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“SEARCHING AFTER THE SPLENDID NOTHING”: GOTHIC EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE RISE OF FICTIONALITY

BY KATHERINE DING

But when I look within, and consider the mind itself which makes me capable of all these prospects and enjoyments; if it is indeed what the *Treatise of Human Nature* makes it, I find I have only been in an enchanted castle, imposed upon by spectres and apparitions. I blush inwardly to think how I have been deluded; I am ashamed of my frame, and can hardly forbear expostulating with my destiny: Is this thy pastime, O Nature, to put such tricks upon a silly creature, and then to take off the mask, and show him how he hath been befooled?

—Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind,
On the Principles of Common Sense*¹

Few critics have taken seriously the Gothic metaphor that Reid uses to criticize David Hume's epistemology.² Published in the same year as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1740)—arguably the first Gothic romance—Reid's critique inadvertently anticipates a structural parallel between Hume's speculative philosophy and the epistemology of misconstrued vision and edifying shame that characterizes early Gothic fiction, particularly that of Walpole's most popular successor: Ann Radcliffe. This transfusion works both ways: if, as Reid fears, Hume's philosophy alerts the reader to the Gothic nature of reality and the spectrality that haunts the operation of perception, Gothic fiction also demonstrates the extent to which apparitional experiences shade into quotidian reality.

Gothic literature from late eighteenth-century England is typically viewed as antithetical both to the rationality privileged by the Enlightenment and to the realism that consolidates the burgeoning novel.³ Even recent critics who argue for a closer affinity between this cluster of supernatural writing and modern philosophy tend to narrow their focus to sympathy and sentimentality.⁴ Although Gothic fiction certainly echoes the period's complex concerns with the origins and transmutability of emotions, I argue that some of the most

influential texts—which shaped readerly expectations of the genre at large—interact more directly with the questions of perception and knowledge at the heart of Enlightenment philosophy. In particular, I explore the extent to which Radcliffe’s version of the Gothic partakes in the epistemological stakes of British empiricist philosophy, and how this reevaluation of what constitutes knowledge helped legitimize the concept of fictionality that also underwrites the rise of the realist novel. Simultaneously, I argue that the Radcliffean Gothic offers a unique form of fictional engagement that cannot readily be described by the current scholarship on fictionality, and must be evaluated on its own terms.

Deidre Shauna Lynch’s analysis of the role of belief in the Gothic tradition is a recent exception to the critical trend that elides the contributions of the Gothic to the rise of the novel.⁵ However, although Lynch argues that Gothic writing “explore[s] the enlightened reader’s complicated relationship to the illusions of fiction” and claims that “the Gothic . . . raised the prospect that fiction’s authority might derive from alternative sources, not from mimetic accuracy . . . but from its performative efficacy—its capacity to affect readers,” she does not extrapolate how these complications shape the emergent concept of fictionality.⁶ Lynch further situates the Gothic in opposition to “the Enlightenment,” whereas I suggest Enlightenment philosophy, particularly from George Berkeley onward, possesses what we might call “Gothic” proclivities. Berkeley, Hume, and even Immanuel Kant radically challenged the representational theory of knowledge that Lynch describes.⁷ They collectively dismantled the very assumption that she assigns to the philosophers, that “‘truth’ is the product of an unmediated encounter between the eye and its object” by doing away with the concept of objects altogether (Berkeley), pointing out the epistemological inaccessibility of the object (Hume), or shifting the grounds of philosophical discussion from accurate representation to universal consensus (Kant).⁸ My argument complicates the accepted dichotomy between the supernaturalism of the Gothic and the naturalism attributed to the aligned forces of empiricism and realism. Against the critical tendency to view the Gothic as the anomaly in the rise of realistic fiction, and to treat the realistic novel as the natural outcropping of Enlightenment philosophy, I argue that Gothic fiction’s demonstration of the means by which we credit what is not tangible or visible is far closer to the speculative Enlightenment philosophy of the mid- and late eighteenth century than the representational mimesis typically attributed to the realist novel.

As the epigraph might suggest, Hume's skeptical empiricism serves as my point of departure. I argue that two concepts entailed by his philosophy—the divorceability of knowledge from “external objects” and the internal paradox that sustains belief—have critical implications for the rise of fictionality (*T*, 116).⁹ Although Hume's explicit discussion of reading does not utilize (and indeed, seems to contradict) these conclusions, the uptake of his claims provide an epistemological foundation upon which Hume's successors—particularly Edmund Burke, Lord Kames, and Dugald Stewart—build up arguments about the nature of aesthetic experience. These claims are absorbed most profoundly—if problematically—by early Gothic texts. Radcliffe's wildly popular and influential rendition of the Gothic, as the following sections will argue, occupies both an exemplary and contradictory position within Hume's epistemic paradigm. On the one hand, by heightening emotions through its archetypal scenes of terror, her novels create such mental vivacity as to solicit belief, enabling the experience of reading to dangerously approximate real experience. On the other hand, she innovates a plot device that forces her readers to recognize that their belief is illusory. Although this recognition fulfills Hume's prediction that “the least reflection [would] dissipate the illusions” (*T*, 172) and “place objects in their proper light” (*T*, 174), it also compromises the sharp distinction that Hume attempts to enforce between reality and imaginative illusions. The Gothic novel, particularly in its Radcliffean incarnation, reveals the extent to which so-called illusion can cast a profound epistemological shadow by offering an alternative—ironically, a deeply Humean—form of knowledge that is requisite to fictionality as a burgeoning epistemic framework. By imposing radical demands on the reader's emotions and credulity, the affective force of Radcliffe's writing reveals the limits of belief, yet also elucidates belief's central role in maintaining the reader's engagement. The Gothic plays with fictionality in its most volatile form. But this volatility cannot be sustained: in the concluding pages, I explore how divergent frameworks of fictionality (which require different reading practices) separate Gothic fiction from the Romantic novel of manners, and thereby offer an explanation for why the Gothic craze fades by the 1820s.

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Although Walpole is credited with founding Gothic fiction, it is through the writings of Radcliffe that the appetite for supernatural fiction reaches its zenith at the end of the eighteenth century. During

its heyday in the 1790s, Radcliffe's self-proclaimed Romances became wildly popular both in Britain and abroad, spawning dozens of imitators.¹⁰ At its peak, the Gothic accounted for 38 percent of the market share of novel production.¹¹ Due to this immense popularity during a formative period when the reception of novels was still in flux, one might argue that the Radcliffean school profoundly influenced the reading practices of the Gothic genre in particular and, as I will argue in the next section, the reception of novels more broadly. If it may be an exaggeration to claim of Gothic literature that "this body of fiction may well have established the popularity of the novel-form," the popularity of Gothic fiction in general—and of Radcliffe's writings in particular—nevertheless shaped the desires and expectations that governed the reading public's encounter with fictional prose.¹² Radcliffe's enduring legacy is that her works illustrate and elevate the potency of affect in the absence of causal objects that justify such responses. They demonstrate that fictional power resides in the effects produced within the mind, rather than in a stable correspondence between the experience and the object of perception.

One manifestation of Radcliffe's emphasis on affect that has received much recent critical attention is her mode of creating atmosphere or aura by giving impressionistic, evocative renderings of barely glimpsed scenery in lieu of realistically accurate or minute descriptions. As the diaphanous term suggests, atmosphere in her works precipitates mental effects (affects) that are unlocalizable in objects—and that indeed dissipate upon too close inspection. Radcliffe's narrator explicitly endorses the emotional efficacy of occluded vision in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*: "To a warm imagination, the dubious forms, that float, half veiled in darkness, afford a higher degree, than the most distinct scenery, that the sun can shew."¹³ The lengthy, yet veiled descriptions that create a sense of atmosphere signal the relocation of the scene inward, within the heroine's sensibilities and the reader's mind.¹⁴ As Lynch reminds us, "atmosphere" is "a word that Romantic period Britons were already learning to use to identify a text's mood creating tone, and which we continue to apply to texts that give us the chills."¹⁵ With the emphasis on emotional and mental effect, the object of perception itself is devalued as merely a prop—a fog machine—to be hidden, lest its presence break the illusion it strives to create.

This tendency towards crafting efficacious impressions rather than striving for representational accuracy is also evident in Radcliffe's indifference to historical anachronism. Many of her contemporary readers point out this reoccurring feature but curiously choose to

overlook it while judging her work. An anonymous review complains that “her ignorance was nearly equal to her imagination, and that is saying a great ideal” and goes on to enumerate Radcliffe’s long list of anachronistic errors.¹⁶ However, rather than arguing that the errors attenuate the effect of her stories, the author concludes, “With all this and more, her romances are irresistibly and dangerously delightful; fitted to insure a mind devoted to them with a species of melancholy madness.”¹⁷ In a similar vein, Julia Kavanagh’s biography of women writers notes that “[*Udolpho*] opens in France, in the year 1584; but the date is immaterial; the story belongs to no time, and Mrs. Radcliffe did not even attempt historic truth.”¹⁸ Describing *Gaston de Blondville* but generalizing more broadly about Radcliffe’s *oeuvre*, an 1834 review in the *Edinburgh Review* reluctantly justifies her extensive landscape depictions: “Even while it tires us, as suspending the interest of the story, it probably attunes the mind to sympathy with the coming events, and like an overture, conveys hints and shadows of what is to follow.”¹⁹ This tendency to condone Radcliffe’s anachronisms continues even into the twentieth century. In 1932, Q. D. Leavis writes: “The superb absence of any historical sense is the saving of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.”²⁰ James Watt carries this claim into present day criticism: “While a work such as *Udolpho*, set in 1584, sometimes mentions ‘the turbulence of that period,’ or certain peculiarities of ‘that time,’ these comments seem to be purely concessionary.”²¹ Taking cues from the signature twilight atmosphere of the story’s presentation, readers can easily accept the counterfactual historical details. The story has already trained them to focus predominantly on the mental effects—the atmosphere or aura—cast by objects, not their representational accuracy.

Terry Castle describes the intensification of sentimentality in *Udolpho*: “[o]ne sees in the mind’s eye those who are absent; one is befriended and consoled by phantoms of the beloved . . . to be haunted, according to the novel’s romantic myth, is to display one’s powers of sympathetic imagination; the cruel and the dull have no such hallucinations.”²² The imaginative mode of interaction privileged in this text requires the physical absence of the beloved in order to “see” him most vividly: “the other was indeed reduced to a phantom—a purely mental effect, an image, as it were, on the screen of consciousness itself.”²³ Whereas Castle recuperates John Locke and focuses her discussion on the spectralization of distant and deceased persons, I would argue, with an eye towards Hume, that the epistemological reality of phantasmatic others that she diagnoses applies much more broadly to the status of all ghostly objects that evoke a strong mental

response—including *Udolpho* itself as a textual, fictional object in the reader's hands.

Nearly every mystery in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is predicated on an unreliable relationship between objects and impressions. To sketch only a few of Emily's misattributions of impressions to improper sources: the identity of a miniature kept by her father, the mysterious music that turns out to be the work of a pensive nun, unseen echoes that originate from a human voice, a French prisoner mistaken for her lover, and a strange figure that turns out to be an escaped prisoner. In one of the most famous scenes of misrecognition, Emily "perceived" (in a vision apparently endorsed by the narrator) the corpse of her aunt only to discover that it was actually her living body, ravaged by illness (*U*, 323). In each case, the heightened impressions are not produced by the object itself, but rather by the imaginative misinterpretations enabled by its ambiguity. Although the obscurity of the object builds interest and terror, the impression is never localizable in any object, natural or otherwise: the anticipated supernatural cause is denied, and the terror is incommensurate to the revealed natural cause. Put bluntly, once stimulated, the emotional effect is independent of the objective cause and thrives only in its absence.

The derivative works of Radcliffe's many imitators maintain—if little else—the readerly engagement fostered by obscurity. The numerous unlicensed chapbooks of *Udolpho* further emphasize novel's modus operandi of efficacious evocation. Such books take great liberties, abridging the storyline and changing the characters' names, while remaining sufficiently suggestive to bask in *Udolpho*'s popularity. The bestseller chapbook, *The Veiled Picture*, reduces Radcliffe's original text to seventy-eight pages, largely by cutting out virtually all descriptive renderings to leave only the skeletal explanations that advance the plot.²⁴ And yet, as with nearly every abridgement, *The Veiled Picture* retains each instance of the original "explained supernatural," further propagating the device and its effects beyond Radcliffe's immediate readership.²⁵ By simultaneously relying on the popularity of Radcliffe's writings and condensing them to the repetition of a single trope, the chapbooks function through a metonymic relationship to invoke the affective force of the original text that it replaces.

Although many critics argue that Radcliffe's texts use the incongruity between extravagant emotional response and its innocuous objective

correlative to train her readers to cultivate an appropriate response or to enforce a rationalizing Enlightenment discourse, the affective force of the text—which accounts for its wild popularity—stems from its lack of emotional discipline.²⁶ As Robert Kiely suggests, “[Radcliffe] may preach prudence, moderation, and universal harmony, but the potential fertility of [its] irrational state remains the most original and convincing aspect of Mrs. Radcliffe’s art.”²⁷ If an eleventh-hour conversion to rationality is the intended effect, it seems curious that Radcliffe’s repeated formula should be pedagogically ineffective for both the heroine and the readers. In stark contrast to the reception of the novel of manners that became popular in the early nineteenth century, the majority of Radcliffe’s readers enjoyed her novels, but rejected this formulaic ending and the rationalistic logic that it seemed to espouse. Her repeated trope of the explained supernatural divorces experiences from the purported objects that give rise to them: a schism that accounts for the novel’s emotive force and is exacerbated—rather than reconciled—by the eventual reattachment of experience to objects enacted by Radcliffe’s naturalistic explanations.

Radcliffe’s contemporary readers relished the power of terror evoked by her stories. The reader feels, as one reviewer puts it, “apprehension that suspends almost the faculty of breathing.”²⁸ Most of her critics and aficionados locate her talent in her ability to heighten the reader’s emotions.²⁹ William Hazlitt’s discussion is typical:

But in harrowing up the soul with imaginary horrors, and making the flesh creep, and the nerves thrill with fond hopes and fears, she is unrivalled among her fair countrywomen. Her great power lies in describing the indefinable, and embodying a phantom. She makes her readers twice children; and from the dim and shadowy veil which she draws over the objects of her fancy, forces us to believe all that is strange, and next to impossible, of their mysterious agency. . . . [S]he has all the poetry of romance, all that is obscure, visionary, and objectless in the imagination.³⁰

Echoing Burkean aesthetics, Hazlitt suggests that the imaginative force of Radcliffe’s novels stems from veiling the object that produces terror. To preview my claims in the following section, the “dim and shadowy” veil also recalls Hume’s relocation of knowledge from representation—here, definitively occluded—to efficacy: from privileging a clear correspondence with the object to celebrating the imaginative force and vivacity that arises despite (and Edmund Burke would add, *because of*) its epistemological obscurity. Furthermore, the conflation

of psychological with physiological reactions—"harrowing up the soul . . . making the flesh creep and the nerves thrill with fond hopes and fears"—evinces the extent to which the mental effect of her stories becomes indistinguishable from real perception and experience within the paradigms of eighteenth-century philosophy. The repetition of jarringly corporeal responses among Radcliffe's reviewers suggests that the vivacity of her stories becomes embodied within her readers. Yet that effect is palpable only when the object itself—the specific source of such emotions—is dematerialized.

The vast majority of Radcliffe's readers and reviewers can appreciate her narrative effects only when the causes of terror remain inaccessible: their most frequent and vehement complaints pertain to her use of the "explained supernatural," which resolves the heroine's (and reader's) sublime terror with disappointingly ordinary causes. Radcliffe's reviewers repeatedly suggest that such revelations detract from rather than heighten their enjoyment. In her preface to Ann Radcliffe in *The Lives of British Novelists*, Anna Laetitia Barbauld registers the collective disappointment produced by *Udolpho*'s naturalizing ending:

It has been the aim in this work to assemble appearances of the most impressive kind, which continually present the idea of supernatural agency, but which are at length accounted for by natural means. They are not always, however, *well* accounted for; the mind experiences a sort of disappointment and shame at having felt so much from appearances which had nothing in them beyond "this visible diurnal sphere."³¹

Barbauld is hardly alone in her complaints. Her disapproval of Radcliffe's "explained supernatural" formula is echoed by—among others—Mary Wollstonecraft, Sir Walter Scott, commentary attributed to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and numerous reviews in the influential *Monthly Inquiry* and *Critical Review*. Similar feelings are noted by dozens of readers in private letters and journals.³² The language of enchantment dominates her readers' descriptions: "Her conclusions are tame and impotent almost without example. But while her spells actually operate, her power is truly magical" (T. Noon Talfourd); "We are not sensible of the general improbability of the story until we have closed the book and shaken off the entrancement with which we were deluded" (*Atheneum*); "Mrs. Radcliffe has contrived to produce as powerful an effect as if the invisible world had been obedient to her magic spell; and the reader experiences in perfection the strange luxury of artificial terror" (attributed to William Enfield); "We are made to wonder, only to wonder; but the spell, by which we are led,

again and again, round the same magic circle, is the spell of genius . . . reason with delight resigns the reins to fancy, till forced to wipe her eyes and recollect, with a sigh, that it is but a dream.”³³ As the emphasis on compulsion that accompanies this repeated metaphor of enchantment suggests, Radcliffe’s readers claim that her fictions compel belief, often despite their own compunctions. How does the text inflict what appears to be an unwilling suspension of disbelief upon readers who insist, afterwards, that they knew better? On which level does this (dis)belief operate?

The rhetoric of compulsion and the conflation between psychological and somatic responses registered by Radcliffe’s reviews invite us to frame these responses through eighteenth century philosophy, which served as the primary forum for discussing the connections between belief, compulsion, and perception. In particular, Hume’s theories of the mind—which emphasize the epistemological import of belief—provides a useful (if incomplete) framework through which to consider Radcliffean fiction. By viewing the Radcliffean Gothic as engaging with a particularly skeptical moment in the contentious debates of modern philosophy, we might see how the concept of fictionality that emerges from her novels can stake a complex epistemological claim.

As numerous scholars have argued, Hume’s epistemology marks a radical break with the representational theories of knowledge posited by earlier empiricists such as Locke.³⁴ Rather than proposing a correspondence between sensory perception and real objects in the world, Hume draws the limit of epistemology at the limit of perception by arguing that the object itself is beyond our reach.³⁵ The consequence of Hume’s mediated view of empiricism—in which all knowledge originates in experience filtered through the perception of objects that are never directly accessible in themselves—is that experience can only be known by its impact on the mind. Detaching experience from strict objective reality, Hume assigns the imagination a formative role in his epistemological paradigm and posits efficacy—the “force and vivacity” of the impressions perceived by the observer—as the only criterion by which knowledge can be assessed (*T*, 50).

As Hume himself notes, and later critics have reiterated, belief becomes critical to his philosophy.³⁶ He describes belief as “something *felt* by the mind, which distinguishes the ideas of the judgment from the fictions of the imagination” (*T*, 146). Since our conception of reality,

according to Hume, is mediated through the passions to produce impressions that differ only in degree from ideas arising from fictional accounts of nonreal experiences, fiction has the potential to produce not only a representation of experience but also the vivacity imparted by experience itself: the diacritical mark of Humean reality. Although Hume attempts to distinguish between experiences of fiction and reality (“there is something weak and imperfect amidst all that seeming vehemence of thought and sentiment, which attends the fictions of poetry” [T, 173]), he acknowledges that the imagination is capable (when it “degenerates into madness or folly” [T, 172], for example) of producing fictions of such vivacity that they are indistinguishable from impressions arising from true perception. Hume’s mediated account of reality and his empowerment of the imagination militate against his expressed desire to relegate the fictions produced by poetry to a lower epistemological status. His discussion of poetry, in fact, anticipates—though never articulates—the possibility that so-called fiction can be made equivalent to reality.³⁷ He writes:

We may observe the same effect in poetry in a lesser degree; only with this difference, that the least reflection dissipates the illusions of poetry, and places the objects in their proper light. ’Tis however certain, that in the warmth of a poetical enthusiasm, a poet has a counterfeit belief, and even a kind of vision of his objects: And if there be any shadow of argument to support this belief, nothing contributes more to his full conviction than a blaze of poetical figures and images, which have their effect upon the poet himself, as well as his readers. (T, 174)

Even as the first sentence attempts to enforce the separation of poetic fictions from reality, the differences begin to collapse in Hume’s description of poetry as “a counterfeit belief” and “a kind of vision.” His description of a “counterfeit belief” is already problematic because belief itself determines the legitimacy of our perceptions in his paradigm.³⁸ In a similar manner, a “kind of vision” is indistinguishable from “true” perception, for Hume’s immediate description of the poet (and his reader’s) “full conviction” blurs the degrees of vivacity that separate impressions of perception from ideas in the mind.

The one concrete difference that Hume here posits between fictional and real experiences, however, is worth investigating and marks the potential for a Gothic turn in his thinking: “the least reflection dissipates the illusions of poetry, and places the objects in their proper light.” Although the fictions cast by poetry can indeed marshal a false conviction that temporarily conflates illusion with reality, Hume suggests

that their inability to sustain belief (their susceptibility to “reflection”) reveals them as imposters to truthful impressions. Yet Hume’s claim that the endurance of belief can successfully regulate the porous boundary between reality and illusion contradicts his own philosophical paradigm. His use of the term “reflection” emphasizes the critical connection between self-consciousness and disillusionment: the turning back of consciousness towards its own action to reveal its operative apparatus.³⁹ What reflection reveals, however, is a fundamental parallel between fiction and reality: if the belief in poetic fictions is illusory, then so is the belief in reality. Belief sustains the customs and habits essential to quotidian life (and as Susan Manning notes, to the philosophy in the remaining books of Hume’s *Treatise*), and can only function by avoiding acknowledgement of Hume’s philosophical tenet that repetition, as the foundation of belief, can never actually establish the truth that it espouses.⁴⁰ Such an evasion, however, can only successfully operate on a latent register, which necessarily escapes conscious observation: all belief requires a lack of reflection in order to be sustained. At the end of book 1 of his *Treatise*, Hume emphasizes the elasticity of belief, which allows one to continuously traverse between enjoying the quotidian world of “the common affairs of life” and reflecting upon philosophical awareness of the illusory nature of that world (*T*, 316). Yet, since Hume argues that “tho’ these operations be equally natural and necessary in the human mind . . . in some circumstances they are directly contradictory,” it seems impossible to reside in both realms simultaneously: to be aware of the fictive nature of reality while partaking in it (*T*, 313). In order to inhabit either state, one needs to set aside—however temporarily—reflection or awareness of the other. As Hume notes in the closing paragraph of book 1, “we shou’d yield to that propensity, which inclines us to be positive and certain in *particular points*, according to the light in which we survey them in any *particular instant*” (*T*, 320–21). Although Hume locates his own moderate skepticism in this oscillation between the vivacity of common life and the skepticism of philosophical endeavors (and encourages his readers to do the same), the work of forgetting is essential to his prescription. Belief, in Humean epistemology, entails a suspension of disbelief: a never-complete effacement of the philosophical paradox that the very concept entails.

The potential for conflation between the “fictions of the imagination” and the fictions of quotidian experience in Hume’s account opens the door for the collapse of epistemological with aesthetic frameworks—precisely the psychological state encountered by Radcliffe’s readers.

Although Hume rigorously pursues the radical implications of his argument in other realms (resulting in, for example, his famous “bundle” theory of personal identity), as previously noted, he refrains from exploring the blurred distinctions between experiences of reality and reading that his reevaluation of epistemology inadvertently introduces (T, 300).⁴¹ His contemporary, Henry Home, Lord Kames, however, completes the “gothic turn” to make the Humean argument that Hume himself resists. Kames’s popular theory of reading adopts and promulgates a version of Hume’s epistemology under the guise of aesthetics:

A lively and accurate description of an important event, raises in me ideas no less distinct than if I had been originally an eye-witness: I am insensibly transformed into a spectator; and have an impression, that every incident is passing in my presence. . . . Hence the pleasure of a reverie, where a man, forgetting himself, is totally occupied with the ideas passing in his mind, the objects of which he conceives to be really existing in his presence. The power of language to raise emotions, depends entirely on the raising of such lively and distinct images as are here described; the reader’s passions are never sensibly moved, till he be thrown into a kind of reverie; in which state, forgetting that he is reading, he conceives every incident as passing in his presence, precisely as if he were an eye-witness.⁴²

In Kames’s description of reading, real presence, as “vouched by eye-sight, [which] commands our belief” converges with “ideal presence,” which compels images of such vivacity that the reader “conceives every incident as passing in his presence, precisely as if he were an eye-witness.” Although reading invokes an aesthetic framework, the absorptive nature of that framework causes the reader to temporarily suspend reflection. “[F]orgetting that he is reading,” the reverie that characterizes a particular type of reading overlaps the aesthetic with the epistemological, rendering the two indistinguishable for the duration of that experience.

Yet this conflation is curious: how can the experience gained from reading approach the vivacity of firsthand sensory experience? As David Marshall notes, “Kames rationally admits that objects presented by fictions of the imagination are not identical to objects actually present to his sight, but he frequently acts as if they were or could be—almost saying as much, even literally saying as much, at least for the moment.”⁴³ Kames’s extravagant description of the vivacity of reading which argues—if only momentarily—for an equivalence with the experiences of sensory perception depends upon an epistemic framework that implicitly deemphasizes the source of that experience

(arising from linguistic description rather than material objects), which enables Kames to argue that they result in the same effect. The reality principle underlying Kames's account of reading is predicated on efficacy rather than referential reliability: his discussion of both ideal and real presence depends on Humean epistemology. Kames also repeats the slippage that occurs in Hume's discussion of experience, but from the opposite direction. While insisting on the separation of his efficacious epistemology from aesthetic experiences such as romance and poetry reading, Hume inadvertently introduces the possibility that the two frameworks might be intermingled. While attempting to distinguish the aesthetic realm of "ideal presence" from real experience, Kames's language slips to reveal their temporary conflation at the site of reading.

Lord Kames's discussion of the power of belief *in reading* explicitly draws out the implications of Hume's paradigm and challenges Hume's dismissal that "poetic fictions" are unable to attain sufficient "force and vivacity" as to compel belief. In direct contradistinction to Hume's claim that "the [reader of history] has a more lively conception of all the incidents [than a reader of romance]" (T, 147), Kames writes, "if, in reading, ideal presence be the means by which our passions are moved, it makes no difference whether the subject be a fable or a true story: when ideal presence is complete, we perceive every object as in our sight; and the mind, totally occupied with an interesting event, finds no leisure for reflection."⁴⁴ The potency of Radcliffe's romances to enchant her contemporary audience lies precisely in achieving what Kames proleptically describes and Hume axiomatically declares to be impossible: she creates "poetic illusions" of such force and vivacity that they temporarily compel her readers' belief by arresting their reflection.

Published at the height of Radcliffe's popularity, Dugald Stewart's *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind* makes an even more explicit claim that an experience of fiction can be epistemologically identical with the experience of reality: "the exercise of both conception and imagination is always accompanied with a belief, that the objects exist."⁴⁵ Although he explicitly allies himself with Reid, one of Hume's arch-critics, Stewart's argument that the steadfastness of this conception solicits belief in the reality of the object is built upon Hume's claim that the experience of reality is linked to the vivacity of an object's effect on the mind. Stewart writes: "when the conceptions of the mind are rendered steady and permanent, by being strongly associated with any sensible impression, they command our belief no less than our actual perceptions; and, therefore, if it were possible for us, with our eyes shut, to keep up for a length of time, the conception

of any sensible object, we should, as long as this effort continues, to believe that the object was present to our senses" (*E*, 80). He argues that this belief endures for the duration of the experience, even if the object is later revealed to be fictional or deceptive. Describing a staged optical illusion in which a spectator is surprised by "a stroke aimed at him by the image of a dagger," he notes, "[i]f a person who has seen this experiment is asked, in his cooler moments, whether or not he believes the dagger which he saw to be real, he will readily answer in the negative; and yet the accurate statement of the fact undoubtedly is, that the first and the proper effect of the perception is belief; and that the disbelief he feels, is the effect of subsequent reflection" (*E*, 77). Stewart makes a strong claim that all experiences—whether of real, deceptive, imaginary, or fictitious objects—will appear real to the observer whose attention is absorbed in that experience.

Stewart's marquis innovation upon a largely Humean framework is to emphasize the critical link—both necessary and sufficient—between attention and belief: "The effect of perception, while it engages the attention completely to itself, is to produce belief" (*E*, 77). Although he does not explicitly frame the argument as such, the implications of this claim suggest that terror and obscurity—traits closely associated with Gothic fiction during this time—are particularly well suited to inducing such absorptive states that allow the reader to temporarily forget the fictitious frame of that experience. Stewart argues that heightened passions—particularly terror, as the dagger example suggests—compel the observer's complete attention and consequently solicit belief while such passions endure. He also claims that obscurity works to a similar end in a different manner, to extend the duration of that experience by prolonging the epistemic suspension that is necessary for belief to function. The thought experiment that Stewart offers as an example could have been lifted from any Radcliffean Gothic novel:

It appears to be no slight confirmation of these remarks that although, in the dark, the illusions of the imagination are much more liable to be mistaken for realities, than when their momentary effects on the objects which the light of day presents to our perceptions; yet even total darkness is not so alarming to a person impressed with the vulgar stories of apparitions, as a faint and doubtful twilight, which affords to the conceptions an opportunity of fixing and prolonging their existence, by attaching themselves to something which is obscurely exhibited by the eye. In like manner, when we look through a fog, we are frequently apt to mistake a crow for a man; and the conception we have, upon such an occasion, of the human figure, is much more

distinct and much more steady, than it would be possible for us to form, if we had no sensible object before us; insomuch that when, on a more attentive observation, the crow shrinks to its own dimensions, we find it impossible, by any effort, to conjure up the phantom which a moment before we seemed to perceive. (*E*, 80)

Like Kames and Hume, Stewart argues that reflection alone can enable one to discern between objects that belong solely to the imagination and those actually present to the senses. Belief in the reality of any particular object—as Stewart’s dagger and crow examples suggest—is impossible to recapture once it has been disillusioned by reflection. Reflection functions in the same manner in all three authors, both to correct misapprehensions of quotidian experiences (as described in preceding quote), but also to reveal the framework that marks fictional or aesthetic experiences as such by shattering the spectator’s absorption in that experience. Describing the experience of watching tragedy, Stewart notes, “I acknowledge, that we have a general conviction that the whole is a fiction; but, I believe, it will be found that the violent emotions which are sometimes produced by the distressed of the stage, take their rise, in most cases, from a momentary belief, that the distresses are real . . . before reflection has time to come to our relief” (*E*, 80–81). Like many philosophers of this period (Hume among them), Stewart is skeptical of the utility of fictional texts: he denigrates the “elevated characters” of romances (which can all too easily describe Radcliffe’s heroines) as being too unrealistic to provide moral education to readers (*E*, 277–78).⁴⁶ Nevertheless, key elements of his philosophy—his concatenation of heightened passions and obscurity with the production of belief that temporary disables the ability to distinguish between fiction and reality—highlights the Gothic reader’s particular susceptibility to absorptive states.

Radcliffe’s fiction, as we have already seen, depends upon an epistemological schism between the object and the experience of perception in order to create the harrowing scenes that draw her readers in. As many of her contemporaries noted, Radcliffe self-consciously adopts Edmund Burke’s influential theory that links the sublimity of terror to the obscurity of its objective cause.⁴⁷ When Emily is led to her imprisoned aunt, for example, she catches a shadowy glimpse of an object whose obscurity accounts for the emotions that it inspires:

As she stood examining it, in fearful expectation of discovering something lying in an obscure corner of the room, and, struck with a horrible conviction, she became for an instant, motionless and nearly insensible. Then, with a kind of desperate resolution, she hurried towards the object that excited her terror, and when, perceiving the clothes of some person, on the floor, she caught hold of them, and found in her grasp the old uniform of a soldier. . . . Scarcely daring to trust her sight, she continued, for some moments, to gaze on the object of her late alarm[.] (U, 323)

The object produces terror only as long as it remains obscure; when Emily compels herself to approach and “grasp” the object, her formerly spellbinding impression immediately dissipates into “late alarm.” This Burkean moment—one of many in Radcliffe’s writings—also elucidates Burke’s intensification of Hume’s epistemological shift; not only is the actual object considered irrelevant aside from its effect on perception as Hume would have it, but it is the very absence of the object that produces the strongest, most “forceful and vivid” (that is, real) impressions in Burke’s account.

The iconic scene of the veiled (and revealed) painting in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* provides an opportunity to examine how Radcliffe’s romances are able to produce these vivid, seemingly somatic effects in her readers. Returning to a shrouded painting that she had noticed earlier, the Gothic heroine Emily “lifted the veil; but instantly let it fall—perceiving that what it had concealed was no picture, and, before she could leave the chamber, she dropped senseless to the floor” (U, 248–49). The buildup to this incident could have served as a Humean illustration of the mind’s readiness to confuse “customary conjunctions” for the assumed logical necessity of cause and effect (T, 70). Prompted by the painting’s apparent “connection with the late lady of the castle, and the conversation of Annette, together with the circumstances of the veil . . . that excited a faint degree of terror,” Emily leaps—unjustifiably so, as it turns out—to associate those rumors with her growing conviction that some horror lurks behind the veil (U, 248). It is also notable that she faints just after she pulls back the veil to “see” what it conceals. Emily’s loss of consciousness interjects between her belief and her reflection upon the object that would have discredited it. However, whereas the heroine readily revives and “recovered her recollection,” Radcliffe’s long narrative delay in divulging what Emily sees (or thinks she sees) suspends the reader in a precarious epistemic state (U, 249). Lacking even a textual description of the actual object that evokes such terror—Radcliffe only displays its vivid effects—the

reader is forced to rely on Emily's habitually oversensitive perceptions. Twice removed from the object (mediated through a lack of description layered over Emily's misperception), the reader experiences vivid sensibility in the absence of any sensation. To read Radcliffe's most iconic and potent scene is to enact a Humean shift that reconsiders what constitutes experience, but it is also to assert a Kamesian and Stewartian emphasis on the intense vivacity of aesthetic engagement.

Emily is never disabused of her conviction that the "no picture" she observes behind the veil is the decomposing body of Signora Laurentini, but a disembodied narrative voice resolves the mystery for the reader some four hundred pages later:

On such an object, it will be readily believed, that no person could endure to look twice. Emily, it may be recollected, had, after the first glance, let the veil drop, and her terror had prevented her from ever provoking a renewal of such suffering, as she had then experienced. Had she dared to look again, her delusion and her fears would have vanished together, and she would have perceived, that the figure before her was not human, but formed of wax. (*U*, 662)

As many critics have noted, the narrative voice slips into the subjunctive to draw attention to the path not taken. Since Emily presumes that Montoni had murdered "the figure before her," her conviction of his villainy and her decision to flee Udolpho are largely motivated by her misperception of this scene. Emily's timely faint sustains both the protracted page count and the emotional vivacity of the narrative. Although the subjunctive seems to echo Hume's claim that "the least reflection dissipates the illusions of poetry, and places the objects in their proper light," Radcliffe's narrator emphasizes the Kamesian impossibility of such a reflection under the narrative circumstances: "no person could endure to look twice." Reflection—which would close the epistemic suspension that obscurity requires—constitutes the very "look[ing] twice" disallowed by the heightened passions evoked by the text.⁴⁸

The Gothic heroine's curious susceptibility to frequent losses of consciousness dramatizes the epistemic state of Radcliffe's readers, who repeatedly attest to the text's power over their bodily as well as emotional reactions. The latter triggers the former: the reader's self-proclaimed passivity signals not an actual inability to close the book, but rather the ability of Radcliffe's fiction to make the readers forget that they are holding a book in the first place. The rhetoric of compulsion also helps to explain the sense of reality that readers

describe: the perception of compulsion echoes the *modus operandi* of real experiences, which are not subjugated to the voluntary control of the mind according to a wide consensus among eighteenth century philosophers.⁴⁹ Belief and vivacity reinforce one another. By subsuming its readers in terrifying experiences that are so vivid as to feel real (to the extent that readers repeatedly describe the reading experience in corporeal terms), the perceived reality of that reading experience arrests the reflection that might dissipate the reader's belief. To believe is habitually to suspend disbelief, to leave off the skepticism (as Hume famously does in the concluding pages of the book 1 of his *Treatise*) that forces one to confront the illusory nature of our habitual connections each time one engages with the quotidian, rather than the philosophical realm. And yet (for Hume, this point serves to moderate his skepticism) acting as if the object of one's belief is really real and not merely perceived as such is sufficient to give this object the efficacy of reality—which within Hume's phenomenological epistemology, is tantamount to reality. Belief can sustain the force of reality as long as its *modus operandi* goes unnoticed. But once attention is called to the act of belief—the fact that this act alone substantiates the force of connections that it purports—both the belief and the ability to act as if it were true vanish. Thus, the epistemology of obscurity and terror that becomes a hallmark of the early Gothic novel—characteristics inaugurated and made famous by Radcliffe—is particularly well adapted to conditioning a state of mental engrossment that temporarily suspends the self-reflection that would reveal the artifice of textuality.

Although Radcliffe's wildly popular texts challenge Hume's dismissal of "the illusions of fiction," Humean epistemology, particularly as refracted through Kames, Stewart, and Burke, can help to make sense of the insistent rhetoric of compulsion that is echoed by reviewers of Radcliffe's work. Barbauld writes,

In novels of this kind, where the charm of suspense and mystery is employed, we hurry through with suspended breath, and in a kind of agony of expectation; but when we come to the end of the story, the charm is dissolved, we have no wish to read it again; we have no wish to recur to it as we do to the characters of Western in *Tom Jones*, or the Harrels in *Cecilia*; the interest is painfully strong while we read, and when once we have read it, it is nothing; we are ashamed of our feelings, and do not wish to recall them.⁵⁰

Scott echoes her commentary: "But if the conscious listener discovers it to be only the noise made by the cat, the solemnity of the feeling is

gone, and the visionary is at once angry with his senses for having been cheated, and with his reason for having acquiesced in the deception. We fear that some such feeling of disappointment and displeasure attends most readers[.]”⁵¹ Allan Cunningham writes, “We are offended with ourselves for being so imposed on; we have a contempt for the very victims who were ‘frightened with false fire;’ and we extend not a little of our ill will to the writer who took such pains to put us out of humor with ourselves.”⁵² The regret (among sympathetic readers) or vehemence (among critical commentators) that is evident in these reviews—which are generally written *after* the commentator finishes the book—is not evidence of compelled will, but rather (as Stewart would remind us) the disavowing of a formerly held belief. This retrospective shame indicates that her readers experience a sense of delusion, (in Coleridgean terms, as opposed to illusion) when confronted with Radcliffe’s explained supernatural. Whereas the enjoyment of fiction as an illusion depends upon the audience’s full acknowledgement of and consent to the fictive nature of their aesthetic experience, delusion entails experiencing the fiction as a form of reality—that is, temporarily forgetting the fictive framework of that experience. The reader’s shame suggests that their sense of belief while engrossed in their reading experience verges into delusion, and becomes so powerful that its disenchantment solicits a violent backlash against—even disownment of—their previous state of mind that permits no return to a state of belief. If Radcliffe’s self-described romances cultivate a taste for impressions segregated from a correlative object, they also leave her readers perpetually dissatisfied. She tantalizes her readers with a momentary suspension of disbelief that her use of the explained supernatural relentlessly shatters.

One might wonder, as her reviewers did time after time, why Radcliffe insisted on recycling a plot device that was unpopular and dissatisfying to her audience. Rather than assume her indifference to criticism or her incapacity to imagine more satisfying endings, I would like to take up Ian Duncan’s suggestion that “[t]he bathos that attends the sentence of rational explanation, the disappointment of demystification, is a necessary aesthetic effect.”⁵³ Duncan links the moment of bathos to the inevitable impotency of the Gothic romance, which “on the last page . . . declare[s] itself void of magic.”⁵⁴ I would add that this ultimately generic self-effacement bears closer resemblance to a

sacrifice than an elegy: it validates the fictionality that it cannot fully occupy. Radcliffe's repeated use of this device despite its overwhelmingly negative reception suggests that the disappointment registered by her contemporary readers may be a part of the pedagogical lesson. By producing addictive, heightened sensations and then revealing that those extravagant feelings cannot be appropriately accorded with their supposed causal objects, Radcliffe and her imitators trained her immense readership to acknowledge the potency and appeal of sensations even when divorced from objects. Although most commentators predominantly register their disappointment, Radcliffe's disenchanting revelations also serve to elevate, by contrast, the imaginative space which had permitted the reader to muster sufficient belief—despite their post-reading protests—to enjoy the impressions of terror that her obscure descriptions provoke. The incongruity between the intense, even overwrought reactions of the heroine (echoed, as reviews and letters show, by Radcliffe's contemporary readers) and the relatively innocuous demystifying explanations can be viewed as enacting a Humean shift to legitimize experiences that are dislocated from the objects that supposedly gave rise to them. The very dissatisfaction of finally seeing the “cause” of the terrors revealed only further substantiates the gratuitousness and even the impediment of representational fidelity, and by contrast emphasizes the “force and vivacity” of experience itself when its corresponding object is unavailable. Paradoxically, it is only when the enchantment is broken that it can be recognized as such: alluring precisely because it is illusory. Radcliffe's readers can only learn that they are capable of vivid emotional and physical engagement with nobodies and nothings when that lack is made forcefully present by the undesired return of the object.

By overusing naturalistic explanation that casts into sharp relief the “force[ful] and vivaci[ous]” impressions dislocated from objects, Radcliffe's Gothic texts surreptitiously condition her immense readership to justify the textual parallel of affective response to fictionality as an aesthetic framework. If readers can recognize and enjoy their strong emotional responses to objects that turn out to be nonpersons (a wax figure, a pile of clothes), then perhaps they can extend that lesson to fiction itself, which provokes emotional engagement with characters that are presented through the illusory nobody of the text. Catherine Gallagher persuasively argues that the nonreferentiality of character names—the implicit contract between novel readers and writers that names in a novel refer to no actual person—accounts for the affective appeal of fictionality. Employing Hume's conception of sympathy as

an appropriation of another's emotions, Gallagher suggests that the referential emptiness of character names invokes the strongest sympathetic transfusion, since novel readers can—without the obstacle of another's body and mind—be “acquisitive without impertinence.”⁵⁵ The pleasurable response to such emotional investment in literal nobodies, I would also suggest, is further conditioned by the epistemology of Gothic fictions, which extends the logic of nonreferential characters more broadly to disproportionate responses to objects within the text, even to textuality itself as an experience of vivid engagement with an object—a book—whose material content cannot justify the passions it invokes in its readers. For Gallagher, the fictionality that “goes without saying” is a historical marker of its establishment, but I would argue, it is also a prerequisite of its success within a Gothic context.⁵⁶ Contrary to Gallagher's Coleridgean claim that the enjoyment of fiction is dependent upon the recognition of that framework as such (the underlying knowledge that what we are reading is fictional, no matter how realistic it may seem), the reception of Radcliffe's works suggest that such recognition must be postponed in order for the experience to be most potent. At the height of the Gothic absorption, the belief that enables fictionality requires the reader to set aside conscious recognition of its paradoxical apparatus: compelled by the vivacity of their emotions aroused by the text, readers do not reflect on the reality of what they read—therefore permitting the experience to feel real until their belief is disillusioned.

In Radcliffe's iteration of the Gothic, the reader's emotional speculation dissipates once the object is identified, for the vivacity of terror far outstrips the represented reality. Radcliffe's reattachment of imaginative efficaciousness to causal objects produces a doubled response in her audience: the nearly universal disappointment that, in the memorable phrase attributed to Mary Wollstonecraft, “leav[es] the aching sight searching after the splendid nothing” emphasizes the attractiveness—seductiveness, even—of emotional investment in imaginative nonrepresentations; while simultaneously, the instant repulsion that compels even her most sympathetic readers to distance themselves from the credulity of their former reading experience renders this imaginative space uninhabitable.⁵⁷

The impossibility of sustaining post-revelatory belief might explain why so many of Radcliffe's readers—even the most sympathetic—claim that her tales cannot sustain the enjoyment of a second reading.⁵⁸ As Scott notes, “the feelings of suspense and awful attention which she excites, are awakened by means of springs which lie open, indeed,

to the first touch, but which are peculiarly liable to be worn out by repeated pressure.”⁵⁹ Gothic fictions rely on the very readerly amnesia of their formulaic devices that they insistently disable. The Gothic remains fictional in Hume’s expressed pejorative sense: it provides vivid impressions (which take on the guise of truthful perceptions) that further reflection exposes as false. To extrapolate further from Hume’s account, belief that can withstand corrective revelation is necessary for a fictionality that does not inevitably discredit its own framework.

In the generation that followed Radcliffe, writers who focused on crafting realistic fiction inherited the readerly desire for fictional engagement that Radcliffe’s texts provoked among the public, but also modulated the requirements of fictionality to inscribe reflection within the reading process so as to deepen rather than shatter the reader’s engagement with the text. One might juxtapose typical heroines from both genres: whereas in *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen’s narrator edifies Elizabeth Bennet by rewarding her “reperusal” with a happy ending—marriage to the man whom, upon considerable reexamination, she finally realized is right—Radcliffe’s Emily, habitually unable “to look twice,” discovers her lover (and her happy ending) only by fleeing from Udolpho under a series of mistaken impressions.⁶⁰ Arthur Aikin’s distinction between the “modern romance”—of which he views Radcliffe’s works as exemplars—and the “genuine novel” elucidates this difference: “the characteristic which distinguishes [the romance] essentially from and shows its vast inferiority to, the genuine novel, is that, like a secret, it ceases to interest after it can no longer awaken our curiosity; while the other, like truth, may be reconsidered and studied with increased satisfaction.”⁶¹ The “genuine novel”—as with belief in Hume’s paradigm—is distinguished from the Gothic by its ability to sustain interest over numerous rereadings and reflections.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, which draws from the popular female Quixote tradition (of which Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* is the most famous example) to parody *Udolpho*. Although Austen deftly imitates Emily’s innocence and overflowing sensibilities in her portrayal of Catherine Morland, the constant reference to her heroine’s voracious novel-reading and her attempts to understand her environment in terms of Gothic fiction inscribes the textual framework directly into the text itself. Whereas Radcliffe’s readers inhabit Emily’s passionate vivacity (and are shamed and edified by the “explained supernatural” formula even when Emily is blissfully unaware), Austen’s readers, ever reminded of the schism to be traversed between the text and the reader’s world,

remain distanced from Catherine's credulity. Allied with the sophisticated narrator rather than the naïve heroine, Austen's readers are buffered from Catherine's mortification when she realizes the nature of her misconceptions. Reflection—the constant awareness of the gap between the experience of reading and the framework of textuality—is pre-inscribed into the reader's mode of engagement with Austen's novel and constitutes one of its main sources of pleasure. In contrast to the anachronistic, exotic setting of the Gothic romance that has not yet survived transplantation to England, Austen's preface—which apologizes for a thirteen year delay prior to publication and reminds the reader that “during that period, places, manners, books, and opinions have undergone considerable changes”—implicitly invites the reader to scrutinize for accuracy and to draw comparisons between the novel and their own quotidian experiences.⁶² The pleasure of reading this self-consciously realistic novel does not dissipate with the awareness of its fictive status: Austen's text invites the reader to complete the reflection that Radcliffe's Gothic romances must arrest in order for its fictionality to function.

Lynch persuasively argues for the rise of rereading as a normative practice during the Romantic era. Austen plays a prominent role in Lynch's account, for her novels edify her readers to accept that “[h]appiness proves a function of the second look that corrects the ‘first impressions’ (Austen's original title for *Pride and Prejudice*).”⁶³ Lynch claims that “good reading”—now viewed as an openness to revision through closer perusal—is distinguished from “bad reading”—seen as cursory or hasty observation.⁶⁴ This new consolidation of reading practices to value reflection clearly shifts away from the *modus operandi* of Gothic fiction. As Leah Price has demonstrated, not only do Gothic readers (like their oversensitive heroines) frequently fail to revise their visions, but the common practice of skipping and skimming—overtly reading for the plot—actually facilitates the opposite form of engagement.⁶⁵ As a genre that tropes the heroine's blindness and depends upon the reader's amnesia of its recycled conventions, early Gothic fiction eventually loses ground when cultural values shift to discourage reading as quick consumption in favor of a more circumspect approach that inscribes reconsideration and revision. When institutionalized as a dominant mode of reading fiction, reflection killed the Radcliffian Gothic.

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NOTES

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¹ Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind, On the Principles of Common Sense in The Words of Thomas Reid; With an Account of His life and Writings*, 3 vol. (New York: J & J Harper, 1822), 1:146.

² For the one recent exception see Ian Duncan, *Scott's Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007).

³ Many recent scholars have positioned Gothic fiction in opposition to the alliance between empiricism and the realistic novel. For example, see Markman Ellis's discussion of Walpole's use of the supernatural: "The supernatural is categorically an unnovelistic aspect of the Gothic—it cannot be reconciled with the empirical observation of the novel" (*The History of Gothic Fiction* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2000], 29). See also David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day* (London: Longman, 1980); E. J. Clery, *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995); Deidre Shauna Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998); David B Morris, "The Gothic Sublime," *New Literary History* 16.2 (Winter 1985): 299–319; and James Watt, *Contesting the Gothic: Fiction, Genre, and Cultural Conflict, 1764–1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999).

⁴ For examples, see Adela Pinch, *Strange Fits of Passions: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1996); Ruth Mack, *Literary Historicity: Literature and Historical Experience in Eighteenth Century Britain* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2009); and Punter.

⁵ See Deidre Shauna Lynch, "Gothic Fiction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Fiction in the Romantic Period*, ed. Richard Maxwell and Katie Trumpener (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), 47–63.

⁶ Lynch, "Gothic Fiction," 54, 67.

⁷ See Lynch, "Gothic Fiction," 47.

⁸ Lynch, "Gothic Fiction," 47.

⁹ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Ernest C. Mossner (1739; repr., Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 116. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated *T*. Hume gives his account of external objects in the following passage:

Now since nothing is ever present to the mind but perceptions, and since all ideas are deriv'd from something antecedently present to the mind; it follows, that 'tis impossible for us so much as to conceive or form an idea of any thing specifically different from ideas and impressions. . . . [W]e never really advance a step beyond ourselves, nor can conceive any kind of existence, but those perceptions, which have appear'd in that narrow compass. This is the universe of the imagination, nor have we any idea but what is there produc'd.

The farthest we can go towards a conception of external objects, when suppos'd *specifically* different from our perceptions, is to form a relative idea of them, without pretending to comprehend the related objects. (T, 116)

¹⁰ Radcliffe's obituary in *The Gentleman's Magazine* describes her fame: "This lady was known and admired by the world, as the able and ingenious authoress of some of the best romances that have ever appeared in the English language; and which, to the honour of the country, have been translated into every European tongue, and read every where with enthusiasm" ("Mrs. Radcliffe," *The Gentleman's Magazine* 93:2 [7 February 1823]: 87).

¹¹ See Robert Miles, "The 1790s: The Effulgence of Gothic" in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), 42.

¹² Devendra P. Varma, *The Gothic Flame: Being a History of the Gothic Novel in England: Its Origins, Efflorescence, Disintegration, and Residuary Influences* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1954), 3.

¹³ Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, ed. Bonamy Dobrée (1794; repr., Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1998), 598–99. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated U.

¹⁴ For more on atmosphere in Radcliffe's novels, see Jayne Lewis, "No Color of Language: Radcliffe's Aesthetics Unbound," *Eighteenth Century Studies* 39.3 (Spring 2006): 377–90.

¹⁵ Lynch, "Gothic Fiction," 47. Lynch, however, claims that such "atmosphere" is in opposition to the reigning Enlightenment philosophy.

¹⁶ "Sketch of the Progress of Novel-writing," *British Review* 9 (1820): 275.

¹⁷ "Sketch," 276.

¹⁸ Julia Kavanagh, *English Women of Letters: Biographical Sketches English Women of Letters: Biographical Sketches* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1862), 139.

¹⁹ Review of *The Poetical Works of Ann Radcliffe: St. Alban's Abbey; a Metrical Romance*, *Edinburgh Review* 59 (1834): 332.

²⁰ Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932; repr., London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), 140.

²¹ J. Watt, 122.

²² Terry Castle, "Spectralization of the Other" in *The New Eighteenth Century*, ed. Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Brown (New York: Methuen, 1987), 234.

²³ Castle, 237, emphasis added.

²⁴ *The Veiled Picture Or, The Mysteries of Gorgono, The Appennine Castle of Signor Androssi, A Romance of the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Jack G. Voller (1802; repr., London: Thomas Tegg; Chicago: Valancourt, 2006).

²⁵ Deborah D. Rogers offers a good summary of Radcliffe's explained supernatural formula: "Another aspect of Radcliffe's art that has come in for much discussion from the start is her so-called 'explained supernatural,' whereby she provides the supernatural with banal causality. This occurs in all her novels except *Gaston*, where the supernatural is not explained away" (ed., *The Critical Response to Ann Radcliffe* [London: Greenwood Press, 1994], xxxii). For additional scholarship that discusses the explained supernatural formula, see also Pinch, Castle, Duncan, and Lynch.

²⁶ For a consideration of the explained supernatural as sentimental training, see Pinch's *Strange Fits of Passion*: "Disciplining and demystifying her character's terrors, Radcliffe's novels suggest that there are ultimately standards of suitable emotional

response. At the same time, of course, her novels glorify and cultivate all kinds of excessive feeling in both her characters and her readers" (111). My discussion of the contemporary reader's emotional response to the Gothic retains the paradoxical schism that Pinch describes, but I reframe the dichotomy to argue that the Gothic is pedagogical because it cultivates excessive feeling but ultimately cannot fulfill the practice that it preaches. For other critics who also view this formula as enforcing a rationalistic, Enlightenment framework, see Glen Cavaliero (*The Supernatural and English Fiction* [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995]); J. Watt; and Lynch, "Gothic Fiction." Lynch, for example, while describing Lewis's *Monk* in contradistinction to Radcliffe, claims, "not for him a conclusion like Radcliffe's that soothes readers' frayed nerves by restoring ordinary reality" (55). Although I agree with the broader claims of Lynch's argument, I would point out that most readers pushed against this naturalizing formula and thoroughly preferred their frayed nerves over ordinary reality. The disappointment registered by Radcliffe's readers is an essential element that must be taken into consideration in any discussion of her reception.

²⁷ Robert Kiely, *The Romantic Novel in England* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1972), 71.

²⁸ Nathan Drake writes on *The Italian* in "On Objects of Terror," *Literary Hours: or Sketches, Critical, Narrative, and Poetical*, 1798, 4th ed., 3 vol. (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1820), 1:362. Over a century later, J. M. S. Tompkin's influential discussion of *Udolpho* reiterates the longevity of this response: "For the first time reading was an exercise to be undertaken with bated breath" (*The Popular Novel in England: 1770–1800* [London: Methuen, 1969], 250).

²⁹ The anonymous 1834 review in the *Edinburgh Review* notes,

A series of hints, glimpses, or half-heard sounds . . . become in her hands invested with a mysterious dignity; so finely has the mind been attuned to sympathize with the terrors of the sufferer, by a train of minute details and artful contrasts, in which all sights and sounds combine to awaken and render the feeling more intense. Yet her art is even more visible in what she conceals than in what she displays[.] (330)

³⁰ William Hazlitt, "On the English Novelists," in *Lectures on the English Comic Writers, 1818* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1907), 150.

³¹ Anna Laetitia (Aikin) Barbauld, "Mrs. Radcliffe," introductory Preface to *The British Novelists*, 50 vol. (London: Rivington and others, 1810), 43:vii.

³² The litany of disappointed reviews is far too long to summarize in this space, so I will recall a few reactions that are broadly representative of the range of sentiments. Excerpted versions of many of these reviews can be found in Rogers. In an fairly gentle review in the *Edinburgh Review*, the author writes, "[I]f these tales of hers have any particular fault, it is precisely, that she all along has her own imagination too completely at command, calculates her effort too elaborately, and insists that she . . . insists after all, to the manifest detriment of her own spells, upon explaining, by natural causes, what we would rather leave enveloped in the vague obscurity of conjecture" (336). Writing on *The Romance of the Forest*, an anonymous reviewer describes more succinctly, "The attention is uninterruptedly fixed till the veil is designedly withdraw" (*Critical Review* 4 [1792]: 458). A more scathing critique (written by Kavanagh) published after Radcliffe's death claims, "She had a fine, but not a free imagination—she never dared, in her published works at least, to go beyond the most ordinary explanations of the most supernatural-looking incidents. She lured with mighty promises, and never ceased to disappoint with the strangest and most provoking tameness" (Julia Kavanagh, ed.,

English Women of Letters: Biographical Sketches [Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1862], 148). The 1834 anonymous review in the *Edinburgh Review* is generally sympathetic to Radcliffe, but—reflecting what seems to be a near-consensus among Radcliffe's contemporary audience—dissents sharply with her use of naturalizing explanations: “[h]ence, up to the moment when she chooses to do so herself, by those fatal explanations for which no reader will ever forgive her, she never loses her hold on the mind” (338). John Colin Dunlop writes of Radcliffe's naturalizing techniques, “They are never properly explained and the author, in order to raise strong emotions of fear and horror in the body of the work, is tempted to go lengths, to account for which the subsequent explanations seem utterly inadequate” (Dunlop and Henry Wilson, *The History of Prose Fiction: Being a Critical Account of the Most Celebrated Prose Works of Fiction, from the Earliest Greek Romances to the Novels of the Present Age* [1814; repr., London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longman, 1845], 415).

³³ T. Noon Talfourd, “On British Novels and Romances, Introduction to a Series of Criticism on the Living Novelists” in *Critical and Miscellaneous Writings of T. Noon Talfourd*, (Philadelphia: A. Hart, 1842), 17; “Radcliffe,” in *Atheneum, Or, Spirit of the English Magazines: Comprehending Original Miscellaneous Communications, on All Subjects of Literature and Science* (Boston: Monroe and Francis, 1819), 5:157; [William Enfield?], review of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* by Ann Radcliffe, *Monthly Review* 15 (November 1794): 280; [Mary Wollstonecraft?], review of *The Italian* by Ann Radcliffe, quoted in Rogers, 55.

³⁴ For example, see Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2006); and Barry Stroud, *Hume* (London: Routledge, 2000).

³⁵ In a recent, influential essay, Quentin Meillassoux argues that one of the pivotal moments in the history of philosophy was a shift away from what had previously been a representational paradigm that attempted to access the object “in itself” and towards an efficacious paradigm in which truth is measured by consensus: “[f]rom this point on, intersubjectivity, the consensus of a scientific community, supplanted the adequation between representations of a solitary subject and the thing itself as the veritable criterion of objectivity” (*After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier [London: Continuum, 2008], 4). Meillassoux traces the turning point to Kant. However, while Kant indeed constructed a thorough and powerful philosophy around this principle, I would argue that the principle itself might traced more properly to Hume, who announced the inaccessibility of the object-in-itself in the opening pages of both his *Enquiries* and the *Treatise*, and whose governing principle of belief is closely tied with the efficacy of custom and consensus.

³⁶ In “An Abstract of a Treatise of Human Nature,” Hume's anonymous review of his own *Treatise*, he notes the originality of his detailed exploration of belief: “When then is this belief? And how does it differ from the simple conception of any thing? Here is a new question unthought of by philosophers” (“An Abstract of a Treatise of Human Nature,” ed. Eric Steinberg [1740; repr., Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993], 130). In his preface to the 1989 English-language edition of *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume's Theory of Human Nature*, trans. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), Gilles Deleuze enumerates the major new concepts created by Hume. First on the list is the privileged status of belief: “[Hume] established the concept of *belief* and put it in place of knowledge. He laicizes belief, turning knowledge into a legitimate belief. . . . The consequences are important: if the act of thinking is belief, thought has fewer reasons to defend itself against error than against *illusion*. Illegitimate beliefs perhaps inevitably surround thought like a cloud

of illusions" (ix). I would further suggest that Hume does not successfully discern legitimate from illegitimate beliefs, but his very failure to do so muddles the epistemological status of the "fictions" that Hume never quite banishes from his philosophy.

³⁷ Recent literary scholarship has taken up the formal connections between Hume's description of the fictitious experience proffered by reading and the quotidian experience of reality. In *Literary Historicity*, Mack situates the limitation of empiricism for understanding history in the conflation of textual and "real" experience in Hume's account (18). In *Scott's Shadow*, Duncan makes the case even more strongly. He argues that Hume's description of the role of custom in crafting the appearance of continuity and conviviality as a veil over the true alienation and fragmentation of existence is itself a type of fiction-making: our experience of reality, properly speaking, is already fictional; see 127–31. I would point out that both viewpoints depend on understanding Hume as positing an epistemology based on efficacy, in which it is the felt texture of the experience—its vivacity and presence—that marks its legitimacy. Only when experience is considered in terms of mental effects rather than originary causes can the textuality that distinguishes reading (and fictionality—entirely unmoored from representational claims—as its efficacious extremity) be understood as knowledge.

³⁸ Consider the following passage from Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Eric Steinberg (1748; repr., Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993):

I say then, that belief is nothing but a more vivid, lively, forcible, firm, steady conception of an object, than what the imagination alone is ever able to attain. This variety of terms, which may seem so unphilosophical, is intended only to express that act of the mind, which renders realities, or what is taken for such, more present to us than fictions, causes them to weigh more in the thought, and gives them a superior influence on the passions and the imagination. (32)

³⁹ Hume writes, "Our sensible perceptions have, therefore, a continu'd and uninterrupted existence. But as a little reflection destroys this conclusion, that our perceptions have a continu'd existence, by shewing that they have a dependent one, 'twou'd naturally be expected, that we must altogether reject the opinion that there is such a thing in nature as a continu'd existence, which is preserv'd even when it no longer appears to the senses" (*T*, 263).

⁴⁰ See Susan Manning, *Fragments of Union, Making Connections in Scottish and American Writing* (Basingstok: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 42.

⁴¹ For the so-called bundle theory, see Hume, *Treatise*, 299–311. "I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in perpetual flux and movement" (*T*, 300).

⁴² Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Elements of Criticism*, 2 vol. (London: A. Miller, A. Kinard, J. Bell, 1762), 1:49.

⁴³ David Marshall, *The Frame of Art: Fictions of Aesthetic Experience, 1750–1815* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2005), 49.

⁴⁴ Lord Kames, 1:36.

⁴⁵ Dugald Stewart, *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, 2 vol. (1792; repr., London: William Tegg, 1853), 1:76. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated *E*.

⁴⁶ Stewart diagnoses the problem with the fiction of his period as such:

As [the novelist's] object is to please, he removes from his descriptions every circumstance which is disgusting, and presents us with histories of elegant and dignified distress. It is not such scenes that human life exhibits. We have to act, not with refined and elevated characters, but with the mean, the illiterate, the vulgar, and the profligate. The perusal of fictitious history has a tendency to increase that disgust which we naturally feel at the concomitants of distress, and to cultivate a false refinement of taste, inconsistent with our condition as members of society. (277–78)

Stewart's query with the novelists is predicated on an expectation of representational mimesis: the novel does not adequately describe experiences that can be matched with those of the readers. That is to say, Stewart still holds reading to a correspondent model (characters that must resemble readers), whereas his epistemology follows the Humean turn to emphasize the efficacy of belief. In that sense, Stewart repeats the contradiction at the heart of Hume's dismissal of fiction. But this conflation of reality with mimetic realism is not limited to eighteenth-century philosophers. Critical discussions of the rise of the novel are also largely oriented from the perspective of mimetic realism: Ian Watt, Michael McKeon, and most recently Catherine Gallagher (whose work I discuss in greater detail in the last section) all assume, in their very different arguments, that realism can be defined by how closely the topic and perspective of the eighteenth-century novel approximates contemporary life. In order to consider the emergence of the form more fully, perhaps literary criticism also needs to follow the Humean turn to explore reality as affect/efficacy, particularly for genres—such as the Gothic—that defy representation as a governing standard.

⁴⁷ Barbauld writes (describing *The Romance of the Forest*): “The author seems perfectly to understand that obscurity, as Burke had asserted, is a strong ingredient in the sublime. . . . These affect the mind more powerfully than any regular or distinct images of danger or of woe” (“Mrs. Radcliffe,” in *The British Novelists: With an Essay, and Prefaces, Biographical and Critical*, 50 vol. [London: J. McCreery, 1820], 43:vi. Although it is difficult to date her knowledge positively, Radcliffe is at least acquainted with Burke's theories, which her speakers reference in the framing device to her posthumously-published *Gaston de Blondville*. Compare to Burke's description of obscurity: “To make any thing very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes. Every one will be sensible of this, who considers how much the notions of ghosts and goblins, of which none can form clear ideas, affect minds, which give credit to the popular tales concerning such sorts of things” (*Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips [1757; repr., Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990], 54).

⁴⁸ Although it is an open question whether Radcliffe read either Hume or Kames directly, she is clearly self-conscious about the role of reflection in shattering the reader's suspension of disbelief. Lauding Shakespeare's use of the ghost in Hamlet, she notes, “In nothing has Shakespeare been more successful then this . . . selecting circumstances of manners and appearance for his supernatural beings, which, though wild and remote, in the highest degree, from common apprehension, never shock the understanding by incompatibility with themselves—never compel us, for an instant, to recall that he has a license for extravagance.” (“On the Supernatural in Poetry,” in *Colborn's New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal* 16 [1826]: 148).

⁴⁹ For example, Stewart emphasizes the critical link between the lack of control over an object of perception and the perceiver's belief in its reality:

In treating the power of conception, I formerly observed, that our belief of the separate and independent existence of the objects of our perceptions, is the result of experience; which teaches us to these perceptions do not depend on our will. While they occupy the mind, to the exclusion of every thing else, I endeavoured to show, that they are always accompanied with belief; but as we can banish them from the mind, during our waking hours, at pleasure; and as the momentary belief which they produce is continuously checked by the surrounding objects of our perceptions, we learn to consider them as fictions of our own reaction. (*E*, 181)

Similar accounts are found in Locke, Berkeley, and Hume.

⁵⁰ Barbault, "Mrs. Radcliffe," vii.

⁵¹ Sir Walter Scott, "Mrs. Radcliffe" in *The Complete Works of Sir Walter Scott*, vol. 8 (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1847), 71.

⁵² Allan Cunningham, "Anne Radcliffe," in *A Biographical and Critical History of the British Literature of the Last 50 Years* (Paris: Baudry's Foreign Library, 1834), 125.

⁵³ Ian Duncan, *Modern Romance and the Transformations of the Novel: The Gothic, Scott, Dickens* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992), 49.

⁵⁴ Duncan, *Modern Romance*, 50.

⁵⁵ Catherine Gallagher, *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670–1820* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1994), 174.

⁵⁶ Catherine Gallagher, "The Rise of Fictionality" in *The Novel, Volume 1: History, Geography, and Culture*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007), 349.

⁵⁷ [Wollstonecraft?], 516.

⁵⁸ Describing *The Italian*, the review attributed to Wollstonecraft notes: "Her mode, it is true, of accounting in a natural manner for supernatural appearances, now that the secret has gotten vent, lessens the effect, and the interest of the story is interrupted by the reader's attention to guard against the delusions of the imagination, which he knows to be glistening bubbles, blown up in the air, only to evaporate more conspicuously" (quoted in Rogers, 54). Elihu Hubbard Smith's letter is more abrasive: "Every chapter abounds with tricks, which keep your curiosity, on a first reading, but never have that effect a second time. And why? Because there is very little character, very little sentiment, very little variety; & the style is a constant ringing of bells, & mist, & glens, & portcullises, & moats, &c &c the miserable & tattered coverings of a feeble imagination & a languid & barren understanding" (Letter to Mary S. Mumford, 28 June 1796, New York, in *The Diary of Elihu Hubbard Smith*, ed. James Cronin [Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1973], 181–82). Although Smith gives a litany of reasons why the novel is lacking, those same elements did not occlude his enjoyment during the first reading.

⁵⁹ Sir Walter Scott, "The Life and Character of Mrs. Ann Radcliffe" in *Museum of Foreign Literature and Sciences*, vol. 7 (Philadelphia: Littell and Carvill, 1825), 192.

⁶⁰ Lynch, *The Economy of Character*, 131. I follow Lynch in emphasizing the importance of this term in reading *Pride and Prejudice*. She writes, "Elizabeth lingers over the sight of Darcy's pictured face not, Austen stresses, because she sees an altered or new Darcy (the portrait depicts him with 'such a smile as she remembered to have sometimes seen'), but rather, because the past she shares with him is, on 'reperusal' permeated with new meanings."

⁶¹ [Arthur Aikin], review of *The Italian*, by Ann Radcliffe, *Monthly Review* 22 (March 1797): 282–84, 283.

⁶² Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (1817; repr., Oxford: Oxford World's Classics 2003), 3.

⁶³ Lynch, *The Economy of Character*, 131.

⁶⁴ Lynch, *The Economy of Character*, 147.

⁶⁵ See Leah Price, *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel: From Richardson to George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000).