

THE “PIECES OF POETRY” IN ANN RADCLIFFE’S
THE MYSTERIES OF UDOLPHO

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They might be sung by Shakespear’s Ariel.
Mrs Barbauld, 1810

Though over the last few decades numerous critical efforts have been made to restore Ann Radcliffe to her rightful place as the mother of Romantic sensibility, it is still necessary to reassess her verse,¹ in order to look at her work from a wider and more adequate perspective. Conventional stereotypes die hard and can only be buried under serious cultural historical work such as Deborah Rogers’ and Rictor Norton’s critical biographies.

By collecting a large number of contemporary and nineteenth-century opinions, Deborah Rogers shows the huge popularity Radcliffe enjoyed at her time, thus explaining why she could not be ignored by the poets of her generation and, even less, by those of the

¹ Ann Radcliffe’s verse includes the poems contained in *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* (1789), *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), *The Romance of the Forest* (1791), *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), in addition to others published posthumously together in *Gaston de Blondville* (1826), and some appeared in her husband’s paper. Two anonymous editions were issued in London in 1815 and 1816 (*The Poems of Mrs Ann Radcliffe*), including other poems whose authorship is still unsure, and in 1834 the edition of *The Poetical Works of Ann Radcliffe*. 2 vols. London; (see Michael Sadleir, “Poems by Ann Radcliffe”, *TLS*, XXIX [29 March 1928], 242).

following generations.² In his cultural biography, Rictor Norton³ leads us to understand that if a writer who was considered ignorant and “wanting education”⁴ could in fact write one of the most successful best-sellers of all times, it was not merely by chance or by lucky intuition. Both scholars follow the lines pointed out by Virginia Woolf, who suggested looking for an explanation for Radcliffe’s enormous success in the taste that had made it possible.⁵

In analysing the response of Radcliffe’s contemporaries to the art of the “great enchantress”, “sorceress” or “magician” (as they called her),⁶ two prevailing reactions can be traced: fear and anxiety, when faced with the suspense of her Gothic atmospheres, and enthusiasm and enjoyment, when faced with her descriptions of nature. Accordingly, if Gothic romance is considered from Maurice Lévy’s critical perspective (with its focus on the Renaissance theme of usurpation in a social-historical context), and if natural landscape and its transformations in eighteenth-century Britain are viewed through the cultural lenses of Ann Bermingham, Norman Everett, John Barrell, W.J.T. Mitchell, and others,⁷ it becomes evident how these approaches combine to substantiate a picture of the eighteenth-century inner mind in which the circuitous journey, so convincingly

² *The Critical Response to Ann Radcliffe*, ed. Deborah D. Rogers, London and Westport: CT, 1994.

³ Rictor Norton, *Mistress of Udolpho: The Life of Ann Radcliffe*, London, 1998.

⁴ See Julia Kavanagh, *English Women of Letters: Biographical Sketches*, London, 1862, 235-331, and B.G. MacCarthy, *The Later Women Novelists 1744-1818*, New York, 1948, 168.

⁵ Virginia Woolf, “Gothic Romance” (Review of Edith Borkhead’s *The Tale of Terror*), *TLS*, V (May 1921), 288.

⁶ The descriptions are respectively by Walter Scott (“Prefatory Memoir to Mrs Ann Radcliffe”, in *The Novels of Mrs Anne Radcliffe*, Edinburgh, 1824, X, xx); T.J. Mathias (*The Pursuit of Literature: A Satirical Poem in Four Dialogues*, London, 1794, 20 n.); and “Estimate of the Literary Character of Mrs Ann Radcliffe”, *Monthly Magazine*, XLVII (1819), 125, repr. in *The Critical Response to Ann Radcliffe*, 114, 105, 93.

⁷ Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition 1740-1860*, London, 1987; Nigel Everett, *The Tory View of Landscape*, New Haven and London, 1994; and *Landscape and Power*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell, Chicago and London, 1994.

documented by M.H. Abrams's in *Natural Supernaturalism*,⁸ is the dominant pervading theme. This, I believe, is a vital starting point in the endeavour to understand the constitutive features of the Romantic "interior landscape" that are responsible for the peculiar atmosphere Radcliffe captured so successfully.

Indeed, as Abrams explains, though incorporating aspects of the Plotinian odyssey and Christian *peregrinatio*, the Romantic journey differs from these from various respects, primarily in the definition of its destination, in which Nature has come to stand for Eden and the harmonious unity of the origin. Despite the consolatory Hegelian notion of a return to a higher level, or the Wordsworthian faith in the possibility of a conjugal intercourse between Man and Nature, such going back to Nature is felt as uncertain, if not unreachable or lost forever. This was the world which, in the wake of the machinations of Milton's Satan, had lost Paradise; and then, together with the knowledge of the loss, the fear grew that it was unrecoverable and that the wandering and exile were endless. Satan's farewell to Paradise – "Farewell happy Fields / Where Joy for ever dwells" – is the great original of a long series of farewells to the parental home, native village, maternal island – "Nè più mai toccherò le sacre sponde ..."⁹ – and countless invocations to melancholy flooding the popular literature of the time, while the new word *nostalgia* – a scientific term indicating *Heimweh* or homesickness¹⁰ – was coming into common use.

Therefore the exceptional success of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* can be explained by its being a *romance* in Northrop Frye's sense of the word:¹¹ it is a secular epic in prose and partly in verse, based on what in the eighteenth century had become the emotional fulcrum of the Western conscious and unconscious collective mind: that is,

⁸ M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, New York, 1971.

⁹ First line of a well-known sonnet (also under the title "A Zacinto", 1801) by Ugo Foscolo: "Never more will I touch the sacred shores"

¹⁰ Jean Starobinski, "The Idea of Nostalgia", *Diogenes*, 54 (1966), 81-103.

¹¹ Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance*, 1976, 15.

Nature¹² (or more specifically Man's relation to Nature). It was not by chance that Radcliffe's contemporaries compared her to great epic poets such as Spenser, Ariosto, Milton and Shakespeare rather than other novelists. Nature is in fact the protagonist of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* – a character eclectically portrayed from all angles according to the contemporary taste that Radcliffe was able to delight, since, she possessed, as Scott remarked, “the eye of a painter with the spirit of a poet”,¹³ and also, as her own poems testify, the ear of a minstrel. It is because “her landscape is the centre of her plot”, and “with her the landscape acquires a personality and suggests the plot”¹⁴ that Radcliffe developed her famous word-painting, by drawing on the pictorial techniques of Salvator Rosa's sublime, of Claude's beauty and, particularly, of Richard Wilson's picturesque. Thus she deserved recognition as “the most illustrious of the picturesque writers”.¹⁵ By adapting Gilpin's teaching to literature and by developing it along the same lines as Cozens and Constable – that is, by allowing more freedom to imagination – Radcliffe paved the way for Turner: first, her style looks forward to Turner's pre-impressionist use of light, and second, by means of her art she achieves a new balance between the verbal and the visual by replacing the visual hegemony by a greater reliance upon the verbal.¹⁶

Radcliffe's word-painting technique is picturesque in its essence, since it fits the criteria established by Gilpin in *Three Essays*. Emily's journey through France and Italy is also picturesque in its continuous alternation between the sublime and the beautiful, light

¹² Christopher Hussey, *The Picturesque Studies in a Point of View*, London, 1927 (repr. 1967), 5-12.

¹³ Scott, “Prefatory Memoir to Mrs Ann Radcliffe”, vi.

¹⁴ J.M.S. Tompkins, *Ann Radcliffe and Her Influence on Later Writers* (Diss., 1921), New York, 1980, 74-75.

¹⁵ C.B. Brown, “On a Taste for Picturesque”, *Literary Magazine and American Register*, II (1804), 163-65.

¹⁶ *Reading Landscape: Country, City, Capital*, ed. Simon Pugh, Manchester and New York, 1990, 3.

and shade.¹⁷ The dominant picturesque dimension of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* becomes particularly relevant when the work is read, in accordance with Frye's notion of romance, as "secular scripture" or epic. In fact, as recent criticism has argued, the picturesque is to be seen not simply as an eighteenth-century aesthetic category and popular fashion, but also as the very mode or set of principles informing the expressive logic of western culture, and, consequently, a "life style" and a "transformational psychic process".¹⁸

As one of Radcliffe's disciples, Robert Louis Stevenson, would say, the romance is an invitation to the reader to get on board the same boat as the narrator and share a choral adventure appealing to what all men have in common. The adventure in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is indeed choral, cathartic and consolatory: all the fears and anxieties of the romantic journey far from home are dealt with and resolved in the end.

The romance opens with the picture of an Arcadian life in harmony with a mythical Nature. However, the intervention of the acquisitive spirit – bourgeois and urbane – of economic prestige (represented by St Aubert's relatives and by Montoni himself)¹⁹ upsets the natural order of things. The characters are taken far from home and dragged into a long series of mishaps and frightening adventures which will come to an end with the reestablishment of the old order and the return to the initial Arcadia. Clearly this situation differs from true Gothic, as Coleridge noticed when he observed that it was above all a romance of suspense.²⁰ So once the suspense is resolved, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* ends up being consolatory. Garber rightly notices that melancholy appears "woven less deeply"

¹⁷ Elizabeth Wheeler Manwaring, *Italian Landscape in Eighteenth Century England*, London, 1925, 117.

¹⁸ See Ann Bermingham, "The Picturesque and Ready-to-Wear Femininity", 88, and David Punter, "The Picturesque and the Sublime: Two Worldscapes", in *The Politics of the Picturesque: Literature, Landscape and Aesthetics since 1770*, eds Stephen Copley and Peter Garside, Cambridge, 1994, 225.

¹⁹ See Mary Poovey, "Ideology and *The Mysteries of Udolpho*", *Criticism*, XXI, (1979), 323.

²⁰ S.T. Coleridge, "The Mysteries of Udolpho, a Romance", *The Critical Review*, 2nd series, XI (August 1794), 362.

in the texture of the narrative than sensibility.²¹ The absence of the hopeless bleak prospect that is proper to true melancholy prevents her famous natural descriptions from being sublime in Burke's sense of the word. In this romance the Romantic sublime appears rather mannered because Radcliffe was never really afraid of Nature. Indeed, despite its eclectic variety of aspects,²² her sublime is fundamentally neo-classical.²³ Nature is the mirror of its great author where one can come in contact with the "Deity" (in Radcliffe's word) and abandon oneself to its laws. This may explain the reassuring power of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* for such a large audience: the most authentic relationship between the self and Nature is one of complete oneness, and this is mostly evident in some of her most beautiful lyrics ("The Glow-Worm", "The Butterfly to His Love", "The Sea-Nymph" and even "Song of the Evening Hour") where the poetic self, far from attempting to absorb Nature, dissolves and becomes part of it. In "The Butterfly to His Love", considered one of Radcliffe's best lyrics, the poetic voice is embodied by an element of Nature expressing its pleasure and joy of living as part of "questa bella d'erbe famiglia e d'animali".²⁴ The same thing happens in "The Sea-Nymph", which Coleridge, not by chance, chose to quote unabridged in his 1794 review.

The fact that this immersion, or rather dispersion, in Nature takes place in a fantastic and dream-like dimension²⁵ – and imagination and dreams are the vehicles of myth – explains the cathartic power of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. In Radcliffe's Nature all the anxieties and fears of the painful journey of self-assertion seem to have disappeared, as if we were brought back in time to a state before the separation from the great maternal organism and by miracle reattached to its vital flow. It is significant that three of the poems in

²¹ Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho: A Romance Interspersed with Some Pieces of Poetry* (1794), ed. with an Introduction by Bonamy Dobrée and Explanatory Notes by Frederick Garber, Oxford, 1970, 675.

²² Ann K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender*, New York and London, 1993, 85-102.

²³ Robert Kiely, *The Romantic Novel in England*, Cambridge: Mass., 1972, 68.

²⁴ A quotation from the Italian poet Ugo Foscolo's *I Sepolcri* (1807), l. 5: "this beautiful family of grass and animals."

²⁵ Radcliffe never saw her celebrated foreign landscapes, but only imagined them.

Udolpho deal with a return journey ending in tragedy (“The Mariner”, “Storied Sonnet”, “The Pilgrim”); two poems, “The Traveller” and “The Piedmontese”, deal with the happy journey back home after having escaped respectively from a life-threatening danger, and the pernicious lure of wealthy Venice. Most of the remaining twenty are devoted to a hedonistic and sensual immersion into the animate world of Nature.

The “pieces of poetry” considered here are an integral part of the peculiar type of romance characterizing *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. This work indeed belongs to a new species of romance narrative essentially marked by interspersed passages in verse, such as – among others – Charlotte Smith’s fiction, which, as Coleridge’s review suggests, many contemporaries appreciated. The emergence and spread of the Romantic novel was very likely furthered by the need to please the reading public or to elevate the tone of a female genre, with the aim of securing the reviewers’ interest and approval. However, such considerations do not entitle us to deduce that the poems were “inserted” in *Udolpho* by “random intrusions”, without “any explained logic”, with the “immediate effect of freezing the narrative”, in a “superfluous”, “ephemeral”, “parenthetical” fashion.²⁶ Nor can we conclude that to evaluate the poems favourably, as Gary Kelly does²⁷, means being subjected to romantic ideology, while culpably neglecting the point of view of a novel-centred criticism gratuitously exhumed (after Scholes and Kellog had buried it in the 1960s). Favret’s critical approach, in fact, is totally inadequate to *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, since the latter is explicitly a romance and not a realistic novel. In Radcliffe’s fiction, as Kelly writes, “verse, as the literary or the expressive, marks the outer and innermost borders of the narrative”.²⁸

The verses, or (as they are called in the title page) “pieces of poetry” – which are interspersed throughout *The Mysteries of* -

²⁶ Mary A. Favret, “Telling Tales about Genre: Poetry in the Romantic Novel”, *Studies in the Novel*, XXVI/2 (Summer, 1994), 162 and 165.

²⁷ Gary Kelly, *English Fiction of the Romantic Period, 1789-1830*, London, 1989.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

Udolpho more abundantly than in any other romance – consist of quotations, mainly used as epigraphs to the chapters, and original poems. Though having different functions, they all contribute to evoking the musical dimension that is so essential in a romance. It is from this dimension that the atmosphere derives its suggestive power and the depth of its overtones evoking the irrational and linking up to the unconscious.

The epigraphs (fifty-seven in all) are much more than decorative additions. Taken individually they fulfil the function of introductory keys both to the events described in the chapter and to the psychological atmosphere of the main episode. Taken together and sequentially, they acquire the evocative force of the chorus in a play: in this case a powerful chorus made up of the voices of Thomson, Shakespeare, Beattie, Collins, Mason, Goldsmith, Milton, Sayers, Gray, Hannah More, Pope and Samuel Rogers, each in its turn accompanying the drama of the circuitous journey.

The first voice belongs to her favourite poet, the author of *The Seasons*. It extols the place the journey starts, and it is by no chance that the temporal perspective is that of *Autumn*:

home is the resort
Of love, of joy, of peace and plenty, where,
Supporting and supported, polish'd friends
And dear relations mingle into bliss.²⁹

Immediately afterwards, in the ghostly words of Hamlet's father, Shakespeare warns that it will be a terrible story, "a tale ... whose lightest word / Would harrow up thy soul" (Vol. I, Ch. 2), as terrible as Macbeth's "unnatural deed" (Vol. IV, Ch. 16),³⁰ or the "nameless deed" mentioned earlier in the title page. It is again Shakespeare's voice – from *King John*, *Richard II*, *Julius Caesar*, but above all *Macbeth* – which repeatedly rises to evoke the "wicked, heinous fault" (Vol. II, Ch. 9) and the consequent "unnatural troubles" (Vol. IV, Ch. 16), and to indicate the primal cause in the will to power:

²⁹ *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, 1 (Vol. I, Chapter 1).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 19 and 641.

“Such men as he be never at heart’s ease, / While they behold a greater than themselves” (Vol. II, Ch. 3), and to remind the readers that “Bloody instructions ... return / To plague the inventor” (Vol. IV, Ch. 17).³¹

The third voice – another warning – belongs to her beloved Beattie, who alternates with Thomson in exalting Nature and regretting the sin of abandonment:

Oh how canst thou renounce the boundless store
Of charms which nature to her votary yields!
The warbling woodland, the resounding shore,
The pomp of groves, and garniture of fields;
All that the genial ray of morning gilds,
And all that echoes the song of even;
All that the mountain’s shelting bosom shields,
And all the dread magnificence of heaven;
O how canst thou renounce, and hope to be forgiven!

....

These charms shall work thy soul’s eternal health,
And love, and gentleness, and joy, impart.³²

If the Chorus, with its variety of poetic voices, enunciates interpretative keys endowed with prophetic resonance, the poems, by illustrating these anticipations, reinforce their oracular power while extending the involvement of the reader to the emotional and irrational field, and, more precisely, to the field of poetry, music and song. A necessary correspondence and formal economy, therefore, link the epigraphs and the poems: the latter develop the prophetic hints of the epigraphs and, like them, may be distinguished into narrative, elegiac and lyrical.

Compared to the epigraphs and the prose narrative, however, the language of the poems appears much simpler. This difference can be significantly seen when we compare the verse and prose descriptions of Nature: in the latter the language appears much more layered and richer in quotations and well as in literary and pictorial allusions.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 295, 641, 182 and 654.

³² *Ibid.*, 27 (Vol. I, Ch. 3).

Indeed, from a technical and stylistic point of view, Radcliffe's narrative language is anything but simple. In spite of the apparent simplicity characteristic of the popular writing of romance, Radcliffe's prose narrative is rich in metaphors that give the events, characters and scenes symbolical haloes and allegorical echoes capable of reaching deep into the sensibility of the period. As Walter Scott wrote, if "actual rhythm shall not be deemed essential to poetry", then we are verily dealing with poetry, with the difference, it must be added, that whilst Radcliffe's "poetry in prose" is more concerned with the eye, thereby invading the visual and pictorial field, her "poetry in verse" prefers to trespass and merge into sound and music.³³ In the poems, which are often called "song", "carol", "lay", "air", and "rondeau", the simple language and rather conventional images have the effect of releasing and accentuating the musicality of the verses which, already musicalized by rhyme, can touch the chord of sensibility, and therefore, as Coleridge wrote, their evaluation is a matter of "taste".

In Radcliffe's romance, the aural dimension proves no less important than the visual. However strong and subtle the evocations may be, no real terror can be created because the prosody – mostly alternating rhyming iambic pentameters and tetrameters – constantly suggests the reassuring presence of a fixed pattern, recurring as in a minuet and harmonious as in a concerto of her beloved Paisiello, where even the strongest and most tormenting emotions cannot affect the stability of the underlying structure. From this point of view, then, the poems in *Udolpho*, taken as a whole, can be truly described as the musical equivalent of the translation of the picturesque into literature.

Indeed the poems enable us to understand the relationship between the elegiac tone, predominating throughout the romance, and the tone that may be more properly defined as lyrical. The latter is in fact merely a development of the elegiac feeling at the moment when the nostalgic vision reaches such intensity that all awareness dissolves into the panic emotion. And it is precisely the triumphant authenticity of the panic moment that throws a shadow of mannerism

³³ Scott, "Prefatory Memoir to Mrs Ann Radcliffe", iv.

onto the other poetical tones, including the elegiac and the nostalgic. It was not simply by chance, nor out of mere chivalry,³⁴ that Coleridge chose to quote “The Sea-Nymph”, one of the best manifestations of the panic moment. He quoted it entirely, justifying his choice by saying he could not resist its fascination and “poetical beauty”. Indeed, as Jacques Blondel claims,³⁵ in these lyrics Radcliffe’s vision is confirmed as being certainly one of light rather than of gloom.³⁶

The notion of poetry in *Udolpho* as music and song – these being the privileged means of expressing myth and the past, or Eden and Nature – may be exemplified and summarized in a comparison with a contemporary sonnet, “Nè più mai toccherò le sacre sponde” by Ugo Foscolo (1801). In the sonnet, better known as “A Zacinto”, the poet vents his nostalgic yearning that his self is lost in an oneiric vision of his native island. This vision fills the whole poem with its light, colours, and sounds: in a word, with its physical beauty which finally materializes in the image of Venus, the Goddess of Fecundity, whose smile only can bear the poetical singing, that is, the dimension of myth where the journey back is always allowed.

The Mysteries of Udolpho allows an oneiric return to Nature, just as Foscolo’s sonnet allows an analogous return to his maternal island. This was why, despite the many faults Radcliffe’s contemporaries found in her romance, they were irresistibly fascinated by it. In this fascination the “pieces of poetry” played a substantial part, if not for their conventional poetic value, at least for their mere presence and function both in the texture and structure of the narrative.

As the Zakynthos poet reiterates and the Orpheus myth testifies, it is only poetry that can bring the past back to life, and thus allowing the present to rejoin it to share and propagate the vitality of myth.

³⁴ Favret, “Telling Tales about Genre: Poetry in the Romantic Novel”, 156.

³⁵ Jacques Blondel, “On Metaphysical Prisons”, *The Durham University Journal*, LXIII (1971), 136.

³⁶ Significantly one of her favourite painters was Claude Lorrain who excelled precisely, according to Constable, in “brightness ... serene beauty ... sweetness and amenity, uniting splendour and repose, warmth and freshness” (see Manwaring, *Italian Landscape in Eighteenth Century England*, 43).

Without its poems, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* would be a Gothic romance more or less similar to many others. This is the case with *The Italian* which is devoid of “pieces of poetry”, though containing poetical descriptions in prose that many critics consider superior to those of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. It is absolutely true that “One is led to believe that poetry is an entirely common occurrence in the world of the novel, practised by nearly everyone upon nearly every premise”. But, far from being a defect of *Udolpho* as a novel, as Favret appears to claim,³⁷ this is one of its merits as a romance and certainly its most authentic interpretative key. Indeed, as far as *Udolpho* is concerned, Scott’s praise attributing to the author of *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) “the eye of a painter, with the spirit of a poet”,³⁸ should be completed with the addition “and the ear of a minstrel”.

Any attempt to measure the originality of her poems by a comparison with her beloved Thomson and Beattie would be misleading. Since Radcliffe’s poems are an integral part of romance, and are essentially characterized by choral writing, they must reflect common and collective feelings. But they are doubtless original in the effect that, like words for music, they produce on readers. This effect depends on the way they appear to be interspersed throughout the narrative: in other words, it depends on the narrative form. *The Mysteries of Udolpho* may be defined as a melodramatic narrative or, rather, a prose melodrama. Only a critical perspective taking into account the vogue of the melodrama at the end of the eighteenth century can allow an adequate interpretation and convincing explanation, in Frye’s words,³⁹ of the “mediumistic” quality, of Radcliffe’s writing and its relationship with the world of the unconscious.

If the interspersed poems are an extension of the poetry in prose which, through rhythm and rhyme, tends to turn into music, then, with their themes and their position in the plot, they provide the focal

³⁷ Favret, “Telling Tales about Genre: Poetry in the Romantic Novel”, 162.

³⁸ Scott, “Prefatory Memoir to Mrs Ann Radcliffe”, vi.

³⁹ Northrop Frye, *A Study of English Romanticism*. New York 1968, 29.

points for outlining the emotional map of the romance's interior landscape. Through a few examples I will briefly illustrate, first, that these poems are organically bound to the rest of the narrative, contributing to its development by playing a precise function (as is the case with "Storied Sonnet"); and second, the profound and lasting influence they exercised on later artists (as was the case with "The Sea-Nymph").

"Storied Sonnet" is set at the centre of the Alpine scenes, immediately after a prose passage describing "precipices ... still more tremendous and ... prospects still more wild and majestic ... the rough pine bridge thrown across the torrent with cataract foaming beneath". This "piece of poetry" depicts the very same images: "The weary traveller ... / ... tremendous steeps, / Skirting the pathless precipice /... / ... hideous chasm ... / ... the cleft pine a doubtful bridge displays ... /... / ... Far, far below, the torrent's rising surge, / And ... wild impetuous roar"⁴⁰

The lyrical version of the scene simplifies the various pictures and further accentuates the conventionality of the images, making them more clearly emblematic and effective in the building-up of the atmosphere. At the same time, both rhyme and rhythm (like choral music accompanying a dramatic scene) enlarge and amplify the allegorical resonance of the entire scene thus recalling the echoes of many other, different voices. One voice, for instance, might be Shaftesbury's apocalyptic voice:

See! With what trembling Steps poor Mankind treads the
narrow Brink of the deep Precipice! From Whence with giddy
Horror they look down, mistrusting even the Ground which
bears'em; whilst they hear the hollow Sound of Torrents
underneath⁴¹

The version in verse aims to transform the heroine's personal experience into a choral one. However, the reader's involvement is

⁴⁰ *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, 164-65 (Vol. II, Ch. 1).

⁴¹ Shaftesbury, *The Moralists*, in Manwaring, *Italian Landscape in Eighteenth Century England*, 18.

not confined to the narrative and musical dimensions, but is further developed on a level we may properly term pictorial, through clear visual images which, as T.S. Eliot maintained in his Dante essay, are the very substance of allegorical language.⁴² The subsequent scene presents, in fact, a subject – Hannibal’s passage over the Alps – which had been described by Thomas Gray as one fit for Salvator Rosa’s painting. Indeed it proved more than fit for the acknowledged “sister of Salvator Rosa”,⁴³ or “the Salvator Rosa of English novelists”.⁴⁴ By a deft handling of narrative perspectives, Radcliffe in fact produced so splendid a version (though in her style of the picturesque sublime) that in the end the reader finds him or herself, along with the heroine, on the edge of the precipice, in the very place as Hannibal’s fighting soldiers.

Since I have no intention of entering into a discussion of possible influences, I limit myself to the suggestion that in 1776 John Cosenz exhibited a “Landscape with Hannibal crossing the Alps”.⁴⁵ In 1812 Turner painted another “Hannibal and His Army Crossing the Alps” (which was to be repeatedly engraved), while in his *Etchings and Engravings for the Liber Studiorum* there are some copies of an Alpine bridge, “The Devil’s Bridge. Mt St Gothard” (dating from about 1806-1807), which were probably studies of Richard Wilson’s impressive pencil drawing called “Ponte Alpino, built by Hannibal”. The Rosean bridge perilously hanging over the abyss⁴⁶ evidently became a powerful symbol in the collective unconscious, and particularly poignant in the second half of the eighteenth century. At the same time, I will not touch upon the reasons why Radcliffe’s

⁴² See T.S. Eliot, *Dante*, London, 1929.

⁴³ Charles Bucke, *Beauties, Harmonies, and Sublimities of Nature*, London, 1837, 122-23.

⁴⁴ Robert Chambers, “Ann Radcliffe”, in *Cyclopaedia of English Literature*, Edinburgh, 1844, 554.

⁴⁵ Samuel Holt Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in Eighteenth-Century England*. Ann Arbor: MI, 1960 (1st publ. 1935), 235.

⁴⁶ According to Lynne Epstein Heller (*Ann Radcliffe’s Gothic Landscape of Fiction and the Various Influences upon It*, New York, 1980, 225) perilous bridges with the cataract foaming beneath it are first to be seen in Salvator Rosa’s “Landscape” and “Landscape with a waterfall”.

“cleft pine” should at best be overlooked as trivial and manneristic, but will only mention Rictor Norton’s suggestions about the difficulty of neutralizing Radcliffe’s subversive voice.

“The Sea-Nymph” is a better example of a poem whose great influence on later writers has been completely overlooked.⁴⁷ In the Venetian scenes, “The Sea-Nymph” occupies the same position as that held by “Storied Sonnet” in the Alpine scenes, and, like the other poem, it is preceded by a faithful version in prose. However, while “Storied Sonnet” describes the “wild forms of danger” and the tragic end of the journey, this poem represents the pleasure deriving from a panic immersion in Nature through the heroine’s (and the reader’s) fantastic metamorphosis into a sea creature incarnating the spirit of the watery city.

If in the nineteenth century the Venetian scenes were considered unsurpassed, and Byron only able to imitate them,⁴⁸ it is because at their heart lies the lay of the sea-nymph. In this poem Radcliffe crowned her fantastic transformation of the Venice she had inherited from artistic and literary tradition, by producing a picturesque and romantic version whose poetical beauty would deeply influence writers and artists after her.⁴⁹ It is from this lay, which “might be sung by Shakespeare’s Ariel”,⁵⁰ that many images and metaphors were drawn by “greater and more serious writers”⁵¹ in order to express their relationship with the mythical watery city.

This lay gave rise to an authentically and radically feminine Venice, which, from then on, would elicit in male visitors and writers a typically double reaction of desire and repugnance, love and hate.

⁴⁷ *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, 179-181 (Vol. II, Ch. 2).

⁴⁸ Chambers, “Ann Radcliffe”, 558.

⁴⁹ See my “Ann Radcliffe in the Representational History of Venice: The Influence of *Udolpho*’s Venetian Scenes” in www.lingue.unibo.it/acume/agenda/cyprus/papers/b_battaglia.htm.

⁵⁰ Anna Laetitia Barbauld, “Mrs Radcliffe”, in *The British Novelists*, London, 1810, XLIII, vi.

⁵¹ Tony Tanner, *Venice Desired*, Oxford, 1992, 5. “Coral bower’s”, “crystal court”, “sparry columns”, “glassy halls”, “pale pearl”, “sapphire blue”, “moonlight waves”, “warbling shells”, “dolphins” etc., will inspire images of the sea world that recur in the works by Ruskin, Melville, Proust, James, Rilke and the other authors mentioned in Tony Tanner’s book.

Therefore the city has at times appeared as an “exquisite sea-thing” benevolent and saving,⁵² while at other times Protean and unreliable, potentially dangerous “like a woman” with “depths of possible disorder in her light-coloured eyes”.⁵³

I cannot mention the other poem, “To a Sea-Nymph”, without wondering how the young romantic poets, including Byron and Shelley, could come to Italy without remembering the mythical rite celebrated on the seashore, the “invocation delivered in the pure and elegant tongue of Tuscany, and accompanied by few pastoral instruments”, and the singing of a chorus and semi-chorus.⁵⁴ Of course, the nymphs and mythical marine creatures descend from Botticelli’s *Venus* and works by other painters of the same subject, but there is no denying the fact that their Romantic descendants would reach a far wider public than their more illustrious predecessors. And it was this larger and popular reading-public, possibly somewhat unrefined and uneducated, that Coleridge and Mrs Barbauld had in mind when they expressed their fear that these elegant “pieces of poetry” would be neglected as something unessential or superfluous.

The present essay is an attempt to recover the unrecognized power of Radcliffe’s “pieces of poetry” both in relation to the question of women’s poetic self-inscription and as regards their crucial role within the narrative of the romance and the aesthetic and philosophic debates of the time.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 12-14: Robert Browning (see “The Sea-Nymph”, quatrains 16-22).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 27: Henry James (see “The Sea-Nymph”, quatrains 6-10).

⁵⁴ *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, 420 (Vol. III, Ch. 7).