

The Mysteries of Udolpho ¹

ANN RADCLIFFE

Ann Radcliffe (1764-1823) was a novelist with a particular flair for Picturesque and Sublime landscape descriptions. She had travelled widely herself and was well acquainted with the categorisations of landscape developed by the Picturesque writers. Her own account of her tour of the Lake District, published in 1795, shows her to have been a fastidious appraiser of scenery. Of Derwentwater she wrote: "The beauty of its banks ... contending with the wildness of the rocks, gives opposite impressions to the mind, and the force of each is, perhaps, destroyed by the, admission of the other". The passage from *The Mysteries of Udolpho* contains most of the scenic elements favoured by Picturesque tastes—a gipsy encampment, Sublime mountain vistas, cottage scenes—and tourists highly susceptible to such landscape impressions.

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They were now so near the fire which had long flamed at a distance on the blackness of night, that it gleamed upon the road, and they could distinguish figures moving about the blaze. The way winding still nearer, they perceived in the valley one of those numerous bands of gipsies, which at that period particularly haunted the wilds of the Pyrenees, and lived partly by plundering the traveller. Emily looked with some degree of terror on the savage countenances of these people shown by the fire, which heightened the romantic effect of the scenery, as it threw a red dusky gleam upon the rocks and on the foliage of the trees, leaving heavy masses of shade and regions of obscurity which the eye feared to penetrate.

They were preparing their supper: a large pot stood by the fire, over which several figures were busy. The blaze discovered a rude kind of tent, round which many children and dogs were playing; and the whole formed a picture highly grotesque. The travellers saw plainly their danger. Valancourt was silent, but laid his hand on one of St. Aubert's pistols; St. Aubert drew forth another, and Michael was ordered to proceed as fast as possible. They passed the place, however, without being attacked; the rovers being probably unprepared for the opportunity, and too busy about their supper to feel much interest, at the moment, in anything besides.

After a league and a half more passed in darkness, the travellers arrived at Beaujeu, and drove up to the only inn the place afforded; which, though superior to any they had seen since they entered the mountains, was bad enough.

The surgeon of the town was immediately sent for, if a surgeon he could be called, who prescribed for horses as well as for men, and shaved faces at least as dexterously as he set bones.

¹ Source from Ann Radcliffe. *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, 1794, chapter 4, selected by Malcolm Andrews. *The Picturesque. Literary Sources & Documents. Volume II, Debating the Theory and Practice of the Picturesque*, East Sussex: Helm Information, 1994.

After examining Valancourt's arm, and perceiving that the bullet had passed through the flesh without touching the bone, he dressed it, and left him with a solemn prescription of quiet, which his patient was not inclined to obey. The delight of ease had now succeeded to pain-for ease may be allowed to assume a positive quality when contrasted with anguish-and his spirits thus re-animated, he wished to partake of the conversation of St. Aubert and Emily, who, released from so many apprehensions, were uncommonly cheerful. late as it was, however, St. Aubert was obliged to go out with the landlord to buy meat for supper; and Emily, who, during this interval, had been absent as long as she could, upon excuses of looking to their accommodation, which she found rather better than she expected, was compelled to return and converse with Valancourt alone. They talked of the character of the scenes they had passed, of the natural history of the country, of poetry, and of St. Aubert, a subject on which Emily always spoke and listened to with peculiar pleasure.

The travellers passed an agreeable evening; but St. Aubert was fatigued with his journey, and as Valancourt seemed again sensible of pain, they separated soon after supper.

In the morning, St. Aubert found that Valancourt had passed a restless night; that he was feverish, and his wound very painful. The surgeon, when he dressed it, advised him to remain quietly at Beaujeu; advice which was too reasonable to be rejected. St. Aubert, however, had no favourable opinion of this practitioner, and was anxious to commit Valancourt into more skilful hands; but, learning upon inquiry that there was no town within several leagues, which seemed more like to afford better advice, he altered the plan of his journey, and determined to await the recovery of Valancourt, who, with somewhat more ceremony than sincerity, made many objections to this delay.

By order of his surgeon, Valancourt did not go out of the house that day; but St. Aubert and Emily surveyed with delight the environs of the town, situated at the feet of the Pyrenean Alps, that rose some in abrupt precipices, and others swelling with woods of cedar, fir, and cypress, which stretched nearly to their highest summits. The cheerful green of the beech and mountain-ash was sometimes seen, like a gleam of light, amidst the dark verdure of the forest; and sometimes a torrent poured its sparkling flood high among the woods.

Valancourt's indisposition detained the travellers at Beaujeu several days, during which interval St. Aubert had observed his disposition and his talents with the philosophic inquiry so natural to him. He saw a frank and generous nature, full of ardour, highly susceptible of whatever is grand and beautiful, but impetuous, wild, and somewhat romantic. Valancourt had known little of the world. His perceptions were clear, and his feelings just; his indignation of an unworthy or his admiration of a generous action were expressed in terms of equal vehemence. St. Aubert sometimes smiled at his warmth, but seldom checked it; and often repeated to himself, "This young man has never been at Paris." A sigh sometimes followed this silent ejaculation. He determined not to leave Valancourt till he should be perfectly recovered; and, as he was now well enough to travel, though not able to manage his horse, St. Aubert invited him to accompany him for a few days in the carriage. This he the more readily did, since he had discovered that Valancourt was of a family of the same name in Gascony, with whose respectability he was well acquainted. the latter accepted the offer with great pleasure, and they again set forward among these romantic wilds towards Roussillon.

They travelled leisurely, stopping wherever a scene uncommonly grand appeared; frequently alighting to walk to an eminence, whither the mules could not go, from which the prospect opened in greater magnificence; and often sauntering over hillocks covered with lavender, wild thyme, juniper and tamarisk, and under the shades of woods, between whose boles they caught the long mountain vista, sublime beyond anything that Emily had ever imagined.

St. Aubert sometimes amused himself with botanizing, while Valancourt and Emily strolled on; he pointing out to her notice the objects that particularly charmed him, and reciting beautiful passages from such of the Latin and Italian poets as he had heard her admire. In the pauses of conversation, when he thought himself not observed, he frequently fixed his eyes pensively on her countenance, which expressed with so much animation the taste and energy of her mind; and when he spoke again there was a peculiar tenderness in the tone of his voice, that defeated any attempt to conceal his sentiments. By degrees these silent pauses became more frequent; till Emily, only, betrayed an anxiety to interrupt them; and she, who had been hitherto reserved, would now talk again and again of the woods and the valleys and the mountains, to avoid the danger of sympathy and silence.

From Beaujeu the road had constantly ascended, conducting the travellers into the higher regions of the air, where immense glaciers exhibited their frozen horrors, and eternal snow whitened the summits of the mountains. They often paused to contemplate these stupendous scenes, and, seated on some wild cliff, where only the ilex or the larch could flourish, looked over dark forests of fir, and precipices where human foot had never wandered, into the glen-so deep, that the thunder of the torrent, which was seen to foam along the bottom, was scarcely heard to murmur. Over these crags rose others of stupendous height and fantastic shape; some shooting into cones; others impending far over their base, in huge masses of granite, along whose broken ridges was often lodged a weight of snow, that, trembling even to the vibration of a sound, threatened to bear destruction in its course to the vale. Around, on every side, far as the eye could penetrate, were seen only forms of grandeur—the long perspective of mountain tops, tinged with ethereal blue, or white with snow; valleys of ice, and forests of gloomy fir. The serenity and clearness of the air in these high regions were particularly delightful to the travellers; it seemed to inspire them with a finer spirit, and diffused an indescribable complacency over their minds. They had no words to express the sublime emotions they felt. A solemn expression characterized the feelings of St. Aubert; tears often came to his eyes, and he frequently walked away from his companions. Valancourt now and then spoke, to point to Emily's notice some feature of the scene. The thinness of the atmosphere, through which every object came so distinctly to the eye, surprised and deluded her, who could scarcely believe that objects which appeared so near were in reality so distant. The deep silence of these solitudes was broken only at intervals by the scream of vultures seen towering round some cliff below, or by the cry of the eagle sailing high in the air; except when the travellers listened to the hollow thunder that sometimes muttered at their feet. While, above, the deep blue of the heavens was unobscured by the lightest cloud, half-way down the mountains long billows of vapour were frequently seen rolling, now wholly excluding the country below, and now opening, and partially revealing its features. Emily delighted to observe the grandeur of these clouds as they

changed in shape and tints, and to watch their various effect on the lower world, whose features, partly veiled, were continually assuming new forms of sublimity.

After traversing these regions for many leagues, they began to descend towards Roussillon, and features of beauty then mingled with the scene. Yet the travellers did not look back without some regret to the sublime objects they had quitted; though the eye, fatigued with the extension of its powers, was glad to repose on the verdure of woods and pastures, that now hung on the margin of the river below; to view again the humble cottage shaded by cedars, the playful group of mountaineer children, and the flowery nooks that appeared among the hills.

As they descended, they saw at a distance, on the right, one of the grand passes of the Pyrenees into Spain, gleaming with its battlements and towers to the splendour of the setting rays; yellow tops of woods colouring the steeps below, while far above aspired the snowy points of the mountains, still reflecting a rosy hue.

St. Aubert began to look out for the little town he had been directed to by the people of Beaujeu, and where he meant to pass the night; but no habitation yet appeared. Of its distance Valancourt could not assist him to judge, for he had never been so far along this chain of Alps before. There was, however, a road to guide them; and there could be little doubt that it was the right one; for, since they had left Beaujeu, there had been no variety of tracks to perplex or mislead.

The sun now gave his last light, and St. Aubert bade the muleteer proceed with all possible dispatch. He found, indeed, the lassitude of illness return upon him, after a day of uncommon fatigue both of body and mind, and he longed for repose. His anxiety was not soothed by observing a numerous train, consisting of men, horses, and loaded mules, winding down the steeps of an opposite mountain, appearing and disappearing at intervals among the woods, so that its numbers could not be judged of. Something bright, like arms, glanced in the setting ray, and the military dress was distinguishable upon the men who were in the van, and on others scattered among the troop that followed. As these wound into the vale, the rear of the party emerged from the woods, and exhibited a band of soldiers. St. Aubert's apprehensions now subsided; he had no doubt that the train before him consisted of smugglers, who, in conveying prohibited goods over the Pyrenees, had been encountered and conquered by a party of troops.

The travellers had lingered so long among the sublimer scenes of these mountains, that they found themselves entirely mistaken in their calculation that they could reach Montigny at sunset; but, as they wound along the valley, they saw, on a rude Alpine bridge that united two lofty crags of the glen, a group of mountaineer children amusing themselves with dropping pebbles into the torrent below, and watching the stones plunge into the water, that threw up its white spray high in the air as it received them, and returned a sullen sound, which the echoes of the mountains prolonged. Under the bridge was seen a perspective of the valley, with its cataract descending among the rocks, and a cottage on the cliff overshadowed with pines. It appeared that they could not be far from some small town. St. Aubert bade the muleteer stop, and then called to the children to inquire if he was near Montigny; but the distance, and the roaring of the waters, would not suffer his voice to be heard; and the crags adjoining the bridge were of such tremendous height and steepness, that to have climbed either would have been scarcely practicable to a person unacquainted with the ascent.

The moon now threw a faint light over their path, and, soon after, enabled them to distinguish some towers rising above the tops of the woods. Still following the note of the bell, they entered the shade of those woods, lighted only by the moonbeams, that glided down between the leaves, and threw a tremulous uncertain gleam upon the steep track they were winding. The gloom, and the silence that prevailed (except when the bell returned upon the air), together with the wildness of the surrounding scene, struck Emily with a degree of fear, which, however, the voice and conversation of Valancourt somewhat repressed.

When they had been some time ascending, St. Aubert complained of weariness; and they stopped to rest upon a little green summit, where the trees opened, and admitted the moonlight. He sat down upon the turf, between Emily and Valancourt. The bell had now ceased, and the deep repose of the scene was undisturbed by any sound; for the low dull murmur of some distant torrent might be said to soothe rather than to interrupt the silence. Before them extended the valley they had quitted: its rocks and woods to the left, just silvered by the rays, formed a contrast to the deep shadow that involved the opposite cliffs, whose fringed summits only were tipped with light; while the distant perspective of the valley was lost in the yellow mist of moonlight. The travellers sat for some time wrapt in the complacency which such scenes inspire. "These scenes," said Valancourt, at length, "soften the heart like the notes of sweet music, and inspire that delicious melancholy which no person, who had felt it once, would resign for the gayest pleasures. They waken our best and purest feelings; disposing us to benevolence, pity, and friendship. Those whom I love, I always seem to love more in such an hour as this." His voice trembled, and he paused.