Traversing Regions of Terror: The Revolutionary Traveller as Gothic Reader

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The Gothic's debt to the French Revolution and to the literature of travel is frequently acknowledged. This essay takes a less-travelled road and explores travel writing's debt to the Gothic by focusing on the letter-journal of an English woman, Mrs. Beaumont, who toured France in 1796 and 1797. Her journal, published in 1798 as A Sketch of Modern France, is a little-known but richly rewarding work which reviewers compared to Helen Maria Williams' famous Letters from France. As A Sketch reveals, Mrs. Beaumont traversed post-Terror France imagining and representing herself as a Gothic heroine haunted by the Terror's victims. The Gothic, I maintain, provides this traveller with an apt (though sometimes problematic) lens through which to 'read' the Revolution and a lexicon with which to express not just its facts, but its emotional truth.

Her present life appeared like the dream of a distempered imagination, or like one of those frightful fictions, in which the wild genius of the poets sometimes delighted.¹

The gothic supplies only the metaphors and the gushing responses of the safely distant spectator, who hears the storm ... notices the bloody daggers and racks, and reads – or starts to, until her candle is extinguished – a letter from an actual participant.²

Finding herself fogbound in a French forest, a traveller recalls,

[m]y fears became very troublesome .... All trepidation, and half dead with apprehension, I was roused by a confused, though distant, noise of voices and rustling among the trees. Now judge what were my sensations! I gave myself up for lost.³

These sentiments – worthy of an Adeline or an Emily – come, not from the pen of Ann Radcliffe or one of her sisters in fiction, but from the journal of an Englishwoman describing her progress through France in 1796 and 1797.
This is precisely the effect it had on our traveller. Pondering the incident described above (involving what appeared to her a narrow escape from murderous thieves), Mrs. Beaumont writes of feeling "as if I had been reading a terrific scene in a novel" (pp. 286-7). This and other similar instances reveal that, in moments of stress or fear, she envisions herself not only reading about but living the travails of a Gothic heroine. David Punter has noted that "to explore the Gothic is to explore fear"; to observe "the various ways in which terror breaks through the surface of literature", and that is what I intend to do. Focusing on the Gothic moments that punctuate Mrs. Beaumont's text, I will show that the Gothic provided this traveller with an apt lens through which to read the Revolution and a lexicon with which to express not merely its facts, but its emotional truth. Reading post-Terror France through a Gothic lens, I maintain, helps her make sense of her experience, often by depriving her of her sense. A practised Gothic reader, she enters her text with such abandon that she revives the Revolution's victims and relives their terror as her own. This intense brand of imaginative communion, however, poses its problems, for what the Gothic reader experiences as expansive, thrilling terror, the Gothic traveller often experiences as paralysing horror: a state in which the boundaries between self and other, past and present, fact and fantasy dissolve, causing her to shrink from the truth she seeks.

**Stranger in an Alien Nation**

Two years after Robespierre's death in 1794, France under the Directory was taking steps to consolidate its Republic while prosecuting the wars by which it continued to absorb and republicanise its continental neighbours. Memories of the Terror and its torrents of blood loomed large on both sides of the English Channel. France had imposed an embargo on English goods, and the war, to all intents and purposes, had imposed an embargo on regular, reliable information, in lieu of which, rumours and partial truths fuelled England's national paranoia. It had been only a year since English citizens in France, rounded up and imprisoned en masse for a second time in 1795, were set free; many remained stranded there, unable to leave yet afraid to stay and be taken for royalist spies. All in all, the situation was not one to tempt travellers.

Yet in late October 1796, an English couple set out from Dover at the start of a five-months' progress through France and Switzerland. The husband, Albanis Beaumont, was a Piedmontese ex-officer and artist, now

Though this traveller — Mrs. Beaumont — is purportedly more interested in the facts of post-Terror France than in romance, her journey (and her journal) are fraught with such fiction-like moments: moments in which the combined pressures of foreignness, uncertainty, and threat turn reality unreal and the result reads like a Gothic novel.

Along with sentimental and historical novels, travel writing is recognised as an important progenitor of Gothic fiction. Critics speak, for instance, of how the privileged status of the travel narratives they incorporated into their texts helped Gothic novelists authenticate and valorise a new species of novel. Approaching the subject from the opposite direction, this paper explores how the Gothic "returned the favour" and influenced the experience and discourse of travel. To do so is to recognise the spectral nature of the genre, and thus to think of the Gothic not only as a species of novel denominated 'modern romance' by its writers and readers, but also as a mode or mood — characterised by fear, disorientation, and threats to the boundaries of selfhood — possessing the uncanny ability to 'haunt' all manner of writing, including the purportedly factual. Its ability to do so gained force from a powerful historical phenomenon: the French Revolution.

Critics concur that the plots, images, and language of the Gothic served Britons in the 1790s as a means of understanding and expressing the enormities of the Revolution. As E.J. Clery notes, "the French Revolution was being written, and consumed by a paranoid British public, like a gripping romance"; not only were Gothics of the period becoming more overtly politicised, but the day's politics imbued a Gothic aesthetic. That the Gothic's tropes of haunting readily migrated from the pages of novels to those concerning current events is illustrated by Edmund Burke who, in his 1796 Letters on a Regicide Peace, refers to the Revolution as 'a vast, tremendous, unformed spectre, in a far more terrific guise than any which ever yet have overpowercd the imagination, and subdued the fortitude of man'. It has been said that 'spectrality and haunting continue to enjoy a powerful currency in language and thinking, even if they have been left behind by belief .... [even in a 'disenchanted' world, ghosts are still invoked when there is some uncertainty about the believability ... of an event or experience in the material world'. Burke's image of the Revolution as a ghostly phenomenon that taxes and escapes the imagination's power to give it form — one shared by writers across the political spectrum — is striking evidence that even the most enlightened observers of the Revolution read and represented it as Gothic: a phenomenon so terrific it disrupted the Enlightenment's attempts to separate reality and romance.
a naturalised Englishman employed as a tutor by the Duke of Gloucester, brother of George III. Beaumont's wife's given name and history remain unknown. As they travelled, Mrs. Beaumont recorded her observations and reflections in a letter-journal addressed to an unnamed English friend. Mrs. Beaumont's account would appear anonymously in 1798 as A Sketch of Modern France. In a Series of Letters to a Lady of Fashion. Written in the Years 1796 and 1797, during a Tour through France. Edited by the Beaumont's friend, newspaperman and critic Christopher Lake Moody, A Sketch was compared by reviewers to Helen Maria Williams' famous Letters from France (published in eight volumes between 1790 and 1796). Like Williams' Letters, it is a multivocal, allusive, extremely literary amalgam of the personal and political. And though Mrs. Beaumont's politics were the polar opposite of Williams' (she, unlike Williams, found little to admire in the Revolution political), her distaste for the Republic by no means dulled her appetite for knowledge about it, as her journal's opening sentence reveals.

Quoting an unnamed source, Mrs. Beaumont writes, "[t]here is scarcely any mind so sluggish as not to feel a certain degree of raptitude at the thought of travelling; 'If', she continues, under ordinary circumstances we have an eagerness to visit and explore foreign scenes and manners, you may judge how much my curiosity was stimulated by the expectation of seeing France in these times. I sat my feet on this shore, peopled by millions hostile to my native country, with some trepidation; but this was a sensation which yielded to ardor for novelty, and to the desire excited in my mind of tracing the effects of one of the greatest political changes which the world has ever experienced. (pp. 1-2)

Our traveller's ardour for the new and foreign speaks to the appeal of the travel plot to readers of Gothic novels, who, judging from the genre's immense popularity in the 1790s, were eager to engage in vicarious adventures of their own. Mrs. Beaumont's statement also reveals how travel - itself an intensification of normal experience - is made more intense when one travels in the wake of cataclysmic change. The Revolution, Mrs. Beaumont observes, 'has had the effect of an earthquake on society; it has shook and subverted every thing to the very foundation'; France's old government is in ruins, and 'the actors in this drama of change are labouring to erect a structure, bearing no resemblance to what once occupied its place' (p. 3). Into this drama of change she will travel, her state of mind a Gothic mixture of eagerness and trepidation.

A striking feature of Mrs. Beaumont's narrative is its self-reflexiveness on the subject of travel writing. From the outset, she betrays an awareness of the genre's propensity to blur the boundaries between fact and fiction. Distancing herself from those travel writers who embellish their narratives with suspect truths or lapse into wholesale fiction, Mrs. Beaumont insists, 'I am resolved not to be a lying traveller' (p. 4). A ubiquitous presence in eighteenth-century life and letters, the 'lying traveller' is one of the categories offered by Laurence Sterne in A Sentimental Journey (1768), a whimsical account of his own travels in France. Mrs. Beaumont would no doubt prefer to be classed as Sterne's 'inquisitive traveller': one who travels for knowledge, especially of facts and their relations. Thus she vows, 'like a grand-juryman, to make a true presentment of things as they shall come to my knowledge' (p. 4). 'If my letters have any value', she tells her correspondent, 'it will be from their containing facts' (p. 4). Moreover, this distancing of her project from the realm of imaginative literature is something Mrs. Beaumont pursues throughout her journal. More than once, for instance, she cuts short or omits accounts of the landscape so as not to overdose or tire her reader with picturesque description. Whether this reticence be a veiled critique of the descriptive expansiveness of Radcliffe and her imitators - novelists and travellers alike - or simply a recognition that the truth of the Revolution does not reside in the beauties of the landscape, she insists that 'I am not a poet' (p. 294).

Our traveller's faith in unadorned fact does not, however, blind her to the difficulty of her quest, as is evident when she cautions her reader, ['y]ou must remember ... that Truth is not a lady of the most easy access, and that in our situation there may be times when we may be unable to push ourselves into her antichamber [sic]' (p. 4). 'Our situation', of course, involves a long-standing, engrained national distaste for the reportedly frivolous, insincere French character - which Mrs. Beaumont decidedly shares - augmented by a barrage of more recent images of the French as bloodthirsty demons. It also involves, as it does for the Gothic heroine, a lack of reliable information about her environment. As Punter reminds us, the Gothic is inherently concerned with 'instabilities of knowledge ... Far from knowing everything', he observes, 'characters frequently know little or nothing about the worlds through which they move or about the situations of power which envelop them.' In truth, it is this very lack of knowledge that appears to motivate the Beaumonts, who travel seeking to appease a 'hunger of the mind' (p. 207). Since war was declared early in 1793 and the free flow of information cut off, news from the front had to take a circuituous
route or (as was often the case) be manufactured. It is fair to say that, during the war years, England itself existed in a state of Gothic anxiety which our heroine imports into France as part of her psychic baggage. Her typically English antipathy for the French intensified by wartime patriotism, Mrs. Beaumont can never forget she is an Englishwoman among enemies. This position ensures that her ‘ardor’ for novelty and her ‘desire’ for information will be shot with apprehension, and that she – like the Gothic heroine – will oscillate between states of intense curiosity and paralysing fear. Like that heroine, whose very survival often seems to hinge on successful pursuit of the truth, she will find its pursuit hampered by the effect that fear and lack of knowledge have on the mind’s ability to process the evidence of the senses. And so, despite Mrs. B’s fondness for the sort of factual information gleaned from empirical observation, the truth she unearths will often consist of facts about her feelings and how they wreak havoc with facts.

Just how slippery the facts can be is clear from the moment Mrs. Beaumont’s ship enters the harbour at Calais and is boarded by a noisy party of armed men. ‘Judge of my alarm!’ she writes, ‘for I fancied that we had fallen into the hands of some miserable privateer’ (p. 5). In reality, these supposed waterborne banditti are merely French soldiers and a harbour pilot, there to help the ship negotiate the sandbanks and the embargo. Yet as the ship approaches the pier, Mrs. Beaumont’s senses deceive her again, and she perceives there ‘such a motley group ... as my English eyes had never seen before, while shoals at a distance were vociferating a thousand oaths, d la Française; le tout ensemble forming so strange and grotesque an appearance that I could have supposed myself looking at a caricature rather than a scene from real life’ (p. 7). One need only recall the hideous depictions of Jacobins in popular political prints of the day to get a sense of how unsettling Mrs. Beaumont’s vision must have been – the vision of a stranger encountering a strange land, seeing through fearful English eyes. These instances are the first of many in which fear breaks through and the alien scene before her, processed by a primed imagination, will prompt hallucinations worthy of a Gothic heroine.

Our traveller’s curiosity and sense of adventure, however, soon enable her to put her unsettling initiation behind her, and indeed, for the first part of her journey she sees little to awaken her fear. As she and her husband proceed in stages towards Paris, there is surprisingly little evidence of Revolutionary violence: the occasional convent turned gin shop or looted church turned Temple of Reason and then appropriated by the army. Such sights provoke reflections tinged with Protestant sarcasm, or at most, a mild, qualified sympathy. Along the route she notes (and jokes about) the poor roads and wretched inns and records conversations with farmers, beggars, and weary soldiers, all yearning for an end to war. Though edified by what she sees and hears, our traveller betrays a sense of surprise verging on disappointment that France is not the ruin she expected. Not until she reaches the abandoned chateau of the exiled Prince of Condé (a brother of the murdered Louis XVI) at Chantilly does she encounter the first real traces of the evidence she has sought. Touring the building, she recounts,

at every step we took, we were continually reminded by detached sentences written on the walls and doors, of the number of wretched beings therein confined during the era of terror; some of which were taken from thence to be guillotined in Paris; others released; and some perished in the castle, leaving the above mementos behind them, sufficiently expressive of the agony of their minds. But enough on this subject. (p. 124)

It is evident that the traces which concern Mrs. Beaumont most are those that attest to the Revolution’s toll on human lives. And while her first encounter with the mementos mori of the Revolution excites melancholy rather than outright fear, in the emotional economy of the Gothic, melancholy is often a first step on the path to more intense passions, acting as a primer of sorts for terror. What is more, here, early in her Gothic progress, Mrs. Beaumont exhibits in the telling the first hint of a pattern repeated in later encounters with traces of the Terror: like the ‘detached sentences’ inscribed by its victims – indeed, like their very heads – her narrative will, again and again, be abruptly cut off. This pattern is part of a larger pattern of interruption that marks her trip: one in which the detached observation of the fact-gatherer and the aesthetic pleasures of the Grand Tour are derailed by the terrifying nature of what she contemplates. Gothic moments such as the one above reveal themselves as sites of uncanny temporal and ontological disruption where the distance between past and present – between what Mrs. Beaumont terms the ci-devant (that is, the days of the Ancien Régime in which Princes and their palaces flourished) and the present of her travels in the newly-formed Republic – narrows, converging on the cause of the effects she has sought. Repeatedly, the spectre of the Terror will emerge from its traces, interrupting her journey as it interrupted the Enlightenment’s sense of history as a glorious trajectory of progress. And though Mrs. Beaumont’s express purpose is to trace this cataclysm’s effects, what she reads in the Gothic text of France will cause her, in various ways, to shrink from what she has sought.
Haunted Imagination

Fresh from her first memorable encounter with the Revolution’s victims, Mrs. Beaumont approaches Paris. Although this is her first visit to the capital, she arrives with a mind well-stocked with horrific images that make for painful anticipation. As was the case for William Wordsworth, who also had his Gothic moments in France, her response arises from an amalgam of information gleaned from a variety of sources. As Wordsworth put it in *The Prelude* (1805),

... the fear gone by
Pressed on me almost like a fear to come;
I thought of those September Massacres,
Divided from me by a little month,
And felt and touched them, a substantial dread:
The rest was conjured up from tragic frictions,
And mournful calendars of true history,
Remembrances and dim admonishments. (X. 62–9)

Wordsworth, who toured France between November 1791 and December 1792, was in the country during the September Massacres that marked the onset of the Terror. Interestingly, he stresses his inability when confronted with its traces to feel as intensely as one would expect and even admits to ‘[a]ffecting more emotion than I felt’ (IX. 71). Mrs. Beaumont, however, far from experiencing a dearth of emotion, labours under an excess. As she attests,

|I only sensations on entering this capital of the French Republic, I can but feebly describe. I trembled, – I wept; – and though I longed to see what this famous city contained, yet I was afraid that my poor nerves would be unequal to the shock which some of its scenes must unavoidably occasion. (p. 134)

Perhaps she has read the latest instalment (1795) of *Letters from France*, Helen Maria Williams’ account of the Revolution. Recounting a Gothic moment of her own, Williams wrote, on returning to Paris after her imprisonment and exile,

on entering again that polluted city, a thousand fatal recollections rushed upon my mind, a thousand local sensations overwhelmed my spirit.... The appalling procession of the guillotine arose before my troubled imagination

... I saw in the vehicles of death the spectres of my murdered friends. The magnificent square of the revolution, with all its gay buildings, appeared to me clotted with blood, and incumbered with the dead.17

Passages such as this one, no doubt, prompted critics to complain that *Letters* was too novelistic: for Williams, revisiting the scenes of the Terror becomes a Gothic haunting that sends her imagination (and her language) into overdrive, the now-benign scene before her calling up visions and emotions from the past that belie the evidence of her senses. And though Mrs. Beaumont has not experienced the Terror first-hand as Williams did, a combination of the evidence gleaned and dwelt on so far in her journey and of accounts such as Williams’ creates for her a vicarious past of interwoven fact and fiction. Discussing the ‘emotional rhetoric’ of the Gothic, Adela Pinch observes that it ‘depicts characters as filled in by feelings that may or may not be theirs. The characters’ emotional lives turn out to be occupied territory.’18 As we shall see, our real-life heroine’s emotional life too proves to be an ‘occupied territory’ in which the boundaries between reading and real-life experience prove disturbingly permeable.

Mrs. Beaumont’s musings as she proceeds through Paris attest to an imagination awash with literary and real-life, vicarious and actual experience, all of which contribute to the mood of haunted memory and anxious anticipation that will accompany her on the rest of her journey. She writes of inviting her husband, who has been to Paris before, to share her mood:

It is a new Paris ... that you are going to explore; – and how unlike the old! – like Mercier’s old man, you will seem to have awoke from a very long sleep. What changes you will contemplate! – what horrid recollections will the view of many places excite! (p. 134)

Mrs. Beaumont is referring to Louis-Sebastien Mercier’s prescient utopian dream-vision, *L’an deux mille quatre cent quarante* (1770), in which the protagonist awakes from a disturbed dream to find that France has undergone a bloody revolution. ‘As for myself’, she reports telling Mr. Beaumont, ‘I shall dream of assassination and murder, and blood will be uppermost in my thoughts’ (p. 134). Her very literary response to Paris is symptomatic of the ‘new collective absorption in the increasingly vivid, if also hallucinatory, contents of the mind’ that characterised late-eighteenth-century culture and readership.19 The era’s aestheticians and nonprofessional readers alike concurred about the power of memory and representations to create a parallel
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reality in auditors’ minds: one equivalent in meaning and force to firsthand experience. One such reader, Lord Kames, in The Elements of Criticism (1762), referred to this species of literary virtual reality as ‘ideal presence’: a visionary state prompted by the recurrence of an intense memory or by powerfully evocative writing. Mrs. Beaumont’s prediction reveals that the bloody scenes of war and massacre Mercier conjured and deplored in his powerfully evocative writing. Mrs. Beaumont’s prediction reveals that the bloody scenes of war and massacre Mercier conjured and deplored in his powerfully evocative writing.

As she explores it, she continues to move freely between and to combine factual and fanciful modes, past reading and present experience, at times cognisant of the differences and at others conflating them. Proceeding through the streets of Paris, Mrs. Beaumont muses on this ‘sanguinary’ place where humans have butchered one another like tigers — something the French would not tolerate in their drama and the English in their revolutions. Suddenly aware of the distance her thoughts have travelled — all the way back, in fact, to the safety and decorum of England — she interrupts their bloody train to admit, ‘but I perceive I am rather sketching the present state of my own mind than a picture of Paris’ (p. 135). At last aware that the scene before her has been subsumed by the disturbing associations it evokes, she snaps out of her solipsistic reverie into a classic example of Lockean reflection: ‘that notice which the mind takes of its own operations’. Locke maintained that thought processes tinctured by passion or interest distort the truth, and indeed, later in her stay in Paris, Mrs. Beaumont, like a chastened Gothic heroine, admits, ‘those terrific illusions which my fancy had conjured up, and which possessed my imagination, were but partly realized’ (p. 135). Traces of the Terror, she conceives, must be sought in order to be found. And, because they are not inscribed on the faces of the Parisians as she assumed they would be, she must look to the Revolution’s architectural ruins — the real-life equivalents of the Gothic’s haunted castles and abbeys — in order to give form to this ‘uniform’d spectre’ and excavate the truth of its human cost.

The scene of Mrs. Beaumont’s most memorable Paris haunting is the Tuileries Palace. Formerly home to the royal family and scene of bloodshed in 1792, it now houses the Directory’s two branches, which she and her husband have come to observe. Proceeding across the Place du Carousel from one council to another, she recalls passing the spot where the ‘bloody scenes of the tenth of August [when a force of Jacobins attacked and assassinated the King’s Swiss Guards] ... were present to my mind, in all their horror’ (p. 193). In a perfect example of the power of ideal presence, we see yet again the Gothic reader’s ability to be occupied and haunted by the experiences of others. ‘Here’, she writes, ‘traces are still visible of the bloody conflict and violence of that day’ (p. 194); these remainders of the Terror — broken ornaments, cannon ball holes, a bullet lodged in a wall — ‘quite harrowed up our souls’ (p. 194). Like the ghost of Hamlet’s father (one of Gothic fiction’s most persistent spectres), these traces are haunting reminders of a tale of betrayal and murder: one accessible across the gap of years to the primed imagination. This particular tale is so harrowing that its auditor declares, ‘I could have no desire to remain here one moment longer than was necessary. Let us hasten to the other Council’ (p. 194).

The process is then repeated as Mrs. Beaumont leaves the Council of Ancients: ‘Arrived at the grand staircase’, she reports, ‘a thousand horrid reflections again rushed into my mind, and I ran down the stairs as fast as I could’ (p. 197). In this case, escape itself is cut off as their guide stops her in mid-career to point out the blood of the Swiss Guard still visible on the walls, insisting it ‘cannot be erased’ (p. 197). In the midst of a Paris that is busy renovating itself in the aftermath of the Terror, the guide represents the historian’s imperative to memorialise atrocity — to remember at all costs. And though this is precisely the sort of evidence Mrs. Beaumont has sought in her quest for the truth about the Revolution, she reports that ‘I shuddered as he spoke, and could not be prevailed on to hear another syllable’ (p. 197).

This pattern, familiar to readers of Gothic novels, is one in which the heroine’s curiosity, heightened by extraordinary circumstances and awe-inspiring settings that whet her imagination, compels her to seek out traces of rumoured or reported violence which are uncannily linked to her own fate: traces such as the bloody knife, the fragmented, half-legible manuscript, the veiled picture. These traces, when found, raise in her mind the spectres of victims along with their emotions, which migrate to the bosom of the already-fearful heroine. Overcome, she runs down the stairs or faints. In The Mysteries of Udolpho, Ann Radcliffe memorably characterises this compulsion: referring to heroine Emily St. Aubert’s desire to look behind the veil at the picture she believes represents the castle of Udolpho’s disappeared former mistress, she writes, ‘a terror of this nature ... leads us, by a kind of fascination, to seek even the object from which we shrink’ (p. 248).
From Terror to Horror

In the culture of sensibility that nurtured Radcliffe and Mrs Beaumont, the goal in relations between humans was to enter into others' feelings through the sympathetic imagination. According to Adam Smith in his ‘bible’ of sensibility, The Theory of Moral Sentiments, sadness or suffering, whether actual or represented, are especially effective catalysts, activating the auditor's pity and drawing her towards the sufferer like a magnet. Indeed, true sympathy required one to ‘enter as it were into [the sufferer’s] body and become in some measure him’.21 Although ranked low in the literary hierarchy by most late-century theorists and critics, novels are now recognised as having served their readers as important laboratories in which they could develop and hone their sympathetic capacities, learning to read with ‘sensibility of heart’; in the process, readers were wont to engage passionately with and, at times, even to lose themselves in texts.22 This process of intense imaginative identification is what the well-read Mrs. Beaumont enacts as she traverses the text that is France, seeking out evidence of human suffering. When she finds it, her sympathy is activated, causing her to ‘home in’ on the suffering’s source, thus collapsing the distance between herself and the Revolution's victims. For such acts of imaginative travel, she found plentiful models in the sentimental fiction of the day, and in its haunted offspring, the Gothic, which presented psychological states with ‘a subjectively-felt intensity not previously achieved in fiction’,23 she found recipes for raising the spectres of the dead.

In the fiction of Ann Radcliffe, the Gothic's most admired practitioner, a new species of spectre takes the place of old-fashioned ghosts; these new ghosts, maintains Terry Castle, are spectralised forms of the other: ‘the products of refined sentiment, the characteristic projections of a feeling heart. To be haunted [in Radcliffe] ... is to display one’s powers of sympathetic imagination.’24 Like her fellow Romantic-era readers, having been habilitated by the Gothic texts she imbibed before visiting post-Terror France – the ultimate Gothic text – to just this sort of phantasmic sympathy, Mrs. Beaumont is compelled to return to what Jacques Derrida, speaking of history, terms the ‘moment of ... production’,25 and there she communes with the dead. Thus, despite the high premium she places on fact, the imperatives of Gothic readership lead her beyond empirical fact into the realm of fantasy where she experiences the terror of the Terror for herself. Such imaginative travel is problematic, however, when one traverses literal ‘regions of terror’.26

In a posthumously-published essay, ‘On the Supernatural in Poetry’ (1826), Ann Radcliffe clarifies the Burke-inspired theories of emotional response to fearsome objects her novels’ heroines enact as they traverse the Gothic landscape. Especially relevant is a distinction suggested but not elaborated on in her fiction: the distinction between terror and horror. Terror, she explains, ‘expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life’; horror, on the other hand, ‘contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them’; as for the causes of these related yet differing reactions, the key difference lies in ‘the uncertainty and obscurity, that accompany the first, respecting the dreaded evil’.27 While neither Radcliffe nor her contemporaries made a consistent or systematic distinction between the two terms in their fiction, the above-mentioned scene involving Udolpho’s heroine Emily and the veiled picture does seem to be a site in which Radcliffe, prior to spelling it out, enacts the terror–horror distinction. Reading with this distinction in mind helps to shed light on the intricacies of emotional response that are key to the Gothic heroine’s experience, as well as the difficulties faced by the Gothic traveller-as-reader.

Anxious and apprehensive at finding herself imprisoned in the castle of Udolpho, separated from her lover and faced with an impending forced marriage, Emily, eager to distract herself, resorts to exploration. The castle’s ‘ancient grandeur’ inspires a ‘melancholy awe’ which ‘awakened all [her imagination’s] powers’ (p. 248). The mystery of the setting leads her stimulated imagination to recall and seek out the veiled picture that earlier aroused her curiosity when the servants hinted at its connection with Laurentini, Udolpho’s mistress, who has mysteriously vanished. All of these circumstances – most notably the ‘circumstance of the veil, throwing a mystery over the subject’ (Burke’s element of obscurity) – combine to excite in Emily ‘a faint degree of terror’ (p. 248). Radcliffe writes, of this species of magnetic terror, ‘a terror of this nature, as it occupies and expands the mind, and elevates it to high expectation, is purely sublime, and leads us, by a kind of fascination, to seek even the object, from which we appear to shrink’ (p. 248).28 Here we can think of Mrs. Beaumont, imagination stimulated as she nears the French coast and travels with her Gothic baggage towards Paris, her apprehension of danger tempered by her desire to peek behind the veil of intervening years at the truth of the Revolution. This, likewise, is Mrs. Beaumont's position before she enters Paris, an olio of tales of ‘assassination and murder’ on her mind.
As Emily approaches the veiled picture, she pauses, 'and then, with a timid hand, lifted the veil; but instantly let it fall – perceiving that what it had concealed was no picture, and, before she could leave the chamber, she dropped senseless on the floor' (pp. 248–9). When she revives, we learn that 'horror occupied her mind' (p. 249). Here, it would seem, Radcliffe embodies the distinction she will later spell out between the pleasing, expansive terror her heroine experiences on approaching the portrait and the obliterating horror that results after the veil is lifted, revealing the mysterious object to be 'real'. So shocking is this revelation that Emily's faculties are temporarily annihilated, and when they return, the horror lingers as she reflects on what she has seen: something so unspeakable that Radcliffe replicates the effect in the novel's plot, postponing for several hundred pages the knowledge of what was behind the veil. Thus, following her fellow aestheticians, the novelist demonstrates that terror ceases to please when the fearsome object presses too close – when obscurity gives way to certainty, and fear is overwhelming. As Thomas Weiskel puts it, 'if the danger is real we turn and flee, without pausing for our sublime moment'. Such is the case when Emily, peering behind the veil, comes face to face with an image of death not only fearsome in itself, but more so for what it hints about the fates of women in Gothic castles. Such is also the case for Mrs. Beaumont at the site of the Tuileries massacre, where her primed imagination rends the veil that separates her from the Revolution's victims and she runs down the stairs, pursued, not by a ghost, but by her own vicarious 'horrid reflections'. And while, as the Gothic's popularity attests, to read about victims and their fates – identifying at a distance – affords a thrilling sort of elevation, to identify too closely is another matter.

In their influential essay 'On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror', Anna Laetitia Aiken and John Aiken suggest this very thing. Although they do not systematically distinguish between terror and horror, as Radcliffe would in 'On the Supernatural' a half-century later, they are apt to reserve the latter term for the most extreme fear-provoking scenes in fiction. They cite as an exemplary scene of horror the episode in Tobias Smollett's novel *Ferdinand Count Fathom* in which the hero finds himself locked in a room with a just-slaughtered corpse (p. 129). Radcliffe, in her 'unveiling' scene in *Undolpho*, would later subject her heroine Emily to a similar close encounter with a corpse (although only a supposed one) to demonstrate the cause and effect of horrific overbalance, also suggesting that horror is intensified by repetition and reflection. And although Mrs. Beaumont is more concerned with reporting than with theorising in her journal, she uncannily embodies just such a response in an entry from the latter part of her journey.

After a relatively peaceful interlude near Geneva, a side trip to Lyons, site of some of the Revolution's bloodiest scenes, throws her once more into a Gothic mode. As at Paris, she nears Lyons in a ready-made state of trepidation: 'You may be assured', she writes, 'that, after what I have read and heard ... I did not approach it with calm and tranquil nerves'; nearing its outskirts, we learn, 'my imagination began to employ itself in painful anticipation' (p. 471). Surveying the city from a distance, she reports, 'my mind was too much occupied by gloomy thoughts to enjoy the scene' (p. 472). Unlike Emily as she approaches the veiled picture, her imagination fuelled by rumour, Mrs. Beaumont is all-too-aware of the crimes that occurred in Lyons. The scene she surveys was the site of a siege by Robespierre's forces in 1793; much of the city was ravaged by cannon fire, and after its surrender, suspected royalists were slaughtered. Recounting the atrocities that occurred on the quays of the river Saone, she warns that their 'bare recital ... must make one shudder', for,

> when the guillotine could not dispatch with sufficient expedition, guns loaded with grape-shot were employed against miserable victims tied together in rows, who fell by hundreds, and whose blood flowed like water into the Saone. Oh! horrible, horrible, most horrible!!! (pp. 477–8)

Like the reader the Aikens describe, Mrs. B, despite her aversion to the scene of slaughter, is borne violently through the process of imaginatively reliving it – not just once, but repeatedly, as she must reimagine her initial experience (itself a repetition of what she has 'read and heard') in order to describe it for her reader. In the overbalance of pain attendant upon this too-close encounter with the dark heart of human nature, the tongue itself shudders and can only, finally, stutter out an epithet that marks the point where imagination and language fall short. This classic case of 'ruptured discourse' – an attempt at representation that 'breaks down as reason struggles with imagination for ascendency: what can be grasped is not equivalent to what is meaningful', for what it attempts to express is 'the unpresentability of death itself'. Compared with the brand of stimulating, curiosity-laced fear that leads a heroine or traveller to want to peek behind the veil (or a reader to turn the page), the sort experienced in a too-close encounter with mortality involves the subject to a greater and more disturbing extent, confounding inner and outer worlds in an all-pervasive disorientation .... Horror appears when fears come a little too close to home.'
explains the incantatory quality of Mrs. Beaumont's 'bare recital', which reads like a spell or charm meant to ward off the victim's fate: in other words, as a barrier to protect her from the spectres she has raised. The result of her repeated brush with the spectre of violent death, this ruptured discourse of horror is yet another form of shrinking in the face of fact that exercises the imagination - that is at once stranger and more real than fiction. More important than the terms we affix to such reactions is the fact that our traveller's imagination is taxed, not in the safety of closet or parlour, but at the epicentre of the Terror: clearly, she has travelled beyond the territory of fiction's cushioned terrors.

**Reading Naked Ruins**

Nowhere is the source of the difference between safely-distanced terrors and those that come too close to home better revealed than in the heroine's encounters with ruins, a staple of the Romantic landscape and a locus of Gothic fear. In Radcliffe's *Romance of the Forest*, the narrator describes the half-ruined abbey in which her travellers take shelter: '[s]everal of the pillars which had once supported the roof, remained the proud effigies of sinking greatness, and seemed to nod at every murmur of the blast over the fragments of those that had fallen before them' (p. 16). Radcliffe's images, it is said, were so vividly drawn they 'shaped experiences and perceptions, and governed the way people viewed ruins on their travels'.

Certainly they influenced Mrs. Beaumont, who writes, of church and castle ruins observed early in her journey, near Clermont, 'their fragments seem to nod at every murmur of the blast over those which had already fallen' (p. 111). For Radcliffe, Mrs. Beaumont, and their contemporaries, such ruins served both as catalysts for meditations on mortality and, increasingly, as aesthetic objects. In fact, as Mrs. Beaumont observes of her 'nodding' ruins, '[t]he whole has a beautiful effect, for which reason I flatter myself the object will be allowed to remain' (p. 111).

Another borrowing points to the novelist's influence while it suggests how Mrs. Beaumont parts company with the Gothic heroine. Radcliffe's Adeline, ruminating over the ruins of a castle in Savoy, reflects, '[i]t seems ... as if we were walking over the ruins of the world, and were the only persons who had survived the wreck' (p. 265). In a similar vein, Mrs. Beaumont, wandering among Revolutionary ruins near Dôle, muses, 'I seem to be walking among the desolations occasioned by an earthquake, whose tremendous violence is scarcely spent' (p. 341). What lies submerged in fictional Gothic texts - the historical realities behind the veil of their setting in an imaginative past - here becomes explicit, and what we get is a glimpse of recent events. William Hazlitt, that sharp-eyed commentator on his times, observed that Radcliffe's ruins 'derived part of their interest, no doubt, from the supposed tottering state of all old structures at the time'. And while the 'last-man' scenario the novelist envisions for heroine Adeline need not refer directly to the tottering state of Ancien Régime France (although it may), our real-life heroine not only chooses to read her in this way but, from her vantage point at the site of the 'wreck', hints at its cause and intimates that it is still in progress.

It is this sense of imminence - of being too close to the source - made all the more imminent by the accumulated horrors she has conjured, that once and for all destroys the distance necessary for aesthetic appreciation. Writes Mrs. Beaumont,

> I must confess that the ruins of the castles built during the feudal system never affected me like these modern ones. I considered them as picturesque objects, and, without adverting to what reduced them to neglected and mouldering ruins, I was pleased with their effect on the landscape. But not so the ruins that now come daily before our eyes: these are not ivy-mantled, but bearing all the naked marks of violence; - these do not relate to 'tales of other times', but are produced by the shocks and convulsions of yesterday. Here the hand of Desolation has been at work and we read the convulsions of the state in the characters of deformity and ruin.

(Mrs. Beaumont's meditation on the differing impact of ruins decently 'clothed' by intervening time and the Revolution's 'naked' ones makes the distinctions between safely distanced contemplation and immediate experience clear. For unlike the romantic ruins one meets with in more mundane travels (or, for that matter, in most Gothic novels), these ruins of the Revolution are too close, both in time and space, to what made them ruins to produce a pleasing effect. Without the veil that time and nature create to soften the naked event, the traveller is brought face to face with the spectacle of history. Significantly, in this moment of epiphany, Mrs. Beaumont's reference to 'tales of other times' reveals she is thinking specifically of Gothic fiction: 'A Tale of Other Times' is the subtitle of Sophia Lee's historical Gothic novel, *The Recess* (1783–5), and the novelists who followed her would also employ the words 'other times' or 'olden times' in their titles to signal that a Gothic was in store. Most often, these Gothic 'other times' inhabit the transitional space between the Middle Ages and
the Enlightenment; more important than historical verisimilitude, critics agree, is the 'civilised' modern reader's sense of being transported back to more passionate and fanciful times. As Walter Scott put it, the Gothic author's purpose is 'to wind up the feelings of his readers till they become for a moment identified with a ruder age'. For Mrs. Beaumont, however, at the Terror's epicentre and feeling its aftershocks, that ruder age belongs not to the distant past or the pages of a novel, but to the fearsome all-but-present. No wonder, then, that often her feelings are wound up at the breaking (or shrinking) point.

In the naked ruin that is Post-Terror France, not only does nature fail to veil the Revolution's 'shocks and convulsions', it raises spectres of its own. While the Gothic's romantic mountains and forests, with their threat of lurking banditti, at times set the heroine's fears on edge, just as often 'the elevating effect of nature's sublimity sustains and strengthens [her] on her travels' at the same time it provides aesthetic relief for the reader's wound-up feelings. However, nature seldom has this palliating effect on Mrs. Beaumont; rather, the selfsame terror her experience as a Gothic reader has taught her to conjure 'prevents all delights from forest scenery' (p. 293). After her fears are put on permanent alert at Paris, her progress through the wild landscapes she encounters on the latter part of her tour—where traces of the Terror are seemingly absent—is marked by Gothic moments such as the one this essay began with, in which her internalisation of the Terror (and consequent self-identification as victim) proves complete. In the forest of Senar, having transformed obscure noises from among the trees into banditti consequent self-identification as victim) proves complete. In the forest of the Terror are seemingly absent—is marked by Gothic moments such as the one this essay began with, in which her internalisation of the Terror (and consequent self-identification as victim) proves complete. In the forest of the Terror are seemingly absent—is marked by Gothic moments such as the one this essay began with, in which her internalisation of the Terror (and consequent self-identification as victim) proves complete. In the forest of Senar, having transformed obscure noises from among the trees into banditti and given herself up for lost, Mrs. Beaumont discovers the 'murderers' are French soldiers on patrol to protect travellers, two of whom in fact have been recently robbed and murdered. In her journal, after first reliving the incident as a scene from a 'frightful fiction' whose conventions dictate that she give herself up for lost, she veers from the frightening possibility and, mentally shifting genres, recounts, '[r]eflecting on it as a reality, I felt grateful to Heaven for our narrow escape, and congratulated myself on belonging to a country, whose forests are not frequented by banditti, and whose government is not under the necessity of choosing captains for the army from those who cannot write' (p. 287). In the end, when identification with the Revolution's victims proves too painful, it is not nature, but nationality (i.e., nationalism) which affords the distance—not aesthetic but moral—that sustains Mrs. Beaumont in her travels and calls her back from the regions of romance.

When, at the end of Udolpho, Ann Radcliffe reveals the source of heroine Emily's fainting horror, we learn that what was behind the veil was indeed 'no picture'. Rather than the rotted corpse we suspect it to be, however, the horrific object turns out to be a wax effigy of a decomposing body constructed for the edification of superstitious Catholics: in other words, it remains a representation. Nonetheless, it is so successful a representation that Emily fails to distinguish between this three-dimensional fake and an actual corpse. It is tempting to read this trick on Radcliffe's part as an allegory for Gothic writing and reading: one in which the masterful novelist has created such a convincing fake that, with their complicity, she terrorises her readers. The trouble, then, for our real-life traveller is that she imports this mode of subliming readership into France, where the Terror looms too close for comfort. And though, as she admits in her more rational moments, the spectres she has raised are fakes (representations issuing from her own well-read mind), her imagination has done such a stellar job of conjuring them, the difference becomes irrelevant. When the distance between reader and text is collapsed, the pleasurable, imagined terror that attends Gothic reading shifts shape to become actual fear—not only for the story's victims, but for the self which has, in the process of Gothic travel, transformed itself into the victim.

Despite the horrors encountered in her travels through France, Mrs. Beaumont, recollecting them from the safety of Swiss territory, can declare, '^[seriously, how necessary it is to traverse a country which has unfortunately been the theatre of war' (p. 418). Perhaps, after all, she has more in common with a 'sentimental traveller' like Sterne than she let on in the beginning. Such a traveller, journeying with eyes, mind, and heart open, is willing to digress—or as Sterne put it, to 'walk up a dark entry', receptive to what lurks there. Indeed, we might best think of Mrs. Beaumont's Gothic moments as digressions from the straight and narrow, fact-paved path to truth, into the dark, winding passages of the haunted imagination. Though insisting she is not a poet, she has nonetheless followed the lead of poetic natures like Radcliffe and Williams into the realm of romance. And though she emerges chastened at the 'womanish fears' (p. 472) traces of the Terror have evoked, those very fears contribute in no small measure to her comprehension of the Revolution's horrors. Her haunted progress through France has led her, if not to the heart of Truth, into her 'antichamber', at least.
Notes


10. In his Preface to A Sketch, editor Christopher Lake Moody describes the letters’ addressee as a ‘Lady of Fashion attached to one of the branches of the Royal Family’ (p. vi). Given Albans Beaumont’s position as a tutor in the Duke of Gloucester’s household, and the fact that his friend Moody had other connections at Hampton Court Palace where the Duke resided, it is not unlikely that Mrs. Beaumont’s correspondent was also ‘attached’ to this branch of the Royal Family – as a courtier or gentle servant, perhaps.

11. As Ellen Moers famously put it, in Radcliffe’s hands, ‘the Gothic novel was a device to send maidens on distant and exciting journeys; in the process it provided a model of female selfhood in “the woman who moves, who acts, who copes with vicissitude and adventure”. Traveling Heroines: Gothic for Heroines’, in Literary Women (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), pp. 123–40; p. 126.


15. Virtually all personal information about the Beaumonts has been deleted from A Sketch. However, it can be speculated that, as an artist who published several books of views of European landscapes, Beaumont may well have used the trip to make sketches, as well as to reconnoitre the Savoy area, where he would later raise merino sheep and establish an iron mine. His wife’s account of their travels (to which he contributed a summation of France’s current state), may well have been read by his employer, the Duke of Gloucester.


17. Helen Maria Williams, Letters from France [1790–5], Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints (New York: Delmar, 1975), v, I, p. 177.


20. Miles, Gothic Writing, p. 39. Discussing ideal presence as an important feature of the Gothic aesthetic, Miles notes that, to a concept already well-known among the era’s readers, Kames made a significant addition: the power of ideal presence to exercise and improve the moral sense.


25. Castle, Female Thermometer, p. 123.


Burke and other late-century aesthetic theorists, Radcliffe points to obscurity – the lack of knowledge or certainty – as an important stimulant of fear.

In their 1773 essay 'On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror', which Radcliffe is likely to have read, Anna Laetitia Aiken (later Barbauld) and John Aiken write that the experience of reading 'well-wrought' scenes of terror 'awakens the mind, and keeps it on the stretch'; addressing readers' paradoxical desire to subject themselves to what is painful, they observe that '[w]e rather chuse to suffer the smart pang of a violent emotion than the uneasy craving of an unsatisiied desire.' In E.J. Clery and Robert Miles, eds, Gothic Documents: A Sourcebook 1700-1820 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); pp. 127–32; p. 129, p. 128. Further page references will be given parenthetically.


Rictor Norton, Mistress of Udolpho: The Life of Ann Radcliffe (London: Leicester University Press, 1999), p. 250. For example, the sight of a ruined French castle prompted Washington Irving to write in his journal for 8 August 1804, '[t]he descriptions [sic] of Mrs. Radcliffe were brought immediately to my recollection [sic]. This would have formed a fine picture for her talents to work upon.' From Irving's Journals and Notebooks, ed. Nathalia Wright (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), v.l, pp. 55–6. In fact, the trope of reading ruins as hieroglyphs of catastrophe comes not from Radcliffe originally but most directly from Volney's The Ruins, or, Meditations of the Revolutions of Empire (1789).


Commentators on the Revolution frequently likened it to a natural cataclysm: most often, a volcanic eruption. An earthquake is Mrs. B's metaphor of choice.


The link between banditti and real-life political 'villains' was closer at the time than it may at first seem. For instance, during the Terror, Jacobins were frequently referred to as banditti by English and French royalists. What is more, some of the highwaymen who roamed France during the Revolution were said to be former soldiers or deserters from the army. In The Mysteries of Udolpho, Ann Radcliffe plays upon the connection when Emily imagines the villain Montoni's political operatives as banditti.

Although beyond the scope of this essay, Mrs. Beaumont's frequent deployment of her superior Englishness in order to differentiate and distance herself from the French and their excessive passions (to which many commentators attributed the Revolution's horrors) supports Ellen Moers' observation that women travellers tended to be 'ill-equipped for vicissitudes of travel, climate, and native mutiny, but well-equipped to preserve their identity as proper Englishwomen' (Literary Women, p. 139). When viewed from this perspective, Mrs Beaumont's shrinking reaction to the spectres her sympathetic imagination has conjured can be seen to stem not just from fear at the prospect of violent death, but from the threatened violation of her identity as a patriotic Englishwoman.