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Gothic Art in Four Romantic Authors

To Pablo and William-Manuel

Abstract. Benjamin Disraeli remarked in 1833 that a key dereliction of modern belief-systems (such as Utilitarianism in political philosophy and Unitarianism in religion) was to omit the imagination.¹ Why did he and other XIXth century authors turn for remedy in this particular regard to Gothic art? Four examples – drawn from Wordsworth (1798), Keats (1819), Stendhal (1830) and Disraeli (1845)² – suggest that Gothic art was invoked by a few prominent Romantic authors, not to thrill us with haunted castles,³ but for a more complex purpose. Their goal was to bring a repressed religious imagination out in the open while also guarding against solipsism. All four authors saw in Gothic architecture a model of transcendent unity based on harmonizing, rather than suppressing, heterogeneous elements. At once naturalistic and mystical, Gothic cosmophilia (love of beauty) offered a welcome alternative both to an increasingly bleak secularism and to a narrow Evangelical

¹ Disraeli, *Letters*, ed. J.A.W. Gunn, John Matthews, Donald M. Schurman, and M.G. Wiebe (Toronto: 1982), I, 447: “The Utilitarians in Politics are like the Unitarians in Religion. Both omit Imagination in their systems, and Imagination governs Mankind.” Cited by Gertrude Himmelfarb in *The Moral Imagination* (Chicago: Ivan Dee, 2006), 93.

² Note that all four examples predate John Ruskin’s *Seven Lamps of Architecture*, 1852.

³ I interpret Horace Walpole’s delight in “Gothick” and Ann Radcliffe’s novels to embrace medievalism precisely as a lost cause, following the demise of the Jacobite faction.

Anne A. Davenport, « Gothic Art in Four Romantic Authors », Jean-François Chassay et Bertrand Gervais [éds], *Paroles, textes et images. Formes et pouvoirs de l’imaginaire*, Université du Québec à Montréal, Centre de recherche sur le texte et l’imaginaire, coll. « Figura », n° 19, vol. 1, p. 107-131.

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moralism. Gothic cathedrals spoke of the soul's vertical dimension against democratic leveling, while Gothic abbeys spoke of human equality before God. Gothic imagery thus allowed our authors to rekindle a distinctly religious imagination without forsaking key commitments of the modern project.

Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey"

When Wordsworth wrote "Tintern Abbey" in 1798,⁴ Gothic architecture had been revived for playful make-belief,⁵ but had for the most part been repeatedly discredited as a religious venue. Gothic shrines had been demonized by Puritans during the Reformation as idolatrous,⁶ replaced by Baroque domes and façades during the Counter-Reformation, ridiculed by the Enlightenment as irrational, and, in Wordsworth's own memory, savagely defaced by French *Jacobins* as politically loathsome.⁷ Why then did Wordsworth choose to evoke Tintern Abbey in the title of his poem? Why not "Lines Written On The Banks of the Wye?" What, in short, does Tintern Abbey *add* to Wordsworth's communion with nature?

⁴ Chateaubriand's *Génie du Christianisme* was not published before 1800 in London and 1802 in Paris. His *Essai sur les Révolutions*, published in London in 1797, expressed a quasi-atheist worldview, concluding with the question: "What religion will replace Christianity?"

⁵ For some of the uses of Gothic in 20th century literature, see Patrick R. O'Malley, *Catholicism, sexual Deviance, and Victorian Gothic Culture* (Cambridge, UK. and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁶ Eamon Duffey, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c. 1400–c. 1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

⁷ As Dennis Taylor points out in "Wordsworth's Abbey Ruins," Wordsworth saw history repeated by the French *sans culottes*, who manifested the same hostility to Catholic buildings as the English Puritans had during the Reformation. J. Robert Barth, S.J., ed., *The Fountain of Light: Studies in Romanticism and Religion*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 14.

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As Coleridge's "Religious Musings" of 1794 attests, the problem of religious emotion vitally shaped Wordsworth's emerging understanding of his vocation.⁸ Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey", in which this vocation is embraced with new conviction, commemorates an earlier excursion with his sister to the same site five years earlier and thus describes a personal pilgrimage. But a pilgrimage *to what?*

After "many wanderings," (*MW*, lines 157-158) disillusioned by radical politics, anxious about the passage of time, Wordsworth returned to a site that tied him to domestic history and to himself with special affective bonds. The poem is a double home-coming. The "dark sycamore" under which he "again reposes" serves as a personal landmark in the wilderness, a privileged site of (no)return, like a family tomb. The poet's memory is revived both acoustically ("Again I hear/These waters") and visually ("Once again/Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,"), giving rise to an immediate, sensorial faith that earth and heaven are one ("and connect/The Landscape to the quiet of the sky"). The poet has carved out a place of imaginative meaning for himself, a place of origin. He seeks to commune, not with nature's "wild seclusion" so much as with the "deeper seclusion" of *place*, of nature "a few miles above Tintern Abbey." The ruined Gothic shrine presides over his home-coming not only because it mirrors his own intimate sense of dilapidation, but because it symbolizes the transcendent promise of spiritual gestation. Tintern Abbey once *gave birth* in this wilderness to the imagination

⁸Thomas McFarland, "The Symbiosis of Coleridge and Wordsworth," *Studies in Romanticism*, xi (1972), 263-303. As Stephen Gill remarks, "Tintern Abbey echoes at a vital moment Coleridge's earlier use in 'Religious Musings' of the word 'interfused.'" Stephen Gill, ed., *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), xvii. Further references to this text will be given in parentheses after the quotation, preceded by the abbreviation *MW*. The poem can be found online at: <http://www.thetalisman.org.uk/tintern/>

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of heaven, perfecting human nature without contradicting it. Half-turned to the earth, the abbey's crumbling vaults speak of a buried hope – of an “old religion” that subtends the poet's modern faith in progress (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Tintern Abbey (photo Dennis Taylor)

Tintern Abbey is never described.⁹ “Vagrant dwellers” half-sheltered in its ruins, like God's proverbial poor, or ghosts of Cistercian monks, remind the poet of the fragility of home, of the risk of being cut-off from history, meaning, hope, sacraments. Wordsworth recalls his own despair in “lonely rooms, mid the din of towns and cities” and how he nursed himself back from anomie by evoking “sensations sweet,/Felt in the blood.” (*MW*, lines 26-31.) Religious imagination stems from the experience of loss and the fear of annihilation.

⁹ This feature of the poem has long attracted the attention of scholars, notably of Peter Brier in “Reflections on Tintern Abbey,” *Wordsworth Circle* 5 (1974), 5-6, and more recently of Dennis Taylor, “Wordsworth's Abbey Ruins,” in *The Fountain of Light*, 37-53.

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Tintern Abbey lies beyond the horizon of visibility, image of a ruined unity, “alpha and omega,” bridging birth and death. The poet feels himself to be “gently led” to a supreme destination. He imagines death, when, he says, we will be “laid asleep in body” and “become a living soul.” (*MW*, lines 36-47.)¹⁰ In this ultimate birth and awakening, the eye will be “made quiet by the power/Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,” and we will “see into the life of things.” In other words, Tintern Abbey impresses a transcendent promise on the landscape, which nature, as such, caught in the cycle of its seasons, is powerless to supply.¹¹ The poet’s religious imagination grows out of the paradox of home-coming, which reveals the impossibility for humans to return. We are not grass. We are not flesh. There is, in this impossibility, a higher sense of home – a “sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused.” (*MW*, lines 96-97) The child’s “coarser pleasures” and “glad animal movements” are relinquished in favour of a spiritual coming of age that lies, always, ahead. “Nature and the language of sense” are the poet’s nurse – but not the poet’s destiny.

John Keats interpreted “Tintern Abbey” to mark a new awareness on Wordsworth’s part of the mystery that exceeds rational understanding.¹² Keats also characterized Wordsworth’s poetic genius as a form of “egotistical sublime.”¹³

¹⁰ “Until, the breath of this corporeal frame./And even the motion of our human blood/Almost suspended, we are laid asleep/In body, and become a living soul”.

¹¹ For a nice study of the relevance of Wordsworth’s Anglican upbringing to “Tintern Abbey”, see Mary Herrington-Perry, ““Tintern Abbey” and the “Spiritual Presence of Absent things,”” on the Web at: <http://prometheus.cc.emory.edu/panles/5C/M.Herrington-Perry.html>.

¹² John Keats, Letter to Reynolds, May 3, 1818; cited and nicely analyzed for its bearing on *The Eve of St. Agnes* by Earl Wasserman in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of the Eve of St. Agnes* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1971), 27-28.

¹³ John Keats, Letter to Richard Woodhouse, October 27, 1818; cited

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Two features of “Tintern Abbey” invite us to qualify Keats’s assessment. First, by citing the abbey in the title, Wordsworth transformed a private pilgrimage site into a collective, shared, ancestral site. The poet’s intimations of immortality inspire him to abandon the first person singular and speak collectively: not I, but *we*, are “laid asleep in body” and born to eternal life. The vanished monastic choir that once gathered in Tintern Abbey looms over the poet’s solitary consciousness through a sort of *mise-en-abîme*.

Secondly, the poet resumes a solitary *I* only to embrace the explicitly dialogical *we* that bursts forth as the poet’s sister is materialized out of absence. Symbol *par excellence* of the organic bonds that tie the poet not only to his own point of origin (his physical birth), but also to the matrix of sensations and values that give his voice meaning, the poet’s sister is directly addressed. With her eyes “full of shooting lights,” she is the poet’s invisible witness and intercessor. The poet cannot find his own voice without the “sister voice” that gives him, not a common language, but a language-in-common. Return (to the site of Tintern Abbey, to himself, to faith, to hope) is possible/impossible only because

... thou art with me, here, upon the banks
Of this fair river; thou, my dearest Friend,
My dear, dear Friend, and *in thy voice I catch*
The language of my former heart, and read
My former pleasures in the shooting lights
Of thy wild eyes.
(*MW*, lines 116-120. Emphasis added.)

in W. Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 260: “As to the poetical Character itself, (I mean that sort of which, if I am anything, I am a member; that sort distinguished from the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime; which is a thing per se and stands alone) it is not itself – it has no self – it is everything and nothing – it has no character – it enjoys light and shade.” Keats means to contrast Wordsworth’s approach to his own “negative capability” method of poetry.

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Poetry, at its root, cannot be egotistical because religious imagination, at its root, *responds*. The poet's absent sister, vested with the mirroring power of a vanished maternal gaze, provides the indispensable alterity that saves the poet from solipsism. The poet can be a witness for past and future generations because he is himself shaped by a reciprocal witnessing. Confident now that Nature "never did betray the heart that loved her," the poet gives voice to the language of return—which is the imaginative communion of prayer. The poet prays that his sister will summon him, address him, turn to him spiritually, from afar, if "solitude, or pain, or grief" becomes her portion. The poet, in short, accepts the debt of reciprocity that a transcendent promise places upon the solitary self, calling him to renounce the vagrancy of self-sufficiency.

Does "Tintern Abbey" derive its force, in part, from a deeper exile? William and Dorothy Wordsworth were aged 8 and 7 when they saw their mother's coffin lowered into the earth. Nature "above Tintern Abbey" is not the nature of boyish innocence, dizzy rapture, conquest, erasure, appetite. Orchards and woods are infused with maternal memory, carved out by shared loss and desire, imbued with faith that what is vanished continues to "give food" for future years. The poet relinquishes the "egotistical sublime" of his youth to let himself *be called* by grief, by trust in a bounty that exceeds him. He embraces his vocation with "a deeper zeal" and a "holier love" for the deities of place "not only for themselves but also *for thy sake*."¹⁴

Keats, "The Eve of St. Agnes"

When we turn to Keats and *The Eve of St. Agnes*, imagination turns radically alchemical and its religious content is more

¹⁴ Cf. Henry Weinfield, "These Beauteous Forms: 'Tintern Abbey' and the Post-Enlightenment Religious Crisis," 82: "Wordsworth's struggle in 'Tintern Abbey' has everything to do with the attempt to find a container, so as to hold onto what would otherwise be ephemeral."

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diffuse. What Keats recovers from a lost Gothic world is faith in the power of religious ritual to spiritualize the human sensorium. The “old religion” hoped to purify human gesture and turn lust into love by starving gross appetite.¹⁵ Gothic architecture – familiar to Keats from Enfield and from the cathedral town of Chichester, which he visited shortly before writing “St. Agnes’s Eve”¹⁶ – emerged from a constellation of practices that made human gesture sacred (*sacrum facere*) and meaningful (*signi-ficant*) by reverencing limits as divine.

Each stanza of the poem, while advancing the narrative, presents a self-contained spiritual panel. Naturalism and supernaturalism are interlaced to create a distinctive aesthetic, reminiscent of stained glass, with dark lead borders and transparent colours.¹⁷ *Mimesis* is only apparent. Each scene is governed by allegorical coherence rather than by natural perspective. In the opening stanza, for example, a triad of owl, hare and frozen grass stand for the sublunar realm, forming a rustic background for the *pastorale* of St. Agnes to unfold. The saint’s mystical lambs – “And silent was the flock in woolly fold” – give immediate tangibility to the spiritual purity

¹⁵ Strangely, despite Keats’ explicit interest in Troubadour poetry (cf. *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*), critics have not interpreted *The Eve of St. Agnes* as a positive nostalgia for Roman Catholicism, but as an attack on religion (Robin Mayhead), an ironic version of the Annunciation (Gail Gibson), and a plea for Paganism over Christianity (Marcia Gilbreath).

Jack Stillinger, *Reading the Eve of St. Agnes* (New York and Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 1999), 62-65. The poem can be found online at: <http://www.bartleby.com/126/39.html>. Further references to this text will be given in parentheses after the quotation, preceded by the abbreviation *ESA*.

¹⁶ See W. Jackson Bate’s account in *John Keats, op. cit.*, 437-438.

¹⁷ Pre-Raphaelites recognized this. See, e.g., Grant F. Scott, *Keats, Ekphrasis, and the Visual Arts*, 87: “*St. Agnes* provided a rich source of vibrant and coloured images for these artists, but more importantly, I think, it showed them that Keats was doing in words what they so desperately wanted to actualize in paint.”

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that emanates from the “sweet Virgin’s picture.”¹⁸ The three cosmic realms (natural, redeemed, divine) are held together by the figure of a kneeling beadsman, whose breath, as he recites the rosary, turns into a scroll of incense, connecting heaven and earth “without a death.” (*ESA*, stanza I, lines 4-9.) The second stanza, similarly, weaves natural and supernatural elements together to depict the mystery of purgatory. The beadsman casts the lamp of living prayer over souls that failed to act in time and who lie dead, frozen, side by side, in torment, in hope.

The ritual of St. Agnes’s eve – the prohibition to speak, to look back, to eat profane food – is at once a trial (separation rite) and a foretaste of heaven. Madeline turns a deaf ear to the brutish merriment that surrounds her and keeps her heart fixed “otherwhere,” on the absent Lover/Beloved who seeks her “across the moors.” Porphyro, in turn, must traverse doors “bolted against the moon.” The two lovers have, in effect, communicated across space – directly, spiritually, which is the way that pure souls, according to Keats, communicate after death.¹⁹ Porphyro is chosen to be Madeline’s mystical groom because he is willing to brave the “whole blood-thirsty race” for her sake. When he learns that Madeline, reciprocally, hopes to behold him and wed him—he “scarce could brook his tears.” Porphyro’s tears dissolve obstacles (bodily impediments to spiritual ascent), and Porphyro is led through dark passages

¹⁸ St. Agnes was a 4th century Roman martyr. On her feast, (January 21) two lambs are solemnly blessed and their wool used for ritual palliums sent by the pope to archbishops.

¹⁹ Keats, Letter to George, December 16, 1818, cited by Bate in *John Keats*, 419: “Sometimes I fancy an immense separation, and sometimes, as at present, a direct communication of spirit with you. That will be one of the grandeurs of immortality – there will be no space and consequently the only commerce between spirits will be by their intelligence of each other – when they will completely understand each other—while we in this world merely comprehend each other in different degrees.”

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toward Madeline, who appears to him as a “mission’d spirit” (sent to redeem him).

We notice that the ritual through which Porphyro and Madeline are joined is at once catholic (open to all, determined by merit) and esoteric (meaningless to the uninitiated). When Madeline enters her innermost chamber, the taper, symbol of the old catholicity of rite/right, goes out, heralding the realm of darkness that lies, in Keats’s private symbolism, beyond the “Chamber of Maiden-Thought.”²⁰ The pallid moonshine indicates that Porphyro is now ready to explore the mystery to which self-limitation alone gives access.²¹ Madeline kneels below a Gothic casement to pray:

A casement high and triple-arch’d there was,
All garlanded with carven imag’ries
Of fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot-
grass,
And diamonded with pains of quaint device,
Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes,
As are the tiger-moth’s deep damask’d wings;
And in the midst, ’mong thousand heraldries,
And twilight saints, and dim emblazonings,
A shielded scutcheon blush’d with blood of
queens and kings.

The Gothic casement is a conduit between this world and the next, a picture of the cosmos, where Madeline communes

²⁰ Keats, Letter to Reynolds, May 3, 1818, cited by Bate in *John Keats*, 333-334: “This Chamber of Maiden Thought becomes gradually darken’d and at the same time on all sides of it many doors are set open—but all dark—all leading to dark passages—We see not the ballance [sic] of good and evil. We are in a Mist – *We* are now in that state – We feel the “burden of Mystery.”

²¹ Letter to Reynolds, May 3, 1818. Keats adds: “To this Point was Wordsworth come, as far as I can conceive when he wrote “Tintern Abbey” and it seems to me that his Genius is explorative of those dark Passages. Now if we live, and go on thinking, we too shall explore them.”

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with the plenitude of God's creation. Her prayer ascends to St. Agnes in heaven through a *scala perfectionis* that comprises dragons and saints, peasants and kings, moths and angels. The beauty of God's handiwork lies in its diversity but requires each creature to operate within proper limits. Harmony is not despotic, but made up of mutually-limited natures, ordered by nested spheres. Porphyro, in effect, beholds, or at least glimpses, what Keats elsewhere calls the "balance of good and evil," invisible to rational thought.²² The moonlight displays each creature in its mysterious purpose. Implicitly, Madeline's prayer is itself part of the divine order, part of the unfathomable "balance." In response to her prayer, her flesh becomes ethereal, she is infused with grace:

Full on this casement shone the wintry moon,
And threw warm gules on Madeline's fair
breast,
As down she knelt for heaven's grace and boon;
Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together prest,
And on her silver cross soft amethyst,
And on her hair a glory, like a saint;
She seem'd a splendid angel, newly drest,
Save wings, for heaven:—Porphyro grew faint:
She knelt, so pure a thing, so free from mortal
taint.

The Gothic casement now discloses divine splendor as an array of colours that initiates Porphyro into the realm of spiritual sense. Madeline, faithful to the rite, *dies to be reborn*, "as though a rose should shut and be a bud again." Porphyro, equally faithful, serves Madeline "spiced dainties," manna and dates, "on golden dishes and in baskets bright of wreathed silver," signifying that taste and touch have been redeemed:

²² Keats, Letter to Reynolds, May 3, 1818, cited by Earl Wasserman, in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of St. Agnes*, 28: "Thought becomes gradually daren'd and at the same time on all sides of it many doors are set open—but all dark—all leading to dark passages – We see not the ballance (sic) of good and evil."

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And now, my love, my seraph fair, awake!
Thou art my heaven and I thine eremite
(*ESA*, stanza XXXI, lines 276-277)

Who dreams and who is awake? Madeline's sleep is a higher level of consciousness, incomprehensible to waking consciousness. Stanza XXIII allegorizes Porphyro's vocation to inhabit a multiplicity of realms. Taking the Virgin's lute, Porphyro turns into a troubadour, playing "an ancient ditty, long since mute, In Provence call'd *La belle dame sans mercy*." Porphyro is the human microcosm, joining earth and heaven through the heart's pure desire and the hand's skill, while Madeline is Porphyro's *amor de terra lonhdana*²³ who summons/protects Porphyro's poetic vocation from infinitely far away, declaring that her happiness depends on it:

Give me that voice again, my Porphyro,
Those looks immortal, those complainings dear!
Oh leave me not in this eternal woe,
For if thou diest, my Love, I know not where to
go. (*ESA*, stanza XXXV, lines 312, 315)

If, as Earl Wasserman has argued, "Porphyro and Madeline have fashioned their own heaven,"²⁴ why does the tale falter, appearing to collapse into a tale of ordinary seduction? Why does Madeline, after their love is consummated, "wake up" and weep and call Porphyro "cruel" and imagine herself to be "a deceived thing"? Does the poem suddenly raise doubts

²³ Citing the troubadour Jaufré Rudel: "Amors de terra lonhdana, Per vos totz lo cors mi dol." For some aspects of this mysticism, see my "Private Apocalypse: Spiritual Gnosis in Saint John Cassian and Peter John Olivi," *Ende und Vollendung. Eschatologische Perspektiven im Mittelalter* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), 641-656.

²⁴ See Earl Wasserman, "The Eve of St. Agnes," first published by The John Hopkins Press in 1953, reprinted in Allan Danzig, ed., *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Eve of St. Agnes* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1971), 24.

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about life and art, lust and love, engulfing us in skepticism?²⁵ Allegorically, Porphyro's vocation is beyond the power of prescribed ritual ("St. Agnes's moon hath set") and depends now wholly on his fidelity. And since he is "no rude infidel," he will not abandon Madeline to "dragons," but carry her off to his home "o'er the southern moors." The enigmatic asymmetry of their sexual union symbolizes the asymmetry between, on the one hand, Porphyro's duty to perform "waking" actions in the realm of flesh and blood, and, on the other, Madeline's transcendent call for his actions, issued from a realm that is "free of mortal stain."

Porphyro, in short, won Madeline by his skill and carried her off as his wife, away from evil barons who despised him and wanted him put to death. In September 1818, three months before writing the poem, Keats, as we know, had been brutally attacked by critics and told to give up poetry and return to his apothecary trade – to "plasters, pills, and ointment boxes."²⁶ Did he compose, in response, a tale that affirms his own poetic calling? The tale depicts, panel by panel, the poet's initiation into imagination and "full" possession of Beauty. When Richard Woodhouse protested to Keats that his revisions of the poem emphasized the sexual nature of Porphyro and Madeline's union, Keats answered that "he should despise a man who would be such a eunuch in sentiment as to leave a maid, with that Character about her, in such a situation; and should despise himself to write about it."²⁷ A poet who will not brave all obstacles and "wed" Poetry without permission or licence, is hardly worth his salt.

The love that was consummated without a marriage-licence, shocking Keats's editor and puzzling scholars ever since, was

²⁵ Jack Stillinger, "The Hoodwinking of Madeline: Scepticism in 'The Eve of St. Agnes'", *Studies in Philology*, 58 (1961), 533-555.

²⁶ Citing Lockhart's review of *Endymion*, published in *Blackwood's* September 1, 1818; cited in Bate, *John Keats*, 367.

²⁷ Letter of Woodhouse to Taylor, cited by Jack Stillinger in *Reading the Eve of St. Agnes*, 22.

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Keats's love for poetry *and poetry's love for him*. A letter of October 1818 suggests that Keats had such metaphors in mind following the brutal attack he had suffered. Expressing the hope that he would never marry, Keats allegorized conjugal bliss as a refined sensorial feast, with "chairs and Sofa stuffed with Cygnet's down," Silk, food like "Manna" and "Wine beyond Claret." To all of this, Keats wrote, he preferred Solitude:

Then instead of what I have described here is a Sublimity to welcome me home. The roaring of the wind is my wife and the Stars through the window pane are my children.... I melt into the air with a voluptuousness so delicate that I am content to be alone.²⁸

The *Eve of St. Agnes* combines both the sensorial feast of conjugal bliss and the "very Abstract idea" of beauty that called Keats to Sublimity and Solitude. The *Eve of St. Agnes* proclaims that Keats both solved his dilemma and answered his critics, not by returning to pills and ointments, but by *marrying Poetry*.

Over and beyond affirming the poet's (catholic) right/rite to Poetry against "the whole blood-thirsty race" of (sectarian) pedantic critics, *The Eve of St. Agnes* evokes Gothic cosmophilia to argue that sensorial imagination, rather than thought, is what leads the poet to the *Belle Dame's* innermost chamber and to the mystery of Poetic art. By discarding religious ritual as archaic, modernity has orphaned itself of access to the spiritual senses. The old religion held that ritual inverted and restored the hierarchy of earthly senses, so that touch became once again the supreme mystical sense, indistinguishable from love. Modernity has flattened the senses, rejecting the promise of "Purgatory sweet" and "Visions of delight." Increasingly replacing artisanal crafts with factory work, modernity has lost faith in the spiritual power of self-renunciation, settling for

²⁸ Letter to George and Georgina Keats, cited by Bate, *John Keats*, 384.

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physical security and tangible comfort. Keats's lovers, whose intimacy transcends the dichotomous language of physical fact, flee into darkness – from a world bereft of magic, bereft of alchemy, doomed to squalor, red in tooth and claw: “And they are gone; ay, ages long ago/These lovers fled away into the storm.”

Stendhal, *Le rouge et le noir*

Stendhal shared Keats's nostalgia for *La Belle Dame*, as well as Wordsworth's fear that modernity would leave us without the transcendent bonds of historic memory. Two passages in *Le rouge et le noir* (1830) express Stendhal's concerns. In the first passage, Julien Sorel, enamoured of Rousseau and passionately committed to *Bonapartisme*, finds himself, most reluctantly, in the company of a group of priests in an ancient Gothic abbey. He just experienced the intoxication of riding an impetuous stallion in military dress,²⁹ and has not removed his riding spurs, which glisten under the priestly cassock he has been ordered to wear.³⁰ Indignant that his group is kept waiting without a word of apology, Julien dashes through the abbey to find the bishop who must lead their procession. He shakes every door and one gives way. Striding past the bishop's attendants, Julien enters into a vast Gothic hall. The vaulted windows have all been walled-up with brick and plaster, except one:

He took a few steps and found himself in an immense and very somber Gothic hall, paneled entirely in black oak; with the exception of one,

²⁹ Stendhal, *Le rouge et le noir*, ed. Henri Martineau (Paris: Garnier, 1960), Livre I, chap. XVIII, 101-102; “Ses épaulettes étaient plus brillantes, parce qu’elles étaient neuves. Son cheval se cabrait à chaque instant, il était au comble de la joie.” See *The Red and the Black*, English translation by Lloyd C. Parks (New York: Penguin Books, 1970), 110-111.

³⁰ Stendhal, *Le rouge et le noir*, 104.

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the ogive windows had been walled up with bricks. The crudeness of this masonry was not disguised in any way and made a sad contrast with the antique magnificence of the paneling.³¹

A treasure-house of skill and beauty was vandalized in the name of expediency and progress. Vaulted windows that once cooperated with God's transcendent splendour to illuminate creation have been destroyed by ignorant, rash hands. Scarcely a handful of local antiquarians even remember that it was Charles the Bold who, in 1470, commissioned the hall and the oak panels "in expiation of some sin." Julien notices that the carvings narrate "all of the mysteries of the Apocalypse."³²

Julien, in effect, is forced to see two contrasting models: a lost world of spiritual restraint, in which rulers, no matter how "bold," were accountable to a higher authority, and a world invented in haste, prone to excess and bereft of the restraining power of art, of forgiveness, of redemption.³³

Julien cannot help but be "moved by such melancholy magnificence." He responds by inhibiting his own impatient

³¹ Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*, 112. Cf. *Le rouge et le noir*, 103: "Il fit quelques pas et se trouva dans une immense salle gothique extrêmement sombre, et toute lambrissée de chêne noir; à l'exception d'une seule, les fenêtres en ogive avaient été murées avec des briques. La grossièreté de cette maçonnerie n'était déguisée par rien et faisait un triste contraste avec l'antique magnificence de la boiserie."

³² Stendhal, *Le rouge et le noir*, 103-104: "Les deux grands côtés de cette salle célèbre parmi les antiquaires bourguignons, et que le duc Charles le Téméraire avait fait bâtir vers 1470 en expiation de quelque péché, étaient garnis de stalles de bois richement sculptées. On y voyait, figurés en bois de différentes couleurs, tous les mystères de l'Apocalypse."

³³ Cf. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, English translation by Isaac Kramnick (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), Author's preface, 17: "Custom and habits had set limits to tyranny and had established a kind of law at the very heart of violence."

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rush forward: *Il s'arrêta en silence*. A hushed reverence seizes him. He is reminded of human finitude and of God, which is to say, of the hidden but irreducible verticality of the human soul. The Gothic setting reminds him of a lost solemnity, a lost harmony, a lost honour, next to which the crude energy of his own generation appears blind and flat.³⁴ The whole event takes only a few moments, occupying only a few lines.³⁵

The unexpected beauty of the Gothic hall stopped Julien in his tracks (minutes later, conversing with the bishop, he is “ashamed of his spurs”) but did he reflect on the implications of his emotion? In the second passage, Julien probes a similar experience in more depth. By now a seminarian in Besançon, he has little affinity for his peers, who seek the priesthood out of economic distress. The venality and corruption of the Restoration church appall him. Asked to go into Besançon to help prepare the Cathedral for the Feast of St. John the Baptist, he is left to guard it against thieves (God’s poor) and finds himself suddenly alone. The aesthetic splendor of the old Gothic world suddenly overwhelms him:

As he finished speaking the clock struck eleven forty-five; at the same time the great bell began to toll. It was ringing at full peal. These sounds, so full and so solemn, thrilled Julien. His imagination had left earth. The fragrance of incense and rose leaves, scattered before the Blessed Sacrament

³⁴ Cf. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, English translation by Isaac Kramnick (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), I, 2, Chap. 9, 367: “The honour of kings has almost lost its authority without being replaced by virtue and there is nothing to raise a man above himself.”

³⁵ Stendhal, *Le rouge et le noir*, Texte établi par Henri Martineau (Paris: Éditions Garniers, 1960), 104: “Cette magnificence mélancolique, dégradée par la vue des briques nues et du plâtre encore tout blanc, toucha Julien. Il s’arrêta en silence.”

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by little children dressed up as St. John, brought his exaltation to a pitch.³⁶

Stendhal's clinical eye is not blind to the morbid character of Julien's rapture: "Julien's soul, exalted by the full and virile sounds, was wandering in imaginary space."³⁷

Julien is intoxicated, dispossessed of himself: why? The Gothic harmony of sound, scent, colour, darkness, coolness, and symbols of sacred mysteries, exceeds intellectual free play and the mildly analgesic effect of art. Not unlike Porphyro who grows faint when he perceives himself to be in the presence of angels, Julien experiences a radical loss of self-control that is at once delicious and disconcerting. We know that Stendhal cherished the sound of church bells from the time of his childhood in Grenoble,³⁸ but also that he experienced some sort of intensely debilitating loss of self-control in Florence, upon leaving the church of Santa Croce.³⁹ Investigators have suggested that he suffered a brief psychotic episode as a result of (syn)aesthetic saturation.⁴⁰ Speaking presumably for Stendhal,

³⁶ Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*, 198; *Le rouge et le noir*, Livre I, chap. XXVIII, 192: "Comme il achevait de parler, onze heures trois quarts sonnèrent, aussitôt la grosse cloche se fit entendre. Elle sonnait à pleine volée; ces sons si pleins et si solennels émurent Julien. Son imagination n'était plus sur terre. L'odeur de l'encens et des feuilles de roses jetées devant le saint sacrement, par les petits enfants déguisés en saint Jean, acheva de l'exalter."

³⁷ Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*, 199; *Le rouge et le noir*, 193: "L'âme de Julien, exaltée par ces sons si mâles et si pleins, errait dans les espaces imaginaires."

³⁸ Stendhal, *Vie de Henri Brûlard*: "the sounds of a beautiful deep bell have, and have always had, a deep effect on my heart."

³⁹ Stendhal, *Naples and Florence: A Journey from Milan to Reggio* (1817): "On leaving the Santa Croce church, I felt a pulsating in my heart. Life was draining out of me, while I walked fearing a fall."

⁴⁰ See Graziella Magherini, *La sindrome di Stendhal* (Firenze: Ponte alle Grazie, 1989), who documents 107 cases of the "Stendhal Syndrome"; and Dario Argento, *La sindrome* (Milano: Bompiani, 1996).

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Julien interprets his vulnerability to religious imagination to be the mark of an artistic temperament: “He would never make a good priest or a great administrator. A soul so moved is good at best for giving birth to an artist.”⁴¹

Does Stendhal imply that the “old religion” inspired transcendent flights but also helped to contain them, to give them form and meaning, saving artists from morbid despair and estrangement? Or does he mean to denounce the *spell* that religious imagination casts on suggestible souls?

In Julien’s case, the delicious *rêverie* that he draws from the Gothic setting is closely connected to repressed oedipal fantasies:

The church stood in a deep silence. A semidarkness and pleasant coolness prevailed throughout; it was still redolent with flowers and incense. The silence, the deep solitude, the coolness of the long naves, sweetened Julien’s reverie.... His soul had all but abandoned its mortal cover, which was walking slowly in the north aisle entrusted to his surveillance. He was all the more tranquil for having made sure there was no one in the confessionals except a few pious women; his eyes gazed without seeing.⁴²

⁴¹ Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*, 199; *Le rouge et le noir*, 193: “Jamais il ne fera ni un bon prêtre, ni un bon administrateur. Les âmes qui s’émeuvent ainsi sont bonnes tout au plus à produire un artiste.”

⁴² Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*, 19; *Le rouge et le noir*, 193: “L’église était restée dans un profond silence. Une demie-obscurité, une agréable fraîcheur y régnaient; elle était encore embaumée par le parfum des fleurs et de l’encens. Le silence, la solitude profonde, la fraîcheur des longues nefs rendaient plus douce la rêverie de Julien.... Son âme avait presque abandonné son enveloppe mortelle, qui se promenait à pas lents dans l’aile du nord confiée à sa surveillance.”

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The pious women, of course, are Madame de Renal, Julien's mistress/mother,⁴³ and her friend, Madame Derville. When Julien recognizes Madame de Renal's hair, he is shattered, the two women flee, and when Father Chas returns, he finds Julien "pale and barely able to walk"—precisely Henri Beyle/Stendhal's state upon exiting Santa Croce.

Henri Beyle became an artist, an author, publishing a description of his morbid episode in *Rome, Naples and Florence* in 1817, under the name Stendhal. Does Stendhal's *alter ego*, his character Julien Sorel, accomplish his artistic calling in a radically solipsistic way, dooming himself and society to tragedy and failure? The next time Julien will find himself in a church, it will be to shoot Madame de Renal: mutilating his own private figure of the *Belle Dame—Tota pulchra*, fount of grace, Virgin and Mother, muse of Cimabue and Jaufré Rudel, anachronistic, forbidden, gone for ever.

Like Keats, Stendhal viewed modernity as energetic and crude, prone to marginalize the voluptuous *rêveries* that nurture religious imagination and initiate the poet into ideal realms. To be moved by inaccessible Beauty – by St. Agnes, by the Virgin – was to disqualify oneself from the age of enterprise. Modernity, Stendhal recognized, had little use for the medieval Queen of Heaven and her liege-artists of *trobar clos*. Whoever could not give her up or at least degrade her into an insipid household idol, or stage her demise in a novel, was not fit to assemble steam engines or run factories and banks. Such a closet *mariolâtre* was fated in the modern world to endure a life of shame, prone to suffer "Stendhal's syndrome" and hysteric states of fugue, or, worse, prone to explosive regressive urges and futile attempts to possess Heaven through drugs and fanaticism. Stendhal, in short, "outs" religious

⁴³ See, e.g., Book I, Chapter XVII, 106: "She would permit herself the same gestures with him as with her children. She would run her fingers through his hair. This was because there were days when she had the illusion of loving him as her own child."

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impulses but warns of their dangerous power when cut off from the shared imagination of the Virgin's Palace. Julien's bitter self-deprecation anticipates Guillaume Apollinaire's distress: "L'amour dont je souffre est une maladie honteuse."⁴⁴ Modernity forces religious imagination into the closet, locks it away, medicalizes it, buries it solipsistically in the suffering heart: "Vous avez honte quand vous vous surprenez à dire une prière."⁴⁵

Disraeli, *Sybil*

More statesman than poet, Disraeli turned to Gothic imagery because he believed that "Imagination in the government of nations is a quality no less important than reason." In particular, he believed that popular sentiment requires "a heroic tradition," sustained in turn "by the high spirit of a free aristocracy."⁴⁶ What he meant is that the mass of people in a modern democracy crave the dignity of cultural meaning beyond immediate survival and physical comfort. A certain kind of elite, sufficiently secure to think independently, sufficiently rooted to transmit moral values, and sufficiently attached to local culture to help it flourish through financial support, constitutes, Disraeli thought, a reasonably good bet. He identified culture, in turn, with popular arts and crafts, customs, literature and music, in which people high and low could take collective pride. The novel *Sybil*, published

⁴⁴ Guillaume Apollinaire, "Zone," *Alcools*, in *Œuvres complètes de Guillaume Apollinaire*, ed. Michel Décaudin (Paris: André Balland et Jacques Lecat, 1966), 57. English translation by Samuel Becket in *The Random House Book of Twentieth – Century French Poetry*, ed. Paul Auster (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 7: "The love I endure is like a syphilis."

⁴⁵ Apollinaire, 57. Samuel Becket translates: "You are ashamed when you catch yourself at a paternoster."

⁴⁶ General preface of the 1870 edition of his works; cited by Thom Braum in *Sybil or the Two Nations* (Penguin Books, 1981), Appendix, 500.

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in 1845, evokes a highly idealized picture of how the Old Catholic church helped to bring all classes of society together to form a mutually-interwoven society, joined by a common aesthetic tradition.⁴⁷ The goal of *Sybil* is not only to warn of the inhuman living conditions of the industrial proletariat and to shame the Whig oligarchy into reform, but more importantly to resurrect bonds of affection between the two estranged English “nations,” namely, in dramatic capital letters, “THE RICH AND THE POOR.” (S, 96.)

In a pivotal scene, Egremont, younger son of a Whig family that was ennobled by Henry VIII and enriched by confiscated church lands, meets a Chartrist radical in a forest, at night, on the confiscated lands in question, near the ruins of Marney Abbey. (S, 86.)⁴⁸ The Chartrist, who is Roman Catholic, paints an eloquent picture of the old monastic world – warmly celebrating the monks’ “labor and fine art” and claiming them as “sons of the People, like myself.” (S, 92.) Egremont is moved by this unexpected perspective on medieval monasticism and filled with respect for his strange interlocutor. The real remedy, however, does not lie in convincing Egremont’s mind but in touching his heart through the power of imagination:

At this moment a sudden flush of rosy light, suffusing the grey ruins, indicated that the sun had just fallen; and through a vacant arch that overlooked them, alone in the resplendent sky, glittered the twilight star...The last words of the

⁴⁷ See Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1980), 86-87, where we are told that Marney Abbey included a “capacious hospital” where “the traveller from the proud baron to the lonely pilgrim asked the shelter and the succour that never were denied, and at whose gate, called the Portal of the Poor, the peasants on the Abbey lands, if in want, might appeal each morn and night for rainment and for food.” Further references to this text will be given in parentheses after the quotation, preceded by the abbreviation S.

⁴⁸ The ruins are described as the “unrivalled remains of one of the greatest religious houses of the North.”

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stranger lingered in the ear of Egremont; his musing spirit was teeming with many thoughts, many emotions; when from the Lady Chapel there rose the evening hymn to the Virgin. A single voice; but tones of almost supernatural sweetness; tender and solemn, yet flexible and thrilling. (*S*, 96.)

Gothic space serves, once again, as a threshold that liberates the imagination from factual confines and allows the soul to soar. The singer, wearing “the habit of a Religious,” which is to say dressed as a universal sister to all human beings and as a daughter of the Virgin, evokes a fount of ancestral memory from which new resources, new possibilities are brought to life. The Lady Chapel, the reader was told earlier, was “still adorned with pillars of marble and alabaster,” shaded by a tower “of a Gothic style most pure and graceful,” but unfinished because the Reformation interrupted the project of building it:

The last of the ecclesiastical lords of Marney, a man of fine taste and a skilful architect, was raising this new belfry for his brethren when the stern decree arrived that the bells should no longer sound. And the hymn was no more to be chaunted in the Lady’s chapel; and the candles were no more to be lit on the high altar; and the gate of the poor was to be closed for ever; and the wanderer was no more to find a home. (*S*, 87.)

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Figure 2 Furness Abbey (photo Dennis Taylor)

When Egremont sees the rosy light suffusing the grey ruins and hears the evening hymn rising from the Lady Chapel, he sees a destroyed Gothic model of grace and harmony come back to life. Egremont is struck by the “almost divine majesty” of the singer’s face and “might have been pardoned for believing her a seraph, that had lighted on this sphere, or the fair phantom of some saint haunting the sacred ruins of her desecrated fain.” (S, 96.)

A revived religious imagination, in short, corrects Egremont’s Whig prejudice against all things Roman Catholic and his uncritical Whig optimism in *laissez-faire* progress. The singer, Sybil, will turn out to be both a Chartrist and the ancestral owner of Marney Abbey, usurped at the Reformation by Egremont’s family. Sybil is Egremont’s moral guide and spiritual sister, but also the Madeline of his Porphyro, initiating him into rituals that purify love and raise the soul to transcendent values. Her treasure is Charity – without

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which aristocratic honour is blind pretence and popular life bereft of human dignity. Egremont and Sybil's marriage will in turn symbolize Disraeli's hope of reviving mutual love among his compatriots across economic divide. His idea was to remind the poor, on the one hand, of their illustrious past as master craftsmen and Gothic builders and to remind Whig oligarchs, on the other, of their debt and duty to others. The solution was neither proud indifference nor class warfare, but "intermarriage" – which is to say a healing interchange of imagination across fortunes. Gothic ruins served both to humble the new industrialist class and to dignify the rights of workers. Marx's 1848 characterization of Disraeli's project as "feudal reactionary" missed the point of introducing Imagination into politics. Disraeli's project hoped to reform capitalism by regulating it. The point was never to return to a past feudal world, but to draw imaginative elements to reframe modernity as communitarian but still richly diverse, welcoming of individual creativity. As though pre-empting the regimented, monolithic imagination of Stalinism and Nazi fascism, Disraeli turned to his imaginary Marney Abbey to promote a flexible, multi-layered, heterogeneous, and Gothic model of community.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ I wish to thank Mark O'Connor for many stimulating insights, Myriam Watthee-Delmotte for her friendship, the organizers of the Montreal Conference for a magnificent time, and Dennis Taylor for numerous discussions and for the permission to print his photographs of Tintern and Furness Abbeys.