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Environmental Self-making and the Urbanism of Ann Radcliffe’s Udolpho

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Abstract
This article addresses the overlooked significance of urban life to first-wave Gothic fiction and the work of Ann Radcliffe in particular. Despite its various remote settings, Radcliffe’s exemplary Gothic novel, The Mysteries of Udolpho, reveals a pervasive concern with urban influence on mental life, one based on medical, educational, and travel writing of the era. Rather than denounce urban influence as mere dissipation, however, Radcliffe portrays the city as a necessary catalyst for the sensibility and subjectivity her novel champions. In turn and at large, Radcliffe puts forth a view of human development at once deterministic and self-determined, wherein human habitats can be manipulated, selected, and otherwise negotiated for the purpose of self-shaping.

The relationship between Gothic literature and the urban sphere has received ample critical attention in recent years, with urban Gothic becoming a significant watchword. In concert with Robert Mighall, many scholars identify the urban Gothic subgenre as breaking from the original mold in the middle of the nineteenth century, exhibiting a true “Gothic of the city” as its “terrors derive from situations peculiar to, and firmly located within, the urban experience” (Geography 30). In contrast, first-wave Gothic literature addresses that which “the city (civilization) banished or refused to acknowledge”; indeed, so strongly do early Gothic narratives associate the terrible with the remote, Mighall adds, that “urban Gothic’ almost seems a contradiction in terms” (“Gothic Cities” 54). Thus, first-wave narratives have remained peripheral to this critical discussion.

Accepting Ann Radcliffe’s The Mysteries of Udolpho: A Romance (1794) as a typical case in point, we might acknowledge that it takes place almost entirely at rural estates or the mountain castle of Udolpho. Venice appears but momentarily while Paris is only mentioned. And yet, The Mysteries of Udolpho reveals a pervasive if underlying concern with the urban sphere’s capacity to alter one’s nerves, tastes, and values, which were yoked together in the eighteenth-century view of sensibility. As early as the second paragraph, Radcliffe introduces this urban undercurrent via Monsieur St. Aubert—a former Parisian and father of the novel’s protagonist, Emily. Though he once “mingled in gay and in the busy scenes” of Paris, M. St. Aubert has rejected the luxury, ambition, and hubbub attendant to urban life and has “retired … to scenes of simple nature, to the
pure delights of literature, and to the exercise of domestic virtues” (1). Here, Radcliffe presents at once the attraction and trouble of urban life, set in contradistinction to the docile and dulcet qualities of rural habitation—a juxtaposition that had become a literary commonplace by the 1790s.

Central to this juxtaposition of country and city life was the nervous degradation associated with the latter, which physicians, estheticians, travelers, and urban commentators termed dissipation. In the novel’s most explicit warning, M. St. Aubert invokes dissipation in his pathos-oriented critique of city life:

its scenes, and its interests, distract the mind, deprave the taste, corrupt the heart, and love cannot exist in a heart that has lost the meek dignity of innocence. Virtue and taste are nearly the same, for virtue is little more than active taste, and the most delicate affections of each combine in real love. How then are we to look for love in great cities, where selfishness, dissipation, and insincerity supply the place of tenderness, simplicity, and truth? (49–50)

Here again, Radcliffe codifies psychological characteristics across urban and rural lines. She also provides a thesis question for her novel—how does one maintain a healthy psyche, defined by a capacity for tender and virtuous feeling, in the face of urban vice and violence? This question must be answered as both Emily and her love, Valancourt, will encounter trials in separate cities, trials that will threaten their sensibility and the momentum of the marriage plot.

Anticipating aspects of my argument, Kate Ellis and Diane Hoeveler have touched on, albeit briefly, the role of urban conditions in early Gothic literature. According to Hoeveler, Radcliffe’s novels “project a deep disdain for the growing urban world,” rejecting the “industrialization” and “new commercial culture” that increasingly characterized the city of the 1790s (87). More generally, Kate Ellis points out that first-wave Gothic literature presented to its largely urban readership relatable concerns—fears arising from a deteriorating sense of community and heightened levels of violence, problems particularly apparent in “growing urban centers” and particularly threatening to women (xi, 8–11). While building on these claims, I propose a more ambivalent portrayal of urban influence in The Mysteries of Udolpho, one that proves more complicated and more interesting than a pat denouncement of urban ills. Rather, Radcliffe portrays the urban sphere as a precarious but necessary catalyst for the subjectivity her novel champions.

By recognizing the city as an integral and unavoidable component of self-formation, Radcliffe depicts a common condition for modern English subjects at the end of the eighteenth century. From the large town to the metropolis, the economic activity lent the urban sphere a magnetic quality, drawing to it ever more inhabitants, as well as wealth, luxury, arts, pollution, and violence. Print culture perpetuated these elements as defining features of the city. For instance, William Cowper writes in The Task (1785) of cities as “nurseries for the arts,” but also as places of “gluttonous excess” and “riot and incontinence” (37). The booming populace, the growing complexity of the built environment, the proliferation of material culture and arts, the blisters of violence, the infected air, all of these elements were strongly associated with urban life and the psycho-physiological economy of those who encountered the shock city.

In The Mysteries of Udolpho, Radcliffe attempts to think through the power of the city to shape mental life, and in this effort she collaborates with educational, medical, travel, and editorial literature of the era. Counter to dissipation, this discourse also proposed
positive influences on the mental faculties, though these could not be easily bifurcated from the city’s negative effects. As exemplary, the nervous disorder attendant to city life was strongly associated with heightened sensitivity, mental expansion, and visionary experience. The precarious relationship between nervous disorder and visionary experience reaches its crisis for Emily at the castle of Udolpho, which I argue is not a shift away from urban concerns but rather an examination of urban degradation as through a glass darkly. Furthermore, the castle’s locality allows Radcliffe’s heroine to enact a program of environmental self-making common to this era, whereby healthful stimulus of surrounding nature is leveraged against the nervous shock experienced inside the walls of the city/castle.

This reading of Radcliffe’s novel also builds on recent efforts to link Radcliffe’s Gothic romance with medically based views of sensibility. For Gavin Budge in particular, the sensibility of Radcliffe’s novel is based firmly in sensationalist psychology and a medical understanding of the nervous system (28–29), a perspective that deviates from long-standing tendencies to read Radcliffe through a psychoanalytic lens, or as part of a discourse of sensibility that had lost its scientific moorings and devolved to sentimentality. In parallel, and closer to my own thinking, Katarina Gephardt has recently touched on the environmentalism of Radcliffian sensibility, correlated to eighteenth-century travel literature that regarded national character as the outcome of respective climates and landscapes (6). Still unexplored, however, is how Radcliffe dramatizes the formation of individual character through Emily’s exposure to and negotiation of a variety of climates and landscapes. Thus, left unaccounted is the environmentalist program for self-formation and the necessary crucible of urban experience, for which Emily is prepared and through which she must pass to attain the ideal sensibility that M. St. Aubert models.

La Vallée and self-regulation

Much of the narrative that takes place in the first part of the novel focuses on M. St. Aubert’s instruction of Emily at rural La Vallée, instruction which frequently invokes late eighteenth-century medical and educational discussions of environmental influence. Both in his claims and actions, M. St. Aubert invokes a contemporaneous understanding of how selection and manipulation of human habitats could have profound implications for physical and mental health. Much of this knowledge Radcliffe would have experienced firsthand through her upbringing in and around London. In one notable instance, Thomas Bentley, the uncle with whom Radcliffe spent many of her formative years, experienced bad health while living in a factory-side home in Soho and had to relocate to the suburban home in Turnham Green “in order to get change of air and scene” (Dictionary of National Biography 318; see also Norton 30–31). Apparently the move was made with young Ann in mind as well, for Bentley describes his niece around this time as “a delicate child needing country air” (qtd. in Norton 31). Furthermore, Radcliffe’s Unitarian upbringing put her into regular contact with physicians both within and familiar to the family (Budge 29; Norton 16–17), who could have affirmed the medical knowledge behind Radcliffe’s geographic and atmospheric sensibility. This includes the Unitarian physician Joseph Priestley, whose writing Radcliffe likely read, particularly his works of the 1770s (Norton 67–69). Priestley’s Miscellaneous Observations Relating
to Education (1778) pertains especially to the psycho-physiological program of self-development that Radcliffe outlines in the first book of her novel.

Along with the effects of the urban atmosphere—to which I will return—the larger discourse on urban life preoccupied itself with the nervous and mental effects of commerce, luxury, and public pleasures, all of which were strongly correlated with urban life. Two of the most celebrated physicians of their day, Priestley and William Falconer similarly observe that commerce can “be accounted favourable to the intellectual faculties” but that repeated and unvarying mental calculations can “corrupt and debase the moral character” (Falconer 415, 410; Priestley 35–36). Falconer goes on to suggest that the sedentary and sheltered existence within the built, commercialized environment makes “the body less robust, and more subject to the action of external impressions” (408; see also 188, 378). Prolonged enervation will eventually render the nerves insensible, forcing one to seek out more outrageous forms of stimulation. In this way, environmental conditions alter taste, and virtue along with it (a formulation that we have already seen espoused by M. St. Aubert). The faculty of “taste” thus becomes in “trading people … very defective,” Falconer asserts; rather than enjoying more healthful aesthetics, urbanites gain a preference for (and further dissipate themselves with) that which is “heavy, glaring, loaded with ornament, and full of affectation of expense” (416). Similarly, Priestley attests to the “temporal benefits” of luxury and pleasure in moderation but expresses his concern that overindulgence can lead to an “excessively dissipated mode of life” wherein one thirsts after greater forms of “sensual indulgence” (64). Both authors see indulgence in luxury as a gateway that leads ultimately to gambling and, even worse, “riot, distraction, despair, and self-murder” (Priestley 65; see also Falconer 538). Such views would have been commonplace to late eighteenth-century readers, and periodicals such as The London Magazine regularly correlated city life with dissipation and dissipation with gambling, crime, general barbarism, and even romantic infidelity. As one author pithily surmises, “London has become luxurious, and … luxury begets dissipation, and consequently the evils we complain of” (King v).

M. St. Aubert’s concerns over urban dissipation, then, reflect a widespread cultural discourse that was ultimately grounded in medical knowledge and environmentalism, and Radcliffe reinforces these concerns by populating her novel with characters that bear symptoms of urban corruption. The Parisian M. and Mme. Quesnel are not only related to the St. Aubert family but also stand as urban corollaries. Opposite to the St. Aubert’s pleasing cottage home, the Quesnel house is “distinguished by an air of heavy grandeur,” invoking the urban tastes Falconer mentions (22). Counter to M. St. Aubert’s “pure taste, simplicity, and moderated wishes,” M. Quesnel is a man whose “aim had been consequence” and who proves calculating in his thought, cold in his demeanor, and satiated only by “splendor” (11). Indignant toward country life, Mme. Quesnel prefers “the splendor of the balls, banquets, and processions” of Paris (12). Mme. Cheron, Emily’s aunt from the French city Tholouse, shares this urban sensibility: she is noted for her “dissimulation” and “ambition,” her “ostentatious style,” her “avarice,” and her “unfeeling manner” (118, 123, 140, 143, 144). Furthermore, she holds regular parties characterized by “dissipation” as well as “immoderate and feverish animation” (122). After her parents’ death, Emily goes to live with Mme. Cheron, and these parties exemplify for her the dichotomy between the healthful, simple stimuli of rural life and the more depraved and debasing sensations of the city.
While acknowledging the urban sphere’s corruptive force, Radcliffe also recognizes the necessity to prepare a developing mind, as Priestley puts it, “for such scenes of vice and of folly as he [or she] must be witness to” (61). Indeed, M. St. Aubert’s primary role in the first book is to cultivate in Emily a sensibility that will allow her to deal with personal trauma as well as navigate the dangers of urban life. Such an education is all the more necessary because Emily bears “a degree of susceptibility” to external influence that is “too exquisite to admit of lasting peace” (5). M. St. Aubert repeats this concern in a deathbed plea that scholars often read as a critique of sensibility, particularly as a feminine flaw. Yet, M. St. Aubert never directly questions the value of fine feeling, which he himself exhibits. Instead, he warns Emily to “command” her feelings, not “annihilate” them, and he proves more adamant in his subsequent requests that she avoid becoming insensible or apathetic (80). Even more to the point: M. St. Aubert’s warnings are not so much gender specific in their language as they are environmentally oriented.

This environmental orientation is part of a larger program of self-formation that M. St. Aubert teaches to Emily, so as to help her control her affective responses to a variety of stimuli and situations. Often through his own behavior, M. St. Aubert shows Emily how to cultivate and manage sensibility through a conscious and active form of environmental engagement. This program echoes one that Priestley outlines in his own educational treatise. Priestley argues that, after instruction in divinity, the most beneficial activities for subject formation are the cultivation of land and the scientific study of natural history—both endeavors utilize “those powers of nature” for the purpose of “enlarging … the powers of man” (16–17). So are M. St. Aubert’s powers enlarged, as he indulges in “the study of botany” and as he “had made very tasteful improvements” to his surrounding lands at La Vallée, improvements that facilitate sensorial enjoyment of the natural world (3, 4). Emily’s father then teaches her the natural sciences and promotes in her a love of natural scenery, framing his pedagogical rationale as such:

Thought, and cultivation, are necessary equally to the happiness of a country and a city life; in the first they prevent the uneasy sensations of indolence, and afford a sublime pleasure in the taste they create for the beautiful, and the grand; in the latter, they make dissipation less an object of necessity, and consequently of interest. (6)

Here, M. St. Aubert more clearly delineates the relationship between taste and virtue, all while discussing mental cultivation once again in environmental terms. The esthetic study of landscapes and the study of botany ready the mind for urban and rural spheres by providing a healthful subject for contemplation; furthermore, they improve nervous health by conditioning a taste for healthful stimulus (and not the debasing pleasures so easily found in urban centers).

Ultimately at stake is the potential and need to manage one’s own psycho-physiological economy through external resources—that is, an environmental program of self-cultivation. In developing such a program, both Priestley and Radcliffe draw heavily from the medical discourse on climatic influence. As the physician William Buchan espouses in Domestic Medicine (1769), which was in its 11th edition by 1790, fresh air and exercise are necessary to the invigoration and convalescence of the nervous system (421–26). Given its prevalence in medical treatises, fresh air was perhaps the most readily prescribed method for curing nervous disorder in the eighteenth century. As a result, few readers would have questioned it when the physician “prescribed the air of Languedoc and
Provence” after M. St. Aubert suffers an illness due to nervous disorder (25, 60). Through their pursuit of natural samples and scenery, M. St. Aubert and Emily enjoy fresh air and exercise in large doses. Furthermore, Radcliffe emphasizes how the landscaping of M. St. Aubert and others can heighten the “delicious fragrance” of the air, which further encourages indulgence in this restorative element (4, 55). Thus, topographic manipulation and selection build on well-known medical strategies in which one leverages external elements to bolster nervous conditions and control affective responses.

Of course, the restorative power of rural air was routinely discussed in contrast to the unhealthy urban atmosphere—referred to often as gloom or miasma—and it was most often prescribed to urban dwellers. Buchan, like Falconer and George Cheyne before him, believed that the unwholesome air of the city could weaken the body, engender nervous disorder, and ultimately lead to “a great delicacy and sensibility of the whole nervous system” (75–80, 453; see also Cheyne 54–56, 104; and Falconer 161–68, 408). Also of note, Buchan aligns the unwholesome air of the city with that of the sick-chamber (79–80). Working along similar lines, Radcliffe portrays M. St. Aubert’s nervous affliction and related confinement as enhancing his fine feeling: “The refreshing pleasure from the first view of nature, after the pain of illness, and the confinement of a sick-chamber, is above the conceptions, as well as the descriptions, of those in health” (8). This portrayal of the highly sensible convalescent provides, I argue, a frame by which to understand M. St. Aubert’s former and Emily’s future return to nature after urban confinement. M. St. Aubert’s experience of nature (when ill or not) appears heightened above those who have always enjoyed country life. He is far more melancholic than the “peasants of this gay climate,” who are rather ludic and capricious, which affords him greater enjoyment of the rural scenes (3). So does his sensibility exceed that of his wife or daughter, as his eyes well with “tears of pleasure” when he explains to them that the “sweet affections” attendant “to simplicity and nature” prove far more delightful than the “brilliant and tumultuous scenes” of the city (4). Such a sentiment, of course, depends upon urban contact.

Thus, M. St. Aubert’s understanding of environmental influence depends upon his urban experience. Such an understanding, in turn, engenders his present “consciousness of acting right,” which further heightens “his sense of every surrounding blessing” (4). Once again taste, virtue, and sensory pleasure intertwine, and all of this informs his education of Emily, which does less to deter her from the urban sphere than to prepare her for it. In Radcliffe’s narrative, urban experience is unavoidable, and unavoidable because necessary for Emily to achieve the ideal sensibility that her father models.

The splendor of Venice

While Emily comes across lesser urban spaces throughout the novel, Venice is the only true city she inhabits. Her stay in Venice will last only a handful of chapters, but the city’s impact on her development is profound. Significantly, Emily discovers in Venice not only the threats to virtue that her father foretold but also the capacity of urban splendor to expand the mind and spur the imagination. Venice’s influence on Emily is readily observed and clearly echoes Radcliffe’s source text, Hester Lynch Piozzi’s Observations and Reflections Made in the Course of a Journey through France, Italy, and Germany (1789). Piozzi’s account exemplifies the environmentalist undercurrent in travel literature of
this era, wherein character parallels the inhabited landscapes and climates: for example, “[t]he mind of an Italian is commonly like his country, extensive, warm, and beautiful from the irregular diversification of its ideas” (2: 140). Piozzi similarly addresses the diverse influences Venice has on its subjects. In many ways, Piozzi’s and Radcliffe’s portrayals of Venetian life rehearse the discussion of urban influence in London magazines. It should be noted that Venice proved to British audiences “a powerful and multivalent symbol” of ruinous decadence and socio-economic vibrancy; in turn, it was regularly portrayed as analogous to another water-bound city—London (Elgin 3, 7).

Not surprisingly, then, Venice besets upon Emily the same troubles that Romantic-era women would have found in London—that is, the threat of their own dissipation or the threat posed by other dissipated urbanites. The greatest peril comes from the very guardians meant to protect Emily: Mme. Cheron and her husband, Signor Montoni. Now immersed in their own element, these urbanites become all the more depraved and viciously ambitious. Montoni in particular takes to excessive pleasures and gambling, and, like him, his usual company proves highly “dissipated,” defined by their “strong passions,” “unbounded extravagance,” “cunning,” and “cruel and suspicious temper” (183). Much of what takes place in Venice and the castle Udolpho exemplifies the urban corruption discussed above—Montoni’s cruel and calculating designs to wed Emily to Count Morano being chief among them. Nearly defenseless, Emily must navigate the designs and violence of dissipated urbanites, which, inevitably, has its effect on her nervous health.

With these odious elements of city life still in mind, I want to turn our attention to the aspects of Venice that expand the mind with novel ideas, that challenge the imagination with the unimaginable, and that refine sensibility with artful stimuli. This more generous view of urban influence was not uncommon in the eighteenth century. For instance, James Boswell puts an urban spin on M. St. Aubert’s natural education, espousing London’s ability to “elevate the mind” and to provide novel “ideas” that one “may lay up … to employ [the] mind in age” (68–69). Following a similarly sensationalist logic in his 1766 proposal to improve London and Westminster, John Gwynn argues for the capacity of urban magnificence to “stimulate the powers of invention” in addition to increasing the “refinement of taste” in all persons (1). Gwynn counters the notion that public magnificence could dissipate the senses; rather, urban splendor benefits the “mere blank slate” of the mind, which develops “new faculties in seeing, hearing, and feeling” in proportion to the objects it encounters (xiv, xv). Also exemplary of this discussion on urban influence is Piozzi’s Observations and Reflections. Venice, for Piozzi, reveals “such a cluster of excellence, such a constellation of artificial beauties, my mind had never ventured to excite the idea of within herself” (1: 151). Furthermore, Venice “realizes the most romantic ideas ever formed of it, and defies imagination” (1: 175). In other words, it is a concretized fantasy beyond her imaginative powers, and thus it excites her mental faculties, expands her mind, and, in doing so, produces “an effect like enchantment” (1: 151).

This is the Venice Radcliffe receives from Piozzi—a magnificent city poised to inspire wonder, spur thought, and enchant the imagination—and Radcliffe further heightens the effect by super-adding the artifice and activity of the Carnival season. “Nothing could exceed Emily’s admiration on her first view of Venice,” Radcliffe assures the reader; the various grand features of that city “appeared as if they had been called up from the ocean by the wand of an enchanter, rather than reared by mortal hands” (174–75). As suggested here, what makes Venice so fantastic is its unique comingling of stone and water, city and
nature. The Grand Canal in particular presents to Emily “forms of beauty and of grandeur such as her imagination had never painted” (176). As for Piozzi, so does Radcliffe’s Venice exceed the limits of Emily’s imagination, creating an enchanting effect that Radcliffe affirms through repeated descriptions of “fairy,” “lofty,” or “magic” scenes that “charm” Emily (175, 176, 188, 216). So strong is the city’s psycho-physiological impact that it causes Emily’s eyes to fill “with tears of admiration and sublime devotion” (175).

Emily’s experience of Venice, while at times vicious, is also visionary, and it teaches her visionary modes of thought. Or, to borrow Gwynn’s phrasing, Venice stimulates Emily’s powers of invention, and it prompts the development of her faculties of seeing, hearing, and feeling. For this reason, I argue that Venice is catalytic to the “sudden twist” that Katherine Kickel observes in Emily’s mode of vision between the early days at La Vallée and her more harrowing experiences in Udolpho (128). Kickel notes that Emily’s visionary moments begin as minor and momentary blurs of the seen and the imaginary, where object cues illicit spectral images of the people with whom they are associated. By the time Emily reaches Udolpho, she achieves a new stage in her visionary progression, one defined by a “sustained … conflation of seeing with imagining.” Elsewhere, Kickel acknowledges a Berkeleyan model that informs Radcliffe’s portrayal of visuality, wherein vision develops through the success of “previous sensory encounters” (122). Yet, Kickel does not identify the sensory encounters that help engender Emily’s more robust visionary experience.

Indeed, Venice instructs Emily how to see as the visionary poet sees—that is, how to conflate the imaginary and the real in sustained and meaningful ways. In one key instance, Emily watches from a balcony passing boats on the Grand Canal, which are decorated as “the fabled deities of the city.” Outfitted with “tritons and sea-nymphs,” the boat-deities appear to “have arisen from the ocean”:

The fantastic splendor of this spectacle, together with the grandeur of the surrounding palaces, appeared like the vision of a poet suddenly embodied, and the fanciful images, which it awakened in Emily’s mind, lingered there long after the procession had passed away. (178)

As with the physical cues in La Vallée that excite a momentary illusion, the spectacle of the present scene is predicated on tangible objects. But rather than observing a momentary blurring of the real and imaginary, the Venetian scene teaches Emily the potential for the real and imaginary to collaborate within the same visual field on an extended basis, such that their reciprocation is esthetic and meaningful. Radcliffe understands this prolonged, visionary conflation as poetic, an association that runs throughout the novel.

Venice, the embodiment of poetic vision for both Piozzi and Radcliffe, awakens in Emily’s mind fanciful images and spurs her to “indulge[] herself in imagining” via her own poetry (178). Of course, Emily’s poetic efforts began in La Vallée, but her Venice verses shed the tame, bucolic realism for a more visionary aspect. Inspired by the scene above, Emily writes a poem about an amorous, sweetly voiced sea-nymph who sings to melancholy sailors passing by. As the poem takes a first-person perspective, the sea-nymph becomes a kind of avatar by which Emily explores an urbanized, Venetian sensibility. Such a sensibility is readily found in Radcliffe’s source, as the Venetian women in Piozzi’s account “follow unrestrained where passion, appetite, or imagination lead them,” but while she acknowledges these women as “sensualists,” she also depicts them as
advantageously sensible, unaffected, and of “good-humour” (1: 181–83). The “magical sweetness” of their manner “confirms” Venice’s enchanting effect, suggesting that the Venetian character is at once the outcome and reinforcement of the locality’s influence (1: 151). In Radcliffe’s novel, too, the “excessive refinement” of the Venetian women, while still reminiscent of urban dissipation, confirms the beneficial possibilities of urban experience. Furthermore, Radcliffe takes pains to contrast the over-ornamented and taste-impaired Mme. Cheron with the more natural “beauty,” “sweetness,” and “true Italian taste” of the Venetian women Emily encounters (188). The Venetian sensibility is particularly apparent in the tone- and emotion-rich singing of both Venetian women and male gondoliers, who embody an urban sensibility defined not by avarice and maliciousness but refinement and mellifluousness. Both in her poem and in her outings, Emily is attracted to and identifies with this Venetian sensibility, itself a product of the part natural, part artificial environment that so enchants her. With its basis in both artifice and natural stimuli, such a sensibility seems nearer M. St. Aubert’s own, all while complicating the dichotomy of city and country tastes that he had espoused.

Of course, Emily’s poem does appear to confirm the enervation attendant to the “excessive refinement” of the Venetian sensibility, thus corroborating M. St. Aubert’s warnings. Even before the poem, Radcliffe emphasizes the sensorial and psychological agitation attendant to Emily’s “anxious enquiry” of the wondrous city, and the nervous aspect of this perception is metaphorically portrayed in the “tremulous picture” of Venice that Emily watches in the agitated water (174–75). Continuing the correlation of agitated water with troubled nervous system, Emily’s sea-nymph poem refers to “the surges” and “restless seas” above the tranquil waters below, evocative of the city’s outrageous stimulation and the desensitization it can cause (179–81). Yet, we might also read the poem’s imagery as an affirmation of how natural elements allow one to cope with urban influence. The poem, which depicts the sea-nymph’s watery world as “cool arcades and glassy halls,” exaggerates and thus highlights the comingling of urban artifice with natural elements discussed above. But also, this comingling speaks to the novel’s underlying program of self-formation, predicated as it is on the shock and awe of the urban sphere combined with the ameliorative effects of nature. In portraying the sea-nymph’s engagement with both the agitated and tranquil waters, Emily invokes (consciously or not) her own engagement with the variable psycho-physiological economies of the urban and natural spaces.

The urbanism of Udolpho

Emily’s removal to the castle Udolpho is occasioned by Montoni’s downward spiral, which follows the usual pattern of urban dissipation: his lust for ambition and outrageous stimulation, having led to excessive gambling and debts, inspires unlawful violence that then necessitates his flight from Venice. But rather than provide refuge from urban concerns, the castle Udolpho functions as a thematic extension of them, wherein Radcliffe reflects the nervous and moral degradation that stems from urban experience. In other words, with the overlay of splendor and artifice largely removed, the distempered urbanites and their increasingly vicious behaviors can be baldly witnessed. There is also a logistical value to this shift: as opposed to Venice, which combined artifice and natural elements, the castle encloses a degenerate microcosm of the urban sphere and juxtaposes it against the
more natural environs beyond its walls. In such a context, Radcliffe can more readily depict the dire results of urban dissipation and the habits necessary for sensorial amelioration through the powers of nature.

In mirroring urban life within the confines of a castle, Radcliffe follows the model set by James Thomson in *The Castle of Indolence* (1748), a source of inspiration that Radcliffe cites on several occasions in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. While consisting of several themes, one major motif is the titular castle’s reflection of the urban sphere and its ills: “Loose Life, unruly Passions, and Diseases Pale” (1: i). An “enchanted wizard” lures unsuspecting subjects (most of whom are from the city) to his remote castle; therein, they find “a huge crystal magic Globe” called “Of Vanity the Mirror,” in which they observe “a splendid City rise to View” (1: xlix, l, liii.). Across several stanzas, Thomson presents the chaotic urban masses and their increasingly impassioned behaviors. Soon, the urban scenes of vice and violence are repeated in the castle, as the latter’s inhabitants are swayed by the “Pleasure of Excess,” are driven into “a gay Uproar,” and are subsequently “madden’d” (1: lxiii). Not only does Radcliffe utilize a similar mirroring, but she also portrays a similar decline into madness and violence within Udolpho—a pattern well established in the medical literature of the day.

That Radcliffe intends the Udolpho scenes to reflect the darker aspects of urban life is signaled initially by the Venetian mirrors and narrative mirroring by which she correlates Montoni’s mansion in Venice and his castle hideaway. In Emily’s arrival to both, the same Venetian servant meets the party inside the gates and leads them into a hall with a marble staircase; one has “silver tripods,” while the other offers a single “tripod lamp”; the luxuriant “lattices” of the former become the “rich fret-work” of the latter; Emily is led into an “apartment” decorated either with “paintings” or a “painted window” (176, 228–29). While the overall aspect of the Venice interior is luxuriant, darkness and desolation define Udolpho, and this narrative/esthetic reflection is punctuated by the description of “a large Venetian mirror” in Emily’s Udolpho chamber, which “duskily reflected the scene” (229).

It is also worth noting that the gothic castle is uniquely suited to frame urban degeneration because it is an older branch within the same architectural genealogy. This lineage is evident in the etymology of *castle*, which comes from the Latin *castellan* and is the diminutive form of *castrum*—a fortified town. Ironically, the feature that most distinguishes Udolpho from Venice is its fortified walls, a feature that makes it only more akin to other traditional European urban spaces. Rome, Paris, London, and many other prominent urban spaces of the eighteenth century grew out of stone-walled fortifications, and the walls of such cities were, as Peter Clark notes, “vital for continental visions of urban identity” (2). This shared structural heritage results in an esthetic resemblance that reinforces their symbolic connection. Radcliffe evinces these similarities in the descriptions of Udolpho, as she repeatedly mentions “massy walls,” “towers,” and “edifices” (226, 227, 251, 287); as well as the lamp lit “arcades,” “avenues,” and “corridor[s]” (245, 300, 320, 326). Much like the London of Radcliffe’s day, Udolpho proves “a strange, rambling place” (231).

Beyond its structure, Udolpho exhibits other urban conditions that worried eighteenth-century commentators. As in Venice, Emily is afforded no refuge from masculine threats in Udolpho, not even in her own chamber. Furthermore, she finds herself regularly confronted with unknown men, such that she becomes preoccupied with “the thought of
being exposed to the gaze of strangers” (311). The constant threat posed by strangers, ocular or otherwise, is a pervasive theme in discussions of urban life, as well noted in the work of Kate Ellis. Raymond Williams, for another example, defines the rural/urban dichotomy by the knowable communities of the former, which fostered “natural country ease,” and the unknowable masses of the latter, which led to “an unnatural urban unrest” (180).

Of course, urban unrest—defined by distemper, agitation, and violence—was not only a response to various urban conditions, it was itself a feature of city life to which denizens had to adapt. So does Emily find herself adapting to the unrest of Udolpho, where Mme. Cheron, Montoni, and the other Venetian carry-overs become ever more combative and create “scenes of terrible contention” (296). Additionally, Emily’s confused wanderings through this stony maze expose her to spectacular (if sometimes unreal) acts of violence, such as when she finds the rotting corpse in the veiled recess. Emily continues to navigate “the intricacies of the castle” thereafter, afraid that she will “again be shocked by some mysterious spectacle” that resides behind “one of the many doors” (258). As in Thomson’s Castle Indolence, tumult eventually pervades Udolpho: “Every where, as [Emily] passed, she heard, from a distance, the uproar of contention, and the figures and faces, which she met, hurrying along the passages struck her mind with dismay … every avenue seemed to be beset by ruffians” (317). Published in the early 1790s, these scenes would undoubtedly bring to readers’ minds the recent mob violence in Paris and London. And like those events, so does the narrative affirm the common belief that urban dissipation would lead to outrageous forms of violence, thereby perpetuating mental distemper.

The longer Emily resides in the castle Udolpho, and experiences its urban conditions, the more she suffers from the symptoms of enervation and distemper. She frequently faints, or is said to have “dropped senseless” (249). She is also routinely described as pale, melancholy, and suffering from shortness of breath. Emily’s trouble breathing is both a result of overexcitement and the poor air within Udolpho—another parallel to urban conditions—which Radcliffe emphasizes through punctuated moments of fresh or freer air (256, 322, 329, 345). Like M. Dupont, another captive of Montoni’s, Emily’s “health and spirits” have “suffered extremely from want of air and exercise” (457), a conclusion in accord with Cheyne’s, Falconer’s, and Buchan’s diagnoses of city life.

But the terror that Emily experiences also has the potential to benefit her mind and progress her visionary sensibility. Radcliffe identifies terror as a potential boon to mental life, as “it occupies and expands the mind, and elevates it to high expectation, [and] is purely sublime” (248). Elsewhere, Radcliffe distinguishes beneficial terror that “awakens the faculties to a high degree of life” and harmful horror that “nearly annihilates them”—the difference between terror and horror being based, in Burkean fashion, on the subject’s distance from the sublime source (“On the Supernatural” 149). Typically following some terror, Emily’s destabilized mind creates a visionary experience, such as when, in the dim lamp-light of her room, “she almost fancied she saw shapes flit past her curtains” or when the lamp’s “faint flashes … upon the walls called up all the terrors of fancy” (241, 254). The correlation between terror and the visionary becomes so strong for Emily that the castle’s scenes of “vice and violence” begin to appear to her as “the visions of a distempered imagination” (329).

The correlation between urban conditions, mental distemper, and “wandering and delusory Images on the Brain” had been established since Cheyne’s English Malady
(1733), if not earlier (54–56, 199). And Buchan’s famous medical work reaffirmed how city life led to “nervous disorders,” which in turn led to “wild imaginations and extravagant fancies” (76–79, 421–22). Thus, not only does Radcliffe mimic within Udolpho the correlation of urban unrest with urban distemper, she also echoes a medical understanding of how distemperment could lead to visionary experience. But even if Emily’s visionary sensibility turns dark in Udolpho, something of the Venetian charm remains, as Radcliffe equates the “dream of a distempered imagination” with the “frightful fictions, in which the wild genius of the poets sometimes delighted” (296). As Radcliffe correlates this visionary mode with mental distemper, she also appears to glorify instead of bemoan Emily’s visionary experience, a stance that proves typical of Gothic and Romantic literature at large (Budge 31; see also Burwick).

The intersections of mental distemper, poetic vision, and urban conditions are best encapsulated in the following scene, wherein Emily attempts to distract herself from her agitated state of mind by reading “the visionary scenes of the poet.” Her attempt, ultimately, proves unsuccessful and she questions whether her mind is “tempered” enough to withstand “the fire of the poet” (383). Emily is not able to reason through this quandary either, as her thoughts would not “be controlled by will.” Significantly, in this moment where internal resources prove lacking, Emily “walked for air in the gallery” near her chamber so as to gain control of her internal state through external means. But as Emily partakes in this micro-example of environmental self-management, she overhears “the wild uproar of riot” from the vicious merriment of a gala in the “habit of Venice” (382–83). Here, Emily becomes a spectator at a sufficient remove, but she has also fortified herself through exercise and the taking in of air (if not in a natural space, at least in a more open space). In this way, Emily appears to resolve her own query, tempering her nerves and mind through a mixture of riotous and relieving stimuli.

This kind of tempering, I argue, is at stake throughout Emily’s residence in Udolpho. Quite often her agitated mind, induced by some terror within Udolpho’s walls, is subsequently relieved or “revived” by the opening of a window to let in “the freshness of the air”; or, Emily takes to the casement or terrace to find a “freer air” that soothes her “anxiety” and allows “her mind to recover[] its strength” (242, 256, 329, 349, 388, 432, 441). It is precisely air, exercise, and rural scenery—the regiment described by Buchan, Cheyne, and others to cure urban distempers—that “braces and invigorates” one’s constitution and relieves nervous disorders (Buchan 424; see also Cheyne 55–57). It must be noted, though, that Emily is not returned to some original state through the methods of invigoration; rather, the beauty of the landscape or the “cool and fragrant air” soothes her mind from a heightened agitation to “a state of gentle melancholy” (416). That is, Emily does not recover the psyche of an innocent girl but rather discovers, through these modes of tempering, the psyche of the melancholy poet.

Thus, the castle’s scenes portray the ongoing degradation of urban unrest, holding this unrest in productive proximity to the rural beneficence without. More than pathetic fallacy, Radcliffe depicts a causal relationship between place and psychological constitution that informed the eighteenth-century prescription of air cures and rural retreats. Following this same logic, Radcliffe outlines a program of environmental self-making designed to cultivate fine feeling and an extravagant imagination. And even if her heroine remains unaware of this program or the value in the dynamic proximity of
urban and rural spheres, Radcliffe still reveals how such proximity fostered the sensibility her novel champions.

**Rural redux**

Emily eventually escapes from Udolpho, allowing for a rural retreat that entails parallel climatic, esthetic, and psychological shifts. Moving away from the “awful” Apennines, Emily travels through landscapes that “softened into the beauty of sylvan and pastoral landscape,” until she eventually comes to rest at the Chateau-Le-Blanc in southern France, a locale she had previously traveled with her father on his own climatic convalescence (462). In time, the “delightful” scenery of this region will have the prescribed effect, as it “gradually restored her spirits to their natural tone” (462, 495). Yet, returning to a former subjectivity proves more difficult than returning to one’s former haunts. Nor is it entirely desirable. Rather, as the natural scenes heal the wounds of urban dissipation, Emily still maintains the heightened sensibility and poetic visuality that resulted from her nervous distress.

In other words, Emily stabilizes her urban-forged sensibility, achieving the state of being modeled by her father at the beginning of the novel. Radcliffe signals this achievement in a number of ways. The Chateau-le-Blanc, which comingles various urban and rural esthetics, reflects Emily’s own mind, impressed as it is with the scenes she has witnessed. Radcliffe also presents a spectrum of sensibilities—from rural to urban—through the chateau’s inhabitants. Significantly, Emily does not identify with the young Blanche, who exhibits the unblemished sensibility of Emily’s La Vallée days; rather, she identifies with Blanche’s father, the Count De Villefort, who proves a typological double of M. St. Aubert.

That Emily has attained a sensibility like her father’s is also evident in her poetry. After Udolpho, the poems she writes and sings include images and tropes previously seen in M. St. Aubert’s own, namely bats and melancholy. Equally significant, these poems point to a shocked but convalescing sensory system. The first poem in question, “To the Bat,” features a watchtower inspired by the one with “broken walls” on the grounds of the Chateau-le-Blanc, which maintains a “small chamber” at the top that “was less decayed” (598, 540, 665). Like many other structures in gothic literature that reflect the psycho-physiological states of their denizens, the ruined tower speaks to Emily’s own subjectivity—a maintained mental stability atop physiological weakening. The permeation of its walls—allowing bats to fly in and out of “the ruins ivy’d tow’r”—symbolizes the enervation attendant to urban shock and the heightened susceptibility to external stimuli that results (598). Indeed, Emily appears increasingly sensitive to the external world while ever more capable of negotiating that world, and like her father, this allows her to more fully appreciate and luxuriate in the “tranquil beauty” of the natural scenes that now inspire her musings (539). The poem, ultimately, portrays and is born of the state of the convalescent invalid.

In addition to bats, M. St. Aubert’s earlier poem focuses on the mystical and visionary experiences that one might have “when melancholy charms his mind” (96). It should be noted that Radcliffe regularly frames melancholy as a potential boon to the imagination and fine feeling, such that the “effect of a melancholy imagination” is to make one “sensible to every impression” (63). At the same time, melancholy is a natural antecedent to psychological shock. We have seen this play out in Udolpho, but it is anticipated even earlier, such as when St. Aubert faints at the beginning of the narrative and Emily
experiences “terror” that is then “subsided into a gentle melancholy” (66; see again on 99). Through melancholy, psychological distress, nervous disorder, and a poetic sensibility are interconnected. And it is no surprise, then, to find these three elements echoed in “To Melancholy,” which Valancourt writes in the ruined tower after his own trials in Paris and which Emily then sings in that same tower. The sharing of both the tower and poem affirm that Emily and Valancourt have gained a similar sensibility after their respective urban trials, a sensibility typified by the novel’s first rural retreater, M. St. Aubert.

Through multiple methods, Radcliffe affirms that Venice and Udolpho have altered Emily and that her rural retreat will soothe the wounds of this urban-forged sensibility. The significance of this gesture extends beyond an acknowledgment of the urban sphere’s capacity to shape one’s constitution and character. Rather, what proves so radical in Radcliffe’s narrative is how the well-known environmentalism of the city–country binary is transformed into a more complex understanding of how one can select and/or augment topographic and climatic elements so as to shape the human psyche. If Emily only understands this process so far as acquiring psychological relief, Radcliffe herself has outlined an elaborate program of environmental self-making—a program informed by sensationalist psychology and dependent upon urban contact—so as to create an idealized sensibility. Adding to the significance of this gesture is the fact that Radcliffe equates this urban-conditioned sensibility with both the romantic dreamer and Gothic heroine. In doing so, Radcliffe points to the urban sphere as an essential catalyst to the sensibility and subjectivity that Romantic and Gothic literature mutually champion.

Notes

1. For other studies that identify this shift from remote castles to urban centers occurring in mid-nineteenth-century Gothic literature, see Botting (6), Dryden (15–16), Wolfreys (9–22), Wasson (132), and Ridenhour (10). While valuably revising the timeline, Kellie Donovan-Condron similarly describes Charlotte Dacre’s Zofloya (1806) as an urban Gothic that departs from earlier Gothic novels and that anticipates “Victorian-era fears” rather than portraying contemporaneous concerns (683).

2. See also Kickel and Schillace.

3. Castle’s The Female Thermometer is exemplary of the psychoanalytic approach to Radcliffe.

4. For studies noting the shift in the discourse of sensibility from a sensorial to an ethical or sentimental experience, see Todd (8), M. Ellis (7), and Ahern (12). For more scholarship that emphasizes sentimentality over sensationalism in the cultural of sensibility in the 1780s and 1790s, see Van Sant and Johnson.

5. For example, see “Estimate of the Manners of the Times” (233–36); “Lively Portrait of the Fashionable Luxuries” (68, 70); Clement’s A Trip to Margate (277–84); and “Letters on the Progress of Luxury” (469–75). It is worth noting that these are not token references to “dissipation”; the word (or a variant) appears 22 times in the 1782 and 12 times in the 1784 publications of The London Magazine.

6. For readings which regard Emily’s capacity for fine feeling as a flaw to be corrected, see Poovey (311), Miles (130), and, more ambivalently, Hoeveler (88).

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