

# *Gothic Romance, Sensibility and the Sublime*

Horace Walpole (1717–1797)

*In the seventeenth century, “gothic” meant crude, rough, and barbaric, a derisive term usually applied to architecture. In 1749, Horace Walpole, the son of the powerful Prime Minister and a Member of Parliament (1741–67), initiated gothic as a fashion when he remodeled a cottage at Strawberry Hill on the Thames near Windsor into a “gothic” castle with artificial battlements, towers, stained glass windows, pointed arches, and furnished it with armor, weapons, a decorative baptismal font, and a plaster mantle painted to look like stone. More a stage-set than a home, it grew and collapsed over the years, initiating a trend in building ruins, “follies” such as Blaize Castle in Northanger Abbey, representing both worldly status and its futility, the invention of personal and public histories that didn’t exist, the weight of a past in which the owners did not share. Walpole studied the antique, the real and the imaginary, and published books on early English life, letters, painting and architecture in his own Strawberry Hill Press. One evening, the story goes, in 1765, while dozing in his castle, Walpole dreamt of a giant hand encased in armor on the staircase, and that evening, he began writing The Castle of Otranto. Finished and published anonymously two months later, it became a formula for gothic romance which is still used in novels and films.*

*Claiming to have found the manuscript in “the library of an ancient Catholic family in the north of England,” printed in Italian in 1529, Walpole offers a fast-paced tale, events taking priority over character,*

atmosphere and special effects over plot. The story takes place during the Crusades, between 1095 and 1243, when Prince Manfred of Otranto arranges for his fifteen-year-old son, Conrad, to marry in order to avoid the mysterious prophecy that he will lose his castle "whenever the real owner should be grown too large to inhabit it." After his son is crushed on the eve of his marriage by a giant plumed helmet, Manfred unjustly accuses a peasant, Theodore, imprisons him under the helmet from which he must either magically escape or starve. The scene initiates a series of events in which otherwise inanimate objects express the wishes of an implacable spiritual world: the nose on a statue bleeds; an armor-clad foot appears in a gallery; a skeleton dressed as a monk offers advice; an ancestral portrait sighs, descends from its frame, and walks out of the novel. The supernatural events are intensified by the familiar Greek tragic themes of false inheritance, retribution, mistaken identity, and incest, a mighty summing up of everything that has been known to terrorize civilized people in the Western world.

To protect his castle and produce an heir, Manfred tries to divorce his good wife, Hippolita, and marry Isabella, his dead son's bride. Theodore, the imprisoned young man, turns out to be the rightful heir to the castle, with whom Matilda, Manfred's daughter, falls in love. Seeing them together and believing the woman is Isabella, he stabs her, unwittingly killing his own daughter. Manfred and Hippolita withdraw to separate convents. Isabella's father offers her to Theodore, who, still overcome by grief at the loss of Matilda, agrees to marry her so "he could for ever indulge the melancholy that had taken possession of his soul."

Displaced by Enlightenment rationality, gothic brought the spiritual world back through things; possessions which, in this first age of consumerism, took over people's lives, shaped and expressed them, and became instruments of revenge. The gothic pattern also reflects an odd sexual fantasy, appealing to women and to men, in which an insensitive male villain overpowers a helpless, vulnerable, and terrified virgin to be saved in the end by a mild-mannered, effeminate "hero." Stylistically, gothic romances are so exaggerated that even the most gruesome incidents seem to be burlesques of the very characters and actions that are supposed to cause terror. The following excerpt is from the opening chapter.

from *The Castle of Otranto*

MANFRED, Prince of Otranto, had one son and one daughter: the latter, a most beautiful virgin, aged eighteen, was called Matilda. Conrad, the son, was three years younger, a homely

youth, sickly, and of no promising disposition; yet he was the darling of his father, who never showed any symptoms of affection to Matilda. Manfred had contracted a marriage for his son with the Marquis of Vicenza's daughter, Isabella; and she had already been delivered by her guardians into the hands of Manfred, that he might celebrate the wedding as soon as Conrad's infirm state of health would permit.

Manfred's impatience for this ceremonial was remarked by his family and neighbours. The former, indeed, apprehending the severity of their Prince's disposition, did not dare to utter their surmises on this precipitation. Hippolita, his wife, an amiable lady, did sometimes venture to represent the danger of marrying their only son so early, considering his great youth, and greater infirmities; but she never received any other answer than reflections on her own sterility, who had given him but one heir. His tenants and subjects were less cautious in their discourses. They attributed this hasty wedding to the Prince's dread of seeing accomplished an ancient prophecy, which was said to have pronounced that the castle and lordship of Otranto "should pass from the present family, whenever the real owner should be grown too large to inhabit it." It was difficult to make any sense of this prophecy; and still less easy to conceive what it had to do with the marriage in question. Yet these mysteries, or contradictions, did not make the populace adhere the less to their opinion.

Young Conrad's birthday was fixed for his espousals. The company was assembled in the chapel of the Castle, and everything ready for beginning the divine office, when Conrad himself was missing. Manfred, impatient of the least delay, and who had not observed his son retire, dispatched one of his attendants to summon the young Prince. The servant, who had not stayed long enough to have crossed the court to Conrad's apartment, came running back breathless, in a frantic manner, his eyes staring, and foaming at the mouth. He said nothing, but pointed to the court.

The company were struck with terror and amazement. The Princess Hippolita, without knowing what was the matter, but anxious for her son, swooned away. Manfred, less apprehensive

than enraged at the procrastination of the nuptials, and at the folly of his domestic, asked imperiously what was the matter? The fellow made no answer, but continued pointing towards the courtyard; and at last, after repeated questions put to him, cried out, "Oh! the helmet! the helmet!"

In the meantime, some of the company had run into the court, from whence was heard a confused noise of shrieks, horror, and surprise. Manfred, who began to be alarmed at not seeing his son, went himself to get information of what occasioned this strange confusion. Matilda remained endeavouring to assist her mother, and Isabella stayed for the same purpose, and to avoid showing any impatience for the bridegroom, for whom, in truth, she had conceived little affection.

The first thing that struck Manfred's eyes was a group of his servants endeavouring to raise something that appeared to him a mountain of sable plumes. He gazed without believing his sight.

"What are ye doing?" cried Manfred, wrathfully; "where is my son?"

A volley of voices replied, "Oh! my Lord! the Prince! the Prince! the helmet! the helmet!"

Shocked with these lamentable sounds, and dreading he knew not what, he advanced hastily,—but what a sight for a father's eyes!—he beheld his child dashed to pieces, and almost buried under an enormous helmet, an hundred times more large than any casque ever made for human being, and shaded with a proportionable quantity of black feathers.

The horror of the spectacle, the ignorance of all around how this misfortune had happened, and above all, the tremendous phenomenon before him, took away the Prince's speech. Yet his silence lasted longer than even grief could occasion. He fixed his eyes on what he wished in vain to believe a vision; and seemed less attentive to his loss, than buried in meditation on the stupendous object that had occasioned it. He touched, he examined the fatal casque; nor could even the bleeding mangled remains of the young Prince divert the eyes of Manfred from the portent before him.

#### William Beckford (1760–1844)

*Like Walpole, William Beckford was the son of a powerful politician, Member of Parliament, the author of a gothic novel and a castle-builder. Born in 1760, the son of the Lord Mayor of London, at age ten Beckford inherited a vast fortune that included Jamaican sugar plantations and at least a thousand slaves. Talented, learned, well-traveled, Beckford was also ill-natured, hedonistic, extravagant, and perverse, the model of a gothic villain. He celebrated his coming of age with a three-day festival at Fonthill, his family estate, transformed by a famous stage designer into an oriental palace reminiscent of The Arabian Nights—a collection of tales which had fascinated Beckford as it did Jane Austen and nearly every other writer in the eighteenth century. After scandalous affairs with a young viscount and with his cousin's wife, and repeatedly exiled to the Continent, Beckford married Lady Margaret Gordon, who died giving birth to his second daughter. Shortly after, he wrote The History of Caliph Vathek (1786), in French, in three days, he says, though it is actually the work of a year, a book so full of mayhem and butchery that, he confesses in the Preface, he trembled while writing it. Again, architecture expresses character: the book is set in a compound of palaces with a tower at the center, where Vathek, his many wives, his mother Carathis, a necromancer (a parody of Beckford's own strict Methodist mother), and their one-eyed mute slaves and eunuchs conduct elaborate sacrifices, the most spectacular a bonfire of venomous oils, skeletons, mummies, and 140 dedicated subjects who, believing that Vathek is in danger, climb the tower and are pushed into the pyre.*

*In 1796, driven back to England by the wars in Europe, Beckford published Modern Novel Writing or the Elegant Enthusiast (1796) and Azemia (1797), novels which satirize the gothic romance, the government, and the war. To establish his presence, he hired James Wyatt, the foremost British architect, who renovated Fonthill into a gothic abbey of monumental proportions, with a huge tower, the largest in England, that collapsed almost immediately. An arrogant and tasteless appropriation of space, labor, and materials, Beckford filled it with dwarf-servants dressed in costumes, odd things and inventions, elaborate gardens, artificial ponds, and wild animals roaming freely—more of a theme park, a Neverland, than the palatial ancestral estate modeled after Salisbury Cathedral that he imagined. Although privacy was one of his obsessions, he nonetheless sold tickets, granted tours, and had Fonthill painted by the popular artists of his day, including Turner.*

*In 1810, one of Beckford's daughters married Lord Douglas, and the other daughter, Margaret, whom Jane Austen called "cousin," eloped with Colonel James Orde on May 15, 1811, suggesting, according to*

some critics, the elopements in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park* (Halperin 198) and eliciting Austen's cryptic comment, "The Papers say that her Father disinherits her, but I think too well of an Orde, to suppose that she has not a handsome Independence of her own" (Letters, May 29, 1811). After 1815, when Byron cites Vathek in his romances, Beckford enjoyed a revival and republished the novel in both French and English. He died at age eighty-four, a recluse in a new tower he built on a hill outside of Bath which he called Lansdown Baghdad.

from *Vathek*<sup>1</sup>

The caliph, not daring to object, abandoned himself to grief and the wind that ravaged his entrails, whilst his mother went forward with the requisite operations. Phials of serpents' oil, mummies, and bones, were soon set in order on the balustrade of the tower. The pile began to rise, and in three hours was twenty cubits high. At length darkness approached, and Carathis, having stripped herself to her inmost garment, clapped her hands in an impulse of ecstasy; the mutes followed her example; but Vathek, extenuated with hunger and impatience, was unable to support himself, and fell down in a swoon. The sparks had already kindled the dry wood; the venomous oil burst into a thousand blue flames; the mummies, dissolving, emitted a thick dun vapour; and the rhinoceros' horns, beginning to consume, all together diffused such a stench, that the caliph, recovering, started from his trance, and gazed wildly on the scene in full blaze around him. The oil gushed forth in a plenitude of streams; and the negresses, who supplied it without intermission, united their cries to those of the princess. At last the fire became so violent, and the flames reflected from the polished marble so dazzling, that the caliph, unable to withstand the heat and the blaze, effected his escape, and took shelter under the imperial standard.

In the meantime, the inhabitants of Samarah, scared at the light which shone over the city, arose in haste, ascended their roofs, beheld the tower on fire, and hurried, half naked, to the square. Their love for their sovereign immediately awoke; and, apprehending him in danger of perishing in his tower, their whole thoughts were occupied with the means of his safety. Morakanabad flew from his retirement, wiped

<sup>1</sup>Collated from the Bentley Standard Authors editions (London, 1834, 1849, and 1852); ed. Richard Garnett (London: Lawrence and Bullen, 1893).

away his tears, and cried out for water like the rest. Bababalouk, whose olfactory nerves were more familiarized to magical odours, readily conjecturing that Carathis was engaged in her favourite amusements, strenuously exhorted them not to be alarmed. Him, however, they treated as an old poltroon, and styled him a rascally traitor. The camels and dromedaries were advancing with water; but no one knew by which way to enter the tower. Whilst the populace was obstinate in forcing the doors, a violent north-east wind drove an immense volume of flame against them. At first they recoiled, but soon came back with redoubled zeal. At the same time, the stench of the horns and mummies increasing, most of the crowd fell backwards in a state of suffocation. Those that kept their feet mutually wondered at the cause of the smell, and admonished each other to retire. Morakanabad, more sick than the rest, remained in a piteous condition. Holding his nose with one hand, every one persisted in his efforts with the other to burst open the doors and obtain admission. A hundred and forty of the strongest and most resolute at length accomplished their purpose. Having gained the staircase, by their violent exertions, they attained a great height in a quarter of an hour.

Carathis, alarmed at the signs of her mutes, advanced to the staircase, went down a few steps, and heard several voices calling out from below, "You shall in a moment have water!" Being rather alert, considering her age, she presently regained the top of the tower, and bade her son suspend the sacrifice for some minutes; adding, "We shall soon be enabled to render it more grateful. Certain dolts of your subjects, imagining, no doubt, that we were on fire, have been rash enough to break through those doors which had hitherto remained inviolate, for the sake of bringing up water. They are very kind, you must allow, so soon to forget the wrongs you have done them; but that is of little moment. Let us offer them to the Giaour; let them come up; our mutes, who neither want strength nor experience, will soon dispatch them, exhausted as they are with fatigue."—"Be it so," answered the caliph, "provided we finish, and I dine." In fact, these good people, out of breath from ascending fifteen hundred stairs in such haste, and chagrined at having spilt by the way the water they had taken, were no sooner arrived at the top, than the blaze of the flames and the fumes of the mummies at once overpowered their senses. It was a pity! for they beheld not the agreeable smile with which the mutes and negresses adjusted the cord to their necks: these amiable personages rejoiced,

however, no less at the scene. Never before had the ceremony of strangling been performed with so much facility. They all fell, without the least resistance or struggle: so that Vathek, in the space of a few moments, found himself surrounded by the dead bodies of the most faithful of his subjects; all which were thrown on the top of the pile. Carathis, whose presence of mind never forsook her, perceiving that she had carcasses sufficient to complete her oblation, commanded the chains to be stretched across the staircase, and the iron doors barricaded, that no more might come up.

No sooner were these orders obeyed, than the tower shook; the dead bodies vanished in the flames, which at once changed from a swarthy crimson to a bright rose colour; an ambient vapour emitted the most exquisite fragrance; the marble columns rang with harmonious sounds, and the liquefied horns diffused a delicious perfume. Carathis, in transports, anticipated the success of her enterprise; whilst her mutes and negresses, to whom these sweets had given the colic, retired grumbling to their cells.

#### Matthew Gregory Lewis (1775–1818)

*In 1796, when Matthew Gregory Lewis, age twenty-one, replaced Beckford as a Member of Parliament (to 1802), he had already anonymously published The Monk, written, he claimed, in only ten weeks, inspired by reading The Mysteries of Udolpho (see Contexts, p. 225), which, in a letter to his mother, he called “one of the most interesting Books that ever have been published.” The Monk, on the other hand, a lurid mix of religion and sex, horror and comedy, rape, necrophilia, incest, and matricide, was universally condemned as obscene and blasphemous. It sold out immediately, eliciting a second edition within a few months under his own name as an MP, and a tamer fourth edition in response to public outcry and a threatened lawsuit in 1798. Thorpe reveals his taste and character when he calls The Monk “the only tolerably decent [novel] to come out since Tom Jones.”*

*Lewis brought the gothic conventions to the stage with six dramas, starting with the successful and profitable The Castle Spectre (1797–98), a true spectacle that challenged dramatic form and set the precedent for a generation of gothic melodrama (plays set to music appearing in the un-licensed theaters). A talented man of letters, Lewis also collaborated with Sir Walter Scott on Tales of Wonder (1801), a collection of translations and original stories that inspired the cartoon*

*by Gillray on the cover. Unlike Beckford, Lewis was a social catalyst, someone who connected people: he knew Goethe in Weimar in 1792, and in the summer of 1816 he translated Faust for Byron, Polidori, and Mary and Percy Shelley, during that great gothic gathering in Villa Diodati, where Mary Shelley wrote Frankenstein and Polidori The Vampyre. Like Beckford, Lewis’s wealth was based on the many slaves who worked his Jamaican sugar plantations. Opposed to slavery, he made several journeys to Jamaica to improve the lives of his slaves; in 1818, during a return voyage, he died of a fever and was buried at sea.*

*Set in Madrid, The Monk is ostensibly about Ambrosio, a founding raised as a Capuchin monk and a charismatic preacher whose virtue is corrupted by a demonic figure who enters the monastery disguised as Rosario, a young novice, and then reveals herself as Matilda. Seducing Ambrosio, she awakens insatiable sexual appetites: “Matilda gluts me with enjoyment even to loathing. . . .” He then seduces the naïve Antonia, who has turned to him for protection, murders her and her mother, who turn out to be his own sister and mother, for which he is brought before the Inquisition. In a subplot, an imprisoned pregnant nun is later discovered with the maggot-covered body of her dead infant whom she could not feed, while the Prioress, after confessing her fault, is stoned and dismembered by a riotous crowd. Ambrosio, rescued by the “The Fiend” from the Inquisition, is flown to the mountains, where the following spectacular conclusion occurs.*

#### from *The Monk*<sup>1</sup>

“What more did I promise than to save you from your prison? Have I not done so? Are you not safe from the Inquisition—safe from all but from me? Fool that you were to confide yourself to a Devil! Why did you not stipulate for life, and power, and pleasure? Then all would have been granted: Now, your reflections come too late. Miscreant, prepare for death; You have not many hours to live!”

On hearing this sentence, dreadful were the feelings of the devoted Wretch! He sank upon his knees, and raised his hands towards heaven. The Fiend read his intention and prevented it—

“What?” He cried, darting at him a look of fury: “Dare you still implore the Eternal’s mercy? Would you feign penitence, and again act an Hypocrite’s part? Villain, resign your hopes of pardon. Thus I secure my prey!”

<sup>1</sup>Matthew Gregory Lewis, *Ambrosio; or, The Monk: A Romance*, 3 vols., 4th ed., (London: J. Bell, 1798).

As He said this, darting his talons into the Monk's shaven crown, He sprang with him from the rock. The Caves and mountains rang with Ambrosio's shrieks. The Dæmon continued to soar aloft, till reaching a dreadful height, he released the sufferer. Headlong fell the Monk through the airy waste. The sharp point of a rock received him; and he rolled from precipice to precipice, till bruised and mangled, he rested on the river's banks. Life still existed in his miserable frame: he attempted in vain to raise himself. His broken and dislocated limbs refused to perform their office, nor was he able to quit the spot where he had first fallen. The sun now rose above the horizon. Its scorching beams darted full upon the head of the expiring Sinner. Myriads of insects were called forth by the warmth. They drank the blood which trickled from Ambrosio's wounds; he had no power to drive them from him, and they fastened upon his sores, darted their stings into his body, covered him with their multitudes, and inflicted on him torments the most exquisite and insupportable. The eagles of the rock tore his flesh piecemeal, and dug out his eye-balls with their crooked beaks. A burning thirst tormented him; he heard the river's murmur as it rolled beside him, but strove in vain to drag himself towards the sound. Blind, maimed, helpless, and despairing, venting his rage in blasphemy and curses, execrating his existence, yet dreading the arrival of death destined to yield him up to greater torments, six miserable days did the Villain languish. On the seventh a violent storm arose: The winds in fury rent up rocks and forests: The sky was now black with clouds, now sheeted with fire: The rain fell in torrents; It swelled the stream; The waves overflowed their banks; They reached the spot where Ambrosio lay, and when they abated carried with them into the river the corpse of the despairing Monk.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge  
from *Biographia Literaria*

In the following passage from the *Biographia Literaria* (1817), Coleridge recalls his collaboration with Wordsworth for their forthcoming *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). The timeline as well as the

principles Coleridge recalls illuminate not only *The Mysteries of Udolpho* but also *Northanger Abbey*.

During the first year that Mr. Wordsworth and I were neighbors, our conversations turned frequently on the two cardinal points of poetry, the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colors of imagination. The sudden charm, which accidents of light and shade, which moonlight or sun-set diffused over a known and familiar landscape, appeared to represent the practicability of combining both. These are the poetry of nature. The thought suggested itself (to which of us I do not recollect) that a series of poems might be composed of two sorts. In the one, the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural; and the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real. And real in this sense they have been to every human being who, from whatever source of delusion, has at any time believed himself under supernatural agency. For the second class, subjects were to be chosen from ordinary life; the characters and incidents were to be such, as will be found in every village and its vicinity, where there is a meditative and feeling mind to seek after them, or to notice them, when they present themselves.

In this idea originated the plan of the "Lyrical Ballads"; in which it was agreed, that my endeavors should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic, yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. Mr. Wordsworth on the other hand was to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand. (Chapter XIV)



## Sensibility

In *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner* and in *Christabel*, like *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *Northanger Abbey*, the emphasis is not so much on what happens, on the action, but on the response, on how characters react to objects and events. However rational the explanation for supernatural or mysterious events, the characters who experience them are often irrational, emotional adventurers, such as Emily St. Aubert, suffering from a common and fashionable personality affliction that was called *sensibility*.

Sensibility as a personal attribute appeared early in the eighteenth century, formulated by philosophers and poets who believed that feelings, emotions, sympathy are, should be, or could become the basis of action, for charitable behavior, for social progress. This identification of sympathy and virtue characterizes some of the best poetry, starting with James Thomson, who is often quoted in gothic novels and in parodies such as *Northanger Abbey*, and culminating in Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book VIII, subtitled, "Love of Nature leading to Love of Mankind." In *Mysteries of Udolpho*, Valancourt, the bereft hero, progresses from self-indulgent feeling to altruism: from the "delicious melancholy" of twilight "which no person, who had felt it once, would resign for the gayest pleasures," a melancholy that awakens "our best and purest feelings; disposing us to benevolence, pity and friendship."

Early in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Emily's father warns her against such excess.

I have endeavoured to teach you, from your earliest youth, the duty of self-command; I have pointed out to you the great importance of it through life, not only as it preserves us in the various and dangerous temptations that call us from rectitude and virtue, but as it limits the indulgences which are termed virtuous, yet which, extended beyond a certain boundary, are vicious, for their consequence is evil. All excess is vicious; even that sorrow, which is amiable in its origin, becomes a selfish and unjust passion, if indulged at the expense of our duties—by our duties I mean what we owe to ourselves, as well as to others. The indulgence of excessive grief enervates the mind, and almost incapacitates it for again partaking of those various

innocent enjoyments which a benevolent God designed to be the sun-shine of our lives. My dear Emily, recollect and practice the precepts I have so often given you, and which your own experience has so often shown you to be wise.

On his deathbed, he again advises, "Those who really possess sensibility ought early to be taught that it is a dangerous quality, which is continually extracting the excess of misery, or delight, from every surrounding circumstance. . . . We become the victims of our feelings unless we can in some degree command them." But Emily pursues sensation for its own sake: "a faint degree of terror . . . occupies and expands the mind," she says, "and elevates it to high expectations . . . and leads us, by a kind of fascination, to seek even the object from which we appear to shrink."

If there is a moral or value to *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, it is the self-control that Emily acquires. After multiple fits of fainting, weeping, and paragraphs of emotional inventories, she unconvincingly admits: "I do indeed perceive how much more valuable is the strength of fortitude than the grace of sensibility, and I will also endeavor to fulfill the promise I then made; I will not indulge in unavailing lamentation, but will try to endure, with firmness the oppression I cannot elude" (214). In *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine, in turn, came to recognize, that she had "an imagination resolved on alarm," a "craving to be frightened," which she "traced" to the influence of reading Mrs. Radcliffe.

## The Sublime

The capacity for feeling is stirred by "sublime" events and scenes. Originally a classical rhetorical form, the sublime in the eighteenth century was associated with nature, the irregular, powerful, unpredictable, terrifying aspects of the landscape such as mountains, earthquakes, volcanoes, storms, tidal waves, gloomy oceans. Such events expressed divine power and wrath, lift the mind and heart and leave the observer transported—but also feeling small and helpless. Wild animals, wars, famines, fires, plagues, tidal waves, the new astronomy and geology with their allusions to infinity,

mysterious and frightening phenomena of all sorts convey the sublime or awaken sublime effects. According to Edmund Burke in *Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757): “Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror . . . productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.”

The impulse to seek the sublime, Burke begins, is curiosity, that same ambiguous faculty on which so much gothic transgression and its archetypal predecessors depend. “The first and the simplest emotion which we discover in the human mind, is Curiosity. By curiosity, I mean whatever desire we have for, or whatever pleasure we take in, novelty.”

Like sensibility, however, the pursuit of the sublime became a social affectation, especially in the fine distinctions and self-observation it encouraged, as Peacock depicts in *Nightmare Abbey* (1818): Scythrop the young hero, having discovered a strange lady in his tower, “either was or ought to have been frightened; at all events, he was astonished; and astonishment, though not in itself fear, is nevertheless a good stage towards it, and is, indeed, as it were, the half-way house between respect and terror, according to Mr. Burke’s graduated scale of the sublime.”

### Ann Radcliffe (1764–1823)

*Ann Radcliffe was the most successful and influential of all the gothic novelists, but, unlike the others, she was an outsider, the sheltered and isolated wife of a lawyer and newspaper editor, who occupied her long evenings alone writing stories that reflected her own fantasy life while they captured and shaped the fantasies of readers and other authors. So reclusive was she that for the last thirteen years of her life, she was reputed to be dead or driven mad by an excess of imagination. In fact, after six novels, a verse romance, a travel diary, and some poems, all in eight years, following *The Italian* (1797), she stopped writing.*

*Universally admired, Radcliffe brought the gothic novel to a peak of popularity and of craft in part because she could tell a compelling*

*story in an appropriate style, reconciled the universal and eternal romance plot with contemporary manners, characters, and popular motifs such as sensibility, the picturesque, and the sublime, and projected them onto sixteenth-century French and Italian characters. Unlike other gothic writers, Radcliffe focused on rational explanations for the supernatural, the psychological sources of terror, exhibiting the aesthetic principles that Coleridge and Wordsworth were formulating for their poetry during the same period.*

### from *The Mysteries of Udolpho*

In the “willing suspension of disbelief” that *The Mysteries of Udolpho* induces, the excesses of the sublime effects and of social sensibility seem appropriate. Emily’s father dies early in the novel, leaving her in the care of a foolish and fashionable aunt who separates her from Valancourt, her true love. With her aunt’s new husband, the mysterious and morose Montoni, captain of a band of thieves, they travel to Udolpho, the castle in the Apennines, where Montoni tricks her into giving up her property then tries to marry her off to the evil Count Moreno. While searching for her aunt, whom Emily believes Montoni has killed, she encounters mysteries such as the disappearance of Laurentini di Udolpho, who turns up later on as a nun, Sister Agnes, having taken on this identity after she murdered Emily’s other aunt because she had been in love with her husband, the Marquis de Villeroi, who owns the chateau in the South of France to which Emily escapes with Valancourt. And so, in its cumulative and convoluted way, it goes on. However dangerous Emily’s situation, most of the terrors are self-induced; she imagines supernatural causes for rationally explained events. The following passage inspired the parody of Catherine’s arrival at Northanger, the smooth path, the uneventful trip, during which time Henry amuses her with his own version of *Udolpho*.

At length, the travelers began to ascend among the Apennines. The immense pine-forests, which, at that period, overhung these mountains, and between which the road wound, excluded all views but of the cliffs aspiring above, except, that, now and then, an opening through the dark woods allowed the eye a momentary glimpse of the country below. The gloom of these shades, their solitary silence, except when the breeze swept over



their summits, the tremendous precipices of the mountains, that came partially to the eye, each assisted to raise the solemnity of Emily's feelings into awe; she saw only images of gloomy grandeur, or of dreadful sublimity, around her; other images, equally gloomy and equally terrible, gleamed on her imagination. She was going she scarcely knew whither, under the dominion of a person, from whose arbitrary disposition she had already suffered so much, to marry, perhaps, a man who possessed neither her affection, or esteem; or to endure, beyond the hope of succour, whatever punishment revenge, and that Italian revenge, might dictate.—The more she considered what might be the motive of the journey, the more she became convinced, that it was for the purpose of concluding her nuptials with Count Morano, with that secrecy which her resolute resistance had made necessary to the honour, if not to the safety, of Montoni. From the deep solitudes, . . . and from the gloomy castle, of which she had heard some mysterious hints, her sick heart recoiled in despair, and she experienced, that, though her mind was already occupied by peculiar distress, it was still alive to the influence of new and local circumstance; why else did she shudder at the idea of this desolate castle?

As the travelers still ascended among the pine forests, steep rose over steep, the mountains seemed to multiply, as they went, and what was the summit of one eminence proved to be only the base of another. At length, they reached a little plain, where the drivers stopped to rest the mules, whence a scene of such extent and magnificence opened below, as drew even from Madame Montoni a note of admiration. Emily lost, for a moment, her sorrows, in the immensity of nature. Beyond the amphitheatre of mountains, that stretched below, whose tops appeared as numerous almost, as the waves of the sea, and whose feet were concealed by the forests extended the Campagna of Italy, where cities and rivers, and woods and all the glow of cultivation were mingled in gay confusion. . . .

Wild and romantic as were these scenes, their character had far less of the sublime, than had those of the Alps, which guard the entrance of Italy. Emily was often elevated, but seldom felt those emotions of indescribable awe which she had so continually experienced, in her passage over the Alps.

Towards the close of day, the road wound into a deep valley. Mountains, whose shaggy steeps appeared to be inaccessible, almost surrounded it. To the east, a vista opened, that exhibited the Apennines in their darkest horrors; and the long perspective of retiring summits, rising over each other, their ridges clothed with pines, exhibited a stronger image of grandeur, than any that Emily had yet seen. The sun had just sunk below the top of the mountains she was descending, whose long shadow stretched opening of the cliffs, touched with a yellow gleam the summits of the forest, that hung upon the opposite steeps, and streamed in full splendour upon the towers and battlements of a castle, that spread its extensive ramparts along the brow of a precipice above. The splendour of these illumined objects was heightened by the contrasted shade, which involved the valley below.

"There," said Montoni, speaking for the first time in several hours, "is Udolpho."

Emily gazed with melancholy awe upon the castle, which she understood to be Montoni's; for, though it was now lighted up by the setting sun, the gothic greatness of its features, and its mouldering dark grey stone, rendered it a gloomy and sublime object, gazed, the light died away on its walls, leaving a melancholy purple tint, which spread deeper and deeper, as the thin vapour crept up the mountain, while the battlements above were still tipped with splendour. From those too, the rays soon faded, and the whole edifice was invested with the solemn duskiness of evening. Silent, lonely and sublime, it seemed to stand the sovereign of the scene, and to frown defiance on all, who dared to invade its solitary reign. As the twilight deepened, its features became more awful in obscurity, and Emily continued to gaze, till its clustering towers were alone seen, rising over the tops of the woods, beneath whose thick shade the carriages soon after began to ascend.<sup>1</sup>

Radcliffe's last gothic romance, *The Italian: Or the Confessional of the Black Penitents*, is also the last of the great gothic novels, some say the best, responding to *The Monk* just as that novel responded

<sup>1</sup>Quoted from the four-volume edition published in London by G. G. and J. Robinson, 1794, Vol II, Chapter 5.

to *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. The villain, Schedoni, an evil monk, is victimized by his past, by the conflict between his instincts and his actions, and by his superhuman ambitions and his mortal limitations—a character reminiscent of Milton's Satan, reflecting the popular view of Napoleon, anticipating Byron's villain-heroes, and invading the dreams and fantasies of British audiences through many afterlives in the popular stage adaptations of gothic melodrama. In *The Italian Monk* (1798), for example, James Boaden set Schedoni to music and ended with his redemption in the obligatory penitential scene with which melodramas end.

from *The Italian*

There lived in the Dominican convent of the Spirito Santo, at Naples, a man called father Schedoni, an Italian, as his name imported, but whose family was unknown, and from some circumstances, it appeared, what he wished to throw an impenetrable veil over his origin. For whatever reason, he was never heard to mention a relative, or the place of his nativity, and he had artfully eluded every enquiry that approached the subject, which the curiosity of his associates had occasionally prompted. There were circumstances, however, which appeared to indicate him to be a man of birth, and of fallen fortune; his spirit, as it had sometimes looked forth from under the disguise of his manners, seemed lofty; it showed not, however, the aspirings of a generous mind, but rather the gloomy pride of a disappointed one. Some few persons in the convent, who had been interested by his appearance, believed that the peculiarities of his manners, his severe reserve and unconquerable silence, his solitary habits and frequent penances, were the effect of misfortunes preying upon a haughty and disordered spirit; while others conjectured them the consequence of some hideous crime gnawing upon an awakened conscience.

He would sometimes abstract himself from the society for whole days together, or when with such a disposition he was compelled to mingle with it, he seemed unconscious where he was, and continued shrouded in meditation and silence till he was again alone. There were times when it was unknown whither he had retired, notwithstanding that his steps had been

watched, and his customary haunts examined. No one ever heard him complain. The elder brothers of the convent said that he had talents, but denied him learning; they applauded him for the profound subtlety which he occasionally discovered in argument, but observed that he seldom perceived truth when it lay on the surface; he could follow it through all the labyrinths of disquisition, but overlooked it, when it was undisguised before him. In fact he cared not for truth, nor sought it by bold and broad argument, but loved to exert the wily cunning of his nature in hunting it through artificial perplexities. At length, from a habit of intricacy and suspicion, his vitiated mind could receive nothing for truth, which was simple and easily comprehended.

Among his associates no one loved him, many disliked him, and more feared him. His figure was striking, but not so from grace; it was tall, and, though extremely thin, his limbs were large and uncouth, and as he stalked along, wrapt in the black garments of his order, there was something terrible in its air; something almost super-human. His cowl, too, as it threw a shade over the livid paleness of his face, increased its severe character, and gave an effect to his large melancholy eye, which approached to horror. His was not the melancholy of a sensible and wounded heart, but apparently that of a gloomy and ferocious disposition. There was something in his physiognomy extremely singular, and that can not easily be defined. It bore the traces of many passions, which seemed to have fixed the features they no longer animated. An habitual gloom and severity prevailed over the deep lines of his countenance; and his eyes were so piercing that they seemed to penetrate, at a single glance, into the hearts of men, and to read their most secret thoughts; few persons could support their scrutiny, or even endure to meet them twice. Yet, notwithstanding all this gloom and austerity, some rare occasions of interest had called forth a character upon his countenance entirely different; and he could adapt himself to the tempers and passions of persons, whom he wished to conciliate, with astonishing facility, and generally with complete triumph.