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Source: *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 22, No. 3, Restoration and Eighteenth Century (Summer, 1982), pp. 519-530

Published by: Rice University

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/450245>

Accessed: 06-02-2020 09:41 UTC

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Ann Radcliffe and the Conservative Gothic

DAVID DURANT

Ann Radcliffe's place among gothic novelists has been consistently misunderstood because she was a conservative writer in what is now considered a revolutionary movement. There is almost unanimous agreement among recent theoreticians of the gothic that the genre constitutes a step away from the neo-classic. Thus Robert D. Hume maintains that it should be seen "as one symptom of a widespread shift away from neo-classical ideals of order and reason, toward romantic belief in emotion and imagination."¹ This focus allows modern readers to take the gothic movement seriously, but it also makes Mrs. Radcliffe's novels seem faint precursors of the genre she is otherwise supposed to embody. As Lowry Nelson puts it, "Ann Radcliffe's various novels . . . now seem more like childish fantasies than evocations of primal horror."² It is not because she is puerile, however, but because she is philosophically traditional, that her novels fit modern definitions of the gothic so badly. She is not a forerunner of the romantic movement, but the staunch foe of its most salient characteristics. Her novels testify to her recognition of those aspects of her age which were to produce the romantic revolution, but she saw them as omens of the disintegration of a culture she cherished. Her novels picture the strength of the irrational, but rather than viewing it as the needed corrective for an over-rational-

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¹Robert D. Hume, "Gothic Versus Romantic: A Revaluation of the Gothic Novel," *PMLA* 84 (March 1969): 282. See also Lowry Nelson, Jr., "Night Thoughts on the Gothic Novel," *YR* 52 (Winter 1963): 238; Francis Russel Hart, "The Experience of Character in the English Gothic Novel," in *Experience in the Novel*, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1968), p. 99; Barton Levi St. Armand, "The Mysteries of Edgar Allan Poe: The Quest for a Monomyth in Gothic Literature," in *The Gothic Imagination: Essays in Dark Romanticism*, ed. G. R. Thompson (Pullman: Washington State Univ. Press, 1974), p. 68; Frederick L. Beaty, "Mrs. Radcliffe's Fading Gleam," *PQ* 42 (January 1963):126; and E. B. Murray, *Ann Radcliffe* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1972), p. 159.

²Nelson, p. 238. See also Hume, p. 290, and Murray, p. 169.

istic age, she saw it as monstrous. She repeatedly describes situations in which hierarchy breaks down, leaving a world of individuals. But instead of applauding that new freedom, she portrays the resultant world as one where people are cut off from one another in crippling isolation. And, while her novels depend upon the malevolence of figures who bear the earmarks of the villain-hero, she resolutely contradicts any impulse to bring out their heroism. For Mrs. Radcliffe, the true gothic terrors were not the black veils and spooky passages for which she is famous, but the winds of change, dissolution, and chaos which they represented.

The vehicle of Mrs. Radcliffe's world view is a mythic pattern which underlies the differing characters, settings, and techniques of her major novels. Individually, each of the works seems simply to repeat the time-honored formula of the sentimental love story, complete with standard gothic complications. But taken together, her major novels demonstrate an obsession with the single subject of the coming of age of the individual. Every step of her heroine's progress is defined in terms of her evolving relationships with a series of explicitly labeled parental figures. Her novels all begin by sketching the pastoral Eden of safe family life; move to the presentation of a fallen world where a father-villain betrays and persecutes the heroine; and end back in the haven of a new family which duplicates the virtues of the initial one. This pattern contrasts a safe, hierarchical, reasonable, loving world of the family with a chaotic, irrational, and perverse world of the isolated. Its circular shape suggests that the only solution to the problems of adult existence lies in returning to traditional, conservative values.

The first section of Mrs. Radcliffe's myth prefaces the gothic horrors to come with an episode which contradicts them not only because it is happy but because it is pastoral. Thus Emily's trials in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* begin after a long section where the heroine lives in bliss with her loving parents.³ Their innocent life is symbolized and partly caused by its pastoral setting, which the novel repeatedly contrasts to the ugly, mechanized, depersonalized vice of the city. It is a retreat to which her

³In the discussion that follows, I have ignored both the apprenticeship first novel and the atypical last one of Mrs. Radcliffe's canon. Quotations and page references are taken from the following editions of the major novels: *A Sicilian Romance* (SR) (1790), 2 vols. (rpt. from the 1821 edn., New York: Arno Press, 1972); *The Romance of the Forest: Interspersed with Some Pieces of Poetry* (RF) (1791) in *The British Novelists*, ed. Mrs. Barbauld, 50 vols. (London: F. C. and J. Rivington et al., 1810), vols. 43 and 44; *The Mysteries of Udolpho: A Romance, Interspersed with Some Pieces of Poetry* (Udolpho) (1794), ed. Bonamy Dobrée (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970); and *The Italian, or the Confessional of the Black Penitents: A Romance* (Italian) (1797), ed. Frederick Garber (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1968). Page or volume and page references are given in parentheses.

father has “retired from the multitude ‘more in *pity* than in anger,’ to scenes of simple nature, to the pure delights of literature, and to the exercises of domestic virtues” (*Udolpho*, 1). The other novels open after the death of one or both of the heroine’s parents, but they too draw upon a familial pastoral. In *A Sicilian Romance*, the unspoiled country and pageantry of an innocent, noble past unite to appear “a smiling Eden” (*SR*, 1:54) where the heroine lives under the protection of a mother surrogate, Madame Menon. *The Italian* demonstrates the beauties of a simpler past in its opening descriptions of Ellena’s life with her Aunt Bianchi. And even *The Romance of the Forest*, which opens *in medias res* with the flight of the heroine, includes a flashback to Adeline’s early, happy life in a convent. Moreover, it utilizes the pastoral potential of the gothic directly when it limns the ruined splendor of a deserted abbey and the beauties of a forest which surround it as background to Adeline’s family life with the La Mottes.

All of Mrs. Radcliffe’s heroines carry into their adventures the memory of pastoral innocence, where a family protected them from harm. This combination of the pastoral and the familial clearly builds on the sentimental tradition, where the heroine’s life follows the archetype of the fall in domesticated form. But the Radcliffe myth is even more familial than its sentimental prototype. In her novels, innocence is not simply lack of corrupting experience, but a factor of the protection of a conventional hierarchy. This is emphasized by the nature of the fall from innocence in the Radcliffe novels. Her heroines are not thrust into the world because of their resistance to their family’s plans for their marriage, nor for any other sin of disobedience. They enter the fallen world simply because their protectors disappear. God finds no one eating the apple; He simply disappears, taking the garden with Him. Thus, even in *A Sicilian Romance*, where Mrs. Radcliffe is most indebted to the sentimental novel, she is at pains to assure her readers that the heroine’s trials come from no fault of her own. And in the later, less sentimental versions of her myth, it is even clearer that there was no sin in the fall. Mrs. Radcliffe’s heroines remain constant in their innocent goodness; only the world around them changes. That makes Mrs. Radcliffe’s myth more deterministic and unpleasant than the normal education novel, since there is no poetic justice in the trials the girls undergo.

Mrs. Radcliffe’s obsession with the family is indicated by making the first step in her heroine’s descent into the world of experience a meeting with new parents. In *The Romance of the Forest*, Adeline is thrown into the company of the La Mottes, whose admiration and love for the girl quickly turn them into a pseudo-family. In *A Sicilian Romance*, while the heroine flees alone, she is soon joined by her governess, who acts as confidant and mother figure. In *Udolpho*, Emily is placed by her

father's will under the protection of Madame Cheron. In *The Italian* there is a modification of the pattern. Ellena is given only the cold protection of an abbess, who acts as much as jailor and persecutor as protector. But even that divergence does not produce any change in the basic pattern, since all of the pseudo-parents are introduced as figures who are not capable of protecting the maturing heroine. Thus Madame Menon, despite her love for Julia, cannot guard her either against her father or the wicked abbot. Madame Menon is simply left behind in the flight of the innocent girl in a world where evil is immensely more powerful than her weak goodness. The same impotence runs through all the pseudo-families, but is joined with other, even less appealing, characteristics. All of the other adoptive families follow the pattern of the wicked step-mother, who betrays the adolescent girl. In *Udolpho*, Madame Cheron's love for Emily had never been very strong, but it turns to active malignancy after she meets Montoni. Her failure as a parent comes from betrayal of the role her age demands. She encourages suitors and then marries one before the heroine can. In *The Italian*, the abbess betrays the heroine by treating her as if she were simply another adult, rather than a favored child. Ellena must cater to the abbess's financial and social objectives by becoming a nun, or be murdered. *The Romance of the Forest* puts the transitional nature of the pseudo-family into clearest focus. The La Mottes take Adeline into their family only after they have been forced to do so. And the love they feel for her is only a selfish affection, which puts self-interest at least on a par with the heroine's.⁴ La Motte makes Adeline into a pawn in his struggles to free himself from his own plight, while Madame La Motte betrays Adeline by suspecting her of an illicit liaison with her husband. All of the second families of the novels dramatize a fallen world, where selfish and materialistic interests have infiltrated the family.

The contrast between the community of the initial family and the autonomy of the members of the pseudo-family establishes the novels' contention that the gothic world is one of adult isolation. All of the heroine's gothic adventures are the result of the heroine's lack of community; she is "An orphan in this wide world — thrown upon the friendship of strangers for comfort, and upon their bounty for the very means of existence" (*RF*, 1:126). The isolation of the heroine in the adult world is dramatized by Mrs. Radcliffe's insistence on the necessity of flight for the innocent. The heroine's instinct after the loss of her real family is to join others, since she has learned to expect loving protection. But when she finds that protection false, she replaces her natural desire for com-

⁴Murray, pp. 64–66 and *passim*, sees disinterestedness as the major ethic of Mrs. Radcliffe's novels.

munity with an instinctive reaction of flight. Mrs. Radcliffe's discovery of the chase as a mainstay of her plots came in *A Sicilian Romance*, where Julia flees from her father; from her older suitor; from an interpolated group chasing another pair of lovers who have little else to do with the novel; from bandits; from her father's forces again; and finally from still another desperado band. The three later novels are not as full of flights, but they retain the basic fact of life in the fallen world: those around the innocent are almost inevitably hostile.

Mrs. Radcliffe's repeated explanation of the isolation that her heroines suffer in the fallen world is the inability of adults to understand each other. While she still lived with her family, the ingénue could know with some surety the motives and inner natures of those around her. But thrown outside the known confines of the family, she is faced with people whose characters are masked. This is partly a method of suspense. Thus, in *The Romance of the Forest*, Mrs. Radcliffe shapes almost every incident so that it will whet the audience's curiosity by limiting the narrative perspective to that of a heroine ignorant by force of circumstances. Adeline does not know her father; why she was forced to flee with the La Mottes; why they had fled Paris; why the Marquis seems to have such power over them; nor the relationship between her fiancé and the La Lucs. She cannot penetrate Peter's outward character to be sure that he is trustworthy; nor know that Madame La Motte is jealous of her; nor even why her lover seems to desert her.

Udolpho expands this theme of adult ignorance by emphasizing the arbitrary nature of wickedness. Madame Cheron permits Emily's engagement to Valancourt, then abruptly breaks it off. Montoni spends the novel herding his bride and the heroine from one part of Europe to another for reasons which are clear only to himself. The unsure world of experience begins to infect the happy memories of the innocent family, when Emily begins to suspect both her father and Valancourt of duplicity. By the time she wrote *The Italian*, Mrs. Radcliffe had come to focus most of her attention on the problems of masked identity. All of the villains of the novel hide their wickedness beneath attractive exteriors. For the first time in her career, she made her villain a priest, insisting upon the discrepancy between his pious demeanor and his vicious hidden nature. And the entire last half of the novel stresses the masks of the adult world by shaping itself as a detective story where all is at last uncovered. No matter what the form of the novels, each depicts the world of experience as one of mystery, where goodness is surrounded by forces it does not understand.

The nature of the fallen world is characterized as much by its landscape as by its action and characters. Following the gothic convention, Mrs. Radcliffe made her heroines discover a nightmare world beneath the pastoral, after they had been expelled from secure family life. Her

underground is a world of chaos, where the forces of the supernatural and of the illicit hold full sway.⁵ The ruined castles and abbeys are graphic symbols of the disintegration of a stable civilization; their underground reaches are the hiding places for all those forces which cannot stand the light of day. *A Sicilian Romance* establishes the gothic geography. Once she flees from her home, Julia finds that the world consists of an interconnected series of underground sites, each one peopled with viler felons than the last. Her villainous father lurks in the dark passageway through which she attempts her first escape; bandits, rapists, and murderers fill the other caverns, subterranean crypts, tunnels, and secret passageways of the novel. What makes the underground so terrible is that its inhabitants include the supernatural as well as the wicked. Thus the wicked forces of the Inquisition who people the underground in *The Italian* are joined by supernatural figures who can apparently pass through walls and come back from the dead to work their revenge. The intrusion of the supernatural into the world of depravity allows Mrs. Radcliffe to explain its malevolence. In the fallen world, there are forces which reason cannot explain: the true authority of reason which had restrained vice has been lost. Once out of the family, the heroine finds that chaos is loosed.

The contrast between the true family and chaos is exemplified by Mrs. Radcliffe's use of a false father as villain. The innovation came in *A Sicilian Romance*, which involves a mutation of the usual sentimental struggle between a heroine's love and a father's authority. Mazzini is the typical misguided, overbearing father, but he also has some aspects of the character of a Lovelace. He is seducer as well as father: he has imprisoned his real wife; pretended she has died; and taken a younger woman to please his lusts. Even his demand that his daughter marry Luovo comes from his illicit consort's depraved love for the hero and jealousy of the heroine. The other novels continue this father-villain combination. In *Udolpho*, the villain Montoni is parental only by virtue of his marriage to Emily's legal guardian. But in both *The Romance of the Forest* and *The Italian*, the parental status of the villain is explicit. Adeline's father plucks her from her convent, exposes her to danger, has her exiled, tries to seduce her, and plots to kill her. In *The Italian*, Schedoni is the monkish henchman of the hero's family who kidnaps Ellena, breaks up her wedding after she escapes, imprisons her fiancé, and finally plots her murder. The climax of the novel comes when he discovers that this plaything is his daughter. There is more than a hint of incest in this formula, but the main focus lies on the definition of an adult world in which the normal, loving relationships of fathers and

⁵See Frederick Garber, "Introduction," *The Italian*, p. xi.

children are replaced by unnatural and unprovoked enmity by the father. To Mrs. Radcliffe, the world outside the family is utterly perverse in its villainy.

Mrs. Radcliffe's gothic underworld speaks for her pessimistic estimation of the modern world which it symbolizes: it is absolutely wicked and completely beyond the control of the innocent. Her heroines are not as spineless as many of their sentimental cousins, but they can find no way to carry the fight to the wicked. Instead, they are wholly concerned with refraining from the wicked actions the hostile world tempts them to and withstanding the wiles of evil by fortitude. The heroines are upheld by a knowledge of their own rectitude and the comforts of belief in God's providence, while the villains are frenetic in their machinations. The result is a picture of a world where to be active is to be depraved. Common sense tells all the heroines that the world is much too strong to be overcome. The father-villain and his henchmen know more than the heroine about the world and have all the powers that come from position, riches, and masculinity. And while the wicked may occasionally stand in awe of goodness, they never find it persuasive. There are no Mr. B.'s in Mrs. Radcliffe's world, ready to be converted by the example of the heroines they terrify. The Radcliffe pattern, instead, is a steady growth of infamy in the villains; the novels' outcomes inevitably show that they were even worse than they had seemed. Their intransigence suggests that the innocent can only suffer in the world outside the family.

The best proof of Mrs. Radcliffe's abhorrence of the modern world lies in the inevitable happy endings of her novels. The terms of success for her heroines are inevitably those which deny any virtue to the revolutionary world of chaos. For her plots are circular. Her heroines do not progress from adolescent innocence to adult goodness through the trials they undergo. Rather, they preserve their innocence through the gothic adventures until they can revert to the hierarchical, reasonable, and safe world of the family. Her heroines devise no strategies by which to appreciate a chaotic world; no method to accept or penetrate the masked character of the adult; and no acceptance of the irrational as a positive force. Nor do they find some new powers by which to change the terms of the world. Rather, they stumble upon the lost family, whose powers are sufficient to erase all traces of the modern world. The family is capable of solving all the problems of the world: it gives the heroine an established place in a traditional hierarchy; overcomes her sense of loss of her initial family; provides her with a community which solves her isolation; surrounds her with people who are not masked; ends her flights; and denies the existence of the supposed ghosts. The family provides a traditional world as the providential reward for the heroine's goodness.

The traditional terms of the heroine's success suggest that the problems of the gothic underworld are not solvable. For to give her heroines a happy ending, Mrs. Radcliffe had to deny the very existence of the problems which her novels had posed. The conclusions insist that adult life is not that of the individual, but that of a member of the rediscovered family. In *The Italian* and *A Sicilian Romance*, the supposedly dead mother comes back to life. In the other two major novels, the heroines find surrogate families who duplicate all the good qualities of those they had lost. The heroine does not discover a safe path within a gothic underworld, but has that terrible site replaced by the world of pastoral simplicity. All of the novels end with pastoral fetes which are as stylized as the icons of the heaven which they represent. In the center of this tableau is the distant but loving patriarch: "The venerable La Luc, as he sat among the elder peasants, surveyed the scene—his children and people thus assembled round him in one grand compact of harmony and joy" (*RF*, 2:239). With him, in the foreground, are the heroine and her husband, both raised from the underworld by the power of the family. Arranged in a defensive circle around them are their relatives, friends, and devoted servants. And in the background are the dancing peasants, ecstatic in the happy ending of all troubles.

Mrs. Radcliffe poses her conclusions simply as the vindication of rewarding providence. Thus *Udolpho* insists "that though the vicious can sometimes pour affliction upon the good, their power is transient and their punishment certain; and that innocence, though oppressed by injustice, shall, supported by patience, finally triumph over misfortune!" But this triumph of providence does not prove the world of the adult livable, since it comes only through regression to the lost family home, which "became, once more, the retreat of goodness, wisdom, and domestic blessedness" (*Udolpho*, 672). The necessity of finding a retreat is indicated by the moral summary quoted above. For Mrs. Radcliffe, there are absolute forces of good and evil which pit innocence against experience. The usual fortunate fall of the education novel, which teaches the innocent how to survive in a fallen world, is thereby impossible. For there is nothing, according to Mrs. Radcliffe's novels, to be learned in the gothic underworld. It is a place where the good always suffer "under the oppression of the vicious and the disdain of the weak" (*Udolpho*, 672). The Radcliffe heroines do not look back on their lives outside the family as a maturing process, but simply as an aberration from a life of necessary seclusion. The conclusions make no attempt to disprove the iniquity of the underworld, but prove that a good person neither can nor should deal with the world.

One of the main proofs that Mrs. Radcliffe's conclusions solve the problems of the novels by evading them lies in her final treatment of her villains. She can find no solution to their perversion of the family short of

denying the existence of its wickedness: the conclusions insist that the father-villain was not the heroine's father after all. In both *The Romance of the Forest* and *The Italian*, the villains prove to be imposters who have killed the real fathers. They are defeated as soon as the heroine's true paternity is revealed. *A Sicilian Romance* finds its conclusion in the substitution of Julia's real mother and brother Theodore for the wicked pair who have finally killed each other off. In *Udolpho*, Mrs. Radcliffe resists the temptation to make Montoni a parent murderer, but she does emphasize the problems of true descent by the insertion of Laurentini's tale which explicitly links vice with the perversion of the normal family. All of the Radcliffe novels concentrate, like Laurentini's tale, on the nightmares which ensue when "the due tenderness of the parents, and the affectionate duties of the child, were equally forgotten" (*Udolpho*, 655).

The most important denial of the gothic underworld consists of the final claim that none of the irrational forces which had seemed potent were supernatural at all.⁶ Like the majority of gothic writers, Mrs. Radcliffe posits a geography which coincides with the twentieth-century schema of conscious and unconscious. But while her novels had seemed to force their heroines to descend to the unconscious depths of the irrational, their conclusions insist that there was no such site to descend to. To the heroine, outside of the hierarchical system of the family, there often seem to be forces which reason cannot explain. But once she has returned to her family's world, the horrors behind the black veil seem to have been only an ugly statue; the ghostly murmurs were only the wind, the voice of a friendly prisoner, or the sounds of servants feeding an imprisoned mother; the dimly lit charnel houses turn out to have been only burial vaults; and apparitions only dreams. That return to logic has long irritated Mrs. Radcliffe's critics,⁷ simply because it shows all too clearly that she rejects the revolutionary gothic. She insists that as soon as one fully understands one's place in the ordered world of the family, all else falls into place. Thus, in *The Sicilian Romance*, the rediscovery of the mother blots out the supernatural world. It was her imprisonment

⁶See Frederick Garber, "Meaning and Mode in Gothic Fiction," in *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture*, ed. Harold E. Pagliaro (Cleveland: The Press of Western Reserve Univ., 1973), who argues that Mrs. Radcliffe's destruction of the supernatural insists upon the human element of villainy.

⁷See S. M. Ellis, "Ann Radcliffe and Her Literary Influence," *ContempR* 123 (February 1923):192; Eino Railo, *The Haunted Castle: A Study of the Elements of English Romanticism* (London: E.P. Dutton, 1927), p. 63; Devendra P. Varma, *The Gothic Flame* (London: Arthur Barter, 1957), p. 97; and Montague Summers, "A Great Mistress of Romance: Ann Radcliffe, 1764-1823," in *Essays in Petto* (London: The Fortune Press, 1928), p. 18.

which caused the sounds the adult world had taken for ghosts. All of the mystery of Adeline's life in *The Romance of the Forest* disappears, too, as soon as she learns that Montalt was her uncle who had murdered her father and taken his place. In *Udolpho*, de Villefort proves that he is a proper father figure in large part because he is resolute in his disbelief in the supernatural. He penetrates the underground, finally, and finds that the ghosts are only smugglers. And the explanation of the wandering ghosts and black veils is complete as soon as Emily hears Laurentini's story clarifying her relationship to an unknown branch of her family. *The Italian* lets Vivaldi play the detective, whose rationality dispels all those seeming ghosts as he finds that Schedoni and his fellows caused them all.

The final rejection of the definition of the real world as isolated, perverted, and irrational makes Mrs. Radcliffe's novels oppose the tradition of the education novel. She accepts its usual psychodrama, but rejects its solutions. The starting point is conventional: life begins for the heroine in the happy time when she and her parents were identical in aims and character. But just when she reaches the age when it would be natural for her to emerge from the confines of family life, her childhood parents "die." Suddenly they seem new people, who treat her as an adult by putting their own interests on a par with hers. Where before they had been authority figures, omnipotent in knowledge and disinterested in their love, they now seem to be individuals, masking their selfish interests. They no longer protect her from the adult world. With the advent of suitors, the mother becomes jealous and the father a competitor, threatening the loved one, separating him from the daughter, punishing her with isolation. The completion of the psycho-drama seems predictable. The heroine will win her new love and then, perhaps, be able to accept her parents in their new role as equals. Mrs. Radcliffe's novels are so interesting because they defeat those expectations. The heroines persist in their adolescent view and are proven correct. Those selfish adults were not her real parents, but vile imposters. She will never achieve equal status with her parents; instead, she will rediscover them as distant arbiters and absolute authorities. The adolescent will have to sacrifice any hope of adult status, ignore the real world, and live docilely as a child for all of her life. But it is worth it: the outside world is too fraught with perils to be endured.

Mrs. Radcliffe's rebellion against the formula of the education novel suggests the true distinction of the gothic genre from its predecessors, as well as her differences from the other gothic novelists. As this essay suggests, there is far more diversity between the various novels labeled gothic than is conventionally supposed, but there are general characteristics which link most gothic novels. The clear implication of most works of the genre is that they will be more escapist than the realistic or even

the sentimental novel. The conventional historical setting of the gothic did allow treatment of the renewed interest in the irrational, the supernatural, and the psychic. In that sense the genre simply uses its retreat to the past as a vehicle for the presentation of contemporary interests. But the popularity of the gothic does not stem simply from its potential as a new technique. It was primarily an offshoot of a desire, on the part of both its readers and its authors, for escape. In contrast to a novel like *Caleb Williams*, which treats gothic themes in a modern environment, conventional gothic novels allowed the comforts of distance in time from the troubled present, melodramatic overstatement of the ordinary world, and resolute avoidance of any direct confrontation with the sociological or political problems of the late eighteenth century. Mrs. Radcliffe remains a fine spokesman for the gothic simply because her themes were as escapist as her genre. This is not to say that her novels ignore contemporary life, but that they reject it. If one accepts the gothic underworld as an apt symbolic description of her age, then one must also accept the proposition that Mrs. Radcliffe rejects both the modern and the gothic. She offers against the chaotic universe the lost world of the pastoral. Her ideal is much more pleasant than the gothic underworld or the modern world that it symbolizes: it is free of the irrational, the unconscious, the individualistic, the isolated, or the masked. Her ideal is a paradise of set values, hierarchy, and joyous openness; it pictures the redemption which follows a virtuous life in the fallen world. Her novels are, finally, otherworldly. They do not offer their readers ways of dealing with the mundane world, but escape from it. Mrs. Radcliffe looks forward to no utopia forged out of the new conditions around her, but backwards to the sanctuary of an Eden.

Edmund Wilson remarks that "the longing for mystic experience which seems always to manifest itself in periods of social confusion [is shown] by injections of imaginary horror, which soothe us with the momentary illusion that the forces of madness and murder may be tamed and compelled to provide us with a mere dramatic entertainment."⁸ In this sense, the popularity of the gothic in England around the end of the eighteenth century does stem from the social conditions of that age of change. But it does not rely, especially in Mrs. Radcliffe's case, on the popularity of the revolutionary spirit. Her novels are written to and embody the response of a civilization which seemed to be facing anarchy. The French Revolution and the attendant radical movements in England threatened the form of government, the class structure, and the way of life of her country. Mrs. Radcliffe spoke for all those who saw

⁸Edmund Wilson, "A Treatise on Tales of Horror," in *Classics and Commercial: A Literary Chronicle of the Forties* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1950), p. 173.

these conditions and longed for a simpler, better age. Her gothic underworld pictures an era so threatening in its newness that it seemed uninhabitable; her conclusions depict an ideal which finds its happiness in resolutely turning its back on modern life. Few of Mrs. Radcliffe's readers probably understood the gothic as a symbol of the French Revolution, especially as they desired a literature which had no such application. But her appeal probably did lie in the general conformity of her myth to a frightened, reactionary impulse. The world outside, her novels insist, is gothic, but there is still perfect safety in return to the older, cherished verities of home and family.