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“NO COLOUR OF LANGUAGE”: RADCLIFFE’S AESTHETIC UNBOUND

Jayne Lewis

He penetrated to the cavern beyond, and from thence to the prison of the marchioness. No colour of language can paint the scene which followed.

Ann Radcliffe, *A Sicilian Romance* (1790)

Here such scenes of sublimity opened upon them as no colours of language must dare to paint!

Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794)

We compare the Newtonian theory of colours to an old castle. . .

Goethe, *Farbenlehre* (1810)

It is a pity that Ann Radcliffe’s “language” should so often lament its own insufficiency of “colour,” when color is one of the qualities that most vividly distinguishes her prose fiction from that of virtually all of her predecessors and contemporaries. “The blue tinge of air” that bathes its opening paragraph goes on to tint the whole of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, melting now and again into the “purple glow of evening.”¹ An earlier novel, *The Romance of the Forest*, naturally hovers nearer the center of the spectrum, among the “tender green of [. . .]

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trees,”² while the otherwise obdurate shadows of *The Italian* part to reveal “yellow jasmine” and, beyond it, “flowers of every vivid hue that paints the rainbow.”³ Suspended, almost always unwillingly, in these uniquely chromatic atmospheres, Radcliffe’s heroines are by contrast often the most colorless things going: they are, famously, airy creatures of “floating hair” and all but printless footfall, clad in “light [. . .] habits” which seem to abstract the wearer from the spectrum that stains the perceptible world.⁴ If, for Radcliffe, language too is finally conceived as colorless—with literary language openly and repeatedly valued for its strange powers of “abstract[ion]” (RF 259)—her ethereal heroines are firmly identified with it. Then again, since it is most often through those heroines’ refined sensibilities that the novel effects of color are conveyed to Radcliffe’s reader—as, more literally, they are conveyed via the configurations of black and white that compose the letters of the gothic page—such an identification makes almost perfect sense. Here, I would like to approach these complementary effects of abstraction and coloration as fundamentally linguistic devices which in Radcliffe’s hands find themselves further filtered through the scrim of specifically feminine perception.

At the moment in the history of feminist literary criticism that the present issue of *Eighteenth-Century Studies* addresses, it seems both possible and important to read Radcliffe in this light, for a rift appears to have opened between our current critique of eighteenth-century English models of aesthetic value and everpressing questions about its politics of language. While it is now usual to see eighteenth-century aesthetics as a “discourse” within which various interests jockeyed for cultural authority, explicitly feminist criticism of this discursive free-for-all has tended to focus on women’s practice of the visual arts or on their second-order representations of them, without seeing their investment in questions of aesthetic value as intimately connected to the questions of literary and more broadly linguistic privilege that have preoccupied other schools of feminist criticism.⁵ Yet Radcliffe worked at the crossroads of visual image and lexical inscription in such a way as to prompt in us, her latter-day readers, new forms of historical and political inquiry, as well as new reflections on our own interpretive project.

“LIGHT NOT UNWORTHY OF CLAUDE”

Like her depiction of a peculiarly female epistemology rooted in the privation of reliable sense experience, Radcliffe’s relationship to eighteenth-century aesthetics has always intrigued her readers. Neither the earliest reviews of her novels nor the critical inquiries of the present day have much managed to separate the fruits of her literary labors from contemporary theory and practice of the visual arts. Predictably, attention focuses on the landscapes so compulsively rendered in all of her major novels—ostensibly natural scenes whose extreme detail and even more extreme conventionality stamp Radcliffe as a pictorialist in the manner of the great landscape artists of her century and the one preceding. Though these artists—conventionally listed as Rosa, Poussin, and Claude Lorrain—diverged rather dramatically in style, Radcliffe appears to have mediated effortlessly among them. In the words of a contemporary, “to the wild landscape of Salvator Rosa” she “added the softer graces of a Claude,” and rare was the notice which did not pause to praise powers of synthesis worthy of Lorrain himself.⁶ Lorrain was admired by the influential aesthete Uvedale Price for the “almost

visible atmosphere that pervades every part [of his canvas] and unites all together," and it is likewise Radcliffe's relentlessly visible atmospheres—the clouds, fogs, vapors and hazes that suffuse all of her romantic scenery—which tend to smooth transitions from one sanctioned aesthetic register (the sublime, say) to another (for example, the beautiful), even as they reveal a Burkean interest in the linked limits of perception and representation.

Burke, Price and their ilk for the moment aside, in 1882 Margaret Oliphant was still noticing Radcliffe's evocations of "the learned Poussin" and appreciating in her pages a "light not unworthy of Claude."⁷ While the Victorian novelist deemed these effects "old-fashioned," she did so only because Radcliffe had been so often imitated, and thereby presumably perfected, by her nineteenth-century successors. Likewise, several notable female critics of the early twentieth century credited Radcliffe's landscapes with introducing the convention of atmospheric "scene" into English prose fiction.⁸ Meanwhile, recent assessments of Radcliffe's writing continue to derive it from eighteenth-century theory and practice of the visual arts, then proceed to chart her borrowings and departures from the standards there upheld.⁹ Lately, however, the more pronounced the departure, the better Radcliffe tends to look, at least from a feminist point of view. In readings like Elizabeth Bohls's deservedly influential one, prevailing aesthetic values of the beautiful, the sublime and the picturesque so inarguably central to Radcliffe's work can look positively hostile to the female subject, particularly to the extent that they promote the abstract, the formal, the universal and the ahistorical over the concrete, the detailed, the aberrant and the historically specific. On this view, any disjunction or incongruity in Radcliffe's texts—any perceived failure to satisfy reigning criteria of aesthetic perfection—becomes a badge of honor, for it is at these points, Bohls suggests, that Radcliffe forces aesthetic systems which posit unified, securely distanced subjects and idealized objects to confront historical and bodily particularity, in the form of a terrorized female viewer, say, or, as in Radcliffe's travel writing, in scenes of local and often politically induced suffering.¹⁰

For critics like Anne Mellor, it is the sublime landscapes that pose the biggest problems, at least to the extent that they (following Burke and Longinus before him) recommend the dissolution of the viewing subject, nonsensically offering to bear beyond language female subjects whom patriarchal culture has, in point of fact, already excluded from it.¹¹ And so whereas they were initially praised for their reconciling conformity with contemporary aesthetic ideals and standards of taste, then thanked for exposing the English novel to them, Radcliffe's landscapes are now most prized when they appear most violently at odds with those same ideals and standards. Indeed, her work is often seen to have matured to the extent that it resisted late neoclassical values and moved beyond them to what amounts to a proto-Victorian realist aesthetic, one presumably free of the tyranny of remote, inherited, and obdurate form.¹²

For all their political vigilance, however, and for all their welcome reminder that the female body was never very happily implicated in contemporary models of aesthetic value, recent accounts of Radcliffe's pictorial bent are inclined to overlook the significantly linguistic nature of her engagement with aesthetic theory and practice. That is, Radcliffe notoriously saw first-hand almost

none of the scenes her fictions so vividly painted. Her continental travels (when she got around to them) were restricted to Holland and Germany, whereas most of her work is set in the anyway more colorful regions of Italy, Spain, and France. Given their author's lack of direct experience, Radcliffe's characters are supposed to move through scenes derived from canvases she must have viewed with her husband during regular visits to the Royal Academy.¹³ But if they were first somehow taken down from the wall, these same scenes arrive on Radcliffe's pages filtered through critical frames devised by others. Where dark clouds worthy of Rosa gather to produce the effect of majesty, sentences like Burke's "the cloudy sky is more grand than the blue" hover too.¹⁴ So what we might call the aesthetic moments in Radcliffe's writing—the many junctures at which her narrative suspends itself to make space for a verbal landscape—are most fairly regarded as points of linguistic mediation rather than as instances of perception, invention, or even mechanical replication. Radcliffe in fact exaggerates just this feature of her scenery whenever she flags it with a scrap of English poetry, or bends the language of description into allusion to such literary topographies as Shakespeare's Arden, Milton's Paradise, Pope's Windsor Forest, or Thomson's English countryside. Even when writing as a travel memoirist, Radcliffe liked to ground natural topographies in lexical metaphor. Her private journal thus repeatedly traces the "dark lines" of the New Forest, and records the way Ullswater, "in all its windings," can take "the form of the letter S."¹⁵

Even with respect to eighteenth-century English aesthetic theory, as codified by familiar authorities like Reynolds, Burke, Gilpin and Price, we surely find Radcliffe concerned more with authoritative words than with visual images, beautiful or otherwise. Indeed, these authorities themselves were at least as exercised over the question of how to talk about pictures as they were over the value of pictures themselves. What Radcliffe's landscapes are left to communicate is thus not so much visual imagery hampered by prefabricated values of beauty, sublimity, and picturesqueness as a set of consciously linguistic practices and assumptions. In the absence of the purely eidetic, such constructions find themselves free to reflect directly upon the authoritative language communities in which Radcliffe's writing by definition participates. From this point of view, the values of abstraction, refraction and diffusion so often registered in that writing would appear to offer more than analogies to the effects of natural light, and more too than mere reflections of aesthetic 'values' in the sense of unimpeachable standards of beauty. Considered, rather, as deliberate shadings of letters—as lexical instances, even literalizations—of pictorial values, Radcliffe's quasi-aesthetic practices demand a closer look.

"ELEGANT DESCRIPTION"

Radcliffe's obituary notice, the first full memoir of her life and Scott's celebrated biographical sketch of 1824 all name among her primary pleasures that of "listening to any good verbal sounds," and cite her apparent "desire to hear passages repeated from the Greek and Latin classics, requiring, at intervals, the most literal translations that could be given" (Talfourd, I, 100).¹⁶ Yet when Radcliffe herself put pen to page, she seems to have spoken first and foremost to the eye. This fact is almost too obvious for words. The first pages of her novels all

bring some seen object into the foreground: an unhappy wife gives "a last look to the walls of Paris" (RF 2); "on the northern shore of Sicily are still to be seen the magnificent remains of a castle" (SR 3); from the windows of a modest chateau, may be "seen the pastoral landscapes of Guienne and Gascony" (MU 3); the scion of a Neapolitan family can "hardly withdraw [his] eyes" from a veiled girl in a local chapel (I 5).

Nor are external objects the only items that remain on display throughout the pages that follow. As the incomparably insightful Terry Castle has shown, interior states and absent things are also eerily visible there, where they assume the form of images that enjoy epistemological parity with the spectres that seem to haunt Radcliffe's abbeys and castles.¹⁷ Though of course the spectres all vanish under pressure from Radcliffe's signature technique of the explained supernatural, they betoken an entirely persistent world in which invisible meaning is always mediated through visual signs, and long after the book is shut they survive as emblems to caution against any unexamined equation of medium and message.

In all of these cases, we speak of pictures that Radcliffe—to use a surprisingly under-investigated term of art—describes, drawing on the well-stocked storehouse of pictorial and poetic conventions available to her as a cultured English woman of the later eighteenth century. It is easy to point to these pictures as they crop up in Radcliffe's text and, thereby, to proceed as if we are seeing what she says. Certainly, Radcliffe's contemporary readers supposed that they could do so. An early review of her popular *Journey through . . . Holland and . . . Germany* (1795) first noted the "strong turn and taste for landscape, or the description of the external face of nature" that marks all of her "romances" (44) and held that throughout her work she viewed "the elements in various combinations . . . not with the eye of a philosopher, but of a landscape painter."¹⁸ With respect to the travel writing, Radcliffe was regarded as "one of the few *tourists* who have diminished the regret that they were not accompanied by the painter."¹⁹ "She is peculiarly happy in her selection of images," the *European Magazine* declared, "and her powers of communication are so copious as to form in the mind of the reader a lively and distinct picture of the objects, and, in fact, to accomplish that by the pen which has always been considered as belonging necessarily to the province of the pencil."²⁰ Radcliffe's descriptions of the Lake District were likewise viewed as "pictures" that "exhibit as clear, distinct and forcible images to the minds' [sic] eye, as is well possible for words to convey" (46).

It was in other words a critical convention to describe Radcliffe's writing as a gallery of watercolors in black and white print, adept at stimulating in the reader's eye the very images which nature or fancy had presumably imprinted upon the author's. But this was also a convention that broke down with surprising ease. The *European Magazine's* "as is well possible for words to convey" is a significant qualification, to say the least, and readers regularly watched Radcliffe's "richly coloured representations" devolve into "high sounding and ambiguous expressions, which always impede the distant presentiment of material forms" until the author's compulsive "repetition of the same images of rock, wood, and water, and the same epithets of grand, vast, and sublime, which necessarily occur, must appear tautologous" (Talfourd, I, 118). As one reviewer complained, "it is a very faint outline, a very glimmering and unsteady prospect of the face of nature

that can be exhibited by writing; and the ideas we form of objects so complex and various, are not so much real images of those objects as confused combinations and analogies drawn from others that had previously come within the sphere of our own perceptions."²¹ Such "ideas" are, in other words, purely verbal. They originate not in perception but rather in the prefabricated forms—most evidently the verbal ones—which appear to mediate them.

Appreciating just this, one of Radcliffe's first readers discovered that, when it comes to her descriptions, "the happiest selection of words and significant epithets are hers [. . .] but it is the language that has been formed by all writers who have made picturesque description a study. It is partly the language of poetry and partly of painting."²² As Radcliffe's verbal icons systematically showed their hand as words first and finally, the only thing for it was to point out that, after all, the grounds of her project were foremost literary. Radcliffe's first memoirist, Noon Talfourd, thus gallantly proposed that, with respect to her "descriptions," the "idea of authorship interposed to give restraint to her style," and that Radcliffe's descriptions were all hampered by the necessity of "writing for the press." From this point of view, it is only in her private journals that can "see[m] the very chronicler and secretary of nature." Only here, freed of typographical restraint, do we find "no aerial tint of a fleecy cloud [. . .] too evanescent to be imaged in her transparent style" (Talfourd, I, 119).

But if Radcliffe's published descriptions of natural objects both experienced (in her travel writing) and imagined (in her novels) fall short of the transparency they pretend to possess, how are we to describe *them*? Oliphant was to conclude that Radcliffe's romantic landscapes were simply "not graphic,"²³ but we could also say that her "picturesque descriptions" are hypergraphic, thanks in part to the compulsive "repetition" that characterizes them, and that finally makes them look more like pictures of words than like pictures of things. "The lady's talent for description leads her to excess," the *British Critic* complained, and a list of mere words carried his point: "We have somewhat too much of evening and morning or woods, and hills, and vales, and streams."²⁴ To other eyes, "Mrs. Radcliffe" was "minute even to tedious prolixity in her local descriptions"; or there was "too great frequency of landscape-painting, which, though it shew the extensiveness of her observation and invention, wearies the reader with repetitions."²⁵ Upon opening *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, even Coleridge found "elegant description and picturesque scenery" likely to dissolve into "descriptions [in which there was] too much of a sameness."²⁶

The word "description" so favored by Radcliffe's first readers reaches with one hand toward the representation of objects external to language. Yet with the other, and far more avidly, the word reaches toward the purely 'scriptive,' and so toward "tautolog[y]"—literally, toward 'same saying,' and exclusively verbal action. Scott was remarkably attuned to the way Radcliffe's descriptions often fade into the latter, and in his appreciation of "Mrs. Radcliffe's powers, both of language and description," he found that her

landscapes are far from equal in accuracy and truth to those of her contemporary, Mrs. Charlotte Smith, whose sketches are so very graphical that an artist would find little difficulty in actually painting from them. Those of Mrs. Radcliffe, on the contrary, while they would

supply the most noble and vigorous ideas for producing a general effect, would leave the task of tracing a distinct and accurate outline to the imagination of the painter. As her story is usually enveloped in mystery, so there is, as it were, a haze over her landscapes, softening indeed the whole, adding an interest and dignity to particular parts, and thereby producing every effect which the author desired, but without communicating any absolutely precise or individual image to the reader. (*Eminent Novelists*, 572)

For all the virtues of Radcliffe's "beautiful description of the Castle of Udolpho," for example, Scott concludes that "were six artists to attempt to embody it upon canvas, they would probably produce six drawings entirely dissimilar to each other, yet all of them equally authorized by the printed description" (572).

Scott, as usual, was right. A "haze" does hang over Radcliffe's "description[s]," even as it is a staple of the scenes described. If, meteorologically speaking, haze (like mist and cloud) weds the ancient view of atmosphere as medium to the modern view of it as a quantifiable entity in its own right, its steady encroachment upon the Radcliffean landscape reminded Scott that Radcliffe's reader is forever wrapped in the fog of linguistic mediation. For all its inclination to turn back upon its own devices, admitting no certainly external object to view, this fog is also one which uniquely liberates its witness, for it both "authorize[s]" a multiplicity of responses and, no less important, sponsors critical analysis of the relationship between verbal representations and their supposed referents. Radcliffe's landscapes model such analysis whenever they present "the elements in various combinations." Recombination naturally frees her reader to perceive that the ties that bind word and world are in fact contingent and mutable, and that every "story" is by definition "enveloped in mystery."

To the extent that Radcliffe obscured the eidetic pretensions of her own words, turning our attention back to their status as media that yet deliver no fixed or certainly pre-existing message, her counterpart in the visual arts doesn't seem to have been any of the idolized masters of the past but rather her contemporary, the Russian-born émigré Alexander Cozens. Popularized in that painter's 1785 *New Method of Assisting Invention in Drawing Original Compositions of Landscape*, Cozens's unique watercolor technique urged the aspiring artist to devise landscapes not in response to panoramas witnessed but out of ink blots randomly scattered on a page. Resurrecting Leonardo's advice to begin with "'an old wall covered with dirt, or the odd appearances of some streaked stones'" in which the artist might then "'discover several things like landscapes,'" Cozens encouraged his readers to create their own "rude forms" by making "an assemblage of dark shapes or masses with ink upon a piece of paper." Though these "masses" might at first appear "rude and unmeaning," Cozens promised that the "general form will exhibit some kind of subject" from which a respectable landscape could develop. The blot itself, Cozens explained, "is not a drawing," but rather "a hint, or crude resemblance of the whole effect of a picture."²⁷ As such, it owes more to writing than to strict imagery, and thus it enjoys a natural affinity with verbal fiction. Indeed, on the authority of one Dr. Brown, Cozens ventured that "a blot in drawing is similar to the historical fact on which a poet builds his drama" (170).

In Radcliffe's case, it has been far more common to excuse the non-empirical status of the "historical fact[s]" upon which she built her dramas than to confront the conspicuously non-referential character of her landscapes, their tendency to dissolve into pure media. Yet this character is everywhere apparent, not just in Radcliffe's "rolling mists" and "shifting vapours" (MU 226) but in "all the magical colouring of light and shade" that bathe her landscapes in the most "splendid tints." These "tints," in turn, link Radcliffe's writing not with earlier prose fiction, nor even with the painted canvases they seem to invoke, but rather with post-Newtonian English poetry, where prismatic imagery serves less to summon a precise visual image than to remind the reader that s/he has entered an entirely cultural grid of signifying conventions, one more likely than not to be rooted in analogy, as opposed to identity with presumably non-cultural objects of perception.²⁸ In fact, Newton himself was soon to be seen as having been "betrayed by a passion for analogy," thanks in large part to his determination to assign seven colors to a rainbow which evidently comprises but six.²⁹ This division of luminous labor had done much to coordinate the spectrum with the harmonic scale (itself newly tempered), but it did little to liberate the natural philosopher from linguistic codes.

At first glance, of course, colors seem to repeal those codes, tearing away a veil of strictly conventional resemblances to reveal things themselves in all their radiant particularity and specificity. To the extent that Radcliffe uses color to this effect, she looks very much like a romantic writer, even anticipating Goethe's anti-Newtonian celebration of colors as "acts of light."³⁰ Locke had held that color is a secondary quality undiscussable in isolation from "Figure"; Boyle had considered it contingent upon the other qualities of evidently colored objects; and Newton's *Opticks* had of course classified colors as the spatially and temporally unstable components of light. In Newton's wake, Goethe was to complain, colors had been discredited in both natural philosophy and aesthetic theory, their "progressive, augmenting, mutable quality" demoted because it betokened such extreme vulnerability to shifting circumstance of time and space. To valorize specific colors was to restore those circumstances to legitimacy. It was—gothically, if not altogether logically—to demolish what Goethe disparaged as the "old castle" of Newtonian color theory, an edifice supported and sustained by conventions of speech.³¹

Philologically speaking, however, color is also a special mode of abstraction. The names of colors—red, yellow, blue and so on—are relatively late entrants into the human vocabulary, replacing the habit of designating the color of an object by mentioning its resemblance to another object of similar hue.³² Goethe was to acknowledge colors' special relationship to the names for them when he complained that, "too evanescent to be arrested," they could be fixed only in the realm of "denomination and description" (1). It took a romantic, though, to see this as a demotion. In the English aesthetic theory Radcliffe would have known, color is not exactly degraded, thanks to its perceived affinity with the special modes of abstraction we find in language. Joshua Reynolds's *Discourses* of course infamously proclaimed that art's "whole beauty and grandeur consists [. . .] in being able to get above all singular forms, local customs, particularities, and details of every kind."³³ Less famously, but at least as significantly, Reynolds found

that "a breadth of uniform and simple colour" will help "to give a general air of grandeur at first view," and that it might do so either "by reducing the colours to little more than chiaroscuro" or "by making the colours very distinct and forcible" (DA 135). To Reynolds's eye, as to Newton's, color worked much as music does: "The elaborate harmony of colouring, a brilliancy of tints, a soft and gradual transition from one to another, present to the eye what a harmonious concert of music does to the ear" (DA 141). Both music and color proceed on the order of language, so much so that color is not only designated "the mechanical part of the art" but is "called *the language of painters*."

As, in effect, a "language," color emerges as a mode of mediation that possesses considerable potential as an autocritical rhetorical form. "It is but poor eloquence which only shows that he orator can talk," Reynolds announced. "Words should be employed as the means, not the end; language is the instrument, conviction is the work" (DA 138). Reynolds accordingly likened the colorist to the automatic writer, comparing the mastery of color to "learn[ing] to read or write" (DA 111–12) and urging the aspiring artist to "paint your studies instead of drawing them" until "colours [. . .] will arrange themselves under the pencil, even without the attention of the hand that conducts them." Colors not only share language's inherently mediatory status and its rhetorical potential. Like Cozens's ink blots, they liberate both consciousness and matter from determinate form without foreclosing the possibility of multiple and constructed meaning. Just so, Uvedale Price might have identified color in general with the crude incursions of materiality and time, but he also granted certain colors a special role as mediators between the world of contingency and that of stable, immutable symbolic forms. Thus "the mellow golden hue" that irradiates a canvas of Claude is "a common and just expression," and it was possible to praise "the numberless beauties and effects, which are produced by [colors'] numberless connections and oppositions."³⁴

"HUE" AND CRY

In all their "rich colouring" (SR 104), Radcliffe's landscapes cannot in truth be said to consist in more than the "beauties and effects" of the English language; in an importantly literal sense, there is nothing more to them. Postromantic readers (especially female ones) have nonetheless wanted to identify these landscapes with the inner lives and epistemological habits of the heroines they by turns thrill, elevate, and sink into melancholy. Because in the end Radcliffe's "scenery" seems too superficial to sustain faith in such identifications, conclusions like Claudia Johnson's ingenious one that the Radcliffean landscape is an idiom of indirect free speech are themselves but metaphorical.³⁵ And yet, when we notice that Radcliffe's landscapes break down into spectral components which reference the operations of language, the same conclusions achieve a newly literal validity. We have only to suppose that what Radcliffe's descriptions indirectly register is not the free speech of her female characters but that of the printed English ones which produce, among other things, the "effects" of female perception, not to mention its "beauties."

Here we happen upon a way into an otherwise baffling exchange toward the end of *The Romance of the Forest*. The Rousseauian patriarch La Luc is de-

riding the writer who “show[s] the dark side only of human nature” by comparing him to the painter who, “collected in his piece objects of black hue only” but “forgot to paint the green earth, the blue sky, the white man, and objects of all those various hues with which creation abounds” (RF 270). La Luc indulges in more than moral criticism here, and makes colors more than allegorical figures for the many shadings of “human nature.” For in his analogy “green,” “blue,” “white,” and “black” fuse aesthetic values with literary ones. They do so quite literally, if we understand by aesthetic values simply the relative luminosities of various “hues” and by literary values nothing besides the conventions within which written words become meaningful in relation to one another. But La Luc frames this neutral value system within one that is anything but that, deriving from it the sort of scale that establishes comparable worth, imputes excellence, grants authority, and compels belief. His value-laden equation of “hue” with word thus witnesses the arbitrary emergence of one kind of value (which is culturally constructed and maintained by collective consent) from another, which is grounded in the simple and specific perceptions of theoretically pre-cultural individuals.

Just so, when we turn to Radcliffe’s use of specific “hue[s]” to enhance her scenery, we often find color detaching itself from material bodies, not to abandon them but to span the chasm that apparently divides those bodies from ideal forms and values. Take blue, for example. Radcliffe’s heroines turn out to be unusually familiar with the “blue tinge of air”; they regularly observe the “blue and cloudless horizon” that frames the “full glow of autumn” (RF 280) or admire “forms of grandeur [. . .] tinged with ethereal blue” (MU 45). Radcliffe’s own reader is hard-pressed to ‘see’ blue, yet the effect of blueness is everywhere apparent, an ethereal substitution for an eidetic particular. Colors employed in this way are visibly aligned with what Radcliffe elsewhere and often terms the “colour[s] of language.” When invoked, such “colour[s]” are fearful, chastened, demonstrably limited in their ability to “paint” a scene. But for this very reason they succeed brilliantly in placing the conspicuously arbitrary instruments of mediation themselves before the reader’s eyes.

By way of illustration, we have only to turn to *The Italian’s* Ellena di Rosalba, who in reluctant flight with her too ardent suitor Vivaldi pauses in the “cool and balmy air” to appreciate “what a soothing shade prevails over the scene. How softened, yet how distinct, is every near object; how sweetly dubious the more removed ones; while the mountains beyond character themselves sublimely upon the still glowing horizon” (I 161). Here, description might be said to paint any number of “objects.” But it may only be said to do so. In reality, Ellena registers nothing but an array of free-floating secondary qualities that create the mere effect of color (“glowing,” “shade”). Significantly, Vivaldi takes a look at the same inscrutable “scene” and finds the “broken summits” that his beloved has just admired to “exhibit the portraiture of towers and castles, and embattled ramparts” (I, 162). Vivaldi’s rejoinder is usually regarded as Radcliffe’s contemptuous gendering of aesthetic response. But, far from opposing Ellena’s abstraction of the scene, Vivaldi simply takes it to its next logical step—that of pure (and not coincidentally gothic) figuration.

It’s a rare man in Radcliffe who takes much time to contemplate a landscape, and an even rarer one who registers that such landscapes are grounded in

figures of speech. Far more often this charge falls to one of Radcliffe's ethereal heroines, each herself an idealization of Radcliffe's reader, and each like that reader perpetually confronted with seemingly concrete visual signs that upon inspection evaporate into something finer—and more oppressive—even than an idea. *The Mysteries of Udolpho's* Emily St. Aubert, for example, studies "gray clouds" that seem "to blush, then to redden, then to glow with a thousand colours" (MU 36). It is the reader, if anyone, who may be said to experience the diverse phenomena of color, and Emily who calls attention to the fact that, outside the arena of linguistic exchange, the 'values' they signify are no more tangible than the phenomena themselves.

"SIMPLE ABSTRACTS"

If Radcliffe's imagery is an evasion of imagery—an embrace of a special mode of abstraction that is both rhetorically powerful and systematically exemplified in what Adeline de Montalt learns to praise as the "beauties" of the English language—what might this say about her aesthetic practice generally? To the extent that abstraction was a politicized and gendered value in contemporary aesthetic theory, Radcliffe's ambivalence has been a staple of feminist criticism of her work. But to the extent that abstraction is an instrumental linguistic value—one whose use and abuse Radcliffe makes visible—we might suppose that she was concerned to reclaim the always only figural "colours, of language," in their very limitation, as rhetorical forms that can prompt political inquiry into communal habits of representation.

Here, Burke's 1754 *Philosophical Inquiry*, so often and so justly invoked to frame Radcliffe's aesthetics, is illuminating, though less for its commentary on "our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful" than for its deliberations concerning language. Burke so deliberates just after considering "Colour," though that consideration is pointedly brief because "with regard to colour, the disquisition is infinite," thanks to every color's dependency on the bodies perpetually "change the idea of it" (SB 186). When Burke finally turns to the question "of Words," we find that they, like colors, are known only in their effects—as media whose disquisition is likewise infinite.

It happens that Burke took a special interest in the kinds of words he called "simple abstracts"—adjectives like "blue, green, hot, cold, and the like" that in contrast to "compounded abstracts" aim for the effects of both "sound" and "picture." But here Burke noticed that when such words are actually used, "I do not find that once in twenty times any [...] picture is formed" (SB 190). Their claims on discriminating eyes and ears notwithstanding "simple abstracts" can provide nothing more than ideas of sounds and images. In Burke's estimation, these notional sounds and images become substantial only in the sense that they accrue customary or communal—exchange—value. That is, while we assume in using such words that they "for[m] pictures of the several things they would represent to the imagination," and indeed behave as if they do, such pictures never truly materialize. They only achieve the "effect . . . that their original has when it is seen" (SB 190). It is "use" or custom that secures this effect, and so, even as their effects mime those of nonverbal "original[s]," such words only mark the

intersection of the communal and the individual. Potentially, therefore, their rhetorical value would lie in their performative scrutiny of that intersection.

Now, considered purely as descriptions, Radcliffe's landscapes virtually consist in simple abstracts. The colors that seem to suffuse them are nothing more or less than these abstracts. But whereas Burke's philosophical treatise could supply only static examples of how these kinds of words cluster and then challenged his reader to "examine himself, and see whether he has had impressed on his imagination any pictures" (SB 191), Radcliffe is free to test these descriptions by embedding them in dynamic fictions of response to them. This in turn frees us to see Radcliffe's pictorial descriptions not as transcriptions of Burke's aesthetic values of sublimity and beauty but rather as active—indeed self-reflexive—extensions of his view of colorful description as a rhetorical mode that shows how linguistic communities work. Like recent feminist criticism of eighteenth-century aesthetics generally, criticism of Radcliffe's aesthetic specifically often overlooks the radically autocritical potential of the descriptive conventions within which she worked. It seems likely, however, that the next chapter we write in the history of eighteenth-century aesthetics will once again foreground the rhetorical techniques at play within it. To add this dimension to existing studies of elitist sociology and of the exclusionary impulse within enlightenment aesthetics will also be to expand our sense of how the literary was in fact 'seen.'

Above all, though, the perspective I've tried to sketch here encourages us to appreciate anew the scope and scale of Radcliffe's innovation. For it is in the details of her verbal canvas—at least as much as in, say, her allegories of inquisition or her explorations of domestic womanhood in patriarchy—that she most directly engaged prevailing forms of cultural authority. Because the descriptions she derived from those authorities aim to make us see nothing through them, but everything in them, they sabotage their own pictorial pretensions. This amounts to true aesthetic critique, even as it challenges from within a culturally cherished superstition about written language. That would be a superstition trenchantly voiced by Radcliffe's contemporary, the Irish elocutionist Thomas Sheridan, when he ventured that writing was first seen as a "supernatural gift" because it makes "sounds visible to the eye," without allowing us to see just how this can be.³⁶ Radcliffe's literary aesthetics do show us how this can be. Thus obsessively repeated textual "effects" like light's dissolution into mist, or its refraction into color, are not in themselves merely slavish reflections of Burke's sublime, Reynolds's abstraction, or for that matter, the Newtonian optics from which both of these ideals were derived. Rather, such Radcliffean signatures trace—indeed literalize—the circumstances under which aesthetic figure and cultural ground become one.

NOTES

1. Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho: a Romance*, ed. Bonamy Dobrée ([1794] Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), 1, 55. Hereinafter MU.

2. Ann Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest*, ed. Chloe Chard ([1792] Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986), 9. Hereinafter RF.

3. Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian*, ed. Frederick Garber ([1797] Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1968), 64.

4. Ann Radcliffe, *A Sicilian Romance*, ed. Alison Milbank (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993), 17, 117. Hereinafter SR.
5. Most work on the politics of aesthetic discourse follows the pace set by John Barrell in his *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt: "The Body of the Public"* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1986) and by contributors to his edited collection, *Painting and the Politics of Culture: New Essays on British Art, 1700–1850* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992). For a vital feminist application from within art history, see Ann Bermingham's *Learning to Draw: Studies in the Cultural History of a Polite and Useful Art* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2000). An exemplary discussion of second-order representations of art within women's writing is Shelley King, "Amelia Opie's 'Maid of Corinth' and the Origins of Art," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 37 (Summer 2004): 629–53. As for linguistic approaches, an especially luminous and persuasive example of women's writing in relation to questions of linguistic and literary exclusion is Deidre Lynch's "Gothic Libraries and National Subjects," *Studies in Romanticism* 4 (2003): 29–48. Finally, David Marshall's *The Frame of Art: Fictions of Aesthetic Experience, 1750–1815* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2005) treats contemporary strategies for representing art in language as strategies for representing reality, and so questions a boundary between the literary and the aesthetic similar to the one I question here.
6. Nathan Drake, "On the Objects of Terror," *Literary Hours; or, Sketches, Critical, Narrative and Poetical*, 3 vols. ([1798] London, 1820), 1: 270.
7. Margaret Oliphant, *The Literary History of England to the End of the Eighteenth and the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century*, 3 vols. (London, Macmillan and Co., 1882), 1: 277.
8. Clara Frances McIntyre, *Ann Radcliffe in Relation to her Time* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1920); Myra Reynolds, *The Treatment of Nature in English Poetry Between Pope and Wordsworth* ([1909] New York: Gordian Press, 1966).
9. Lynn Epstein, "Mrs. Radcliffe's Landscapes: The Influence of Three Landscape Painters on Her Nature Descriptions," *Hartford Studies in Literature* 1 (1969): 107–20; Charles Kostelnick, "From Picturesque View to Picturesque Vision: William Gilpin and Ann Radcliffe," *Mosaic* 18 (1985): 31–48; William C. Snyder, "Mother Nature's Other Natures: Landscape in Women's Writings, 1770–1830," *Women's Studies* 21 (1992): 143–62.
10. Elizabeth Bohls, *Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics, 1716–1818* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), 209–29.
11. Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 95.
12. Dorothy McMillan, "The Secret of Ann Radcliffe's English Travels," *Romantic Geographies: Discourses of Travel, 1775–1844*, ed. Amanda Gilroy (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 2000), 51–65.
13. On the Royal Academy and Radcliffe, see Aline Grant, *Ann Radcliffe: A Biography* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1952).
14. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (henceforth SB), ed. David Womersley (London: Penguin, 1998), 122.
15. Radcliffe, journal, first published as part of Thomas Noon Talfourd's *Memoir of the Author* prefixed to *Gaston de Blondville; or The Court of Henry III*, 4 vols. (London, 1826). 1: 22.
16. See also Walter Scott, "Mrs. Radcliffe," *Lives of Eminent Novelists and Dramatists* ([1824] London, 1870), 552.
17. Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), 120–39.
18. *English Review* 26 (1795): 1.
19. *Critical Review* 14 (July 1795): 241.
20. *European Magazine* 28 (August 1795): 98.
21. *Monthly Review* 18 (November 1795): 241.

22. *Critical Review* 14 (July 1795): 242.
23. Oliphant, *Literary History*, 278.
24. *British Critic* 4 (August 1794): 110.
25. *European Magazine* 25 (June 1794): 433; *Gentleman's Magazine* 64 (September 1794): 834.
26. S. T. Coleridge, letter to William Wordsworth (October 1810), in *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 3: 290.
27. Alexander Cozens, *A New Method of Assisting Invention in Drawing Original Compositions of Landscape* (1785), rpt. in A.P. Oppé, *Alexander and John Robert Cozens* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1954), 170. Of interest on Cozens is Marina Warner, "Spirit Visions: Faces in the Clouds, Figuring the Invisible," *Raritan* 31 (2002): 264–301.
28. Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Milton Demands the Muse: Newton's "Opticks" and the Eighteenth-Century Poets* (London: Archon, 1963).
29. Sir John Leslie, *Treatises on Various Subjects of Natural and Chemical Philosophy* (London, 1838), 7.
30. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Preface to *The Theory of Color (Die Farbenlehre)*, trans. C.L. Eastlake ([1810] London, 1840), xvii.
31. Goethe, Preface, xxii. On color's degradation thanks to its tendency to itself degrade in response to atmosphere, see John Gage, *Colour and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction* (London: Thames And Hudson, 1993). Eve Sedgwick mentions Radcliffe's bent toward fading colors in "The Character in the Veil: Imagery of the Surface in the Gothic Novel." *PMLA* 96 (1981): 255–70.
32. M. Luckiesh, *The Language of Color* (New York, 1930); Gage, *Color and Meaning: Art, Science and Symbolism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1999).
33. Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art* (Chicago: Packard, 1943), 119. Henceforth, DA.
34. Uvedale Price, *An Essay on the Picturesque* (London, 1796), 173; 217.
35. Claudia Johnson, *Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender and Sentimentality in the 1790s* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995), 117–8.
36. Thomas Sheridan, *A Course of Lectures upon Elocution* ([1762] Menston: Scolar, 1968), 7. This essay was born of a springtime spent reading Radcliffe with Noelle Chao and Melissa Sodeman. I thank them for their ebullient and inspiring company.