1772, on several parts of England, particularly the mountains and the lakes of Cumberland and Westmorland*, weds beauty to sublimity.⁴ Austen was soon to follow suit in *Northanger Abbey*.

A further similarity between the novels of Ann Radcliffe and Jane Austen consists in the circular or quasi-circular trajectory of their novels. At the conclusion of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Emily St. Aubert returns to the scene of her childhood. Although she and her bridegroom, Valancourt, have traversed one of the grandest edifices of the Western hemisphere, mighty Udolpho, they opt for

the beloved landscape of their native country, . . . the securest felicity of this life, that of aspiring to moral and laboring for intellectual improvement, . . . the pleasures of enlightened society and . . . the exercise of benevolence, which has always animated their hearts; while the bowers of La Vallée became, once more, the retreat of goodness, wisdom and domestic blessedness! (631-32)

La Vallée is such a haven of near perfection that Emily has been unable to find its match on her far-flung sojourns. Once the secret that her father harbored is uncovered, the damage that was done him repaired, and the shadow hovering over the aptly named “valley” lifted, thanks to Emily’s journey of discovery, the only thing left for her to do is to find her way back to what is now more than ever a good place. Radcliffe’s affinity with Romanticism makes itself most clearly felt in the ending of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* when she shows that children may indeed “go home again,” and lovers may find paradise on earth. But, as usual, things are not quite as simple as they first appear in Radcliffe’s novels. Without the intervention of the younger generation, its fearless detective work, and the machinery of punishment their investigation sets into motion, the father’s house would not be “the retreat of goodness, wisdom and domestic blessedness” that it has become by the end of the story.

The close of *Northanger Abbey*, not surprisingly, lacks Radcliffe’s elevated diction and lofty idealism. However, Austen’s understatement should not come as a surprise since, from the beginning, the tone of the novel intimates that its author does not wish to stun readers with the same grand utopian resolutions as Radcliffe. Rather, Austen’s text throughout maintains a note of irony and self-deprecation, which her narrator had sounded at the be-

ginning when intimating that Catherine Morland would make a most unlikely literary heroine. But there is nonetheless a striking commonality *Northanger Abbey* shares with *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Like Emily, Catherine as a bride reclaims a domestic sphere akin to the one she left behind. In her case, it is a parsonage, better appointed than her father's at Fullerton, but fulfilling the same actual and symbolic function. Catherine is no heiress, and she cannot return to her childhood home, but Austen provides the next best thing for her in Woodston: "a place like," only newer, better, and prettier, or so it seems to Catherine's loving eye. Irene Collins in *Jane Austen and the Clergy* mentions that most parsonages in the eighteenth century were "mean dwellings, hardly better than the cottages of the poor," and this tendency changed only when the gentry appointed their younger sons to positions within the Anglican Church (61-69). General Tilney's boast that "there are few country parsonages in England half so good" (213) confirms Woodston's being a fine house indeed—as one would expect, given his mania for improvement that has already manifested itself at Northanger.

The account of Catherine's tour of Woodston allows Austen's subtle ambiguity to emerge most markedly. On the one hand, Catherine's taking refuge at a parsonage seems to emulate Emily's return home in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. On the other hand, Austen clearly debunks the Romantic pathos inherent in the exaltation of La Vallée by depicting Woodston's advantages as mostly material and practical. She describes Woodston as "a new-built, substantial stone house with its semi-circular sweep and green gates" (212). Catherine is shown the "commodious, well-proportioned . . . dining parlour," the "smaller apartment, belonging peculiarly to the master of the house," and the "prettily shaped" drawing room, from which she is able to see "green meadows" and "a sweet little cottage among the . . . apple trees" (213-14). When the narrator makes mention of "Henry's genius," it is in reference to his abilities as a gardener, and to somewhat ironic effect (214). But does the humor in *Northanger Abbey* signify the absence of a serious message? Gardens and their designs were fast becoming major preoccupations in the literature of Austen's era. Goethe's *The Elective Affinities*, whose central metaphor is taken from botanic grafting, was published in 1809.⁵ Thus, although Catherine's ecstasies in the sight of Henry's landscaping abilities might at first appear amusing, the idea to be decoded from the comedy inherent in the lines provides a hint as to Austen's response to Radcliffe: the very modesty of aspiration that exhausts itself in the creation of an exemplary (though not ostentatious) house and garden. Twice Catherine mentions "the cottage" visible from the

parsonage, and for this important reason: the simple rural building signifies her “revolution” from gothic grandeur to the pastoral picturesque, from sublime artifice to beautiful authenticity.

While Emily St. Aubert’s and Catherine Morland’s respective quests for selfhood resemble one another in certain aspects, the vision of their creators in regard to their protagonists’ future lives is thus markedly different. Despite her avowal that Emily will live out the remainder of her existence in intellectual simplicity, Radcliffe’s high-minded diction places *The Mysteries of Udolpho* firmly in the tradition of the continental artistic-philosophical novel of Goethe and Rousseau, removing her heroine to the utopian sphere of Romantic wish-fulfillment. To the end, the story of Emily St. Aubert remains fairytale-like, an impression that is affirmed by the description of La Vallée as a “retreat.” Austen’s simple elegance of style, by contrast, stresses her kinship with the didactic, picaresque, and realist traditions in literature, Richardson and Fielding, and her insistence that the parsonage is “well-connected” (212) argues for a social, rather than an aesthetic, significance of her fiction.⁶ Yet, *Northanger Abbey* also contains the famous “defense of the novel,” which shows that Austen’s work, too, was written, at least in part, for aesthetic reasons. But what is the artistic-theoretical point Austen wants to make in *Northanger Abbey*?

The answer is at once simple and complex. It is that (literary) taste matters: and this conviction Austen might have derived not only from Richardson or Fielding, but also from Ann Radcliffe. Like Emily St. Aubert, Catherine Morland receives an important lesson in (good) taste in the novel that tells her story. Or more precisely, she learns to lose the veneer of (bad) taste she had temporarily acquired from trendsetting Isabella Thorpe during her stay in Bath. In the process, she recovers, with the aid of Henry, her own, natural instincts, the results of both her breeding and her upbringing at Fullerton. It is significant that the medium corrupting Catherine’s goodness of predilection are (bad) gothic novels, passed on to her by Isabella, whose epistolary pomposities offer the best argument as to why young women should not read melodramatic thrillers. Isabella and her brother John, who is also an eager advocate of “horrible” tales, are notorious frauds and liars, and it is evident that their cavalier treatment of truth, honor, and loyalty has been gleaned from the pages of the books they so avidly consume. It must be significant that John Thorpe does not appreciate one of Jane Austen’s own favorite writers, Frances Burney, whose novels he damns with faint praise. The deprecation that he and readers like him profess eventually brings the narrator onto the scene of *Northanger Abbey*, eager to defend Burney and her peers:

“It is only Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda;” or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language. (38)

The narrator’s vindication provides a clear statement about Austen’s artistic beliefs, and she obviously privileges fiction above other genres. Her narrator also displays a preference for works whose pertinent trait is verisimilitude and, by subjecting poor Catherine Morland to the mental confusion of gothic nightmare and hellish reality at Northanger, she demonstrates how much better it would have been for her heroine to read *Cecilia*, *Camilla*, or *Belinda*, instead of *The Monk*, or even *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. So who will teach Catherine to choose correctly, since she is perusing (what for her are) the wrong texts?

That teacher is Henry, who also reads *The Mysteries of Udolpho* but shows no adverse effects, thereby proving that reading need not corrupt absolutely. When Catherine visits Woodston, she is still under the influence of the dressing-down that she received from him the day he discovered her in his dead mother’s rooms at Northanger. Henry’s reproof has made Catherine realize the absurdity of her thought process, set into motion by her consumption of horror tales, which prompted her to cast his father in the role of his mother’s killer. Thanks to Henry’s admonishment, Catherine has come to understand that, while she may enjoy residing in gothic monstrosities in her imagination, she in reality prefers the simple life symbolized by Henry’s parsonage:

What a revolution in her ideas! she, who had so longed to be in an abbey! Now, there was nothing so charming to her imagination as the unpretending comfort of a well-connected Parsonage, something like Fullerton, but better: Fullerton had its faults, but Woodston probably had none. (212)

Having shed the fashionable-Isabella skin, Catherine is able intuitively to recognize Woodston’s suitability as a home. And in contrast to the day at Northanger when she spoke “out of turn” and said the wrong words to Henry about the death of his mother, her timing and diction are now excellent. At Woodston, Catherine literally “speaks as she finds,” while her natural delicacy reasserts itself. Catherine’s carefully paced, yet rapturous praises of the parsonage illustrate that she has recovered her aesthetic footing, and that she has learned to express herself appropriately. Is Catherine aware that her enthusiastic statements about her newfound architectural priorities can also be understood as declarations of love?

Even if Catherine is not, then Henry Tilney is. After all, he has worked hard to guide her aesthetic preferences to the point where she renounces gothic abbeys for picturesque parsonages. As early as their excursion to Beechen Cliff in Volume One, Chapter Fourteen, Henry instructs Catherine in the ways of proper perception and expression in accordance with the natural sights she encounters. Henry helps Catherine develop the ability “to see” and voice the categories of the sublime and the beautiful that comprise the harmony called the picturesque. As he does so, he falls in love with her, and she more deeply in love with him. As in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, learning to determine and communicating one’s aesthetic priorities are therefore activities that go hand in hand with finding the right partner and way of life; and the confluence matters because it is the outcome of having honed one’s (good) taste.

That Catherine has mastered the art of “tasteful” conversation shows when she visits the parsonage at Woodston. The Beechen Cliff and Woodston episodes illustrate that Austen shared with Radcliffe the conviction that picturesque scenarios facilitate the development of natural predilection, self-knowledge, and the ability to identify the right idiom on which to found a lasting relationship. *The Mysteries of Udolpho* contains a veritable thesaurus of suggestions with which to capture the susceptibility of human beings to the two principal aspects of the landscape, the sublime and the beautiful, and a plethora of idiomatic options to describe the responses arising from the twin encounters with the charming and grandiose elements of geography. That Austen draws on this rich storehouse of alternating aesthetic expressions in *Northanger Abbey* shows not only in the Beechen Cliff and Woodston scenes, but in many of the passages describing the emotional world of Catherine Morland.

As the narrative of *Northanger Abbey* progresses, the text abounds more and more with the beautiful and sublime language of sensibility reminiscent of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. As Catherine’s social exposure presents her with an increasing range of choices, she makes her first instinctually “tasteful” decision, that is, she transfers her liking for one set of friends, the Thorpes, to the Tilneys. At the same time, the depictions of Catherine’s corresponding shifts in emotion, her anxieties, desires, and reflections, also begin to build in intensity and frequency. And the ironical voice that lovingly derided Catherine at the opening of the novel as Quixotic gives way to a more respectful tone that convinces readers of her increasing maturity. Thus, *Northanger Abbey* gently hints that while Austen’s England does not offer the same unlimited scope for adventure as does Mrs. Radcliffe’s Europe, it still poses sufficient formative sublime challenges to a heroine’s feeling heart and mind. In both locales, a

“heroine” may grow from a doubting, inexperienced girl into a more knowing, assured young woman. In comparison to Emily St. Aubert’s world, Catherine’s sphere is small, and the edifices she visits are unimpressive. Nevertheless, the modest inventory of the novel presents Catherine with a similar choice between the sublime (the abbey) and the picturesquely beautiful (the parsonage and adjacent cottage) as that offered to Emily St. Aubert.

Why is it important that Catherine has a sublime encounter? The answer to this question might be contained in *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory* (1996), which contains excerpts from the writings of only two women, Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and Helen Maria Williams’s *Letters Written in France* (1790) and *A Tour in Switzerland* (1798).⁷ Thus, the *Reader* confirms the critical consensus existing among feminist critics today that the aesthetics of the sublime excluded women, since they were numbered among the *objects* considered suitable for artistic contemplation but assumed incapable as *subjects* of experiencing the sublime.⁸ Opinions vary as to whether women authors entered the sublime territory regardless of gender prejudice. Anne Mellor, for example, suggests that women did “domesticate” the sublime in the gothic genre and discusses an “alternative, more positive representation of the sublime” in Radcliffe’s work (94). However, it could be argued that the sublime as defined by Mellor in the novels of Ann Radcliffe is almost indistinguishable from Gilpin’s picturesque. Could it have been her early awareness of this overlap that served as the creative stimulus for Austen when she made alchemy of Radcliffe’s gothic adventures and Gilpin’s English Arcadias by transposing the novelist’s plots onto the landscape artist’s settings? This tempting proposition might answer the question why her brother Henry would pay homage to Gilpin in the biographical notice accompanying a work by his sister, *Northanger Abbey*, which itself included an encomium not to the reverend, but to novels and their authors.

NOTES

1. On Romantic sublimity, see William Deresiewicz's *Jane Austen and the Romantic Poets*.
2. Norton also argues on behalf of Radcliffe's rationalism in *Mistress of Udolpho*.
3. In 1815, philosopher Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck defined this sublime as "contemplative," which, Natasha Duquette suggests, is a positive version of this aesthetic.
4. Jacqueline Howard, in the introduction to the Penguin 2001 edition of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, also suggests that Radcliffe must have read Gilpin's works.
5. *The Elective Affinities* opens, "Edward—as we shall call a well-to-do baron in the prime of his life—had been spending the finest hours of an April afternoon grafting freshly cut shoots onto rootstocks" (93). The grafting metaphor informs the subsequent relationship experiments undertaken by the baron and his lovers in the novel. On the importance of gardens in the eighteenth-century novel, see also Inger Brodey.
6. Chapman allows the term "well-connected" to refer to "the social position of the parsonage" but suggests that it is "perhaps more likely that it means conveniently arranged" (292).
7. Notable for their absence are, among others, Ann Radcliffe, Joanna Baillie, Charlotte Smith, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, and Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck.
8. See Battersby (1-11) and Freeman (1-12) on the female or feminine sublime.

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