

Gothic piles and cynical follies revisited: A quizzical tour through country house literature of the long eighteenth century

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Abstract

The eighteenth century witnessed an expansion in domestic tourism that allowed increasingly diversified visitors to access the grand homes of those for whom more lavish types of travel had furnished their seats, in town and country alike. Numerous travel guides and literary texts engage with the ongoing 'country house' tradition of praising the home, gardens, and owner of such places. However, the shifting social contexts in which both these buildings and the ideologies they embodied often drew writers to satirise critically the great houses they ostensibly admired. This essay examines how the Gothic aesthetic infused the broader country house tradition with a novel way of assessing the uneasy tension between tradition and innovation catalysed by the changing circumstances of the eighteenth century by examining the links several key writers forged between Gothic architectural structures and literary texts. It examines Horace Walpole's Gothic projects in both *The Castle of Otranto* and Strawberry Hill; Mary Leapor's *Crumble Hall*; William Beckford's *Vathek* and Fonthill; Austen's *Northanger Abbey* and Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey*; before settling on a detailed discussion of Norman Abbey in Byron's *Don Juan*, the literary equivalent of his own seat at Mansfield which, in turn, became a key spot on the tourist trail.

Key words: Gothic, country houses, travel literature, tourism, satire, romance, poetry, Horace Walpole, Lord Byron, Jane Austen, Mary Leapor, William Beckford

STRAWBERRY HILL, near Twickenham, the villa of the Earl of Orford (better known in the literary world, and often quoted in this work, as Mr. Horace Walpole) is situated on an eminence near the Thames, commanding views of Twickenham, Richmond Hill and Park, Ham, Kingston, &c. This beautiful structure, formed from select parts of Gothic architecture in cathedrals, chapel-tombs, &c. was wholly built, at different times, by his Lordship, whose fine taste is displayed in the elegant embellishments of the edifice, and in the choice collection of pictures sculptures, antiquities, and curiosities that adorn it; many of which have been purchased from some of the first cabinets in Europe. The approach to the house, through a grove of lofty trees; the embattled wall, overgrown with ivy; the spiry pinnacles, and gloomy cast of the buildings; give it the air of an ancient abbey, and fill the beholder with awe, especially on entering the gate, where a small oratory, inclosed with iron rails,

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and a cloister behind it, appear in the fore court. (*Ambulator*, sixth edition, 1793: 233)¹

The Ambulator, which was first published in 1774 and went through several altered additions until the eighth appeared in 1796, provides a walking tour around London and its environs that participated in a wider phenomenon of travel literature. It blends the guidebook leading tourists around continental and domestic sites and the ‘art of walking the streets of London’ genre most famously initiated earlier in the century by John Gay’s *Trivia* (1716). R. Lobb, the editor who signs the preface to the fourth edition (1792), places *The Ambulator* within this lineage of rambling tours with a purpose, and their condensation of the wider patterns of travel and tourism exhibited on grander scales throughout the century. Visiting ‘Royal palaces, magnificent seats, and elegant villas’ can ‘afford inexhaustible gratifications for curiosity’, and enable the ‘man of leisure’ to view ‘the finest collections of paintings, inestimable antiques, venerable decorations of ancient splendour, or all the exquisite embellishments of modern art’ (*Ambulator* 1793: iii). Compared to country seats, those visited in the city provide ‘landscape, less extensive’, but which ‘invites the pensive mind to contemplation; or the creative powers of Art exhibit an Elysium, where Nature once appeared in her rudest state’ (*Ambulator* 1793: iii).

The city Rambler can experience the combined entertainment and instruction such tours are typically advertised to provide, marvelling at the splendour purchased by wealth and privilege. He also participates in it to some degree, and takes something away with him: ‘the man of leisure may find amusement, and the man of business the most agreeable relaxation’ (*Ambulator* 1793: v). This increasingly domesticated middle-class pursuit allowed those for whom money, time, and perhaps inclination precluded the option of a Grand Tour such as experienced by the privileged few, especially earlier in the century, an opportunity to exercise their own compacted version.² The art works collected and fine tastes honed abroad could be appreciated within the easily accessible vicinity of the metropolis, perhaps even on the single day-trip; the

¹ The sixth edition of *The Ambulator* is selected as the main text here, as its alterations are particularly germane to the present argument.

² For classic accounts of the Grand Tour, see Hibbert 1987 and Black 1990; 1999.

educational pleasures of touring could be sampled by the visitor just as he might dip into an anthology of literature's finest beauties.³ The analogy is particularly apt when contemplating a volume such as *The Ambulator*, whose alphabetised itinerary provides an easily navigable tour through both book and cityscape, with factual observation—historical record, architectural detail—sitting alongside subjective interpretation, such as characterises tour guides of the period more generally. Locations perhaps only hitherto pictured in the mind's eye, formed by reading about and viewing images depicting them, could now be encountered first-hand.

Such experiences never remain static, of course: even the place visited twice in the same month will never be quite the same, let alone when the trip is stretched across wider expanses of time; both place and visitor invariably find alteration. The preface to *The Ambulator*'s fourth edition asserts how constancy and change characterise both touring and compiling a tour guide: 'The fluctuations of property' make 'many alterations indispensable' in such a work (*Ambulator* 1792: [ii]). The same claim appears in the preface to the sixth edition (1793), but is developed to engage even more closely with the immediate contexts of the volume's production: its author notes the precariousness of the book trade (John Bew, the initial bookseller, had since gone out of business), but also the fluid experiences of touring. Yet whilst the places visited inevitably change in their appearance, surroundings, and purposes, they also possess the fixity of tradition and historical precedence:

From the fluctuations of property, and the variety of new objects which taste and opulence create, every edition of a work of this nature must admit of great improvement. (*Ambulator* 1793: v)

The country house, and the literary and visual culture it generates, provides a cipher for the mobile contexts characterising the particular moments in time in which visitors view and visit such sites. It not only reflects changing aesthetic tastes, but also political, social, and economic trends, and offers critical comment upon them even at the moment of seeming to contemplate, to admire, to praise (Fowler 1994: 18-24).

³ George Kearsley's *Beauties of...* literary anthology series was popular during this period. See Cook 2010: 283.

The Gothic, as architecture and literary aesthetic, plays a prominent role within these larger narratives. Strawberry Hill—Horace Walpole’s famed, ‘gloomy’ Gothic pile, home both to vast collections of art-works and antiquities and to the distinguished scion of ‘the literary world’ whose imagination, inspired by these remarkable surroundings, produced the century’s first Gothic romance—embodies these patterns of fixity and change (Harney 2013: 1-3). Both Strawberry Hill and *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) articulate the wider anxieties instigated by the contexts of their production, whether concerning political flux or that of newly emerging forms of prose fiction.

The ongoing fascination with the Gothic aesthetic endures throughout ensuing decades and similarly bears the imprint of change. It provides a variable barometer oscillating between pressing concerns and escapist fantasy, the movement of which shifts according to the new specifics of time and place. Throughout the tangible and imaginary Gothic conjured by Beckford, Peacock and, most significantly here, Byron’s *Don Juan* (1818-23)—whose Norman Abbey, modelled on the poet’s own seat at Newstead, is first visited in Canto XIII (1823) (McGann 1986: 755)—each author takes his reader on a tour of the remnants of venerable antiquity to lament its decay, but also to situate such ruination within the present, looking back in order to look forward.

Realising Walpole’s Gothic imaginary

Strawberry Hill occupies both a significant position and a turning-point in the long-standing tradition of country houses, their landscaped gardens, and the literary culture they generate: its situation, ‘on an eminence near the Thames, commanding views of Twickenham, Richmond Hill and Park, Ham, Kingston, &c.’ places it alongside other great houses famed for the prospects they give over the surrounding landscape, and for those they offer to the visitor who pictures them from appropriate junctures of the ‘approach to the house’, here accessed ‘through a grove of lofty trees’. This house is home to a ‘choice collection of pictures, sculptures, antiquities, and curiosities that adorn it; many of which have been purchased from some of the first cabinets in Europe’ (*Ambulator* 1793: 233), a repository for Walpole’s Grand Tour.

Strawberry Hill rapidly became a spot on the tourist trail; the visitor experience was even orchestrated by its owner, complete with its own

catalogue of contents as guidebook (Clery 1998: viii; Watt 1999: 17).⁴ In turn, it contributed towards a wider tourist industry by featuring in travel guides that listed it as a must-see item on the itinerary, as *The Ambulator* was later to do. The author of *London and its Environs Described* (1761) also gives an account of Twickenham that enumerates this 'elegant Gothic seat called Strawberry Hill, belonging to the Honourable Mr. Walpole' as among several of the area's notable attractions (1761: 211). Meanwhile, *A Description of the Gardens and Buildings at Kew, in Surrey* (1763) admires Strawberry Hill both within and without; it is 'an antient Abby, and the Inside is quite answerable to its venerable Aspect' (1763: 8). The author goes on to itemise these contents within their respective, carefully appointed spaces as the reader tours the interior: 'The Rooms and Furniture have all the noble Simplicity yet Magnificence of Antiquity, without its Decay', as 'the Gothic Taste is admirably preserved thro' the whole' (1763: 8). This is a harmonious pastiche of assembled 'select parts', which nevertheless attain an aesthetic coherence.

Strawberry Hill is thus eminently situated within country house culture and the texts and images which celebrate it, whose emergence is most notable in the late seventeenth century. This tradition embodied an interaction of the Sister Arts (especially architecture, landscape gardening, poetry and painting) shaped by the increasing urge to travel abroad, which, as previously noted, enabled wealthier tourists to amass impressive collections of art and antiquity to furnish their ancient piles, but which also shaped new aesthetic tastes (Hagstrum 1958: 130-31). The sober edifice of Jonson's Penshurst in 1616, not 'built for envious show' (Fowler 1994: 1.53), was transformed into the more lavishly opulent, yet refined taste exhibited in Richard Boyle, 3rd Earl of Burlington's edifices in the early eighteenth century, inspired as they were by Grand Tour travel. Here, balance and harmony countered Jonson's projected fears of gaudiness, of all money and no taste, for Burlington proved the 'certain truth', that 'Something there is, more needful than Expençe/ And something previous e'en to taste—'tis sense' (Pope 1994: 40-2.68).⁵

⁴ See Walpole's own *Rules for Showing Strawberry Hill* (1784) and *A Description of the Villa of Mr. Horace Walpole* (1784).

⁵ For a counter-reading of these lines see Ferraro 1996: 144-45.

The ‘taste’ and ‘sense’ combined in Burlington’s architectural structures embody the virtues of the owner himself, in the true tradition of the country house. He owns both a reverence for antiquity and an appropriately tasteful enthusiasm for novelty: he will ‘Erect new wonders, and the old repair’ (Pope 1994: 172), Pope observes. Indeed, as Walpole was famously to comment in *Anecdotes of Painting* (1762-80), Burlington put his wealth to good use to develop the type of educational and pleasurable experience of the city-country seat admired in tour-guides like *The Ambulator*: ‘Never was protection and great wealth more generously and judiciously diffused than by this great person, who had every quality of a genius and artist, except envy’; he was ‘the Apollo of Arts’ (Walpole 1786: 4.229; 4.235).⁶

Strawberry Hill, however, is both like and unlike the venerably antique yet tastefully new model inspired by Burlington. As *The Ambulator* describes, ‘This beautiful structure, formed from select parts of Gothic architecture in cathedrals, chapel-tombs, &c. was wholly built, at different times, by his Lordship, whose fine taste is displayed in the elegant embellishments of the edifice’ (*Ambulator* 1793: 233). It is a pastiche of a version of ‘Gothic’ that is at once truthful and fantasised, composed of multiple dispersed parts coalesced within the single, and singular edifice. As Marion Harney stresses, Walpole disliked ‘hybrid species’ that generated a ‘debased Gothic’; at Strawberry Hill, the ‘Gothic villa’ is ‘set in a complementary but contrasting landscape setting’ to create a harmonious entity (Harney 2013: 87; 103). Strawberry Hill both ‘offered a heterogeneous alternative narrative [to existing architectural projects such as Burlington’s] where the building and the objects told their own spontaneous, imaginative history’, and a complete aesthetic whole (Harney 2013: 3).

As an alternative version of the country house model, Strawberry Hill owned an ability to reflect and comment upon contemporary contexts determined by its unique position set against the backdrop of its own political ancestry, and that of its owner, at this point in the mid eighteenth century. Strawberry Hill was the seat of a scion of the Whig aristocracy: Walpole’s illustrious political ancestry purchased the wealth needed for such an enterprise (Clery 1998: xxvii; Lake 2013: 500-501). He was a well-travelled and well-educated representative of his own

⁶ See also Junod 2011: chapter 2.

status and wealth, a Grand Tourist whose travels abroad supplied the tangible and the imaginative goods out of which he constructed his innovative vision of a present built using the relics of the past (Clery 1998: ix). This dualistic motion of progression pitted against tradition to forge startlingly innovative aesthetic modes and ideas characterises not only Walpole's project at Strawberry Hill but also his realist-romance Gothic hybrid, *The Castle of Otranto*.

It is not remarkable to draw a connection between the two, of course (Watt 1999: 13); Walpole himself first makes it when narrating the story's genesis, apparently conceived from a dream he experienced at Strawberry Hill, in which 'I had thought myself in an ancient castle (a very natural dream for a head filled like mine with Gothic story)' (Sabor 1995: 65).⁷ The narrative of *Otranto* is constructed through a sustained architectural metaphor: the castle provides a constant backdrop to and, indeed, protagonist in the story that enriches its suspenseful effects. Its internal spaces create a claustrophobic maze of corridors and chambers imprisoning its inhabitants, making the past a palpable presence from which the living inheritors of this space cannot escape: 'The lower part of the castle was hollowed into several intricate cloisters; and its was not easy for one under so much anxiety to find the door that opened into the cavern', Isabella finds as she flees the semi-incestuous desire for a legitimate heir of her pursuer and erstwhile host (Walpole 1998: 27).

As E. J. Clery suggests in the insightfully cogent essay prefacing her edition of *The Castle of Otranto*, this text and Strawberry Hill alike use their chosen architectural and aesthetic mode to reinforce the political ideology encoded within the narrative (Clery 1998: xv). They straddle 'antiquity or innovation' to celebrate the past and to acknowledge its potential redundancy, and the need for existing structures to shift to meet the needs of the present (Clery 1998: xi, xxv-xxvi; Watt 1999: 13, 28; Lake 2013: 501). They display the precarious fragility of lineage and of inheritance, experienced throughout examples of the country house mode—but which can be mapped onto a wider, national scale too (Fowler 1994: 21)—and which finds an apt mechanism of expression in the transgressive nature of Gothic.

Otranto uses the hybridity of the Gothic aesthetic to create spaces liberating the free play of the imagination to connect fantasy pasts with a

⁷ Taken from Walpole to William Cole. 9 March 1765 (*Correspondence*. I.88.).

real-life present (Watt 1999: 25). This relies on an ongoing eighteenth-century investment in the visual qualities of the imagination that stems back to Locke and Addison, and which fuelled a rich relationship between verbal and visual arts. Harney writes that Locke and Addison's notion of 'filling the space of the imagination with visual images and impressions' directly stimulated the parallel experiences of the real and the imaginary Walpole provided both in his architectural projects and in his romance, for which the Gothic aesthetic was particularly suited (Harney 2013: 3). At Strawberry Hill, 'Walpole created a place for his imagination to operate freely'; *Otranto* is similarly 'a fabrication of his imagination', which 'exhibited imaginative freedom in literary and spatial terms' through the fantasy architectural construction it invites its readers to explore (Harney 2013: 280-81).

Otranto's generic identity similarly exhibits a free-roaming movement across formal borders. It is both a self-professed pastiche built on the model of Strawberry Hill, and a *mélange* of the emerging realist novel and the fantastical romance (Watt 1999: 15). Walpole, again, identifies as much in the pivotal preface to the text's second edition in which, abandoning the ruse of the first that it was based on a rediscovered ancient manuscript, the author differentiates between 'the ancient and the modern' romance in a manner akin to contemporary and later attempts to theorise these variant forms of prose fiction (Walpole 1998: 9; Watt 1999: 12-13). Clara Reeve's preface to *The Old English Baron* (1777-78), for instance, famously retraces the borders between innovativeness and lineage belonging to generic hybridity, whilst overtly acknowledging the debt of inheritance she owes to Walpole (Coykendall 2005: 433-35): 'This Story is the literary offspring of The Castle of Otranto, written upon the same plan, with a design to unite the most attractive and interesting circumstances of the ancient Romance and modern Novel, at the same time it assumes a character and manner of its own' (Reeve 1977: 3). Her version, however, compensates for the failures of her predecessor's—most notably, the incorporation of near-ridiculous supernatural elements in Walpole's narrative. *Otranto* indulges too much in 'the marvellous', such that 'it palls upon the mind (though it does not upon the ear)' because 'the machinery is so violent, that it destroys the effect it is intended to excite' and pushes the story beyond the bounds of 'probability' (Reeve 1977: 4). It is notable in this

context that her later *Progress of Romance* (1785) relegates *Otranto* to the metaphorical space of the footnote.

As Clery, for one, acknowledges, *Otranto* might well be read ‘as a self-conscious burlesque’ rather than as a successful ‘terror fiction’ (Clery 1998: xxii; Watt 1999: 36-37). Perhaps it stretches the evidence too far to claim *Otranto*, or Strawberry Hill, as elaborate political allegories, manifestations of Whig ideology, or even creative masterpieces. James Watt argues that for Walpole his ‘aristocratic identity was a construct, which he had continually to rehearse’, and that the appearance of eccentric detachment portrayed by later commentators belied the ‘precarious’ nature of his actual position (Watt 1999: 21-22). And yet real-world concerns tend to be secondary to notions of ‘diversion’ and ‘amusement’ in Walpole’s work (Watt 1999: 23). Later critics thus rehearse the commentaries voiced by Walpole’s earliest readers. Indeed, Reeve was not alone in considering the text to be a failed folly which ruins the seriousness of its intentions; Hazlitt, for instance, was one among many readers who thought its supernatural conceits were absurd (Clery 1998: xxi). Similarly, William Henry Ireland identifies Walpole as a chief proponent of the ‘romancers’ who, in the crazed castle of his imagination and home, spawned a frivolous literary fashion:

In mazes monastic of Strawberry Hill,
Sir Horace first issu’d the marvellous pill;
His brain teeming hot with the chivalrous rant, O!
Engendered the Giant, and Castle Otranto. (Ireland 1815: 137-38)

A footnote informs the reader that ‘The style of this would-be flight of fancy [...] is a further convincing proof of its writer’s total incapacity to produce any composition bearing the stamp of originality and genius’, concluding that ‘the world would have lost nothing had his romance and his drama existed only in the mazes of his lordship’s pericranium’ (Ireland 1815: 137-38).

Ireland’s ironic tone merely reflects back upon a mixed reception to Walpole, home and romance novel (Sabor 1995: 1-3), which self-professed eccentrics such as John Hall-Stevenson had previously lampooned in *Crazy Tales* (1762), even as contemporaneous guidebooks such as *London and its Environs Described* lauded the venerability of

Strawberry Hill and its owner. As Hall-Stevenson announces in a mock-apology ‘to himself’,

You tell me, if I needs must print,
 You’ll not oppose my foolish will,
 And bid me take a sober hint
 From sober folks at Strawberry Hill. (Hall-Stevenson 1762: v)

Although these writers may vocalise—with varying degrees of levity—some among posterity’s critical assessment that we cannot take *Otranto* too seriously either as political manifesto or as successful novel, given its questionable sobriety, Walpole’s own literary-critical assessment of his work in the Preface to the second edition pre-emptively accepts and defies such charges simultaneously. He stakes a claim for the ‘new species of romance’ he has created, which grants him the ‘liberty’ to experiment with such boundaries at will, mobilised by the Gothic imaginary (Walpole 1998: 14). Treading the fine line between the purely fantastical and ‘the rules of probability’, in fact, provides the most promising route towards suspense. Whilst consciously invoking Shakespeare as a point of comparison is, of course, significant in establishing the ‘natural’ qualities of Walpole’s character depictions, and stakes the text’s claim to be taken seriously (Walpole 1998: 10-11; Clery 1998: xv), this literary forbear also legitimates a degree of fantasy. Conscious that the domestic characters might ‘excite smiles’, Walpole asserts that this serves to heighten the sublimity of the elevated protagonists and the tragedy they enact: ‘the contrast between the sublime of the one, and the naïveté of the other, sets the pathetic of the former in a stronger light’ (Walpole 1998: 10; Clery 1998: xxx). Bathos can serve to lift the sublime still higher: folly serves a purpose, at the same time as questioning its seriousness (Watt 1999: 35). Both Walpole’s romance and his home become fittingly ambiguous, ambivalent constructs the identities and ‘purposes’ of which remain elusively mixed.

Otranto and Strawberry Hill both reinvigorate the ongoing precariousness of the relationship between the old and the new, fantasy and the real, which characterises Shakespeare (at the very least) as much as the here and now of mid eighteenth-century England. They nevertheless combine an alternative investment in the mobile generic forms of imaginative literature and its ability to gesture towards external

reference-points belonging to the contemporary moment. As such, Walpole's version of the country house model in both building and text to some degree embody defunct feudal structures that signal the political 'disaffection' Watt identifies in Walpole (Watt 1999: 37). The past always haunts present moments. It is, after all, 'the portrait of the grandfather', typical feature of the country house with its symbolic load of ancient heredity rights, which admonishes Manfred the usurper (Walpole 1998: 26). And yet the pleasure in escapist folly, for all its weighty potential, eventually leads principally to a 'diversion' for those with leisure and wealth sufficient to enjoy it (Watt 1999: 31-32), whether the author-owner or those tourists who later behold his 'gloomy', abbey-like fantasy with 'awe'.

Crumbling Gothic edifices

Whatever their degree of seriousness, both Strawberry Hill and *The Castle of Otranto* reflect (even whilst they burlesque) the tensions integral to a moment of political change and of aesthetic shift; publications such as Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry* (1757) and Edward Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759) provided new stimuli for exploring the relationship between realism and fantasy, manifested in the reverence for antiquity and its transformation witnessed in text and house alike (Clery 1998: xiv, xxxi-xxxii; Havard 2013: 11-12; 37-38).

Although both Strawberry Hill and *Otranto* may juxtapose anxiety and resolution in a serio-comic manner, they nevertheless reflect discordant strains within the seemingly harmonious country house mode itself, where the opportunity to recycle idealised models of the past to reflect upon political uncertainties in the present was rarely far from view (Fowler 1994: 21). The restoration of properties ravaged by Civil War in the later seventeenth century signalled regeneration and a strident hope for national, as well as local prosperity and security; of the Countess of Rutland's Belvoir, for instance, the perhaps forgotten Mildmay Fane writes in 1659 that

Where Troy once stood (some say) now corn doth grow:
Fertility thus springs from overthrow.
Had Belvoir not been crushed by our late quarrel,
It had not shined in such apparel

As its re-edifying hat put on,
To shape the frame into an union. (Fowler 1994: 1-6, 255)

Destruction and construction are immovably cemented together.

The country house genre and its sources of inspiration, however, are far from immune to quizzical questioning, as displayed from Marvell onwards. Indeed, ‘anti-country house’ texts, such as Jonathan Swift’s ‘To Quilca, a Country House not in Good Repair’ (1725), satirise the inflated idealism of the genre, if not necessarily (in this case) the ideologies such structures enclose. Swift mimics these texts’ habit of marrying owner and home by addressing the edifice as though it were a person, but structure and virtues alike are subjected to ironic inversion in this tourist’s account:

Let me thy Properties explain,
A rotten Cabbin, dropping Rain;
Chimnies with Scorn rejecting Smoak;
Stools, Tables, Chairs, and Bed-steds broke:
Here Elements have lost their Uses,
Air ripens not, nor Earth produces:
In vain we make poor *Sheelah* toil,
Fire will not roast, nor Water boil.
Thro’ all the Vallies, Hills and Plains,
The Goddess *Want* in Triumph reigns;
And her chief Officers of State,
Sloth, *Dirt*, and *Theft* around her wait. (Fabricant and Mahony 2010: 223-24)

However, whilst Restoration country house poems, and even such satirical takes on them, paper over the cracks and fissures of such a crumbling structure—of building and ideals—the shaken foundations of political hegemony with the decline of the Whig ascendancy made such a harmonised narrative increasingly less credible during the eighteenth century (Clery 1998: xxvii-xxviii). Mary Leapor’s *Crumble Hall* (1751), for instance, parodically satirises the idyllic feudal myth such places embody. She implores the Muse’s inspiration to sing of

That *Crumble-Hall*, whose hospitable Door
Has fed the Stranger, and reliev’d the Poor;
Whose *Gothic* Towers, and whose rusty Spires,
Were known of old to Knights, and hungry Squires.
There powder’d Beef, and Warden-Pies, were found;
And Pudden dwelt within her spacious Bound:

Pork, Peas, and Bacon (good old *English Fare!*),
With tainted Ven'son, and with hunted Hare:
With humming Beer her Vats were wont to flow,
And ruddy *Nectar* in her Vaults to glow.
Here came the Wights, who battled for Renown,
The sable Frier, and the russet Clown:
The loaded Tables sent a sav'ry Gale,
And the brown Bowls were crown'd with simp'ring Ale;
While the Guests ravag'd on the smoking Store,
Till their stretch'd Girdles would contain no more. (Leapor 1751: 112)

Deliberately parodying the Jonsonian model, Leapor invokes a romanticised picture of the building and its inhabitants, emphasising the communally shared bounty of its hospitality; the busily 'humming Beer' that in 'her vats were wont to flow' is a poetic realisation of a Hogarthian vision of British health and prosperity. The '*Gothic Towers*' of the edifice, of course, aptly house the 'Knights, and hungry Squires' of chivalric romance who feast on this abundance, just as Jonson envisages how the 'bullocks, kine, and calves' feed on Sidney's land only joyfully to feed the guests at his table (Jonson 23; Fowler 1994: 53). Just as at Penshurst 'all come in, the farmer, and the clown' (Jonson 48; Fowler 1994: 55), here too all are welcome: 'The sable Frier, and the russet Clown'.

'Of this rude Palace might a Poet sing' (112), Leapor ironically declares, before taking her reader within the house to explore the moribund reality that actually occupies so superficially glamorous a building. We find the ancestral display of portraiture turned to a ghastly, pantomimic pantheon evocative of Swiftian grotesque:

Strange Forms above, present themselves to View;
Some Mouths that grin, some smile, and some that spew.
Here a soft Maid or Infant seems to cry:
Here stares a Tyrant, with distorted Eye. (Leapor 1751: 113)

Mice lead 'the Guests' now inhospitably transformed into 'the Stranger' along the darkened passageways; he 'blindly feels' his way along the wall (Leapor 1751: 114), perhaps with an allusion to another decayed system of 'tyranny' in the form of the defunct Marian monarchy (the 'Three Blind Mice' nursery-rhyme which satirises it had existed since 1609 (Opie and Opie 1997: xx)). The spatially orchestrated tour of venerable paintings, such as were later listed in Walpole's *Catalogue of*

Pictures and Drawings in the Holbein-Chamber, at Strawberry Hill (1760)—both those of actual and of artistic ancestry—becomes here a dreary trawl through an indiscriminate, undistinguished collection of forgotten family heirlooms and the values they embody.

Leapor's parodic tour of the house's interiors imaginatively exploits the type of domestic tourism Strawberry Hill later attracted. The reader notes the apparent disdain for foreign fancy found in the 'familiar rooms'—in which the 'Hanging[s] ne'er were wrought in *Grecian* looms' (116)—but is led to surprising, and typically unexplored areas. As Sharon Young writes, 'The tour gradually reveals that Crumble Hall is not a conventional grand estate: its architecture is dated, its layout unfit for eighteenth-century living, its contents worn or unloved, and its servants unaccustomed to operating within conventional social boundaries' (Young 2015: 51). Below the apparent finery of upstairs we find a servant underworld that resembles the profiteering, sordid servant-class satirised in Swift's *Directions to Servants* (written c. 1730; pub. 1745); as this tract's persona advises the Cook, 'Never clean your Spits after they have been used, for the grease left upon them by meat is the best thing to preserve them from rust, and when you make use of them again, the same grease will keep the inside of the meat moist' (Swift 2003: 26). In *Crumble Hall*, 'Roger'—'O'er-stuff'd with Beef, with Cabbage much too full,/ And Dumpling too (fit Emblem of his Skull!)/ With Mouth wide open, but with closing Eyes'—snores upon the table while 'Urs'la' the cook rebukes him, before 'The greasy Apron round her Hips she ties,/ And to each Plate the scalding Clout applies' (Leapor 1751: 119).

Bathetic depictions of grease, dirt, and slovenly behaviour are ironically juxtaposed within an overblown poetic rhetoric whose dryads and nymphs satirise the very notion of a paradisiacally harmonious and wholesome English country house in which classical inheritance is refashioned into native, romantic 'Gothic' (Young 2015: 52-53). The reality of day-to-day life is, of course, far different; but Leapor cynically emphasises the gulf between the real and the fantasy evocations of such places at such a time. As Young writes, 'the shift in focus from hospitality to tourism' indicates a re-evaluation, and to some extent devaluation of the social role of the country house (and the texts which celebrate it) within a differently mobilised commercial, political, and social economy (Young 2015: 56). Whilst a far cry from the fantastically

tragic romance that Walpole later creates in the ‘spiry pinnacles’ of his Gothic imaginary, the Knights and Squires of Leapor’s decaying ‘*Gothic Towers*’ inhabit an equally precarious building and social structure alike.

Gothic follies

Such a complex context involving the symbolic value of the great house, its owner’s role within it, and its literary representations provides one angle for examining the influence that Walpole’s romance exerted upon subsequent articulations of the Gothic aesthetic, architectural and novelistic. This, too, maps subsequent shifts of political and social landscapes upon imaginative texts that use Gothic structures to create a ‘probable’ fantasy which couples imaginative licence with real-world referentiality. We have already noted Reeve’s positioning of *Otranto* as a historical relic just a decade or so after its first appearance. By the 1790s, Walpole himself was able to witness an explosion of Gothic fiction inspired by his own model, and yet in many respects radically different from it (Clery 1998: xxxiii; Miles 2002: 41; Townshend 2014: 388). The ‘terrorist system’ exhibited in texts as distinct as Ann Radcliffe’s *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and Matthew Lewis’ *The Monk* (1796) frequently deploys similar settings and themes to those of *Otranto*—their remarkable castles and monasteries reinforce these texts’ imaginative effects—but they now inhabit radically divergent frames of reference.

Gothic romances of the 1790s do not necessarily take a real-life point of origin and render it strange, but invent their own itineraries and destinations without their authors ever having visited these supposed locations. Walpole the Grand Tourist created a Gothic romance set against the backdrop of a fantastical version of his own Gothic home; *Udolpho* and those places built on its model are purely imaginary creations. The reader of *Otranto* can glimpse the origins of this original narrative through touring London’s environs and paying a visit to Strawberry Hill (or, indeed, Trinity College, Cambridge, which Walpole identified as a source (Watt 1999: 28)); no such option lies open to the lovers of terror fiction of the 1790s. The texts that fire their imaginations displace fear and anxiety about the present not just by projecting it back onto a romanticised and fantasised past, but onto an alternative present which lies across the channel (Miles 2002: 54-55).

And yet beyond the contextual differences that separate these groups of texts lies something notably distinct regarding tone. Radcliffe attempts to render the experience of Gothic terror more nobly sublime (Miles 2002: 43). By contrast, as previously noted, *Otranto* could be read as intentionally ridiculous, as a whimsical fancy the supernatural happenings of which take place in a historically and geographically remote time and place the better to entertain the reader (Sabor 1995: xiii). It is this spirit of play that carries *Otranto*—and by extension Strawberry Hill—into a new generation’s Gothic texts and architectures other than those typically aligned with the ‘terror system’.

Among them, as Nicole Reynolds discusses, it is striking to what extent William Beckford’s *Vathek* (1786) mirrors the tone, if not the narrative substance and setting, of *The Castle of Otranto* (Reynolds 2014: 89). Of ‘The palace named *The Delight of the Eyes*, or *The Support of Memory*’, the narrator describes how ‘Rarities, collected from every corner of the earth were there found in such profusion as to dazzle and confound, but for the order in which they were arranged’ (Beckford 2008: 2), just as *The Ambulator* praises Strawberry Hill’s ‘choice collection’ of carefully orchestrated ‘curiosities’. Equally, whilst *Otranto* provides a grotesquely spectral correlative to the portraits hanging in Strawberry Hill’s chambers and galleries, so in *Vathek* ‘One gallery exhibited the pictures of the celebrated Mani, and statues, that seemed to be alive’ (Beckford 2008: 2).

Both authors use actual architectural constructions to fuel their Gothic imaginations, both in building projects and in their fantastically exaggerated romances. However, Beckford took this imaginative freedom to notorious extremes in Fonthill Abbey: the immense Gothic ‘Folly’ so untenable that it collapsed into flames (Saintsbury 1914: 319–20; Reynolds 2014: 92). As William North, author of a biographical memoir of Beckford prefacing the 1849 edition of *Vathek* (and of a satirical response to Disraeli’s *Coningsby*) describes:

The distinguishing architectural peculiarity of Fonthill Abbey, was a lofty tower, 280 feet in height. This tower was prominently shadowed forth in ‘*Vathek*,’ and shows how strong a hold the idea had upon his mind. Such was his impatience to see Fonthill completed, that he had the works continued by torchlight, with relays of workmen. During the progress of the building, the tower caught fire, and was partly destroyed. The owner, however, was present, and enjoyed the magnificent burning spectacle. It was soon restored; but a radical fault in laying the foundation, caused it

eventually to fall down, and leave Fonthill a ruin in the life-time of its founder.
(North 1849: vii)

This store-house of treasures was built on a scale far surpassing the comparable moderation of Walpole's vast collections at Strawberry Hill, an emblem of excess on every level—of wealth misspent, and of a legacy poorly invested. This owner's 'extravagant mode of life' and 'the loss of two large estates in a law suit' meant that Beckford had 'to quit Fonthill, and offer it and its contents for public sale' (North 1849: vii-viii). The sober balance between opulence and utility maintained by Burlington—for all that Pope might yield a satirical edge to his praise of such equilibrium (Ferraro 1996: 144-45)—and which Walpole, in turn, invests in his original composition at Strawberry Hill, becomes distorted to grotesqueness in Beckford's Folly. Its demise, and the dissipation of both building and contents, signifies a wider dispersal of the country house fantasy, in which the art of the collector has surpassed utility to provide a warped form of enjoyment at such a 'spectacle':

The costly treasures of art and virtue, as well as the furniture of the rich mansion, were scattered far and wide; and one of its tables served the writer of this memoir to scribble upon, when first stern necessity, or yet sterner ambition, urged him to add his mite to the Babel tower of literature. (North 1849: ix)

Fonthill Abbey, like *Vathek*, is as much a product of its time as Strawberry Hill and *The Castle of Otranto*, if on a vastly distorted scale: the proportions of wealth, and the symbols of national prosperity and of virtue embodied in the country house estate, no longer operate along the same tenable lines. In this context, it is not insignificant that Beckford's literary projects should adopt a self-consciously subversive ridiculousness that far surpasses the tongue-in-cheek qualities Walpole gifted to his home and text: publications such as *Modern Novel Writing* (1796), or his satirical version of painterly biographies in the manner of Walpole's *Anecdotes, Biographical Memoirs of Extraordinary Painters* (1780) (Junod 2011: 82). As George Saintsbury has written, *Vathek* itself displays its author's notorious eccentricity; it 'is certainly in parts, grotesque, extravagant and even nasty', but it nevertheless displays an 'almost Shakespearean' oscillation between the sublime and the absurd, 'between the flickering farce atrocities of the beginning and the sombre magnificence of the end' (Saintsbury 1914: 320-21)—albeit in a far more

Newbould, M-C. 2018. "Gothic piles and cynical follies revisited: A quizzical tour through country house literature of the long eighteenth century." *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 17(1):85-119.

‘extravagant’ manner than Walpole adopted. These creative outputs mark not just the author’s extreme eccentricity but also a whimsical abandonment of previously enshrined codes of decorousness and appropriateness that seems in keeping with the times. Walpole may have been whimsical, but Beckford owns an almost cynical folly born of the spirit of the age.

Beckford is not an isolated, eccentric case, after all. Even Jane Austen—not generally regarded as a fantastical or cynical author—redeploys the model of the defunct country house embodied in the Gothic folly in *Northanger Abbey* (1797-98; pub. 1817) to reflect upon contemporary fiction and reading habits, but also more widely upon the historical moment (Miles 2002: 57-58). The ‘long, damp passages, its narrow cells and ruined chapel’ (Austen 2013: 143) that Catherine envisages at Northanger, of course, disappointingly prove to represent mundane modernity. Austen’s characteristic swing from the sublime to the affectionately risible mirrors how Walpole merges similarly contrasting affective modes (Duquette 2010: n.p). As Catherine approaches this much-anticipated site of her literary pilgrimage,

[...] every bend in the road was expected with solemn awe to afford a glimpse of its massy walls of grey stone, rising amidst a grove of ancient oaks, with the last beams of the sun playing in beautiful splendour on its high Gothic windows. But so low did the building stand, that she found herself passing through the great gates of the lodge into the very grounds of Northanger, without having discerned even an antique chimney. (Austen 2013: 164)

The house itself, much as Leapor’s reader discovers in the textual tour of *Crumble Hall*, proves to mismatch ideal and reality: ‘The furniture was in all the profusion and elegance of modern taste’ (Austen 2013: 165); there are no mouldering walls or ‘ponderous’ carvings; and Catherine—still clinging at this point to her ‘visions of romance’—feels the pang of disappointed fantasy: ‘To an imagination which had hoped for the smallest divisions, and the heaviest stone-work, for painted glass, dirt, and cobwebs, the difference was very distressing’, Austen tells us with affectionate amusement (Austen 2013: 166).

By the time that *Persuasion* was published posthumously in 1817, oddly yet aptly twinned with *Northanger Abbey*, the landscape in which the country house featured was far different. The harmonious balance of utility, sense, taste and responsibility had disintegrated even beyond

Mansfield Park's warnings about irresponsible landowners (Henry Crawford; Sir Thomas and Tom Bertram); now, Kellynch Hall's very survival is in doubt, passing as it does to the hands of a financially capable, but genealogically inappropriate heir in the form of a retired naval man—an entrepreneur of nationalistic sentiment and of real-world opportunity alike. But it is the Gothic pile as a constantly durable, yet mutating presence within the shifting social and political contours of the country house mode which produces the most compelling link with Walpole's moment.

Shortly after *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*'s appearance, Thomas Love Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* (1818) situates the precarious relationship between utility and redundant folly in an entirely new context, with its comic indictment of the purposeless occupants of an outmoded inherited space. The building itself pays testament to this introversion, as found in the parody in the novel's opening pages of the delineation of lineage set against the backdrop of an ancestral home, as found in 'typical' romances (itself parodied in *Persuasion*):

Nightmare Abbey, a venerable family-mansion, in a highly picturesque state of semi-dilapidation, pleasantly situated on a strip of dry land between the sea and the fens, at the verge of the county of Lincoln, had the honour to be the seat of Christopher Glowry, Esquire. This gentleman was naturally of an atrabilious temperament, and much troubled with those phantoms of indigestion which are commonly called blue devils. (Peacock 1979: 39)

Peacock eschews the niceties of description in indicating the building's distinctive architectural features—it is simply enough to note that it is 'venerable', exhibiting the non-descript 'highly picturesque' ruination now easily identifiable with the Gothic aesthetic (Townshend 2014: 278-79). It is situated, appropriately, on the no-man's-land of the flat, watery fenlands. Just as Catherine experiences the disappointed prospects she had expected to encounter on nearing *Northanger*, so, too, the approach to this 'family-mansion' bears no distinguishing feature or elevated view, nor the 'pleasing prospect up and down the river' admired of Twickenham's mansions in *London and its Environs Described*. Here,

The road which connected Nightmare Abbey with the civilised world, was artificially raised above the level of the fens, and ran through them in a straight line as far as the eye could reach, with a ditch on each side, of which the water was

rendered invisible by the aquatic vegetation that covered the surface. (Peacock 1979: 62)

Whilst the house may be indistinguishable from its generic type, its inhabitants betray the peculiar distinctiveness of individuals who are nevertheless typecast. Peacock's satire of his Romantic contemporaries has inevitably attracted attention (Wright 1979: 17-26; Mulvihill 1995: 533-34); but it is significant that these heralds of a modern era of literary inheritance should demonstrate intellectual demise—or, at least, the obscurity and obfuscation that lead to redundancy—amid the decaying edifices of an outmoded Gothic abbey bereft of its original purpose and barely granted a new one. Scythrop, Glowry, Flosky, Cypress: each embody the troubled moment of the modern, where even those literary inheritors befriended and admired by the author struggle with the tense balance between antiquity and modernity, the pull of the ancient and the desire to stamp the world with the new. The satire is ironic in its doom-laden pronouncements, of course, vocalised as they are by Mr Toobad:

It is our calamity. The devil has come among us, and has begun by taking possession of all the cleverest fellows. Yet, forsooth, this is the enlightened age. Marry, how? Did our ancestors go peeping about with dark lanterns, and do we walk at our ease in broad sunshine? Where is the manifestation of our light? (Peacock 1979: 100-101)

The condensed, and by now familiar movement from sublimity to the ridiculous is dense and swift, positioned on the rhetorical stages of a too-logical argument that meanders *ad absurdum*, just as the almost unnavigable (because featureless) flatlands of the approach lead only to Nightmare Abbey. The age of chivalry is truly dead: 'We see men in stays, where they saw men in armour'. Just as Walpole's Theodore is torn between two love-suits, so Scythrop is (almost) fatally attracted to two equally unsuitable matches—and ends up with neither: he 'tore both the letters to atoms, and railed in good set terms against the fickleness of women' (Peacock 1979: 124), a victim of the failed conclusion of romance ('in good set terms') in a new world whose currency is 'paper', not 'gold', filled with 'prisons', not 'castles'. The effect is to render ridiculous—Peacock was hardly a latter-day Burckean, and his satire of the contemporary literati is amused rather than viciously lampooning. And yet—in a parallel manner to Walpole, and indeed to Beckford—Peacock nudges towards the cyclical cynicism at redundancy, excess, and

lack of utility prevalent across country house texts, and most aptly visible in those which celebrate the ‘antique’ Gothic, albeit punctured by a levity which nevertheless churns the movements of the life of the great house and its inhabitants onwards.

Byron’s Gothic poetics

Byron carries this legacy to a partial resting-point in this network of associations. Byron: the Mr Cypress of Peacock’s satire, whose declared admiration of ‘that singular volume’ *Vathek* is manifested in *The Giaour*, and whose revivification of *Otranto*’s principal protagonist in his own doomed Manfred testifies to his investment in these diverging yet confluent influences. Byron envisages cynical folly in his exploitation of the Gothic country house particularly acutely in Canto XIII of *Don Juan*, and the societal and intellectual decay it houses. Norman Abbey is largely a fictional embodiment of Byron’s seat at Mansfield, and yet it also participates in the country house mode’s characteristic mixture of tradition, refashioned: once an actual abbey (like Appleton, Fonthill, Northanger and Nightmare, and unlike Strawberry Hill—which, according to *The Ambulator*, merely has ‘the air’ of an abbey) its former function has since shifted from that of religious utility to moneyed leisure. Byron invests anew in the capacity of the country house mode to look nostalgically (if ironically) to the past in order to reflect upon the present with comic cynicism.

Norman Abbey’s description is, indeed, heavily indebted to the country house tradition, with its notion of old spaces redressed for new purposes, of former habits now discarded:

To Norman Abbey whirled the noble pair,—
 An old, old monastery once, and now
 Still older mansion; of a rich and rare
 Mixed Gothic, such as artists all allow
 Few specimens yet left us can compare
 Withal. It lies perhaps a little low,
 Because the monks preferred a hill behind,
 To shelter their devotion from the wind. (Byron 2013: XIII.55)

Walpole’s pastiche is reassembled here in a hybrid mode he nevertheless disdained in the ‘Mixed Gothic’ of the Abbey; venerable antiquity is almost infantilised by the twice-incanted ‘old, old’, whilst also ‘rich and

rare'. Its stones speak of its historically polyglot heritage; like Fonthill, it is 'The Gothic Babel of a thousand years' (Byron 2013: XIII.50).

Unlike Northanger and Nightmare Abbeys, its position lends it a significance redolent with the aesthetic appropriateness of the prospect poem: 'It stood embosom'd in a happy valley' of a *Rasselas*-like idyll. This is reminiscent of Byron's comment on *Vathek* in a note to *The Giaour*, that its 'beauty of description, and power of imagination' and its 'originality' surpassed all other European attempts at the 'Easter tale': 'even *Rasselas* must bow before it; his "Happy Valley" will not bear a comparison with the "Hall of Eblis"' (note to *The Giaour* l. 1334; Byron 1970: 895). The water imagery integral to depicting flourishing prosperity in many country house poems (Denham's *Cooper's Hill*, for instance), suggesting as it does regeneration, irrigation, growth, and power, also helps to frame Norman Abbey's symbolically picturesque presentation:

Before the mansion lay a lucid lake,
 Broad as transparent, deep, and freshly fed
 By a river, which its softened way did take
 In currents through the calmer water spread
 Around... (Byron 2013: XIII.57)

And yet the original purpose of the building that determined its appearance and its location no longer holds true: the 'situation' before 'a hill', once dictated by devotional practice, has become only an unmovable relic of a now-defunct past. Norman Abbey is a real-life space and a fantasy, or at least a nostalgic memory belonging to a structure whose stone existence was ontologically realised by the activities that took place within it.

This characterises the heritage belonging to both building and poetic text. As J. Andrew Hubbell has explored, Byron borrows tropes familiar from country house poetry—in particular 'To Penshurst'—to create an Edenic cocoon in which the harmonious functioning of the estate embodies the virtue of its owners (Hubbell 2018: 233-37). Their hospitality is born of a generosity that successful stewardship of the estate can afford to provide, just as their social virtues make such gestures entirely natural—an extension of the English political liberty which generates liberality. Norman Abbey similarly exhibits the country house's ability to act as a microcosm of the nation; it celebrates British

antiquity as an essential backdrop to present-day sociability. And yet, as the name itself suggests, this is also a hybrid of cultural forms, aesthetic principles, and beliefs:

A glorious remnant of the Gothic pile
 (While yet the church was Rome's) stood half apart
In a grand arch, which once screened many an aisle.
 These last had disappeared, a loss to art.
The first yet frowned superbly o'er the soil,
 And kindled feelings in the roughest heart,
Which mourned the power of time's or tempest's march,
In gazing on that venerable arch. (Byron 2013: XIII.59)

'To be sure, the pointed arch was preserved—the form of them was Gothic—' (Austen 2013: 165), Catherine feverishly asserts of Northanger's windows; here, the 'venerable arch' of the 'old, old' pile is a complex historical palimpsest of tastes and ideas, both admirably present and yet in decay. The memory of significance and grandeur lingers like that of its now vanished 'devotional' purpose, but time and climate lend a mourning air to a recollection which is embodied in a mouldering remnant of the past. The Abbey is both preserved and ruined, requiring an imaginative effort to envisage the noble fragment as a 'grand' whole, worked over as it has been by subsequent, less sublime hands:

The mansion's self was vast and venerable,
 With more of the monastic than has been
Elsewhere preserved. The cloisters still were stable,
 The cells, too, and refectory, I ween.
An exquisite small chapel had been able,
 Still unimpaired, to decorate the scene.
The rest had been reformed, replaced, or sunk,
And spoke more of the baron than the monk. (Byron 2013: XIII.66)

Both the tangible remnant of former spiritual uses, and a sense of their now 'reformed' or even 'sunk' purpose—the ruin of Catholicism enshrined in the semi-preserved edifice which once housed it—haunts Norman Abbey. Byron nevertheless presents a push-pull between past and present, fragmentation and wholeness, to create a harmonious hybrid within and without:

Huge halls, long galleries, spacious chambers, joined
 By no quite lawful marriage of the arts,
 Might shock a connoisseur; but when combined,
 Formed a whole which, irregular in parts,
 Yet left a grand impression on the mind,
 At least of those whose eyes are in their hearts.
 We gaze upon a giant for his stature,
 Nor judge at first if all be true to Nature. (Byron 2013: XIII.67)

This is a consciously uneasy hybrid whose legitimacy is at once uncertain—‘no quite lawful marriage of the arts’—and yet which somehow works. Here lies the fragmented ‘giant’ of a former glory, but the decay and subsequent accumulated history of which renders it both more grotesque and strange, and yet stimulates the ‘gaze’ of true sensibility for those ‘whose eyes are in their hearts’. The negotiation of hybridity thus informs the tour of the Abbey’s internal spaces as much as that of its exterior façades. We still have the ‘venerable’ portraiture of ancestry that plays so pivotal a role in great houses, albeit rendered perverse in *The Castle of Otranto*. Again continuity runs alongside change but, like the mice that run along the corridors of Leapor’s poem, in potentially misleading ways. At Norman Abbey, ‘Steel barons’ give way to ‘gay and garter’d earls’, such is the inevitable march of lineage through fashion and the shifting concepts of utility it leaves in its wake (Byron 2013: XIII.68), whilst the viewer observes how ‘Judges in very formidable ermine’ sit alongside ‘Bishops’, ‘Attorneys-general’, and ‘Generals’ (Byron 2013: XIII.69). And yet, distinguishable only by position or rank and not by name, these visible emblems of traceable history cede their place as the viewer’s gaze travels about these stone spaces to objects perhaps that stimulate reflection upon alternative lines of inheritance:

But ever and anon to soothe your vision,
 Fatigued with these hereditary glories,
 There rose a Carlo Dolce or a Titian
 Or wilder group of savage Salvatore’s. (Byron 2013: XIII.71)

As Jerome McGann suggests, this passage is perhaps a recollection of Byron’s own visit to Italy in 1817 where, at the Mancusi Palace, he beheld ‘paintings by Dolce and Titian’ (McGann 1986: 757). Byron the instigator of domestic tourism to sites of venerable British antiquity

merges here into Byron the continental traveller, whose expectations of what he sees are preformed by the very images which adorn the walls of his ‘old, old’ English home:

Here sweetly spread a landscape of Lorraine;
There Rembrandt made his darkness equal light,
Or gloomy Caravaggio’s gloomier stain
Bronzed o’er some lean and stoic anchorite. (Byron 2013: XIII.72)

In this tour of Norman Abbey’s interiors the unremarkable presence of English history sits in questionable harmony with the distinguished, visible presence of continental tastes and the tours which shape them. As such, as Hubbell argues, Norman Abbey is both the ‘fond’ depiction of Newstead described by Byron’s editors (McGann 1986: 756; Hubbell 2018: 237) and a morbidly nostalgic lament for the decay of past structures situated against a yearning for the inheritance visibly found abroad. It is a satirical reflection on the outmoded social systems that lent venerability to such edifices in the first place: an anti-Penshurst, so to speak.

The superficial sociality that takes place within these spaces is a grotesque distortion of the ‘true’ hospitality envisioned in earlier examples of the country house genre, and subsequently lampooned by Leapor. In Canto XIII of *Don Juan*, the assembled society at Norman forms an ungainly hybrid which lacks the virtues of the ‘Mixed Gothic’ of the building itself. ‘The noble guests, assembled at the Abbey’ are reeled off in a wearied, indiscriminating list of empty titles, until the poetic voice collapses into the ennui of abandonment of this particular game:

With other Countesses of Blank – but rank,
At once the lee and the *élite* of crowds,
Who pass like water filtered in a tank,
All purged and pious from their native clouds;
Or paper turned to money by the Bank. (Byron 2013: XIII.80)

Here is nothing but an empty ‘Blank’—like the ‘Blank Blank Square’ of his ‘noble’ protagonists’ London home (Byron 2013: XIII.25), which thinly shields contempt at the nonentity rather than being modestly deferential towards anonymity, making a vast blank of the chequered ‘chessboard’ upon which Adeline as Queen moves with suspect grace

(Byron 2013: XIII.89). The vaporous qualities of the assembled crowd mean they pass through such venerable buildings as indiscernibly as the filtering of water into ‘a tank’. An empty vacuity sits at the heart of a society whose ‘rule of right [...] hath a little leaning to a lottery’ (Byron 2013: XIII82; Hubbell 2018: 240), nothing more than flimsy paper money circulating in venerable stone spaces, as Mr Toobad foretells. In a newly new-moneyed society, the glitter of splendour gives off only a surface-level glitter, as Pope scorns among Burlington’s imitators, and as *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* warns ‘Vathek! England’s wealthiest son’, who

Once form’d thy Paradise, as not aware
When wanton Wealth her mightiest deeds hath done,
Meek Peace voluptuous lures was ever wont to shun. (Byron 1970: I.22, 184)

McGann suggests that ‘Byron’s comments throughout this canto are made against the background of a social ideal which he draws from the eighteenth century, and in particular from Fielding’s version and representation of that ideal. Against it he sets in contrast the fast world of the Regency’ (McGann 1986: 759). And yet the harmonious ideals of house and society presented in eighteenth-century literature—even in Fielding himself, for all the fond gestures towards Squire Western, Sophia, and Paradise Hall, let alone in Gothic romance’s dysfunctional dynastic households—presents less a fondly recalled contrast than a continuity of sceptical consciousness regarding such defunct structures. To some degree this reflects Adam White’s assessment of Byron’s incorporation of ‘Gothic modalities, tropes, and themes’ elsewhere in his work, among which he enumerates ‘the fatal pressure of ancestral, hereditary, and familial forces’ similarly witnessed in *Otranto* (White 2017: 88).

Is it right to call such a stance ‘cynical’? Or as exhibiting Byronic ‘scepticism’? As Anthony Howe argues, scepticism is wrought within Byron’s poetic position and practice; *Don Juan* enacts the disappointment of a Catherine Morland on a mature plane of philosophical reflection, enriched by a consciousness of lost pasts and lost innocence—or at least the yearning for an unreachable idyll which, as the country house and its (satirical) poems exhibits, probably never existed in the first place, just as Johnson’s Happy Valley can only ever pertain as an unmapped ideal. As Howe writes of Byron’s negative

attitude towards ‘systems’ and ‘systematic philosophy’, it enacts ‘a long trail of delusion and hubris, one “system” consuming and usurping the next’ in a non-generative hereditary succession (Howe 2013: 35). And yet Byron is both part of and resistant to these societal structures, and the spaces which enable their circulation—from the Parliament to the country house (Howe 2013: 31).

As John Owen Havard argues, in his later poetry Byron ‘confronted a more pervasive condition of political inertia, including the hegemony of a repressive “Tory” government (with which he was—despite appearances to the contrary—closely implicated)’; as such, *Don Juan* presents ‘Byron’s broader objective to oppose, resist, or more fundamentally reject the present party system—and what, if anything, he sought to put in its place’, but from a position in which he is directly implicated (Havard 2013: 186). The move from *Childe Harold* to *Don Juan*, Howe argues, is less that of ‘a clean break from an abandonment of earlier “romantic” Byronic texts’ than ‘a haunting of their problematic possibilities’, realised in the dynastic decay of Norman Abbey and the vacuity of its present-day inhabitants (Howe 2013: 118-19).

Like Walpole, Byron is caught in a position of simultaneous participation and detachment; and yet this does not necessarily instil an alternative form of ‘inertia’ born of ‘ennui’—‘a growth of English root,/ Though nameless in our language’ (Byron 2013: XIII.101; Havard 2013: 191-3). As such, if it is cynicism, then it is of the ironic sort, perhaps touched with the whimsy of a Beckford, or even a Peacock, albeit underlined by a political urgency and seriousness. After all, Byron perhaps glances towards his own portrayal in *Nightmare Abbey* when describing these blank holders of rank with personae that are depersonalised, but nevertheless embody the fantastical familiarity associated with caricature: both the reality of something recognisable, and the fantasy of its distortion, jostle together for the reader and viewer’s attention. Just as Peacock summons Cypress, Scythrop, and Flosky to assemble a strangely dysfunctional pantheon of modernity, so too Byron enjoys conjuring ‘the Duke of Dash, who was a—duke’ (Byron 2013: XIII.85); and

[...] Dick Dubious, the metaphysician,
Who loved philosophy and a good dinner;
Angle, the *soi-disant* mathematician;
Sir Henry Silvercup, the great race winner.

There was the Reverend Rodomont Precisian,
 Who did not hate so much the sin as sinner [...] (Byron 2013: XIII.87)

There is ‘Lord Pyrrho’ ‘the great freethinker;/ And Sir John Pottledeep, the mighty drinker’, alongside ‘Jack Jargon, the gigantic guardsman;/ And General Fireface, famous in the field’ (Byron 2013: XIII.84; XIII.88). These are, as McGann suggests, ‘imaginary, largely *linguistic* characters’, but they have also ‘been traced to dominant models’ in Byron’s own social acquaintance (McGann 1986: 757). They simultaneously inhabit the function of the type-cast prop and the individualised quality of the satirical thumb-nail sketch. The resemblance to a Restoration comedy is remarkable, but one which Byron promptly dismisses:

If all these seem an heterogeneous mass
 To be assembled at a country seat,
 Yet think, a specimen of every class
 Is better than a humdrum tête à tête.
 The days of comedy are gone, alas,
 When Congreve’s fool could vie with Moliere’s *bête*.
 Society is smoothed to that excess,
 That manners hardly differ more than dress. (Byron 2013: XIII.94)

Whilst ‘heterogeneous’ seems inferior to ‘mixed’ they nevertheless share a commonality. The hybridised Gothic of Norman Abbey is both a rueful testament to time past and a cynical comment upon the mixed-up confusion of the present, which out of cacophony eventually produces a blank silence, whilst the pleasurable roughness and texture of the Gilpinian picturesque are smoothed out into banal sameness. The comment is trenchant, the method nevertheless comic, despite Byron’s apparent protestations. As Howe writes of the deterioration of existing structures—fondly recalled, nostalgically lamented—and the questionable value of those which inhabit their place, ‘These losses are compensated by a broader tenanting of a serio-comic existence that contains the sublime moment while remaining critical of the contemporary culture of the sublime’ (Howe 2013: 119).

The debunking of the country house envisaged in *Don Juan*, far from expelling both the great house and the texts which celebrate it into redundancy, comes to spell a new phase in the literary tourism these texts enact within themselves, and which they in turn invite in reality.

Newstead Abbey became as famed an element of the tourist trail as Strawberry Hill. With the growth of a moneyed middle class came an even more notable expansion of tourism in the nineteenth century, with domestic travel experiencing a marked boom; visiting sites of literary inheritance featured heavily on such itineraries, and helped to shape an increasingly emergent notion of literary canon as nationalistic tool (Watson 2009: 2-3). But, just as *The Ambulator* identified Strawberry Hill's famous 'literary' owner as a key reason to visit this tangible manifestation of his imagination, so Byron's seat became indissolubly allied to the literary artefacts in which the very inheritance of such a concept and its actual embodiment came under scrutiny.

Series of tour-guides such as Murray's Handbooks became wildly popular, in whose formation Byron—man and work formulated into myth—played a significant part. Literary extracts from his work took a signal role in this series' self-promotion, and in shaping a wider culture of literary tourism and continental travel. James Buzard observes how Byron's ongoing cultural significance in the nineteenth century emerged 'through his peculiar influence on the habits of tourists', for which Murray's guidebook enterprise was directly responsible (Buzard 1993: 115). Murray exploited the inclusion of passages from Byron in his guides, as he had done with previous authors' works, but modified them to negotiate the 'irrelevant' presence of Byron's political polemic (Buzard 1993: 122-23).

'This reconstructed Byron', Buzard writes, 'pervades Murray's handbooks, well suited to the brief and disconnected emotive-aesthetic responses which tourists sought to display' (Buzard 1993: 127), much as the literary anthology selects and re-presents its authors to suit a particular editorial agenda (Cook 2010: 285). The actual and the textual 'Byron' thus became merged in popular tourist culture, and in turn determined the nature of the real and the imaginative encounters travellers experienced abroad. As Barbara Schaff writes, 'Murray's extensive use of Byron [...] provided tourists with cultured, elitist, anti-touristic gestures in the emerging age of mass tourism' (Schaff 2009: 106). The effect was not only to change the culture of travel, but of its textual handling, as '[b]y integrating the literary into his handbooks, Murray [...] created a hybrid genre, harmonising the tone of subjective travelogues with the form of the modern guidebook' (Schaff 2009: 109).

While these analyses focus on how Literary Byron shaped experiences of travel to Italy through the medium of the guidebook, they do not examine how far the native ‘antiquarian’ Gothic of Byron’s homeland appropriated both man and writing in a comparable way long after Murray’s death in 1843. Nevertheless, the appropriateness of Byron as a useful tool in constructing such tourist experiences is equally applicable in the domestic context: ‘the theatrical quality of his poetry, characterised by an acute sense of place and history as well as a sense for lively dramatic scenes’ (Schaff 2009: 122) also pertains to the textual tour of Norman Abbey and to the tourist’s pilgrimage to Newstead itself.

The *Handbook for Travellers in Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire, and Staffordshire* appeared in Murray’s series in 1874 and, among the notable sites to which it takes its readers and travellers on the ground alike, Newstead features prominently. In typical guidebook style the author describes the surrounding country and notable qualities of the building and its grounds, but entrenches the account firmly within the literary heritage which lends the Abbey’s stones fresh appeal. The entry is laced with extensive quotations from *Don Juan* detailing Norman Abbey’s architectural features—the ‘Mixed Gothic’; the grand arch—but the history of the building is that of its inhabitants, and of its visitors. Among them, Horace Walpole is said to have greatly admired the place: ‘I like Newstead. It is the very abbey’ (*Handbook* 1874: 79), he is quoted as saying, before he details some of its notable features. And yet, the entry continues,

The poet was a minor when he came into possession of his desolate heritage, and in after years his habits and want of means prevented his doing anything effectual to arrest its decay, though he always regarded it with affection. (*Handbook* 1874: 79)

It was the sale of Newstead in 1818, shortly before he began writing *Don Juan*, which ensured the Abbey’s survival and its restoration, according to the ‘taste and judgment’ of its new owner, just as Fonthill’s creator was compelled to sell it after a costly construction campaign (Reynolds 2014: 94). As at Kellynch, the dislocation of antiquity from its roots of origin—or, at least, from the iteration of ‘tradition’ enshrined in this space—perversely ensures its survival.

As such, the myth remains entwined within the building to acquire new layers of significance for subsequent visitors, who pay homage to these sites of pilgrimage to encounter an elevation directly opposed to

Catherine Morland's disappointment upon reaching Northanger. William Wells Brown, a freed slave, took the American version of the Grand Tour to England during the mid-nineteenth century; his experience of the tangible artefact of Byron's literary fame lends the literature of the country house a new impetus of praise, and fresh potentialities:

We have just paid a visit to Newstead Abbey, the far-famed residence of Lord Byron. I posted from Hucknall over to Newstead one pleasant morning, and, being provided with a letter of introduction to Colonel Wildman, I lost no time in presenting myself at the door of the Abbey. [...] I felt as every one must, who gazes for the first time upon these walls, and remembers that it was here, even amid the comparative ruins of a building once dedicated to the sacred cause of Religion and her twin sister, Charity, that the genius of Byron was first developed. Here that he paced with youthful melancholy the halls of his illustrious ancestors, and trode the walks of the long-banished monks. (Wells Brown: 1852: n.p.)

The American tourist comes to appropriate the English country house through the direct experience of a space hitherto only captured via the literary imagination stimulated by Byron's verse. The veneration of the literary artefact nevertheless also sits twinned with that of religion's 'sacred cause', a return to the original unreformed purpose of this space of mixed forms and functions.

However, as Shirley Foster writes of American travellers' experience of 'literary tourism' to Europe, and in particular Britain, the gap between 'the encountered reality' and 'the idealised preconceptions, built up from textual and anecdotal pre-knowledge' could create a 'discordance' disagreeable to the traveller's pursuit of entertainment and instruction (Foster 2009: 176). Just as Catherine Morland experiences an unpleasant dissonance between the 'visions of romance' and the architectural spaces that are supposed to harmonise with them, so these American tourists had to confront the challenge of overcoming 'disillusion' to make the experience not only manageable, but positively their own. As such, 'while acknowledging the constructed and codified nature of such cultural sanctification'—such as Sophia Hawthorne experienced when performatively recalling Byron's verse upon visiting Newstead—many visitors 'sought to accommodate to its demands by using the imagination to create an alternative vision that enhanced reality with a degree of fictionalisation' (Foster 2009: 178; 176).

Foster describes how 'almost all American tourists [...] sought to separate themselves from the pervasive power of literary cultism, and in

order to assert both the individual and national identity and to challenge the codifying voices of Old World Cultural authority' (Foster 2009: 179). The legacy of the past thus becomes crucial to the negotiation of the present—as it had been for all these writers—but here, too, rather than shackle the imagination it must liberate it to serve new purposes. The realms of fancy envisaged by Walpole and realised in his textual tour of his own home morphs, by the 1850s, into a freshly valent concept of the Gothic and its embodiment in the country house: both a reality and fantasy, but with an equally complex ability to channel the anxieties, hopes, and fears of a new contemporary moment.

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