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# PICTURESQUE MOVEMENT IN ANN RADCLIFFE'S NOVELS

JULIEN MOREL

Ann Radcliffe's novels were published at a time when people in Britain and in Europe had already started traveling for pleasure. Indeed, in the second half of the eighteenth century, traveling was no longer a hazardous occupation—it was not as dangerous as it is on some occasions for the main characters in Radcliffe's plots. Samuel Johnson's *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, made in the autumn of 1773, shows for instance that even a tour of Scotland was then by no means uncomfortable or difficult: "The roads beyond Edinburgh, as they are less frequented, must be expected to grow gradually rougher; but they were hitherto by no means inconvenient."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The Major Works*, ed. Donald Greene (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 600.

In this context, it is no surprise that traveling could become a leisure activity, and Radcliffe's novels reflect the taste for travel which had developed in the decades preceding their publication. Radcliffe's characters usually are, from the beginning of each novel to its end, in motion, traveling either for pleasure, necessity, or under compulsion. Of course, this overall pattern is not unique in the literary context of the period. Indeed, we should remember that most of the major novels of the eighteenth century, by Fielding, Smollett, or Sterne, for example, depict characters in constant movement, traveling considerable distances in Britain or abroad. Some of them are constructed as travel books, like *A Sentimental Journey* or *The Expedition of Humphrey Clinker* for example, for they show the peregrinations of their protagonists across one or several countries. But Radcliffe describes a particular form of motion or travel which has to be related to the British—and European—taste for the much debated aesthetics of the picturesque.

In those early days of tourism, viewing the countryside became one of the favorite activities of the gentry. There are obvious signs in Radcliffe's novels indicating that her writing was very much influenced by this interest in traveling, and that she was well-read in one particular kind of travel: picturesque travel.

William Gilpin was the most renowned among picturesque travel writers (indeed so famous that William Combe based his character Doctor Syntax, in his *Tour in Search of the Picturesque*, on Gilpin); Gilpin published books of observations on some of the most spectacular parts of Great Britain. There is no explicit reference to Gilpin in Radcliffe's works; his name is never directly referred to, but the description of a mountainous prospect, in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, as "beauty sleeping in the lap of horror,"<sup>2</sup> is actually a quotation from Gilpin's *Observations on Cumberland and Westmoreland*, in which he cites the words of one of his friend, who once exclaimed on observing the lake of Windermere: "Here is beauty indeed—Beauty lying in the lap of Horror!"<sup>3</sup> So even though his name never appears in any of Radcliffe's novels, Gilpin's influence can be as easily detected as Burke's in Radcliffe's descriptions of beautiful and sublime scenery. Gilpin tried to arrange landscapes into pictures, describing in detail why they were or were not picturesque (like Uvedale Price, he considered that roughness, intricacy, and

<sup>2</sup> Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho. A Romance*, ed. Bonamy Dobrée (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 55.

<sup>3</sup> William Gilpin, *Observations, Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty, Made in the Year 1772 on Several Parts of England, Particularly the Mountains and Lakes of Cumberland and Westmoreland* (Poole: Woodstock Books, 1996), 183.

variation were among the most important characteristics of the picturesque). It appears that Radcliffe had in mind these considerations about picturesque scenery when she composed her descriptions of landscapes with meandering rivers, ruins overgrown with ivy, abrupt precipices and shaggy trees, among other elements of the picturesque. But it is also possible to argue that her characters have the same attitude toward landscape as Gilpin does. According to him, it is the pleasure of pursuit that sets the traveler into motion, as he expects to discover the ideal picturesque landscape at every turn of the road. He writes in his *Three Essays: on Picturesque Beauty; on Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape* (1792): "The first source of amusement to the picturesque traveller is the pursuit of his object and searching after effects. This is the general intention of picturesque travel."<sup>4</sup> Radcliffe's main characters do exactly this: they make frequent excursions to contemplate the landscapes surrounding their homes or on the road to another place. The verbs and adverbs describing this activity show that it is pleasurable. For example, at the beginning of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*: "M. St. Aubert loved to *wander*, with his wife and daughter, on the margin of the Garonne";<sup>5</sup> or "When weary of *sauntering* among cliffs that seemed scarcely accessible but to the steps of the enthusiast . . . they would seek one of the green recesses, which so beautifully adorn the bosom of these mountains."<sup>6</sup> These characters seem to be literary versions of picturesque travelers like Gilpin: as Gilpin tours lake and mountain regions, Radcliffe's characters stroll near and far their estates and picturesque gardens in La Vallée or Leloncourt, pausing to contemplate the most striking instances of picturesque scenery.

These excursions seem to have no other narrative function than emphasizing the characters' taste for natural landscape, and to please the reader with aesthetic codes that he was certainly familiar with. Whereas some critics, contemporary to Radcliffe and later, considered that her descriptions of landscape were too numerous, lengthy, and repetitive, I believe they are necessary to the novel for various reasons. First, the ability to recognize the aesthetic value of a particular view is peculiar to virtuous characters only. Villainous characters cannot appreciate the beauty or sublimity of a landscape. Montoni, for example, "cared little about views of any kind,"<sup>7</sup> and when he decides to

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Hussey, *The Picturesque. Studies in a Point of View* (1927; New York: Archon Books, 1967), 83.

<sup>5</sup> Hussey, *The Picturesque*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Hussey, *The Picturesque*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Hussey, *The Picturesque*, 171.



travel to Venice, taking Emily with him, “they set forward . . . with all possible rapidity.”<sup>8</sup> They stop for a night at Verona, having “proceeded without any interruption.”<sup>9</sup> Therefore, there are two opposite modes of travel and movement in Radcliffe’s novels: the virtuous, who are responsive to all forms of beauty or grandeur in the scenery, always journey at a leisurely pace when they are free to do so, whereas villains, who are strangers to the harmony of nature, always prefer the shortest and quickest way.

The very course of the paths on which virtuous characters walk or ride can be described as picturesque: they choose the most winding and intricate ways which offer a variety of points of view over the surrounding landscape. When St. Aubert and Emily set out for Languedoc,

St. Aubert, instead of taking the more direct road, that ran along the feet of the Pyrenées to Languedoc, chose one that, winding over the heights, afforded more extensive views and greater variety of romantic scenery. He turned a little out of his way to take leave of M. Barreaux.<sup>10</sup>

As the last sentence indicates, the journey can be freely modified; it is made of many detours. And as they progress, the travelers even seem to forget about their destination, for Languedoc or Provence are not mentioned again in the next pages. Instead, the narrator presents us with the many stops made by St. Aubert and Emily, sometimes caused by the surprises along the road:

The ruggedness of the unfrequented road often obliged the wanderers to alight from their little carriage, but they thought themselves amply repaid for this inconvenience by the grandeur of the scenes; and, while the muleteer led his animals slowly over the broken ground, the travellers had leisure to linger amid these solitudes.<sup>11</sup>

The picturesque line of the road (it is winding and rough) is accessory to the characters’ taste in spectacular scenery: it is the means through which their never failing curiosity for new scenes is satisfied. Following the serpentine line

<sup>8</sup> Hussey, *The Picturesque*, 171.

<sup>9</sup> Hussey, *The Picturesque*, 174.

<sup>10</sup> Hussey, *The Picturesque*, 27.

<sup>11</sup> Hussey, *The Picturesque*, 28.

of the path is indeed the surest way of insuring that the views are going to be varied. The search for the picturesque can only be made on a picturesque road, as Gilpin confirms in his *Observations on the River Wye*:

Here the descent consists of various rocky knolls, prominences, and abruptnesses; among which a variety of roads wind down the steep towards different parts of the vale; and each of these roads, through its whole varying progress, exhibits some beautiful view, discovering the vale, either in whole or in part, with every advantage of a picturesque foreground.<sup>12</sup>

This “varying progress” of the character in search of picturesque landscapes is completely at odds with the uniformity of the tyrants’ way of traveling. They usually follow the main roads, travel in straight lines and as fast as possible. They ride powerful and very swift horses, who are mere slaves to their will. Most of Montalt’s appearances, in *The Romance of the Forest*, are elliptically announced by the trampling of the horses’ feet at full gallop. For instance: “as Adeline was alone in her chamber, she was roused from a reverie by a trampling of horses near the gate, and, on looking from the casement, she saw the Marquis de Montalt enter the abbey.”<sup>13</sup> This contrasts dramatically with the verbs and nouns describing how the virtuous travel: “wanderers,” “linger,” or “alight,” for instance.

When they are compelled to proceed on a mountainous road, the antagonists show no sign of appreciation of the landscape. Thus Montoni, after having exhausted his carriers on his way to Udolpho, is forced to stop. But while Emily is delighted with the scenery, only the history of the road is interesting to him: “The travellers being seated on the point of a cliff, Montoni and Cavigni renewed a dispute concerning Hannibal’s passage over the Alps.”<sup>14</sup> Only the functional aspect of the road deserves Montoni’s attention, while Emily’s eye is often attracted by the sublime heights of the mountains or the beautiful colors of the valley below. Indeed, virtuous characters know precisely why a landscape is beautiful or sublime. And not only is nature an object of aesthetic appreciation, but it also has a soothing effect on the suffering

<sup>12</sup> William Gilpin, *Observations on the River Wye, and Several Parts of South Wales, &c. Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty: Made in the Summer of the Year 1770* (London, 1782; London: Pallas Athene, 2005), 21.

<sup>13</sup> Ann Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest*, ed. Chloe Chard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 97–98

<sup>14</sup> Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest*, 166.

mind. When they are in the company of strangers, heroines sometimes find a moment to isolate themselves and admire some striking landscape. In these necessary excursions, as in any pleasurable one, they usually choose the most winding paths, which offer a variety of points of view. That is why Emily cannot be pleased with Mme. Cheron's French garden at Toulouse:

Her thoughts thus recalled to the surrounding objects, the straight walks, square parterres, and artificial fountains of the garden, could not fail, as she passed through it, to appear the worse, opposed to the negligent graces, and natural beauties of the grounds of La Vallée, upon which her recollection had been so intensely employed.<sup>15</sup>

The symmetrical forms of Cheron's garden confirm that tyranny is associated with straight lines in Radcliffe's novels: villains never deviate from their course, unless necessity compels them. But the heroes' and heroines' steps are often guided by undulation; like Rousseau drifting on his boat, rambling without a destination is for them a way of escaping the society of tyrants. Rousseau thus describes how he seeks a solitary refuge in the forests or mountains of his native country:

Je gravis les rochers, les montagnes, je m'enfonce dans les vallons, dans les bois, pour me dérober autant qu'il est possible au souvenir des hommes et aux atteintes des méchants. Il me semble que sous les ombrages d'une forêt je suis oublié, libre et paisible.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, Radcliffe's heroines can step aside temporarily from a place of persecution. Julia, in *A Sicilian Romance*, offers a good illustration of this, when she wanders into the woods surrounding the abbey where she is hiding from her father:

Julia accustomed herself to walk in the fine evenings under the shade of the high trees that environed the abbey. The dewy coolness of the air refreshed her. The innumerable roseate tints which the parting sun-beams reflected on the rocks above, and the fine

<sup>15</sup> Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest*, 120.

<sup>16</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Les Rêveries du Promeneur Solitaire*, ed. Erik Leborgne (Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 1997), 144.

vermil glow diffused over the romantic scene beneath . . . excited sensations of a sweet and tranquil nature, and soothed her into a temporary forgetfulness of her sorrows.<sup>17</sup>

The young woman of feeling is composed, thanks to the scenery she contemplates: as she analyzes the composition of the landscape, she herself reaches composure. The movement of the eye over the landscape entails a change in the mind of the heroine, from agitated thoughts to tranquil ones. Only a solitary excursion can produce these effects, as the windings of the path reflect the progressive work of the mind: to reach a beautiful landscape is indeed to reach peacefulness. As Joseph Addison comments in the *Spectator* of June 21, 1712:

Delightful Scenes, whether in Nature, Painting, or Poetry, have a kindly Influence on the Body, as well as the Mind, and not only serve to clear and brighten the Imagination, but are able to disperse Grief and Melancholy, and to set the Animal Spirits in pleasing and agreeable Motions.<sup>18</sup>

Motion and emotion are therefore closely connected: to move away from the society of tyrants is to drive away unpleasant thoughts, at least for a short period of time, for this state is always temporary.

These excursions can be extended as much as the character desires, which can bring sudden variations in circumstances. Pleasure can give way to fear when a heroine has rambled too far and does not find her way back, or when an intrusion occurs in the landscape. This is what happens with Julia and Mme. de Menon in *A Sicilian Romance* when they discover men in the woods and run back to the abbey:

As Julia gave a last look to the scene, she perceived two men leaning upon a part of the ruin at some distance, in earnest conversation. . . . They walked swiftly through the woods, whose shades, deepened by the gloom of evening, prevented their distinguishing whether they were pursued. They were surprised to observe the

<sup>17</sup> Ann Radcliffe, *A Sicilian Romance*, ed. Alison Milbank (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 125.

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, *The Spectator*, ed. Gregory Smith, vol. 6, nos. 395–473, June–September 1712 (London, J. M. Dent, 1898), 58.

distance to which they had strayed from the monastery, whose dark towers were now obscurely seen rising among the trees that closed the perspective.<sup>19</sup>

This change from tranquillity to agitation is caused by the circuitous walk of the heroine, who loses her sense of time and direction, and therefore may encounter danger lurking in these woods. The extension of the excursion is therefore subservient to the plot, as well as a means of bringing about the variations in landscape which are essential to picturesque description. In this example, a variation of light and perspective is caused by the length (in time and distance) of Julia's excursion. As Radcliffe seems to follow Gilpin's advice that a picturesque traveler should see a landscape in various lights, these lengthy walks permit a shift from daylight to twilight, as very often a heroine watches the sun go down, and admires its effect on the colors of the landscape.

Excursions then produce motion in the landscape itself, showing the various transformations that it undergoes as the light or the weather changes. Movement also conveys transitions from the beautiful to the sublime, or from the sublime to the beautiful as the characters explore the country. In *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, when Count de Villefort and his daughter ramble in the Pyrénées, their excursion starts as a pleasant walk in a pastoral valley, where they meet "within a little green recess among the rocks, a group of mountaineers, tripping through a dance."<sup>20</sup> This occurs "about sun-set," and as the travelers progress through the forest on the mountain, and as the light declines, sublime elements give an increasingly awful aspect to the scene ("awful" referring here to the sentiment of mingled fear and admiration described by Burke as the effect of the sublime). As the sun sets, the scenery is dramatically transformed:

The scenery assumed a more tremendous appearance, invested with the obscurity of twilight. Where the torrent had been seen, it was now only heard; where the wild cliffs had displayed every variety of form and attitude, a dark mass of mountains now alone appeared; and the vale, which far, far below had opened its dreadful chasm, the eye could no longer fathom.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Addison and Steele, *The Spectator*, 126.

<sup>20</sup> Addison and Steele, *The Spectator*, 597.

<sup>21</sup> Addison and Steele, *The Spectator*, 597.

The group will then have to proceed in the obscurity and the gloom of pines, along dangerous chasms. The variety of the picturesque gives way to the uniformity of the sublime, this gradual variation being conveyed by the declining light of the sun. The chapter ends with the terrific encounter with the robbers in their fortress, and a narrow escape for the protagonists. This mutation of the landscape is therefore instrumental in the plot, as new scenery is very often accompanied by new events. In this respect, Richard Payne Knight's commentary regarding what he calls "romantic scenery" can be applied to the works of Ann Radcliffe, which were, for most of them, entitled "romances":

There is another species of scenery, in which every object is wild, abrupt, and fantastic;—in which endless intricacies discover, at every turn, something new and unexpected; so that we are at once amused and surprised, and curiosity is constantly gratified, but never satiated. This sort of scenery we call *romantic*; not only because it is similar to that usually described in romances, but because it affords the same kind of pleasure, as we feel from the incidents usually related in such of them as are composed with sufficient skill to afford any pleasure at all.<sup>22</sup>

It is my contention that the readers of Radcliffe find it as equally pleasing to peruse her novels as to wander in a picturesque landscape or garden: Radcliffe's romances offer the same kind of surprises and detours as the scenery they describe.

The windings of the picturesque roads are in actual fact reproduced in the narrative outline of the novels. Radcliffe's plots never follow a straight line; they are, in my opinion, modeled according to a picturesque pattern; they contradict what Horace Walpole wrote about his own novel, *The Castle of Otranto*: "There is no bombast, no similes, flowers, digressions, or unnecessary descriptions. Every thing tends directly to the catastrophe. Never is the reader's attention relaxed."<sup>23</sup> The very fabric of Radcliffe's works is essentially made of these digressions, ornaments, and descriptions, which are anything *but* unnecessary.

When Sir Joshua Reynolds, in his thirteenth discourse as president of the Royal Academy, asks: "Variety and intricacy are beauties and excellences

<sup>22</sup> Richard Payne Knight, *The Landscape. A Didactic Poem, Addressed to Uvedale Price, Esq.* (London, 1794), 195.

<sup>23</sup> Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, ed. Michael Gamer (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 6.

in every other of the arts which address the imagination: and why not in architecture?"<sup>24</sup> I believe Radcliffe's literary technique should be included in these "arts which address the imagination." The aesthetics of her novels is that of a picturesque line, which brings the reader to surprises and unexpected scenes, or pleases him with minute descriptions of landscapes or gardens. The various digressions composing the novels can be compared to the path of a picturesque garden, sometimes bringing the walker back to a place he has already seen, but showing it at a different angle or in a different light. This is what the visitor of the garden at Ermenonville, created by Rousseau's friend René-Louis de Girardin, may expect from a walk along its path, as the anonymous description of the place illustrates:

Le sentier s'éloigne de la rivière fraîche et fleurie de la petite rivière pour serpenter dans la forêt et conduire à des points de vue dont le genre agreste rappelle ces scènes pastorales embellies par la brillante imagination des poètes qui ont chanté les amours des bergers et les mœurs du siècle d'or: il ramène ensuite sur le bord du ruisseau, à l'endroit où l'on a placé un petit obélisque.<sup>25</sup>

Like a path in a picturesque garden, Radcliffe's narrative technique is at once digressive and progressive—a shandyesque movement allowing the narrator to return to previous events, while at the same time revealing aspects of these events of which the reader was unaware before. The explanation about what Valancourt really did in Paris, for instance, brings the plot to an end, as Emily discovers that in spite of his errors, he was also an agent in the liberation of M. Bonnac.

This character—M. Bonnac—is introduced at the very end of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and his only function in the novel is to testify in favor of Valancourt. This is one of the techniques used by Radcliffe in order to connect all the threads of the narrative together in the last chapters, and it is the subject of a rather harsh statement by Maggie Kilgour: "This seems to violate our expectations concerning novelistic and aesthetic coherence: you just don't suddenly introduce new characters to solve old mysteries and to do so seems

<sup>24</sup> Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses*, ed. Pat Rogers (London: Penguin, 1992), 298.

<sup>25</sup> René-Louis de Girardin, *De la Composition des paysages ou des moyens d'embellir la nature autour des habitations, en joignant l'agréable à l'utile, suivi de Promenade ou itinéraire des jardins d'Ermenonville, auquel on a joint vingt-cinq de leurs principales vues, dessinées et gravées par J. Mériçot fils*, ed. Michel H. Conan (Paris: Edition du Champ Urbain, 1979), 148.

a sign of sheer sloppiness."<sup>26</sup> This is also a technique which is parodied by Sade in his *Aline et Valcour*, in which characters meet by pure happenstance after having travelled vast distances across the world. It might be true that the unexpected appearance of M. Bonnac is convenient to the narrator, but I think that, more importantly, it is part of a narrative strategy based on the picturesque principles of concealment and intricacy; it is in no way a sign of sloppiness, as Kilgour asserts. One commentary by Uvedale Price about the effect of the picturesque seems to provide a perfect definition of the kind of pleasure that a reader can find in the novels of Radcliffe: "By its variety, its intricacy, its partial concealments, it excites that active curiosity which gives play to the mind, loosening those iron bonds with which astonishment chains up its faculties."<sup>27</sup> The sudden introduction of M. Bonnac allows the narrator to reveal a part of the plot that was concealed before, in a novel made of many accidents and incidents which trigger unexpected turns in the plot.

The intricate form of the narrative, as well as the variety of the landscapes described, allow me to assert that Radcliffe's narrative technique can be defined as picturesque writing. Even the syntax in some descriptions of landscapes, or the discourses of the garrulous servants, who can never go straight to a point, can be said to be picturesque. In this respect, the reaction of the reader, confronted to the various delays of revelations, or the sometimes misleading epigraphs, could at first sight be compared with the reaction of the baron in the Provençal tale read by Ludovico in *Udolpho*, in the supposedly haunted chamber of Chateau-Le-Blanc:

With hesitating steps and a suspicious eye, [he] followed through an obscure and intricate path, till, having proceeded a considerable way, he again demanded whither they were going, and refused to proceed unless he was informed.<sup>28</sup>

The course of the narrative is comparable to this "intricate path," *but* the picturesque construction of the novel is precisely what gives pleasure to those who appreciate this kind of literature, for it excites their curiosity, compelling them to proceed further in the narrative.

<sup>26</sup> Maggie Kilgour, *The Rise of the Gothic Novel* (London: Routledge, 1995), 122.

<sup>27</sup> Sir Uvedale Price, *An Essay on the Picturesque, as Compared with the Sublime and the Beautiful; and on the Use of Studying Pictures, for the Purpose of Improving Real Landscape* (London, 1796), 106.

<sup>28</sup> Price, *An Essay*, 555.



Reading a novel by Radcliffe is therefore to follow the intricate narrative line drawn by the author; the pleasure of reading is very much the same as that felt in a picturesque garden or journey: it is the pleasure of pursuit, a quest for surprising points of view. In this context, landscape descriptions are no obstacles to readers accustomed to this picturesque quest: When the course of events is left aside to give way to a lengthy description of landscape, the progression of the narrative is delayed; but these descriptive moments are eagerly awaited by readers who are familiar with the theory and practice of the picturesque. They are therefore essential to the novel, for they prove that the contents of the descriptions and the structure of the novel are concomitantly picturesque.