

"A Constant Vicissitude of Interesting Passions": Ann Radcliffe's Perplexed Narratives

GARY KELLY

THOMAS Noon Talfourd, Ann Radcliffe's official biographer, begins his memoir of her with the pleasant observation that in spite of her literary fame "she confined herself, with delicate apprehensiveness, to the circle of domestic duties and pleasures."¹ Indeed, the steady rate at which she produced those works which made her famous suggests nothing so much as knitting or needle-work, the standard pass-times of women of her class, education, and means. She married William Radcliffe in 1787, and after a decent interval to get over the novelties of conjugal life she took up her "work", and scarcely laid it down for the rest of her life. Her first novel, *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne*, was published in one volume after the middle of 1789. She published the two-volume *Sicilian Romance* twelve to fourteen months later in the second half of 1790. The three-volume *Romance of the Forest* was published at the end of 1791, or eighteen months later. Then, twenty-eight months later still, in May 1794, she published *The Mysteries of Udolpho* in four volumes. In other words, from her first to her fourth novel, from 1789 to 1794, over a period of five years, Radcliffe had written ten volumes of fiction at a steady rate of six or seven months per volume. Then, from the end of May until late autumn 1794, the Radcliffes went on a tour of the Continent and Britain, and Ann Radcliffe's account of the tour, adapted from her travel journal, was published eight months later, in May 1795. Eighteen months later at the beginning of 1797 she published *The Italian* in three volumes. Once again she had kept to her usual work rate, but she

published no more in her lifetime. She continued to write poetry, a historical Gothic novel, and a verse romance, as well as keeping copious journals of her annual tours with her husband. But after *The Italian* she realized that she had nothing more to say publicly and, always careful to avoid public notice whenever and in whatever way possible, she wrote only for herself, and one can only assume that she continued to write as steadily and as happily within her "circle of domestic duties and pleasures" as she had always done.

It is not at all patronizing, then, to see Radcliffe's steady development and expansion of a few basic techniques in her published fiction as writing to a pattern which could be enlarged at will, like knitting, or making a quilt. In fact Talfourd's account of the way she wrote also suggests some kind of pleasant but absorbing needle-work. She wrote her novels, according to Talfourd, when her husband was kept away until late in the evening by his responsibilities as a newspaper editor.

On these occasions [Talfourd writes], Mrs. Radcliffe usually beguiled the else weary hours by her pen, and often astonished her husband, on his return, not only by the quality, but the extent of the matter she had produced, since he left her. The evening was always her favourite season for composition, when her spirits were in their happiest tone, and she was most secure from interruption. So far was she from being subjected to her own terrors, that she often laughingly presented to Mr. Radcliffe chapters, which he could not read alone without shuddering.

Although Mrs. Radcliffe was as far as possible removed from the slavery of superstitious fear, she took an eager interest in the work of composition, and was, for the time, completely absorbed in the conduct of her stories. The pleasures of painting have been worthily celebrated by men, who have been devoted to the art; but these can scarcely be regarded as superior to the enjoyments of a writer of romance, conscious of inventive power. (p. 8)

It was not the terrors she was in the act of describing which absorbed her, then, but the act of composition itself.

What exactly was the "work of composition," the "conduct" of which she pursued with such steadiness, pleasure, detachment, and absorption? First of all, it has to be recognized that in many ways Ann Radcliffe's novels are simply Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* writ long. The very title of

her first novel suggests this, and in fact every element of Walpole's novel appears in *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne*: the complex and concealed blood relations; the stereotyped and exaggerated characters; the "comically" loquacious servants (borrowed from Shakespeare); the gloomy settings, confusing passageways, and obscure places of confinement; the oppression of a helpless young female by a tyrannical older man; the rapidly paced narrative, made of a series of shocks and surprises; and the gestures at explaining mysteries and the supernatural on rational grounds. At the same time, all of these themes and devices dramatize the conflict of reason and emotion, and this is essentially a moral conflict.

Walpole himself saw this tremendous machine achieving its moral by affective rather than didactic means. In the verse dedication of his novel to Lady Mary Coke he asks:

The gentle maid, whose hapless tale
 These melancholy pages speak;
 Say, gracious lady, shall she fail
 To draw the tear adown thy cheek?

No; never was thy pitying breast
 Insensible to human woes;
 Tender, though firm, it melts distrest
 For weaknesses it never knows.

Here indeed was a claim for the moral value of the "tale of terror": it gave the "pitying breast" the chance vicariously to experience "human woes" — defined in books on female education as the best preparation for eternity — and at the same time directly to exercise sympathy — defined by Adam Smith as the essence of the social bond. The same claim to moral and social utility was of course advanced in the novels of those earlier delineators of sensibility, Defoe and Richardson, as well as by Rousseau. Walpole was simply exploring a different way of doing the same thing. In his two prefaces Walpole also indicates both his connection with the earlier novelists of sensibility, and his departure from their methods. In the first preface he declares that the work he has "edited" will keep the reader's sympathies continually

engaged: "Terror, the author's principal engine, prevents the story from ever languishing; and it is so often contrasted by pity, that the mind [of the reader] is kept up in a constant vicissitude of interesting passions."² In the second preface he describes how "ancient" romance broke too freely the rules of probability, whereas "modern" romance, that is the novel of manners, dammed up the fancy, attempting a too "strict adherence to common life" (p. 43). Walpole declared that he was "desirous of leaving the powers of fancy at liberty to expatiate through the boundless realms of invention, and thence of creating more interesting situations . . ." (*ibid.*). Here was the real reason for his "invention" of a new kind of romance, to create "more interesting situations," ones more capable of arousing terror and pity in the reader, than earlier forms of romance or novel were any longer able to do.

Did Ann Radcliffe share Walpole's aims in fiction? The similarities between her first novel and Walpole's suggest that she did. But even here she began to alter Walpole's fictional rhetoric in significant ways, adding new elements, emphasizing others, and suppressing others again, thus creating a different system of devices and a different effect. In general, she loosens, relaxes, softens, and sentimentalizes what Walpole had done. These changes are apparent even in *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne*, which is only the skeleton of the system she would develop to fullness in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. She adds description of landscape and the emotions it arouses in her heroines, for example, a new element in the range of emotional responses described in the novel, and one which pertains to the sublime of sensibility rather than of terror. In fact, Radcliffe gives greater emphasis in general to the milder or "feminine" emotions, and greater emphasis to the heroine. This development can be seen most clearly in the later novels, with their numerous evening and moonlit scenes described in terms of the heroine's response to them. Along with this Radcliffe places less emphasis on the terrors arising from shock and surprise, and thus softens the "cross-cutting" effect of these shocks and makes the narrative seem less disjointed. The "rationalizing" and diminishing of

the use of the supernatural — in most literary histories seen as the distinctive trait of Radcliffe's Gothicism — also helps to throw greater emphasis on the milder emotions, by defusing the terrors. Furthermore, Radcliffe tries to eliminate mimetic expressiveness from her accounts of emotional response, although in all of her novels there are a few examples of attempts to register suspense or shock by syntax or by typographical devices such as the dash and exclamation mark. Finally, she moralizes her descriptions of emotion to a much greater extent than Walpole. She places more emphasis on the moral quality of emotional conflicts, she adds explicit morals to her novels, and she introduces the theme of benevolence as an aspect of sensibility.

The most important result of Radcliffe's changes, however, was compositional. The extraordinary emphasis on shock, surprise, and narrative disjunction in *Otranto* was a distinctly limited principle of composition — limited by the law of diminishing returns. Shock and surprise rapidly exhaust their freshness, and it is hard to imagine *The Castle of Otranto* being any longer than it is. In contrast, Radcliffe could make each of her novels up to *Udolpho* precisely one volume longer than its predecessor. By lowering the emotional intensity, slowing the pace, distributing the shocks and surprises more widely, emphasizing milder feelings and adding emotions which were responses to nature and social sympathy, and by moving these emotions, embodied in a heroine, into the foreground, Radcliffe opened Walpole's form to almost indefinite expansion. With each successive novel she expanded her material and refined her treatment of it, while keeping to Walpole's principle of the perplexed or "braided" narrative — maintaining a "constant vicissitude of interesting passions."

Ann Radcliffe altered Walpole's "invention" so consistently and progressively through the thirteen volumes of her published fiction that one is led to ask what "idea" her own novels dramatize. I think it is clear even from her first novel that her fiction embodies a model of the human mind in which reason chastens the passions, restrains the imagination, and

reconstructs experience, thus presiding over individual moral growth and ensuring eventual happiness. The novels are relatively uninterested in social values or experience except as they reveal or dramatize individual moral character, and yet the novels also care little for any "realistic" presentation of individuality because it is the emotions themselves which Radcliffe is interested in, not their embodiment in character.

On the thematic level, of course, Radcliffe's novels are about sensibility, as that term embraces a whole range of physical and mental susceptibility. It is this susceptibility which divides the heroines from the villains, and discriminates the degrees of moral worth in those characters not absolutely vicious. But it is not as a moral measure that sensibility is the subject of the novels, but as a stock of themes which the heroines and heroes run through en route to what Burke in his *Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* had defined as the sublime virtues. These themes are organized in three main clusters, around the larger themes of perplexity, terror, and sensibility itself. In each novel the heroine is exposed (the passive voice is appropriate) to a succession of experiences, episodic in nature, which produce in her a variety of emotional states. In short, the heroine spends most of the novel being moved, and so most of the material of the novel is description of either the motive force or the emotion itself. A typology of these emotional states will help to clarify both the argument and the structure of the novels.

Around perplexity, then, one could group such inner states as "tortures", "tumults", and "conflicts", all of which are kinds of psychomachia, struggles of different emotions against each other, or of powerful emotion against self-control. Here is the reaction of the heroine of *The Romance of the Forest* on learning that she is really the daughter of her persecutor's brother: "The feeble frame of Adeline, so long harassed by grief and fatigue, almost sunk under the agitation which the discovery of her birth excited. Her feelings on this occasion were too complex to be analysed."³ On the other side of such tumults are "mysteries" (inexplicable facts), "melancholy"

(the conflict of facts with hope or expectation), and "suspense" (uncertainty about facts or the meaning of facts). These are, therefore, all epistemological conflicts.

Greater in intensity, and therefore used somewhat more sparingly in the novels, are those emotions grouped around terror, ranging from surprise, to shock, to sublimity as terror, to blankness and inanition — the heroine faints. Somewhere in that range is obscurity, a stronger version of the mysteries associated with perplexity, and defined by Burke as one of the chief sources of the sublime. This group of emotions is used more sparingly owing to the law of diminishing returns mentioned earlier: shock and sublimity depend on surprise or unfamiliarity for their effect.

On the other side of perplexity from terror is that cluster of emotions around sensibility itself. These on the whole are the pleasurable emotions (though even the emotions associated with terror and perplexity are in some way pleasurable), and range through response to the picturesque and the sublime in landscape, music, and poetry, to melancholy, and, of course, love. It is important to note that in each successive novel Radcliffe progressively increased the amount and variety of these emotions, culminating in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, her longest work. Moreover, since each novel attends primarily to a heroine rather than a hero, this group of emotions, those associated with the feminine character for centuries and now part of the dominant values of the culture of sensibility, naturally comes to dominate Radcliffe's fictional rhetoric. In other words, from *Athlin and Dunbayne* to *Udolpho* that group of emotions associated with female sensibility gradually moves towards establishing itself as the norm.

But only "towards", for there is another system, present throughout these novels, and traditionally associated not with femininity and youth, but with a fully realized humanity and maturity. This system is associated with reason, continually struggles against the excesses of sensibility, and eventually, in *The Italian*, forms a proper union with it. The difference between perplexity, terror, and sensibility in Radcliffe's novels is that the first two overpower or baffle reason, while

the last can join with it to form the fully human individual who is the result and the goal of the experiences which the novel describes. The natural compatibility of reason and sensibility can be seen in the emotions or states of mind associated with reason: certainty, patience, fortitude, resignation, respect — in a word, tranquillity. Radcliffe's heroes and heroines do not on the whole use reason to arrive at knowledge; rather, they use reason to chasten emotion to a just response to the facts of experience and observation. Reason schools Sensibility and then marries her.

There is of course a dark version of this picture. The villains and villainesses fail to rule their passions with reason, and although they do not suffer the wide range of perplexities and terrors endured by the heroes and heroines, they are only plunged deeper into the passions of ambition, pride, hatred, and revenge, and the tumults of self-conflict. Here is a description of the emotional state of affairs at the vicious Baron Malcolm's castle of Dunbayne after he has won a victory: "Misery yet dwelt in the castle of Dunbayne; for there the virtues were captive, while the vices reigned despotic. The mind of the Baron, ardent and restless, knew no peace: torn by conflicting passions, he was himself the victim of their power."⁴ The perplexities of such villains are ended only by death, and they are, naturally, beyond the consolations of sensibility, since they are by definition "insensible" and "unfeeling". Worse still, while denied the chastening exercise of reason because they lack sensibility, they can only put reason to work as the slave of the passions, and thus transform it into cunning. Finally, the heroes and heroines are defined on the other side first by the *fainéant* fathers, whose lack of moral character results in paralysis of the will, and secondly by the servants, who also stand in stark contrast to the villains. Low-born rather than nobly born, dominated by superstitious fear and the instinct of self-preservation rather than by passion or self-interest, slaves to ease rather than ambition, comic rather than menacing, loquacious rather than taciturn, sociable rather than solitary, and loyal rather than treacherous, the men and

maids who serve the heroes and heroines represent the values of common humanity rather than excessive individualism.

Such is the model of human nature and knowledge embodied in Ann Radcliffe's novels, but it is hardly original.⁵ What is original is the way she takes over, adapts, and combines certain features of the fictional rhetoric of the day in order to dramatize this model. The plots, for example, are as conventional as the themes and characters, and are all based on the standard romantic plot:⁶ cavalier meets damsel, they fall in love, they are separated by circumstances or the machinations of their foes, they overcome or survive separate strings of difficulties, are reunited, and marry. This simple pattern is based on the theme of the lover's test (both the lovers being tested), and operates through the simple mechanisms of concealment and revelation: the true character or family of one (or both) lovers is concealed from the other, a series of mysterious or inexplicable obstacles is thrown in the way of their union by concealed or mysterious agents for concealed or mysterious reasons, the mysteries are explained (usually by the narrator directly, but also through various *dei-ex-machina*), and the marriage and the moral are delivered as a package in the last chapter. There is no variation from this pattern; the variations are all concentrated in the obstacles and delays and mysteries which keep the lovers apart, and, as we have seen, these variations are all motivated by the necessity of presenting "a constant vicissitude of interesting passions" in the various characters, but especially in the heroine.

There is no essential difference, for example, between castles on the north-east coast of Scotland, another on the north coast of Sicily, a ruined abbey in Fontainville Forest in France, a chateau in Languedoc and a castle in northern Italy, or a convent in southern Italy and the prison of the Inquisition. All are more or less exotic settings where the requirements of conventional domestic realism can be ignored and where occasions of melancholy, mystery, and terror may credibly be contrived at will, for the reader could hardly know any better, and wouldn't care anyway. There is, too, no

essential difference between the various sets of characters, between a Mary and Laura, an Emilia and Julia, an Adeline, an Emily, and an Ellena; between an Osbert and Alleyn, a Ferdinand and Hippolitus, a Theodore, a Valancourt, or a Vivaldi; for they are all merely organs of sensibility, male or female. There is, similarly, little difference between a Baron Malcolm, a Marquis Mazzini, a Marquis de Montalt, a Marchese Montoni, and a father Schedoni (also known as the Count di Marinella), for they are all mysterious, menacing, and Machiavellian, mere machines of awe and terror to the heroines, and fierce rivals of the heroes. In other words, character is presented in abstract and exaggerated terms, to avoid the necessities of detailed psychological realism, and to throw the emotional response itself into the foreground. In Radcliffe's novels individual psychology does not exist, only set patterns of virtuous sensibility, human weakness, or unfeeling depravity. (Indeed, excessive individualism is usually a sign of vicious character.) Individuality is suppressed in order to focus the maximum attention on description of general psychological conditions of sensibility, perplexity, or terror. The lack of individuality of course extends to dialogue, which is stilted and probably derived from the Heroic Dramas of the previous age. But once again, the flatness of technique here does serve a purpose: it forces attention on the general moral issues being discussed, rather than on the individualistic expressive styles of the speakers. And so there is no attempt at characteristic speech except for the menacing and mysterious taciturnity of the villains on one hand and the comic loquaciousness of the servants on the other, but even these are largely devices to create suspense by concealing or delaying information, or by providing "comic" relief to highlight the "serious" emotions of the protagonists. In dialogue, as in most everything else, the heroes and heroines occupy neutral ground. Finally, setting itself is presented in generalized and abstract terms, derived from books of travels,⁷ pressed into the categories of sublime and picturesque, coloured by paintings or prints of Claude, Rosa, and Poussin,⁸ and described from the point of view of the

affected sensibilities of the heroine. This brief summary of the formal elements of Radcliffe's novels clearly indicates that every aspect of her fictional technique has been generalized, and any stylistic trait that could make a technique noticeable by drawing attention to itself has been eliminated, so that the descriptions of emotional responses may be unrivalled in their dominance in the whole fictional structure.

How then are these descriptions organized into a temporal sequence? Are they organized at all? The typology of emotional states which was outlined earlier is associative in nature, and thus lacks any principle of organization based on moral development or progress. Therefore a fiction embodying that typology will itself be unprogressive and repetitious in form. The only principles distinguishing the parts of the system are conflict and gradation: some emotions are opposed by others; some are stronger than others. The only progressive principle comes from the emotions' relation to reason: reason chastens the passions, and so refines, harmonizes, and "tranquilizes" them. In Radcliffe's novels, however, the passages of sensibility are a kind of ground to the passages of perplexity, and this does constitute a sort of organizing principle, though an unprogressive one, and as a result of it the perplexities bear the burden of the novel's argument about the relation of emotion and reason. As we have seen, all aspects of the novel's formal technique are motivated by the need to create occasions of sensibility or perplexity, but even the descriptions of different kinds of sensibility can be seen as motivated by the need to highlight the perplexities. Here already is the principle of alternation in the overall temporal pattern of the novels, and it is in fact the only strong organizing principle present in any of Radcliffe's fictions. The alternation need not, as in the cruder kinds of Gothic, be between diametrical opposites, but only between differences, and so throughout the novel the heroine merely goes through a variety of emotional states in more or less rapid succession. In fact in her most fully developed novel, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Radcliffe is fond of delineating a movement through gradations of sensibility rather than the extreme oscillations

between sensibility, perplexity, or terror characteristic of her earlier work. Another way of varying the pattern (thus using the same material twice over, a truly housewifely economy) is to switch back and forth from one character to another, a device Radcliffe uses in *The Italian*. The word "meanwhile" appears at the head of chapter after chapter as the narrative switches from the heroine Ellena to Vivaldi the hero. These kinds of alternations or "constant vicissitudes," then, form the basic unprogressive pattern of Radcliffe's novels, one which is itself a kind of perplexity, in the root sense.

However, this "braided" form, which organizes the descriptions of emotion, would hardly sustain interest for a novel longer than *Otranto* without assistance from other formal principles, and of course the most important of these is suspense. Suspense is normally discussed as an affective rather than a formal device, and in Gothic fiction it clearly does have the former function. But it also serves to organize the material into both large and small units. Suspense enters into both the perplexities of the characters, and the mysteries, concealments, and other unexplained phenomena of the novel. Some mysteries last only a few lines, others for the whole of the novel, and the former are used to give dramatic intensity to a particular passage, while the latter organize the narrative material into a plot. Nevertheless, suspense used in this way contributes nothing to any progressive development of form or theme in the novel, and is largely assimilated to the repetitive quality of the form. In *The Romance of the Forest*, *Udolpho*, and *The Italian*, for example, evening scenes comprise a great deal of the descriptive material, but Radcliffe also arranges a number of different kinds of suspense around evening and midnight. Further, in *Udolpho* many of the chapters are organized into units of a day, ending with evening and a melancholy withdrawal of the heroine to her repose. Or the heroine may go to her nightly rest very late, wound up after the midnight terrors she has just passed through, either unable to sleep, sleeping but wracked by bad dreams, or sinking exhausted into a dead slumber. In many cases the unresolved mystery of the night before greets the

heroine with its grey pall and its perplexities at the beginning of the next day, and the next chapter. A simple structuring device such as this allows for both alternation and linking through parallelism or repetition, but it is still basically an unprogressive device.

Patterns such as this one are often combined with others such as the journey, the sojourn, or the confinement, which organize the narrative material into larger units. Suspense is usually employed to heighten interest in these cases, as the heroine waits in fear to learn where she is being taken, or spends her time waiting for some known or unknown terror to be inflicted on her, or longs for her liberation. While she travels, waits, or longs a variety of terrors or perplexities is run at her. In *Udolpho*, for example, Emily first travels around southern France with her dying father, experiencing a variety of the sublime and picturesque, as well as difficulties, doubts, and embarrassments; then she sojourns with her vain and vulgar aunt, suffering constant affliction from her aunt's insensitivity; then she is menaced with ardent Italians in Venice after her aunt marries Montoni; then she experiences a series of doubts and terrors at Udolpho; then her sojourn there turns into a confinement, and she is taken on a pointless journey so that she can experience more sublime landscape and nocturnal terrors; finally she escapes and returns to her native soil only to endure doubts and mysteries as to her beloved Valancourt's moral character. Clearly, there is no necessary connection between these various parts of the novel; in fact once the inherent possibilities for suspense have been exhausted, the episodes are often perfunctorily terminated, as Emily escapes rather easily from Udolpho, for example, and the menacing Montoni is dismissed from the novel in a few lines. The significance of the suspenseful situations is diminished even further by Radcliffe's tendency, much commented on from her day to this, to explain the various mysteries on rational grounds, often in a dry and abrupt fashion. In other words, the "concatenation" in Radcliffe's novels is negligible, and this fact only allows "the constant vicissitude of interesting passions" to dominate

completely the structure of her novels.

The larger mysteries seem to exercise as little shaping force as the lesser ones, until *The Italian*. In *Udolpho* one could find an example, often several, of each one of the emotional states described earlier, and Radcliffe "braids" all the varieties of terror, perplexity, and sensibility together until she finally exhausts her repertoire, and has to end her novel. So in *Udolpho* the initial problem — whether Emily will marry Valancourt — is lost sight of, as Valancourt himself is lost sight of, for large tracts of the novel. In fact Valancourt figures at all in the large central portion of the novel only as a source of melancholy reminiscence (a variety of sensibility) for Emily while she is sojourning at Toulouse, Venice, or Udolpho. There is never any real doubt of the final union of hero and heroine, and the whole of the fictional technique of the novel is subordinate to the description of emotions, as the suspense involving Emily and Valancourt hardly exercises any shaping pressure on the plot. In *The Italian* this is no longer the case. The dominant characteristics developed in *The Romance of the Forest* and *The Mysteries of Udolpho* are still present, but they are joined to a more powerful governing mystery, embodied in the character and actions of Schedoni, and as a result the whole fictional system is altered. Nevertheless, the alterations are characteristic ones and revolve around the identity of Ellena and Schedoni. Along with this goes the greater attention and more complex character given to Schedoni. His identity is not kept entirely concealed, but his real relationship to Ellena is, as he is first her persecutor, and then, allowed to believe that she is his daughter, he becomes her protector. This reversal, however melodramatic, gives at least a little more unity to the plot. In addition, Radcliffe makes Schedoni more "interesting" by lending him some of the qualities of susceptibility which she had previously reserved for the weak, sick, dying, or otherwise *fainéant* fathers. The "vicissitudes of interesting passions" in Schedoni thus rival those of the heroine. But Schedoni is still primarily a machiavel, and Ellena, to a much greater extent than any of Radcliffe's earlier heroines, tries to

control her sensibility with reason. At the same time Radcliffe sloughs off some of the heroine's emotional susceptibility, and, lending it to Vivaldi, a hero governed more than any earlier one by his passions, allows Ellena to become a better embodiment of fortitude, stoic calm, and patience, virtues associated with rational self-control. Thus the tension between the rational virtues and the stronger passions is much more prominent in this novel. In a way this is a move back towards the compression and intensity of *Otranto*, and in fact there was really no other way Radcliffe could go and still work with the same material. She had developed this material by expansion and dilation from *Athlin and Dunbayne* to *Udolpho*; she had condensed and heightened the outlines of her material in the *Italian*; henceforth she would have to bring into her system materials or forms that were different altogether.

Since even *The Italian* is based on the constructive principle of providing "a constant vicissitude of interesting passions" by means of a perplexed narrative form, it is clear that Radcliffe's novels are essentially unprogressive, like eighteenth-century fiction in general. The novels have no real concatenation of circumstances and character, the characters change little, the little change is not dramatized, and there is only an end to the "constant vicissitudes" and no real conclusion. The heroes' and heroines' perplexities are simply terminated, by a *deus ex machina*, a sudden reversal, or starting revelation. Clearly Radcliffe is relying upon her readers' automatic agreement with the view "that those who do only THAT WHICH IS RIGHT, endure nothing in misfortune but a trial of their virtue, and from trials well endured, derive the surest claim to the protection of heaven,"⁹ or "that, though the vicious can sometimes pour affliction upon the good, their power is transient and their punishment certain; and that innocence, though oppressed by injustice, shall, supported by patience, finally triumph over misfortune!"¹⁰ The real unifying principle in all of the novels, then, is the internal coherence of the system of emotions outlined earlier. This system was imbedded as a convention in

the ideology of people of Radcliffe's class and education; therefore she could rely upon her readers' knowledge of the system precisely because it was conventional. At least she thought so until the success of Lewis's *The Monk*, and a host of inferior imitations of her work, made her think again. That is one reason why she gave her fictional system a clearer and more forceful expression in *The Italian*. It is as if, perceiving herself to have been misunderstood, she wished to restate her case, only more clearly, economically, and emphatically.

But if Radcliffe's novels are indeed unprogressive in form; if they dramatize only the conflict of reason and emotion and not the conflict's resolution, then those early parodists and modern commentators are right for finding Gothic novelists guilty of encouraging that very sensibility they claim to disapprove of. There is however an important aspect of Radcliffe's fictional rhetoric which I have not discussed, and which does pose as the guarantee of reason's supremacy and educative force. This aspect, like the system of emotions, also tacitly invokes a convention. The language and style of Radcliffe's narrative "voice" are calculated to give the minimum effect of strangeness and unfamiliarity, even while rendering what is strange and unfamiliar.¹¹ It is a style so conventional that it becomes transparent, allowing all attention to focus on the narrative material itself, description of the causes and effects of emotion. Thus a style the reverse of one which is mimetically expressive achieves the same effect, or rather it achieves a greater effectiveness precisely because it eschews the stylistic excesses of expressiveness perpetrated by Radcliffe's limitators. Objectively, one can describe Ann Radcliffe's narrative voice as calm, even-tempered, relaxed, and lucid. In other words it is expressive, but not of the terrors, tumults, perplexities, or sensibility it describes. Rather, the narrative voice expresses sensibility enlightened, tempered, and refined by reason, a kind of sensibility which she and her readers would have called taste.¹² This term has declined in importance and value since Radcliffe's time, so it is worth recalling what Burke says about it in the treatise which was the source of Radcliffe's

own terms and definitions for discussing the Gothic element in literature.¹³ ". . . Taste, in its most general acceptation," Burke writes, "is not a simple idea, but is partly made up of a perception of the primary pleasures of sense, of the secondary pleasures of the imagination, and of the conclusions of the reasoning faculty, concerning the various relations of these, and concerning the human passions, manners and actions."¹⁴ Taste, in other words, is not an instinct, but a union of the senses with imagination and judgment, and it is to be cultivated and exercised just as the understanding is. The prose style of Radcliffe's novels represents a model consciousness, the kind of integrated and unified consciousness towards which her heroines are supposed to strive. And so the resolution of the conflict of reason and sensibility is not in the plot or argument of the novel, not in the dramatized moral growth of individual characters, but in the narrative voice. But since this resolution has taken place before the novel even begins, in a sense there is no dramatic resolution in the novel itself. The narrative voice continues throughout the novel to describe "constant vicissitudes of interesting passions" without itself undergoing those vicissitudes. At the same time the narrative voice is not ironically detached from what it describes. Rather it regulates the vicissitudes, absorbs, tempers, and rationalizes them in the same way that a calm, rational observer will report another's declaration of anger, confession of perplexity, or melancholy complaint, stripping it of its expressiveness in the process of reporting it. The material is absorbed into the narrative voice, the narrative voice does not lend itself to the material. In fact, every aspect of Radcliffe's novels is deformed in the same way. The stereotyped characterization, the stilted formal dialogue (hardly varied even by the "comically" loquacious servants), the mysteries and terrors blandly explained away or perfunctorily dismissed, the eschewing of the erotic suggestiveness and Grand Guignol horrors practised by other Gothicists, the avoidance of any aspect of language which was so lively as to draw attention to itself — all these aspects of Radcliffe's novels represent the

deformation of fictional technique to serve the higher cause of good taste. As Q.D. Leavis has put it, "Mrs. Radcliffe makes an appeal less to the nerves than to the imagination, using . . . the desiccated idiom of the age, like Scott, and she does achieve a total effect. The sensation novelists make a brutal assault on the feelings and nerves in quite another way."¹⁵

And yet these "sensation novelists" took their lead, in many cases and many ways, from Radcliffe, and so the question arises, did she communicate her good taste to her readers? Naïve readers, especially those Q. D. Leavis describes as reading primarily "to pass the time not unpleasantly," seem to be able to read for "the story" alone, and so the fact that Radcliffe's imitators ignored the "good taste" implicit in her narrative voice, and pushed her narrative material to greater and greater extremes of sensationalism in a maximally expressive style, suggests that her readers could ignore, or be oblivious to, the morals she drew as well as the moral values represented by her "conventional" style. This was a development of Gothic themes, imagery, characters, and settings which would soon consume itself. Appropriately, the vogue for the type of Gothic fiction inspired by Radcliffe seems to have exhausted itself just before the posthumous publication of her last experiments in Gothic, *Gaston de Blondville* and *St. Alban's Abbey* (1826). So in a way the development by others of the kind of fiction she practised has reversed the way in which her own novels can be read. She intended them primarily to have a conventional moral function, to dramatize the opposition of reason and emotion and to show the supremacy of reason in her narrative style; her readers and her imitators ignored her intention and appreciated her novels for their affective function, for their Gothic terrors and trimmings; but the exhaustion of those terrors and trimmings by her imitators leaves us with no alternative but to read her work for its rhetorical function, for the way she embodied her ideas in narrative style and form. We read Ann Radcliffe's novels as documents in the history of the language of literary forms.

There is one further reason why we read Radcliffe, though it too is largely a historical one. In a sense all literary texts are expressive in that all are products of an individual mind, in a particular cultural, social, and historical context, and so the final question is, what do Radcliffe's fictional texts express about her mind? This is not an idle question for two reasons. First, her texts are part of the literature of sensibility, and the rhetoric of that literature placed the highest value on what Aristotle, in his rhetoric, defined as *ethos*, or the moral character of the author. Second, expressivity has tended to be an especially important issue with women writers, because of the greater restraints placed upon the kinds of self-expression allowed them, and because their *ethos* has tended to be much more closely scrutinized and more severely judged than that of men writers. The critical controversy that broke out soon after the appearance of *Jane Eyre* is one example that comes to mind. Perhaps, then, it is time to return to the point of departure of this essay, in the remarks of Talfourd on the domestic character of Ann Radcliffe's life and work. As Talfourd said, explaining her avoidance of literary social life, "nothing could tempt her to publish *herself*; or to sink for a moment, the gentlewoman in the novelist" (p. 13). Again one thinks of Charlotte Brontë. And yet Ann Radcliffe did publish herself in her novels, for like Charlotte Brontë she revealed herself not so much in what she wrote about as in the way that she wrote. The imprisonment of terrors and perplexities in her even-tempered narrative style; the consistent use of conventional language to support conventional values; the embodiment of philosophic taste — the union of sensibility and reason — in the treatment of her fictional material; and the perfectly regular development, expansion, and refinement of her basic fictional pattern — all these aspects of her fiction successfully publish, and publish in the only way open to her, Ann Radcliffe as she wanted to be.

NOTES

- ¹"Memoir of the Life and Writings of Mrs. Radcliffe" in Ann Radcliffe, *Gaston de Blondville* (4 vols., London: H. Colburn, 1826), vol. I, p. 3.
- ²*The Castle of Otranto in Three Gothic Novels*, ed. Peter Fairclough (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 40.
- ³op. cit. (London, 1791), vol. III, p. 303.
- ⁴*The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* (London: Hookham and Carpenter, 1789), p. 91.
- ⁵See for example, the account of Radcliffe's "bourgeois" ideology in Wylie Sypher, "Social Ambiguity in a Gothic Novel," *Partisan Review*, 12 (1945), 50-60.
- ⁶See Donald Thomas's distinction between two basic romantic plots (heroine weds social superior, heroine weds social equal), in "The First Poetess of Romantic Fiction: Ann Radcliffe, 1764-1823," *English*, 15 (1964), 91-5.
- ⁷See C. F. McIntyre, *Ann Radcliffe in Relation to Her Time* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1920), p. 59, and J. M. S. Tompkins, "Ramond de Carbonnières, Grosley and Mrs. Radcliffe," *Review of English Studies*, 5 (1929), 294-301.
- ⁸See Lynne Epstein, "Mrs. Radcliffe's Landscapes: The Influence of Three Landscape Painters on her Nature Descriptions," *Hartford Studies in Literature*, 12 (1969), 107-20.
- ⁹*The Sicilian Romance* (2 vols., London: T. Hookham, 1790), vol. II, p. 216.
- ¹⁰*The Mysteries of Udolpho*, ed. Bonamy Dobrée (London, New York, and Toronto, 1966), p. 672.
- ¹¹Cf. William Ruff's comments on Radcliffe's diction, which he points out as drawn from the poets Radcliffe uses for her chapter epigraphs in *Udolpho* and *The Italian*, in "Ann Radcliffe, or, The Hand of Taste," *The Age of Johnson*, ed. F. W. Hilles (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1949), p. 188.
- ¹²Cf. again William Ruff's essay, which treats taste and Ann Radcliffe's exercise of it with mild amusement and condescension, showing a lack of awareness of how important a concept it was in Radcliffe's day.
- ¹³See Radcliffe's "On the Supernatural in Poetry," *New Monthly Magazine*, 16 (1826), 145-52, and A. D. McKillop's comments in "Mrs. Radcliffe on the Supernatural in Poetry," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 31 (1932), 352-9, along with Malcolm Ware, *Sublimity in the Novels of Ann Radcliffe* (Essays and Studies on English Language and Literature, Upsala University, no. 25, 1963).
- ¹⁴*Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. J. T. Boulton (London and New York: Routledge and Paul, 1958), p. 23.
- ¹⁵*Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932), p. 154.