Gothic Trajectories: Latitudinarian Theology and the Novels of Ann Radcliffe

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Critical Trajectories and the Misprision of Radcliffe

Since the earliest biographical writings—Sir Walter Scott's assessment and the memoir attached to Radcliffe's posthumously published novel *Gaston de Blondeville*[1]—the novels of Ann Radcliffe have been located in the trajectory by which the generic norms of Gothic fiction developed. Criticism has placed Radcliffe by anticipation in the context of subsequent developments in the Gothic genre. She is accepted as an important innovator but is also seen as having fallen short of realizing the genre's full potential, largely owing to her penchant for explaining away supernatural events by naturalistic means. The overall assessment of this mode of criticism is well summarized by T.N. Talfourd: "Mrs Radcliffe may fairly be considered as the inventor of a new style of romance; equally distant from the old tales of chivalry and magic, and from modern representations of credible incidents and living manners. Her works partially exhibit the charms of each species of composition."[2] Such criticism was written some thirty years after the novels themselves, and thus has the benefit

1 See Sir Walter Scott, *Prose Works* (Edinburgh: R. Cadell, 1834–36), 3:337–89; and [T.N. Talfourd], "Memoir of the Life and Writings of Mrs Radcliffe" in *Gaston de Blondeville, or The Court of Henry III. Keeping Festival in Ardenne, A Romance*, 4 vols (London: H. Colbourn, 1826).

2 [Talfourd], pp. 105–6.

of seeing the generic trajectory of Gothic fiction in a way Radcliffe herself could not at the time of writing.

More recently, critics have sought to place Radcliffe's novels in the contemporary context of the 1790s. Here the argument has been over the ideologies Radcliffe was utilizing rather than the genre in which she operated, or rather, over the ideological resonances of the Gothic genre itself. Radcliffe, then, is assessed with respect to her surroundings—what might be called an "ecology" rather than a "trajectory."[3] It has been suggested that Radcliffe's work has radical strains in its presentation of women and more generally in its portrayal of patterns of feminine sensibility. She is seen as representing a middle-class, radical Dissenting tradition opposed to a Burkeian reassertion of aristocratic values. Yet even in this ecological approach, there is a proleptic angle, which sees Radcliffe as the incomplete realization of a generic trajectory: the limitations of her radicalism are discussed, her providential endings of marital bliss being as problematic today as they were to early nineteenth-century critics. She emerges from this criticism, as she did from trajectory-based generic criticism, as at best a liminal figure. Her novels point towards radicalism, while she pulls back from endorsing such a position. As an influential statement of this approach to Radcliffe puts it: "By taking Emily out of Udolpho, restoring her to nature's inspiring influence and to a moral, paternalistic society, Radcliffe is able to substitute ethical dilemmas for the unresolvable threat of avarice and to return the plot complication to a harmless encounter between virtue and error."[4] Radcliffe highlights the tensions in paternalism, while finally reverting to an endorsement of a more benevolent version of the same ideology.

Further light can be shed on the aims of Radcliffe's novels by treating them neither in a generic context, nor in the historical context of the 1790s, but by setting them in the context of the intellectual milieu from which she came. Such an approach reactivates a line of inquiry signalled but not taken by Radcliffe's early biographers. All these memoirs emphasized that Radcliffe's education inculcated values from a generation previous to her birth; her ideas

3 I take the term "ecology" from J.G.A. Pocock's *Barbarism and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

4 Mary Poovey, "Ideology and *The Mysteries of Udolpho*," *Criticism* 21 (1979), 307–30, at 325–26. Many of the claims in the previous paragraph are summarized in Robert Miles, *Ann Radcliffe: The Great Enchantress* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).

derived from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century intellectual arena. Discussing Radcliffe's reclusivity, Ann Elwood argued she got her ideas from "the early impressions of education, and ... the somewhat primitive and old-fashioned society with which she associated."[5] These values informed her presentation of the issues of nature, the supernatural, and the providential in her novels.

The key element of Radcliffe's "old-fashioned society" lies in her religious beliefs. She was imbued with the tenets of the latitudinarian school of Anglicanism. While some modern critics have tried to connect Radcliffe with Dissent and radical religion, contemporary biographers were in no doubt as to her orthodoxy: "She was educated in the principles of the Church of England; and through life, unless prevented by serious indisposition, regularly attended its services. Her piety, though cheerful, was deep and sincere."[6] What makes many modern commentators see Radcliffe's religious beliefs as more radical is their rationalism, but this rationalism was quite compatible with latitudinarian theology. A cheerful but sincere piety was exactly the variety they had always encouraged, rather than the fanaticism they saw as having been a dangerous ingredient of the Civil War. Robert Miles points out that Radcliffe's London middle-class background is the sort which encouraged religious radicalism, but it was also the traditional stronghold of latitudinarian preaching.[7]

A more serious and sustained argument for seeing Radcliffe and her work as coming from a religious context outside Anglicanism has been made in Rictor Norton's excellent biography, *Mistress of Udolpho.* Norton argues for a radical Ann Radcliffe, aligned with Unitarianism, on two grounds. First, biographically: Norton points out Radcliffe's position in a constellation of radical Unitarians related to Dr John Jebb, who left the Anglican Church because of his Unitarian/Arian beliefs after its failure to repeal compulsory subscription to the (Trinitarian) Thirty-Nine Articles. Radcliffe's husband William started life in radical religious journalism and was also of a Dissenting family,

5 Ann Elwood, *Memoirs of the Literary Ladies of England*, 2 vols (London: H. Colbourn, 1843), 2:169; see also [Talfourd], pp. 6, 13.

6 [Talfourd], p. 105. Cf. Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 30.

7 Miles, pp. 3–4. For the foundations of latitude in the same parts of London, see Margaret Jacob, *The Newtonians and the English Revolution 1689–1720* (Hassocks, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1976), pp. 49–50.

while her first official biographer, Thomas Talfourd, was a Unitarian lawyer.[8] Secondly, on textual grounds: using three main types of evidence, Norton suggests that Radcliffe was a Unitarian. First, her language in describing God in the novels: "There is no suggestion in Ann Radcliffe's novels or journals that she believed in the Trinity ... Ann Radcliffe never refers in her novels to Jesus Christ ... Her God is very much a Unitarian deity, which she described as a 'Supreme Being,' a 'Great Author.'" Secondly, Norton points out that Radcliffe, both in her travel journals and in the novels, could be virulently hostile towards Roman Catholicism, as were all the leading Dissenters of her era, with the exception of Richard Price. Finally, Norton sees Radcliffe's literary *œuvre* as dealing with "the debate between rationalism and enthusiasm," adding that this is best understood "within the context of the Dissenting debate between the Rational Dissenters (that is Unitarians) and the Evangelical Dissenters." Within this debate, Norton unsurprisingly sees Radcliffe's novels, with their rationalistic explanations of supposedly supernatural occurrences, as on the side of the Unitarians, for whom "belief in God necessarily entailed a rational sanction for the supernatural." Overall, Norton sees Radcliffe's "belief in the scientific progress of civilisation" as recapitulating "Unitarian utopian belief" in science.[9]

The depth and quality of Norton's biographical research and textual insight are not in doubt, but his theological and ecclesiological positioning of Radcliffe appears fundamentally flawed—a misprision of her identity. Norton rightly points out that Radcliffe was related to Dr Samuel Hallifax, Bishop of St Asaph, who was a staunch defender of the Thirty-Nine Articles.[10] This fact could be used as evidence to construct a Tory Anglican Radcliffe as assuredly as her kinship with John Jebb has been used by Norton to depict a radical Unitarian Radcliffe. But we should support no denominational positioning of Radcliffe simply on the basis of a kinship network, especially when, as in this case, there is no evidence she ever met either man.[11] Applying this approach to Norton's other biograph-

8 Rictor Norton, *Mistress of Udolpho: The Life of Ann Radcliffe* (London: Leicester University Press, 1999), pp. 14–16 for Jebb, pp. 55–56 for William, and pp. 246–49 for Talfourd.

9 Norton, pp. 18–19, 69, 70, 20.

10 Norton, pp. 14–16.

11 Norton says only that they are both "the relations she is *most likely* to have visited," p. 16 (emphasis added).

ical evidence yields further cause for scepticism about his portrayal of a Unitarian network around Radcliffe. Norton's assertion that Ann's husband William came from a Dissenting background is entirely based on "speculation" about his kinship with a Dissenting clergyman, Ebenezer Radcliffe, for which no concrete evidence is adduced.[12] Furthermore, it is worth noting from Norton's own account that William graduated from Oxford in 1785, which would have necessitated his swearing adherence to the Church's Thirty-Nine Articles—precisely the allegiance which John Jebb could not sustain and which led him to secede from the Church. If William was part of a Dissenting/Unitarian connection, his allegiance to it was either episodic or strategic.[13] Finally, Norton gives clear evidence that Ann's official biographer, Talfourd, was a Unitarian, but this produces more problems for his thesis about Ann's religious identity. As we have already seen, Talfourd said Ann was "educated in the principles of the Church of England" and retained her allegiance. Norton suggests that Talfourd's biography elided points about her identity because of her husband's scruples about her posthumous reputation.[14] Yet the evidence suggests William was more concerned about allegations that Ann had been a plagiarist and the later rumours of her insanity. There is no evidence that he was concerned about her religious position, but if he was a Dissenter, he would surely have been happy to have Ann's Dissenting faith recorded. Talfourd, as a Unitarian who had publicly subscribed to Unitarian causes, would not wish to "cover up" Radcliffe's religious identity—quite the contrary, given his esteem for her literary abilities. If both William and Talfourd were Dissenters, far from covering up Ann's religious affiliation, they were clearly memorializing her Anglican education and practice, even if they might have wished that her talents had emerged from a Dissenting context such as their own. At best the biographical evidence leaves the case for a radical Unitarian Ann Radcliffe not proven: at worst it suggests Talfourd's biographical comment was in fact true.

12 Norton, p. 55.

13 For the need to subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles, see J.C.D. Clark, *Samuel Johnson: Literature, Religion and English Cultural Politics from the Restoration to Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), esp. pp. 95–96. On the vexed issues of confessional and dynastic oaths in the eighteenth century, see the debate among J.C.D. Clark, Howard Erskine-Hill, Donald Greene, and Howard Weinbrot in *The Age of Johnson* 8 (1997) and 9 (1998).

14 Norton, pp. 246–49.

What of Norton's three levels of textual evidence? Here a similar picture presents itself. To describe God as the "supreme Being" or "Great Author" hardly put Radcliffe outside the ambit of orthodox Trinitarian Anglicanism. Acknowledged literary figures whose Anglicanism is beyond doubt, such as Joseph Addison, used the same terms.[15] Particularly in "literary" contexts, authors tended to use such a language in referring to God, but even the sermons of Anglican clergymen use the same terms.[16] In short, Radcliffe's *œuvre* was in genres where abstruse discussions of the Trinity would have been inappropriate, so the textual absence Norton discerns is likely to be *generically*—rather than *doctrinally*—driven. On Norton's second textual point, Radcliffe's anti-Catholicism cannot adjudicate between an image of her as latitudinarian Anglican or Unitarian. While both groups showed a discernible softening in attitudes towards Roman Catholicism in Radcliffe's era, both also started from a position of extreme anti-Catholicism, something which remained a mainstay of English religious life across the denominations well into the Victorian era.[17] Norton's final point is that Radcliffe's works adjudicate in Dissenting debates between rationalism and enthusiasm and come down on the side of Unitarian rationalism. But once more, the debate between the poles of rationalism and enthusiasm was one which preoccupied the entire religious community in the "long" eighteenth century and was in no way the preserve of Dissent.[18] Latitudinarian Anglicanism as assuredly as Unitarianism was preoccupied with rationalism, with science, and with the belief in these forces of progress. Late eighteenth-century Anglicans were

> sympathetic to the dissenters. ... They disliked what they perceived as the anti-rationalism of the evangelicals and Methodists. They were opposed to sceptics

15 In *Spectator* 413, for example, Addison refers to God as "the Supreme Author of our Being."

16 See below for Clarke on God as "the Author ... of Nature" (p. 595) and Paley on God as the "supreme intelligent Author" (p. 591).

17 See Martin Fitzpatrick, "Latitudinarianism at the Parting of the Ways: A Suggestion," *The Church of England c.1689–c.1833: From Toleration to Tractarianism*, ed. John Walsh *et al* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 209–27, esp. pp. 218–19 for latitudinarian anti-Catholicism in the era of Radcliffe. The enduring importance of anti-Catholicism can be traced in Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging a Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) and E.G. Norman, *Anti-Catholicism in Victorian England* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1968).

18 See especially Brian Young, *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth Century England: Theological Debate from Locke to Burke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

> and freethinkers, and joined forces with the dissenters in defending natural and revealed religion against them, but they thought that freedom of enquiry and debate assisted the continuous improvement of religion.[19]

The fact that Radcliffe's novels espouse such values is not conclusive as to her religious identity.

Norton's case for a Unitarian Radcliffe is definitely not proven on either biographical or textual grounds. On the contrary, Radcliffe espoused a latitudinarian perspective. Two points seem to favour such an interpretation. First, Talfourd's point that Radcliffe attended Anglican services. As Rivers observes, "the failure in the 1770s of the campaign to have the requirement to subscribe [to the Thirty-Nine articles] removed meant a rift between latitudinarian churchmen who continued to subscribe and unitarians who felt unable to do so, but the former remained sympathetic to the latter."[20] After the 1770s, then, there was an increasingly clear separation between Trinitarian Anglican and Unitarian congregations, with Radcliffe's relative, John Jebb, a prominent example of the rift. That Radcliffe continued to attend Anglican services strongly suggests an Anglican identity, while her faith in reason suggests it was of the latitudinarian brand. Second, as we shall see, Radcliffe textually supported a clear division between God and nature, where Unitarians, by conflating reason and religion, were more liable to conjoin the two.[21]

Norton's thesis is a subtle attempt to place Radcliffe in an "ecological" context. I suggest that Radcliffe, to be read in terms of her own trajectory, needs to be seen rather in the context of latitudinarian religion. I focus on William Paley, perhaps the most influential latitudinarian writing at the same time as Radcliffe, and on William Gilpin, a key figure bridging the divide between latitudinarian theology and literature in the 1790s. I will also discuss the founding fathers of latitudinarianism in the era after the Restoration.

19 Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1660–1780: Volume II: Shaftesbury to Hume* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 345.

20 Rivers, p. 345.

21 See below. These two points strongly suggest that Radcliffe was not a Unitarian, but they cannot determine whether she was a latitudinarian Anglican or attached to "old" Dissent, which was Trinitarian and continued to allow for attendance at Anglican services. I lean to an Anglican interpretation, but in truth the biographical and textual evidence may be too sparse to allow for a firm determination.

Religious Trajectories: An Outline of Latitudinarian Theology

The roots of latitudinarian theology lay in the turmoil of the Civil War. In its aftermath, many sought a theology which could lead to a less factious belief in Christianity in general, and Anglicanism in particular. The latitudinarians forged a nexus of ideas about the interrelationship of God, the natural world, and providence which they hoped had the "latitude" to comprehend a greater number of Protestants within the Church of England.[22] The retrospective and prospective sides of this creed, together with its rhetoric of inclusion, were nicely summarized by John Tillotson, Archbishop of Canterbury and perhaps the most powerful latitudinarian spokesman: "The manners of men have been almost universally corrupted by a Civil War. We should therefore all jointly endeavour to retrieve the ancient virtue of the Nation, and to bring into fashion again that solid and substantial, that plain and unaffected piety, (free from the extremes both of superstition and enthusiasm) which flourished in the age of our immediate Forefathers."[23]

Central to the latitudinarian approach was the belief that natural religion proved the existence of God. Natural religion suggested that justifiable belief in God could be founded upon the exercise of reason alone, which need have nothing to do with the observation of the natural world at all, but could be achieved by self-examination. There is no doubt that the latitudinarians believed in the light of nature in this sense, but they also believed in the significance of the natural world and its landscapes as a proof of both the being and attributes of God.

Latitudinarianism was distinguished from other theologies in the Anglican Church not by its belief in the utility of the natural world as evidence for the existence of God, but by the strong emphasis it placed upon this form of evidence. Key to this reliance on the natural world was the argument from design, that is, that the order, harmony, and structure of the visible world, at every level from the atomic to the universal, showed the operations of an infinitely wise creator. As

22 The label "latitude" was initially a pejorative one, given to this approach by its High Church Anglican opponents. For the founding tenets of the latitudinarian position, see Jacob; W. M. Spellman, *Latitudinarians and the Church of England, 1660–1700* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993); and *Philosophy, Science and Religion in England, 1640–1700*, ed. Richard Kroll *et al* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

23 John Tillotson, *Works*, 3 vols (London: J. Round, 1735), 1:40.

the key early latitudinarian Isaac Barrow put it:

> The best (no less convincing than obvious) arguments, asserting the existence of a Deity, are deduced from the manifold and manifest footsteps of admirable wisdom, skill and design, apparent in the general order, and in the peculiar frame of creatures; the beautiful harmony of the Whole, and the artificial contrivance of each part of the world.[24]

This argument was not, of course, new to the period, having been a commonplace in both classical and medieval thought.[25] But the later seventeenth-century latitudinarians could take up the argument with renewed vigour, as scientific inquiry led to the proliferation of facts and observations about the natural world. The increase in information, coupled with the latitudinarian desire to emphasize the natural proofs of God, led to a reliance on design arguments in the "long" eighteenth century, which J.H. Newman called the "age of evidences."[26]

Latitudinarian ideas remained in circulation throughout the eighteenth century and into Radcliffe's era.[27] As late as the early nineteenth century, William Paley exhibited a structure of thought still recognizably latitudinarian in its conjunction of Christianity, nature, and providence. Thus in Paley's *œuvre*, the role accorded to natural reason and the observation of nature in leading the individual to faith was unusually strong, as it had been in Isaac Barrow: "if one train of thinking be more desirable than another, it is that which regards the phenomena of nature with a constant reference to a supreme intelligent Author. To have made this the ruling, the habitual sentiment of our minds, is to have laid the foundation of every thing which is religious."[28] In short, Paley's theology was

24 Isaac Barrow, *Works*, 3 vols, 5th ed. (London: A. Miller and J.&R. Tonson, 1741), 3:289.

25 See Robert Hurlbutt, *Hume, Newton and the Design Argument* (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 1965), part 2.

26 John Henry Newman, *Fifteen Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford*, 3rd ed. (London: Rivingtons, 1872), p. 197.

27 Studies of the later history of the latitudinarian movement include Fitzpatrick; John Gascoigne, "Anglican Latitudinarianism, Rational Dissent and Political Radicalism in the Late Eighteenth Century," in *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 219–40; and John Gascoigne, *Cambridge in the Age of the Enlightenment: Science, Religion and Politics from the Restoration to the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

28 William Paley, *Natural Theology*, in *The Works of William Paley* (London: University Press, 1827), p. 552.

unusually dependent on the design argument, his *Natural Theology* being a massive exposition of God's operation through natural laws. Likewise and at the same time (the time at which Radcliffe wrote), William Gilpin, now remembered for his picturesque tours but at least as prolific as a Low Church Anglican homilist, delivered the same views in his sermons. He argued that "in the first place God speaks to us in the *works of creation.*"[29] The design argument was given especial prominence given the limited geographical dispersal of the Christian dispensation: "Nature never produced an atheist. God Almighty left the heathen nations without excuse for atheism, in giving them rain and fruitful seasons, from which they might ... have collected his being and government."[30] Gilpin, then, argued for the paramount role of natural religion and the design argument, in leading people to a rational faith.

Indeed, this argument lay behind Gilpin's "picturesque," which was an attenuated form of the design argument, aimed at an audience he perceived to be unreceptive to the didactic imperatives of the sermon.[31] A number of latitudinarian preachers similarly appealed to an aesthetic form of the design argument, being led into "literary" landscape descriptions, for example in John Ray's *Wisdom of God manifested in the works of Creation:*

> How variously is the Surface of it [the earth] distinguished into Hills, and Valleys, and Plains, and high Mountains affording pleasant Prospects? How curiously cloathed and adorned with the grateful verdure of Herbs and Stately Trees, either dispersed or scattered singly, or as it were assembled in Woods and Groves, and all these beautified and illustrated with elegant Flowers and Fruits.[32]

Particularly important to the aesthetic version of the design argument in the homiletics of latitudinarian divines was the stimulus provided

29 William Gilpin, *Sermons Preached to a Country Congregation*, 3 vols (Lymington: Cadell and Davies, 1799–1804), 2:126.

30 Gilpin, 3:398.

31 See Robert Mayhew, "William Gilpin's Latitudinarian Picturesque" in *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 33 (2000), 349–66. While I draw on Paley and Gilpin to depict latitudinarianism in the age of Radcliffe, I am not suggesting that these were the direct sources of Radcliffe's theology. Such moral and religious ideas were common currency: Addison's *Spectator* essays were an obvious source, as were female conduct books.

32 John Ray, *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of the Creation* (London: Samuel Smith and Benjamin Walford, 1691), p. 63.

by Thomas Burnet's *Sacred Theory of the Earth.*[33] Burnet was himself on the latitudinarian wing of Anglicanism (with a tendency towards rationalist heterodoxy), but argued that the mountains and irregular coastlines of the planet showed not harmony but fragmentation, not design but disorder. For Burnet, the earth showed the shattered ruins left by the Deluge, whose effects were superimposed on the wreck already caused by the Fall. As Bentley commented, citing *Paradise Lost* on the "irregular" topography of paradise: "we appeal to the sentence of Mankind, if a Land of Hills and Valleys has not more Pleasure too and Beauty than an uniform Flat? Which Flat, if ever it may be said to be delightful, is then only, when 'tis viewed from the top of a Hill ... They [the poets] cannot imagine even Paradise to be a place of Pleasure, nor Heaven itself to be Heaven without them."[34] Isaac Barrow's sermons in particular, which had more rhetorical flourish than the plain style of most latitudinarians, developed aesthetic arguments at some length, appealing to all the senses:

> [We are] invited to open all the avenues of our soul, for the admission of the kind entertainments nature sets before us ... doth she not everywhere present spectacles of delight ... to our eyes, however seldom any thing appears horrid or ugly to them? where is it that we meet with noises, so violent, or so jarring, as to offend our ears? All the air about us, is it not (not only not noisome to our smell, but) very comfortable and refreshing?[35]

This form of argument brought the "design" theory within the purview of literature and *belles lettres*, focusing on the appearance of the earth's surface—on the landscape. As we will see, it was within this nexus that Radcliffe developed her landscape descriptions, although subsequent critical analysis has frequently decoupled them from their theological context.

33 For the importance of Burnet in the development of landscape aesthetics, see Marjorie H. Nicholson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1959).

34 Richard Bentley, *Eight Sermons Preach'd at the Honourable Robert Boyle's Lecture*, 6th ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1735), pp. 297–98; see also William Derham, *Physico-Theology: or, a Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God, from his Works of Creation*, 4th ed. (London: W. and J. Innys, 1716), pp. 71–72.

35 Barrow, 2:71; see also Tillotson, 1:12; and Samuel Clarke, *Sermons*, 10 vols, 3rd ed. (London: J. and P. Knapton, 1732), 1:16 and 7:316–17. The appeal to all the senses was retained from medieval rhetorical training: see Ernst Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), p. 198.

It should be emphasized that the design argument, in whichever form, had a built-in refrain on the limits of science and reason in the proof of God. This was vital as it preserved a role for scripture: latitudinarianism was still a faith grounded in the Bible. As God was omnipotent and omniscient, his full design of the universe was beyond our comprehension, as indeed was the design of any individual part of it, since each part was linked to the whole system. A truly scientific design argument led simultaneously to piety and to humility: "it assures us that some effects are possible, but cannot help us to determine what is impossible ... *his works (as Lactantius speaks) are seen with eyes, but how he made them, the mind itself cannot see.*"[36] This argument was modelled in the language of landscape: in the afterlife our understanding of the operation of the system of nature would be enhanced, giving us expansive, wide prospects of a sort unimaginable in this life.[37] A fine example of this imagery was provided by Burnet's *Sacred Theory*:

> the fairest Prospect in this Life is not to be compar'd to the least we shall have in another. Our clearest Day here is misty and hazy: We see not far, and what we do see is in a bad Light. But when we have got better Bodies in the first Resurrection ... better Senses and a better Understanding, a clearer Light and an higher Station, our Horizon will be enlarged every way, both as to the Natural World, and as to the Intellectual.[38]

This emphasis on limits helped to forestall the dangers of hubris, and checked the tendency to conflate nature with God (which would negate the need for scripture), something which the linguistic policing of the term "nature" also sought to prevent. The increased theological sensitivity among the latitudinarians was apparent in the increased concern to assure that the term "nature" was used in ways which did not lead to idolatry. As Samuel Clarke put it: "in Truth, inanimate *Nature* is nothing but an *empty Sound*; Unintelligent *Agents* and *Powers*, (as we improperly call them,) are nothing but *mere Instruments*; and the Whole Effect is *really* the *Operation* of *Him*, who is

36 Barrow, 2:134; see also Tillotson, 2:551.

37 See John Barrell, *English Literature in History, 1730–1800: An Equal, Wide Survey* (London: Hutchinson, 1983).

38 Thomas Burnet, *Sacred Theory of the Earth*, 2 vols, 4th ed. (London: John Hooke, 1719), preface to book 4.

the *Author and God of Nature.*"[39] This caveat was designed to prevent the deification of nature—a possibility because of the unprecedented role that latitudinarian theology gave to nature. This move kept latitudinarianism within the fold of Christian religion, at some remove from the deist and other heterodox approaches to nature, although deists such as John Toland and Matthew Tindal attempted to link themselves with Tillotson and other latitudinarians.[40] Latitudinarianism's reliance on nature and reason could be hijacked to legitimate more "radical" theological positions such as Dissent and rational Dissent: indeed, in Radcliffe's age, the Unitarian Theophilus Lindsey argued that "the English latitudinarian tradition ... led inevitably to unitaritanism."[41] Yet there were clear doctrinal distinctions: the latitudinarians never collapsed reason and revelation, however much they emphasized natural religion; they retained a key role for providential lines of explanation and a determining role for scripture. Latitude did not conflate God with nature, as Toland and Tindal did, and nor did it countenance a non-Christian Godhead, even if not conflated with nature, as did Shaftesbury. Above all, latitudinarians retained a Trinitarianism, something that kept them categorically distinct from the rational Dissent and Unitarianism of Radcliffe's generation.[42]

For Paley, as for Clarke a century earlier, nature was most definitely not to be conflated with God, as tended to be the case with deists and rational Dissenters. To confuse God with nature was to fall into idolatry: "Contrivance [in nature] ... proves the *personality* of the Deity, as distinguished from what is sometimes called nature, sometimes called a principle: which terms in the mouths of those who use them philosophically, seem to be intended, to admit and to express

39 Clarke, 7:354; see also 7:306. See also Robert Boyle, *A Free Inquiry into the Vulgarly Received Notion of Nature,* in *Works,* 4:358–424.

40 See John Toland, "An Apology for Mr Toland" (1702), *Christianity Not Mysterious: Text, Associated Works and Critical Essays,* ed. Philip McGuinness *et al* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1997), p. 119; and Matthew Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation: or, the Gospel a Republication of the Religion of Nature* (London: Thomas Astley, 1730), p. 9 and pp. 27–28.

41 Rivers, 2:349.

42 On the pivotal place of Trinitarian belief in religious schisms of the later eighteenth century, see J.C.D. Clark, *The Language of Liberty, 1660–1832: Political Discourse and Social Dynamics in the Anglo-American World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) and A.M.C. Waterman, "The Nexus between Theology and Political Doctrine in Church and Dissent," *Enlightenment and Religion,* ed. Haakonssen, pp. 193–218.

an efficacy, but to exclude and to deny a personal agent."[43] Paley shows the later generations of latitudinarians still steering clear of the conflation of God with nature, and Gilpin's *Sermons* show that they continued to recognize the limits of reason in the proof of God. To see human reason as the exclusive route to faith was profanely to imagine that a limited intellect could determine the plan of an omniscient one:

> The man of *reason* opposes Christianity. ... his grand attack is founded on the all-sufficiency of reason ... But, what is most perverse in his attack on Christianity, he has different modes of judging between religious and scientific truth. In many parts of science, he is obliged to confess his ignorance. But he has not that candour, when he meets with a difficulty in religion.[44]

Where, as we have seen, Tillotson's generation linked this hubris to deism, unsurprisingly in the post-1789 context which Gilpin shared with Radcliffe, his impious rationalists were from a different stable: "The Abbé Barruel has written a history of Jacobinism, from which it appears, that Voltaire, and all the French philosophers were of this class."[45]

As the latitudinarian emphasis on the limits of human reason suggests, if nature was designed to function by means of laws accessible to the human intellect, an overarching and providential teleology was also behind these laws, the proof of an omniscient intellect which mortals could view but partially. In the founding generation of latitudinarians, Tillotson interpreted the Glorious Revolution (and without doubt, the term is appropriate in his case) as the last in a series of providential deliverances of the British Isles, whereby God "hath been pleas'd to work for this *Nation* against all the remarkable attempts of Popery, from the beginning of our *Reformation.*"[46] The teleological framework in which historical events are embedded and the anti-Catholicism which Tillotson displayed here were recurrent elements of that latitudinarian thought that was to inform Radcliffe's writing.

For Paley, as for Tillotson a century earlier, behind the everyday operation of the natural world lay a grand providential scheme, the

43 Paley, p. 523.

44 Gilpin, 3:400–1.

45 Gilpin, 3:401.

46 Tillotson, 1:301.

end of which was the salvation of mankind. History was a teleological movement towards this point:

> Of all the views under which human life has ever been considered, the most reasonable, in my judgment, is that which regards it as a state of *probation* ... since the contrivances of nature decidedly evince intention; and since the course of the world and the contrivances of nature have the same author; we are, by the force of this connexion, led to believe, that the appearance, under which events take place, is reconcileable with the supposition of design on the part of the Deity.[47]

Other latitudinarians of Paley's generation, such as Gilpin, also defended the reality of God's providential dispensations,[48] but in both cases, true to Tillotson, this reality was not to be conflated with miracles, the epoch for which was past.

The train of thinking Paley and Gilpin encouraged involved the analysis of nature's laws as the expression of God's will. Certain natural events, such as the wind which had blown William III ashore in 1688, were seen as providential interventions in the natural course of events, but in the main latitudinarians focused on the everyday operation of natural laws. Latitudinarians argued that they differed from other theologies such as the Roman Catholic and the evangelical, which emphasized extreme events as proofs of God, as did other Anglican theologies, notably Methodist and Calvinist variants. In particular, the latitudinarians wished to show the distance between rational Protestantism and superstitious Catholicism. Indeed, one of the main aims of latitudinarians in their attempt to unite Protestants was to distance themselves from Roman Catholics, towards whom they showed little tolerance.[49] In this regard, latitudinarians from the seventeenth century through to Paley's generation divided "providential" interventions by God from "miracles." They argued that the age of miracles had "now ceased in the Christian church,"[50] but Providence continued to unfold. The distinction between the providential and the miraculous was straightforward: a miracle was an action *against* the course of nature, whereas Providence was God guiding human actions to a favourable conclusion *by means of* natural laws.

47 Paley, p. 549.

48 See Gilpin, *Sermons*, no. 15 "On Providence," esp. pp. 180–82.

49 See Fitzpatrick, pp. 218–19.

50 Tillotson, 2:509.

Latitudinarian theology, then, created a distinctive doctrine concerning the interrelation between the natural and the supernatural, which held sway for over a century and which, I will suggest, was key to Radcliffe's treatment of these themes. It showed a strong tendency to see God in the natural world, especially in natural laws, and tended to be sceptical about the supernatural. While providential interventions in the course of nature did occur, they were infrequent and most attributions of divine wrath or visitation were simply superstitious displays of scientific ignorance. Such ignorance was particularly associated with Roman Catholicism. Quotidian providential interventions were rare, but the whole course of human history was a teleology, albeit one which the limited prospect of human beings inevitably found hard to comprehend.

Revisionist Trajectories: The Novels of Ann Radcliffe

Ann Radcliffe's novels develop in ways consistent with latitudinarian theology, and substantiate the claim that her old-fashioned education in Anglican principles influenced her thematic interests and narrative strategies. First, attention will be paid to Radcliffe's presentation of landscape imagery, which follows the lines prescribed by the latitudinarian doctrine of nature and the natural evidence of God. Then the broader framework of the "explained supernatural" which Radcliffe deployed and the narrative closure she sought will be discussed in their relationship to latitudinarian doctrines of the supernatural and the providential.

Landscape, Nature, and Religion

Radcliffe's novels are renowned for their abundance of landscape imagery, which some contemporary reviewers found excessive: "We trust ... we shall not be thought unkind or severe if we object to the too great frequency of landscape-painting; which, though it shews the extensiveness of her observation and invention, wearies the reader with repetitions."[51] Clearly, Radcliffe found her landscape descriptions meaningful, although many of her contemporaries did not: the meaning lies in the theological purpose which many of those descriptions demonstrate.

51 Review of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, *Gentleman's Magazine* 64 (1794), 834.

Looking at picturesque and pastoral landscapes, Radcliffe characters were continually led to an appreciation of God's benevolence. Thus in *A Sicilian Romance,* Julia's spirits are "insensibly tranquilized" by a moonlight scene: "The night was still, and not a breath disturbed the surface of the waters. The moon shed a mild radiance over the waves ... A chorus of voices now swelled upon the air, and died away at a distance. In the strain Julia recollected the midnight hymn to the virgin, and holy enthusiasm filled her heart."[52] The civilized landscapes of human cultivation and activity, then, could lead the contemplative mind to mirror the tranquillity of the scene and be led beyond this to the Creator. It is in sublime and rugged landscapes, however, that the linkage of the Creator to his creation is most frequent. As Ellena says in *The Italian,* this is because such landscapes lead one to a direct appreciation of God's grandeur:

> If I am condemned to misery, surely I could endure it with more fortitude in scenes like these, than amidst the tamer landscapes of nature! Here, the objects seem to impart somewhat of their own force, their own sublimity, to the soul. It is scarcely possible to yield to the pressure of misfortune while we walk, as with the Deity, amidst his most stupendous works![53]

As with Isaac Barrow, landscape is the strongest proof of God's existence, and can be turned to in any misfortune.

Radcliffe also showed her belief in the design argument *in propria persona* in her travel account, *A Journey made in the Summer of 1794.* This work is by no means as theologically laden as her novels, but at Ullswater, in the Lake District, the surrounding mountains are described as "huge, bold, and awful; overspread with a blue mysterious tint, that seemed almost supernatural." She argued, in terms interesting for their apparent linkage of poetry and religion, that the overall experience of Ullswater "inspires that 'fine phrensy' descriptive of the poet's eye, which not only bodies forth unreal forms, but

52 Ann Radcliffe, *A Sicilian Romance,* ed. Alison Milbank (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 58. References are to this edition. See also Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho,* ed. Bonamy Dobrée (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 113–14. References are to this edition.

53 Radcliffe, *The Italian, Or The Confessional of the Black Penitents. A Romance,* ed. Frederick Garber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 62–63. References are to this edition. See also *Udolpho,* pp. 4–5 and p. 475; and Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest,* ed. Chloe Chard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 265. References are to this edition.

imparts to substantial objects a character higher than their own."[54]

The frequency with which Radcliffe links viewing the landscape with ascending to a mood of devotion is consonant with a latitudinarian position of the sort we have already seen articulated by Paley and Gilpin, given the unusual emphasis it placed on naturalistic proofs of God. The design argument, however, was in no sense the preserve of the latitudinarians; only further details of Radcliffe's presentation of the natural world allow us to be confident that her use did fit into a latitudinarian argument.

Radcliffe's emphasis on the natural as proof of the divine could be part of a deist strategy of conflating the two, as was the case in Radcliffe's day for rational Dissenters and Unitarians—but the novels specifically work against such a position. Only her evil characters conflate nature with the divine, an error from which we have already seen that both Samuel Clarke and William Paley were keen to distance latitudinarian theology. The first instance comes in *The Romance of the Forest*, where the Marquis of Montalt urges La Motte to kill Adeline: "Truth is often perverted by education. While the refined Europeans boast a standard of honour, and a sublimity of virtue, which often leads them from pleasure to misery, and from nature to error, the simple uninformed American follows the impulse of his heart, and obeys the inspiration of wisdom." Montalt goes on to list those peoples who sanction murder, arguing that they follow "Nature, uncontaminated by false refinement" (p. 222). In another important instance, nature is taken as divine in similar circumstances when Schedoni in *The Italian* encourages the Marchesa de Vivaldi to agree to the murder of Ellena di Rosalba (pp. 177–78). As Miles glosses this passage: "Schedoni draws his morality from nature. Custom and law are no more than vulgar prejudices ... nature reveals a morally anarchic world of self-assertion."[55] Clearly, Radcliffe uses his argument that nature is God to horrify her readers by its possible consequences. Her portrayal of Schedoni's and Montalt's appeal to nature may owe something to the eighteenth century's opinion that Edmund's appeal to nature as his goddess in *King Lear* was an

54 Radcliffe, *A Journey made in the Summer of 1794, Through Holland and the Western Frontier of Germany, with a return down the Rhine: To which are added Observations during a tour to the Lakes of Lancashire, Westmoreland, and Cumberland* (London: G.G. and J. Robinson, 1795), p. 408 and p. 477.

55 Miles, p. 162.

expression of atheism.[56] Even if Schedoni is taken to be adopting a libertine stance, rather than a deist one, Radcliffe's response is still clearly one which is hostile to that position on theological grounds, and which tends to see libertinism as the inevitable consequence of a flight from rational Christianity. As Gilpin laid the excesses of the Jacobins at the door of hubristic Voltairian deism, so Radcliffe links moral depravity and the exaltation of human reason over the divine.

Radcliffe's opposition to such materialism is rendered explicit by La Luc, her portrayal of an ideal vicar in *The Romance of the Forest.* His speech has close parallels with Paley's previously cited comments about the personality of God: "When the imagination launches into the regions of space, and contemplates the innumerable worlds which are scattered through it, we are lost in astonishment and awe. ... O! how expressively does this prove the spirituality of our Being! Let the materialist consider it, and blush that he has ever doubted" (pp. 275–76). As opposed to conflating God with nature, the heroes and heroines of Radcliffe's novels ascend from nature to its Creator in the way the latitudinarians envisaged. The difference can be seen in *The Romance of the Forest.* Where Montalt uses nature to justify murder, Adeline, his proposed victim, responds differently: "The scene before her soothed her mind, and exalted her thoughts to the great Author of Nature; she uttered an involuntary prayer: 'Father of good, who made this glorious scene! I resign myself to thy hands'" (p. 22). Nature has an author who can be perceived through it, but is not synonymous with it, just as William Paley was arguing contemporaneously.

It is clear, then, that Radcliffe's invocations of nature are to be distinguished from those of deists, but it is also noticeable that it is the everyday course of nature which leads to reflections on God, rather than extreme natural events. The novels contain a number of storm scenes and shipwrecks, but these are not interpreted as evidence of God's wrath. In *A Sicilian Romance,* Julia and Ferdinand are shipwrecked in their attempt to escape from Sicily, but there is no suggestion that this event is a divine judgment (pp. 152–54). The same holds for the Mediterranean storm in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (pp. 484–85). This sets Radcliffe's interweaving of religion and the operation of the natural world apart from many in the Calvinist

56 *Complete Works of William Shakespeare,* ed. Stanley Wells *et al* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) *King Lear,* 1:2. See William Warburton, *The Works of Shakespear,* 8 vols (London: J.&P. Knapton, 1747), 6:15.

Dissenting tradition such as Daniel Defoe or, in her own era, from William Cowper's Calvinist Anglicanism, which interpreted the Sicilian earthquake as evidence of God's wrath at human sinfulness. John Wesley, from the perspective of Methodist Anglicanism, had viewed the London earthquake of 1750 and its more devastating successor in Lisbon in 1755 as the wages of sin.[57] Radcliffe had expressed her view of extreme natural events in her own travel writings. Travelling in a storm, she was impressed by the rational and measured effects of God's omnipotence, rather than being terrified by it as either capricious or wrathful: "This display of the elements was the grandest scene I ever beheld; a token of GOD directing his world. What particularly struck me was the appearance of irresistible power, which the deep monotonous sound conveyed. Nothing sudden; nothing laboured; all a continuance of sure power, without effort."[58]

Just as the latitudinarians viewed some extreme events as providential but never as miraculous, so Radcliffe did countenance some natural operations as God's intervention in the course of events, but only by means of natural operations. The death of the cruel Baron of Dunbayne in Radcliffe's first novel leads to a reflection on the "innate and active power of justice" which gives "to the virtuous, the pure ray of Heaven;—to the guilty, the destructive glare of lightning."[59] This might be seen as youthful exuberance on Radcliffe's part, but the possibility that an earthquake was providential is also discussed in *The Italian*, the last novel published in her lifetime (pp. 261–62). Yet these extreme events are interpreted as the result of the normal operations of nature, by which judgment is served on particular characters. Moreover, in neither case is the providential status of the natural event confirmed unequivocally: humans are too limited to determine with certitude.

The portrayal of true and false spirituality in Radcliffe's novels reinforces the contention that they are latitudinarian in intent. True spirituality builds from the appreciation of the natural world. Just as

57 William Cowper, *Poetical Works*, ed. H.S. Milford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), *The Task*, book 2; John Wesley, *Journals*, ed. Nehemiah Curnock, 8 vols (London: Epworth Press, 1909–16), 3:453 on London; and John Wesley, *Serious Thoughts on the Earthquake at Lisbon* (London, 1755).

58 [Talfourd], p. 53, extracted from Radcliffe's private journals.

59 Radcliffe, *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne*, ed. Julian Wolfreys (Stroud: Alan Sutton Press, 1994), p. 74.

nature was the foundation of a religious attitude in Paley's *Natural Theology* and in Gilpin's *Sermons*, so for Blanche in *Udolpho*: "God is best pleased with the homage of a grateful heart, and, when we view his glories, we feel most grateful. I never felt so much devotion, during the many dull years I was in the convent, as I have done in the few hours, that I have been here, where I need only look on all around me—to adore God in my inmost heart!" (pp. 475–76). But Radcliffe is not engaged here in either radical anti-clericalism or in chauvinistic anti-Catholicism. Not all convents are dens of false spirituality, because some Catholic characters build on a rational Christianity. The portrait of the superior of Santa della Piéta in *The Italian* is important in this respect: "Her religion was neither gloomy, nor bigotted; it was the sentiment of a grateful heart offering itself up to a Deity, who delights in the happiness of his creatures; and she conformed to the customs of the Roman church, without supposing a faith in all of them to be necessary to salvation" (p. 300). The convent is set in a beautiful landscape which harmonizes with the reign of the superior and there is no sign of the gloomy seclusion suffered by so many of Radcliffe's heroines in convents. The superior's religion is cheerful yet deep, just as Radcliffe's was, according to her early biographers. Radcliffe's attitude towards Roman Catholics here was much more tolerant than that of the founders of latitudinarianism, but this is unsurprising: English attitudes to Roman Catholics became more tolerant throughout the century, notably in the 1790s when the defence of the established order in church and state in the aftermath of the French Revolution became more important than denominational infighting.[60]

Radcliffe portrays only a latitudinarian form of Roman Catholicism in this positive light. As Diego Saglia says, some form of cultural-geographic imperialism is at work here, where "the narrator organizes the discourse on Italy so as to allow the Protestant, Northern, English characters to emerge as familiar figures in the cultural arena of fiction, while native presences are paradoxically objectified as distant, strange, and alien."[61] Radcliffe's imagery of bogus spirituality typically draws on

60 As Colin Haydon puts it, by the 1780s "influential sections of the Anglican Church wanted more toleration for the papists." Colin Haydon, *Anti-Catholicism in Eighteenth-Century England c.1714–80: A Social and Political Study* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 243–44.

61 Diego Saglia, "Looking at the Other: Cultural Difference and the Traveller's Gaze in *The Italian*," *Studies in the Novel* 28 (1996), 12–37 at 19.

latitudinarian images of Roman Catholicism as superstitious, hostile to science, "distant, strange, and alien." It is only with the progress of science that the "vulgar" beliefs encouraged by the Roman Catholic Church could be removed. Radcliffe alludes to two such beliefs which had amused generations of Protestant travellers to Italy. Most notable is the tradition which peopled Mount Etna with devils, which Radcliffe mentions in *A Sicilian Romance* (p. 28). There is also Paulo's appeal in *The Italian* (p. 78) to St Januarius, the Neapolitan patron saint who was alleged to have the power to stop Vesuvius erupting. Radcliffe probably got the details about these traditions from Patrick Brydone's popular travel narrative *A Tour Thro' Sicily and Malta* (1773), which treated both beliefs with a rationalistic scorn which, much to Samuel Johnson's irritation, tipped into heterodoxy on the question of the accuracy of the Mosaic account of the creation.[62]

Radcliffe summarizes her anti-Catholicism in *A Sicilian Romance*, explaining the difference between modern religion and that of the late sixteenth century:

> The dark clouds of prejudice break away before the sun of science, and gradually dissolving, leave the brightening hemisphere to the influence of his beams. But through the present scene [in the sixteenth century] appeared only a few scattered rays ... Here prejudice, not reason, suspended the influence of the passions; and scholastic learning, mysterious philosophy, and crafty sanctity supplied the place of wisdom, simplicity, and pure devotion. (pp. 116–17)

Similar vignettes can be found in *Udolpho*, where reaching an appreciation of God through nature is compared favourably with "all the distinctions of human system" (p. 48), and in the posthumously published *Gaston de Blondeville*. Set in the time of Henry III, *Gaston de Blondeville* contrasts the heroic Archbishop of York, who is sceptical of sorcery and the supernatural, with the Machiavellian prior, "no true son of the church," who promotes a belief in sorcery.[63] Radcliffe has never had a reputation for historical accuracy, and whatever period she discussed, her pattern of ideal devotion looks decidedly latitudinarian in its reliance on the new science and its criticism of superstition.

Scholastic philosophy and liturgical rigour are repeatedly compared unfavourably with a rational and scientific faith built from the

62 See James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. G.B. Hill, rev. L.F. Powell, 6 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934–50), 2:468 and 3:356.

63 See Radcliffe, *Gaston de Blondeville*, 2:282–83, 2:287, 3:40.

observation of the natural world, in which all tenets beyond a belief in a Christian God as benevolent are treated as adiaphora. At times, the two visions of spirituality are directly juxtaposed, as in Blanche's comments about convents cited above and Ellena's experiences in San Stefano in *The Italian*. While Ellena can be moved by a solemn church service (p. 85), her attention tends to stray. This occurs when she sees Olivia for the first time during a service, the remainder of which she spends trying to catch her attention (pp. 86–87). Her inattention is in stark contrast to her response to the sublime landscapes around San Stefano, which rivet her attention to God as the service could not: "Hither she could come, and her soul, refreshed by the views it afforded, would acquire strength ... Here, gazing upon the stupendous imagery around her, looking, as it were, beyond the awful veil which obscures the features of the Deity, and conceals Him from the eyes of his creatures, dwelling with a mind thus elevated, how insignificant would appear to her the transactions, and the sufferings of this world!" (pp. 90–91).

Radcliffe's lack of interest in doctrine and liturgy not only distinguishes her theological dynamics from those of Roman Catholicism, but also from High Church Anglicanism. High Churchmen could have agreed with her views of nature—the fourth edition of Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* (1773) drew on Robert Boyle's *Free Inquiry* to advise against using the term "nature" as a synonym for God. But the High Churchmen emphasized the importance of active charity rather than the mere observation of nature. In Mrs Thrale's comment on Johnson's attitude to this issue, Radcliffe could easily be substituted for Rousseau: "Rousseau is not like Johnson when he thinks a mute & sublime Admiration of his works is the best Worship of the Creator, altho' that Admiration should excite no Act of any sort, but end wholly in itself—Johnson thought that God Almighty sent us here *to do* something—not merely to *stare about.*"[64] Johnson, like many High Churchmen, was more favourable to making churches and the liturgy appeal to the senses than to the reverse idea that nature, by appealing to the senses, could lead people to faith.[65]

64 Hester Thrale/Piozzi, *Thraliana: The Diary of Mrs Hester Lynch Thrale (later Mrs Piozzi), 1776–1809*, ed. Katharine C. Balderstone, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951), p. 716.

65 See G.M. Ditchfield, "Samuel Johnson and the Dissenters," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 68 (1986), 373–409.

Radcliffe's novels are responsive to the general contours of latitudinarian thought about the interconnection between the natural world and rational faith. The latitudinarians portrayed themselves as treading the *via media* between the excesses of superstitious worship and scientific ignorance found in Roman Catholicism (and, to a lesser extent, in High Church Anglicanism), and the opposite extreme of irreligious scientism, represented by the deists who replaced the Christian God with a self-sufficient Nature. Radcliffe's heroes and heroines are clearly latitudinarian figures surrounded by religious extremists. Further, the way that the most Catholic characters such as Schedoni are shown to invoke the deistic argument that nature is God is entirely traditional within Anglican apologetics, which argued that the two extremes on either side of the *via media* were interchangeable.[66] The theology approved in Radcliffe's novels leads from nature to its creator. Moreover, this connection is by no means only available in the presence of extreme natural events, but is felt predominantly in the face of everyday landscapes, be they pastoral or sublime. Admittedly, the progress from nature to faith is a more purely aesthetic one in Radcliffe than it had been in the early latitudinarians, but the beauty of nature had always been a vital persuasive tool and in the same era as Radcliffe, Gilpin likewise sought to sweeten the doctrinal pill of latitudinarianism by more "literary" descriptive conventions as embodied in his picturesque tours. As with the latitudinarians of the later eighteenth century, natural religion of this kind is available to all in Radcliffe's novels: Protestants and Roman Catholics who base their religion on nature rather than the peripheral matters of liturgy and doctrine should be able to live together peaceably. Radcliffe's Anglicanism and the superior of Santa della Piéta's Catholicism are the fruits of the same process of reasoning and are entirely compatible.

Explaining the "Explained Supernatural"

Critical discussion of Radcliffe's novels has frequently remarked unfavourably on two of their recurrent narrative patterns. First, Radcliffe's technique of the "explained supernatural," wherein

66 Anglican rhetoric is ably discussed by J.G.A. Pocock, "Within the Margins: The Definition of Orthodoxy," *The Margins of Orthodoxy: Heterodox Writing and Cultural Response 1660–1850*, ed. Roger D. Lund (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 33–53.

apparently supernatural events are later explained by naturalistic means, has always been seen as a failure of nerve. Criticism placing Radcliffe in a generic trajectory defined by the conventions of the Gothic sees Radcliffe as having taken the Gothic so far, but not been prepared to take it to its logical conclusion, reverting to an enlightenment rationalism in the last instance. By Radcliffe's death in 1823 the development of Gothic novels could be seen in perspective, and her transitional status was clear: "It is extraordinary, that a writer thus gifted should, in all her works intended for publication, studiously resolve the circumstances, by which she has excited superstitious apprehensions, into mere physical causes. She seems to have acted on a notion, that some established canon of romance obliged her to reject real supernatural agency."[67]

The second characteristic, which has received less but equally unfavourable attention, is Radcliffe's way of resolving all her novels by simplistic conclusions in which virtue is rewarded and vice punished. Once again, this has been seen as a failure of nerve, notably by modern critics who place Radcliffe in an "ecological" context of the 1790s, and see a latent radicalism within Radcliffe's *œuvre*. Even Radcliffe's first generation of critics in the early nineteenth century were unsatisfied with the narrative glosses she gave at the conclusion of her novels: "And did Mrs Radcliffe really write to enforce truths so excellent, but so commonplace? It is hard to believe it. But a certain formality, a love of trite and too evident conclusions, always were her errors." Julia Kavanagh links Radcliffe's conclusions with her naturalistic explanation of the supernatural, both demonstrating that she "had a fine, but not a free imagination."[68]

While it is undeniable that Radcliffe's conclusions and explanations of the supernatural are somewhat mechanical in their effect, both can be explained by reference to latitudinarianism. As we have seen, Radcliffe follows a latitudinarian form of argument with respect to the interrelation of nature and religion at a thematic level. She also structures her narratives in ways that reflect latitudinarian arguments about and distinctions between the supernatural and the providential. She repeatedly shows how chains of natural events can lead to providential outcomes, just as the latitudinarians did. In her novels

67 [Talfourd], p. 115. See also Scott, pp. 369–71.

68 Julia Kavanagh, *English Women of Letters*, 2 vols (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1863), 1:308.

rational explanation is not antithetical to divine purpose. By the same token, what most see as providential intervention is simply superstition designed to mislead the credulous, as to the latitudinarians were the pomp and ceremony of Catholicism.

Radcliffe rationally explains what appear to be omens or interventions from a supernatural world of ghosts and spirits. Normally the resolution of supernatural appearances into their natural causes is delayed until the end of the novel, but in *Udolpho* there is one potted version when Emily sees a light glittering at the end of a lance "resembling what she had observed on the lance of the sentinel, the night Madame Montoni died ... She thought it was an omen of her own fate." Her escort gives the light a natural explanation, based upon the electrical effects of thunderstorms which Radcliffe had read of in Bertholon's writings on electricity. Emily's descent from latitudinarian rationalism is reproached: "you are not one of those, that believe in omens: we have left cowards at the castle, who would turn pale at the sight. I have often seen it before a thunder storm, it is an omen of that, and one is coming now, sure enough. The clouds flash fast already" (p. 408). Ugo, who utters this reproach, has acted as a good empirical scientist, looking to correlate an apparently unusual effect with the natural conditions in which it occurs.

In all of her novels, Radcliffe develops the same pattern which this incident demonstrates on a smaller canvas. The supernatural is continually deflated, most obviously in *The Italian.* One of the central points of this novel is the education of Vivaldi, whose benevolent character is not supported by a rational approach to the natural world. Schedoni plays on Vivaldi's superstition in order to mislead him into thinking that the mysterious Nicola di Zampari is a ghost, a plan which eventually backfires. Descanting on Vivaldi's "prevailing weakness" on his deathbed, Schedoni delivers what could be the text for the education of all Radcliffe's characters: "the ardour of your imagination was apparent, and what ardent imagination ever was contented to trust to plain reasoning, or to the evidence of the senses? It may not willingly confine itself to the dull truths of this earth, but, eager to expand its faculties, to fill its capacity, and to experience its own peculiar delights, soars after new wonders into a world of its own!" (pp. 397–98). Schedoni advocates rational religion patterned, as latitudinarianism was, on a solid foundation in truths of nature: Vivaldi could have avoided many of the dangers into which he

has been led. We saw above that Radcliffe tried earlier in *The Italian* to direct her readers away from the consequences of a rationalistic deism conflating God with nature through Schedoni's character. Here, however, she shows through the same character that the correct response is not to jettison reason for a mystical apprehension of the Christian God (as had Vivaldi), but a reasoned acceptance of science and its limitations in the face of God's omnipotence. Taking Radcliffe's two deployments of Schedoni together, we get a critique of deism, but equally a refusal to collapse into mysticism and superstition; we get the advocacy of a rational approach to both faith and the operation of the natural world, grounded in the operation of scientific laws, tempered by an acceptance and awe that these are God's laws, directed to providential ends. In short, taking Radcliffe's depictions of true and false religious approaches to nature and the supernatural as revealed through Schedoni, we can discern the advocacy of a latitudinarian *via media* between the extremes of Catholic mysticism and rationalistic hubris.

The apparent supernatural, then, is continually undermined as the result of evil intentions playing upon the credulity of overactive imaginations. But if supernatural interventions do not occur to show the workings of God, Providence may: "the most obvious residue of the spiritual after the supposed apparitions have been cleared away is Providence." While I agree with Clery that "material existence is suffused by religion" in Radcliffe's novels, I would argue that the type of theology the novels develop can be specified more precisely than as just "religion."[69] Paley believed natural laws created an ideal state of probation for moral actors: Radcliffe's novels show virtue passing through rationally explicable affliction to reach a life of happiness. All of Radcliffe's novels have endings which "point the moral" that virtue is rewarded and vice punished. The moral of each is explicitly Christian: Paulo in *The Italian* likens Vivaldi's path to happiness to passing through purgatory to reach heaven (p. 413), but perhaps more redolent of the latitudinarian view is the conclusion to *A Sicilian Romance*: "In reviewing this story, we perceive a singular instance of moral retribution. We learn, also, that only those who do only THAT WHICH IS RIGHT, endure nothing in misfortune but a trial of their virtue, and from trials well endured derive the surest claim to the protection

69 E.J. Clery, *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction, 1762–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 111, 113.

of heaven" (p. 199). The natural world is a state of probation, the main purpose of which is to test moral worth. Moral probity is available to all who follow the promptings of natural religion which allows all rational actors to distinguish right from wrong.

Natural laws produce providential outcomes. Within the narrative economy of Radcliffe's novels, this has to take a rather different form from that within latitudinarian argument more generally. Where in latitudinarianism the just dispensation of rewards can be postponed to the afterlife, as a novelist Radcliffe has to draw this reward forward to the present. The *terminus ad quem* moves from the afterlife to a narrative closure, but this still gives her works a strongly teleological view of history akin to that of latitudinarian thought. Early in *A Sicilian Romance* Mme de Menon argues that spirits may exist, for "Who shall say that any thing is impossible to God?" She argues that the restricted capabilities of human reason mean that much about the creation is mysterious to us: "If we cannot understand how such spirits exist, we should consider the limited powers of our minds, and that we cannot understand many things which are indisputably true. No one yet knows why the magnetic needle points to the north" (p. 36). This is an argument exemplified in Thomas Burnet and one which latitudinarians frequently used, arguing that in the afterlife we would gain a broader prospect of God's governance of the creation. In Radcliffe's novels, however, just as the rewards of providence are brought into the living present, so putative apparitions from the spirit world are explained in this life. The education of the characters gives them the broader prospect which theology could postpone. In this case, secret cells in Mazzini's castle explain the sounds which had been interpreted as interventions from the spirit world (p. 195).

While the form of the novel demanded that the working of natural laws for providential ends be explained within the lifetime of the characters, Radcliffe did still gesture to the broader prospect the afterlife would give us in terms familiar from Anglican apologetics. In *The Romance of the Forest* La Luc, who is more of a latitudinarian than a Rousseauesque figure, puts the argument in its traditional form: "in a future state ... We shall then be enabled to comprehend subjects too vast for human conception; to comprehend, perhaps, the sublimity of the Deity who first called us into being. These views of futurity ... elevate us above the evils of this world, and seem to communicate to us a portion of the nature we contemplate"

(p. 274).[70] While virtue is rewarded within the human time frame of the novels, the ultimate reward will be in the afterlife. Radcliffe herself expressed such views in her private journals, drawing on the same theme and also emphasizing that natural laws led to belief in a Christian God:

> [I] saw the sun set behind one of the vast hills. The silent course over this great scene awful—the departure melancholy. Oh GOD! thy great laws will one day be more fully known by thy creatures; we shall more fully understand thee and ourselves. The GOD of order and of all this and of far greater grandeur, the Creator of that glorious sun, which never fails in its course, will not neglect us, His intelligent, though frail creatures.[71]

The narrative elements of Radcliffe's novels which critics past and present have found least satisfactory are related to a latitudinarian position. Latitudinarianism created a distinctive interrelationship of nature, reason, and religion, which supported a providentialism stripped of the supernatural and the superstitious. Just as Radcliffe articulated a rational approach to religion via an understanding of the natural world, so the overall patterns developed in her novels reflected a belief that the operation of natural laws was simultaneously providential. Natural laws create a moral state of probation for characters to endure, but these laws also ensure that virtue is rewarded both with happiness in this life and with a prospect of futurity.

Theology and Gothic Trajectories

If we accept that Ann Radcliffe's novels reflect a latitudinarian theology in terms of narrative structure and content, then early English Gothic novels could display a variety of theological politics. As Marilyn Butler has shown, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as published in 1818 shows a thoroughgoing materialism.[72] Where La Luc in *The Romance of the Forest* discerned a spiritual presence in nature which should make the materialist blush (pp. 275–76), Shelley articulated the opposite position, draining nature of the numinous and making the dangers of a Christian vitalism all too apparent. Both used a

70 See also Radcliffe, *Gaston de Blondeville*, 2:313–14.

71 [Talfourd], p. 39.

72 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: 1818 Text*, ed. Marilyn Butler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), Introduction.

rationalistic framework, and both used landscapes to express their natural philosophies, but the visions of science and reason they drew on were very different. Radcliffe's Anglicanism, learned from her old-fashioned education, looked back to science in the age of Newton and the Boyle lectures, which had emphasized the compatibility of science with Christian revelation. Shelley, having been raised by Wollstonecraft and Godwin, two of the leading theorists of radical educational reform, was anything but old-fashioned, looking forward to the far less comfortable relationship between science and religion which developed in the Victorian period, and which had already been signalled by the life and work of Joseph Priestley and James Hutton.[73] While only twenty years separate the two writers, their mental worlds showed a far greater separation. Only the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein* drew Shelley closer to Radcliffe's practice, pressure for orthodoxy forcing her to "sacralize Nature in a style new to the novel."[74] As Pocock has said, "the great discovery which we constantly make and remake as historians is that English political debate is recurrently subordinate to English political theology."[75] It would appear that the war of ideas in the English novel of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was similarly one which operated within a theological understanding of politics.[76]

Most of the criticism of Radcliffe's novels was not contemporary with their production. Apart from book reviews, criticism began with biographical assessments after her death in 1823. The gap between the writing of the novels and the onset of critical reflection is important. As intimated previously, this gap allowed Radcliffe to be assessed in terms of a generic trajectory which she herself had helped to forge. Many of the values Gothic novels such as *Frankenstein* or *The Monk* upheld were polar opposites to those she had demonstrated in her writings, notably the materialism of the former and the atheism of the

73 See Frank Turner, "The Victorian Conflict between Science and Religion: A Professional Dimension," *Isis* 69 (1978), 356–76.

74 Butler, in Shelley, *Frankenstein: 1818 Text*, p. 199.

75 J.G.A. Pocock, "A Discourse of Sovereignty: Observations on the Work in Progress," *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain*, ed. Nicholas Phillipson and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 377–428 at p. 381.

76 Some moves towards this theological view of politics are now being drawn into literary history: see Robert M. Ryan, *The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature 1789–1824* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

latter. The genre of the Gothic novel developed in ways Radcliffe was not responsible for and showed no sign of concurring with. To recover the project on which Radcliffe herself was engaged in her novels requires looking back to the intellectual milieu she came from, rather than fitting her work within a generic framework defined during and by the seismic shifts occurring in English society and thought in the period from 1789 to 1832.[77] One of those shifts, and the one which obscured Radcliffe's own aims even from many of her earliest critics, was the collapse of traditional latitudinarianism. As Fitzpatrick puts it, the 1790s saw "the loss of coherence of traditional latitudinarianism. A movement which had emerged as a moderate response to the factionalism and fanaticism of the early modern period, could no longer cope with the new rifts emerging in government and society as they entered the age of revolutions."[78] The latitudinarian position itself became dragged towards extremes which it had previously held in productive tension: "Its combination of moderate scepticism and rationality was too easily separated out into conservatism and radicalism."[79] Radcliffe's role as a latitudinarian novelist, then, was problematic, and the problems of articulating her position paralleled those which led to the collapse of latitudinarianism itself. Contemporary critics could easily see the supernatural framework of romances as too radical for comfort, and her use of it as too conservative. Modern critics have done much the same, seeing signs of radicalism and feminism in her works, coupled with egregious conservatism in her conclusions. While criticism was dragged towards the extremes, there is no sign that Radcliffe herself was; her cheerful piety remained, amid the storms of critical controversy that tried to blow her works off course towards the extremes her literary *via media* steered between so carefully.

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77 For which, see J.C.D. Clark, *English Society 1688–1832: Ideology, Social Structure and Political Practice during the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), ch. 6.

78 Fitzpatrick, p. 227.

79 Fitzpatrick, p. 226.