

Sublime scenes and Horrid Novels

Milestones along the Road to Middle-earth

by John E. Ellison

Habitual theatregoers or operagoers will already be familiar with the fashionable practice of the "update". *Hamlet*, for instance, is seen to be all the better for being set, say, in a biscuit factory just off the M25. The "relevance for our time" of *Macbeth* is thought to be improved if the witches set their cauldron up as the reactor of a nuclear power station sited in the midst of the blasted heath (planning permission having, of course, been given). Lovers of literature, on the other hand, do not normally have to face this kind of disorientation. I propose to begin by indulging in a little of it now. The subject of this rather impertinent escapade is *Northanger Abbey*; I hope that the spirit of Jane Austen is in a forgiving mood. Here, then, are Catherine Morland and her friend Isabella Thorpe discussing the pleasures of literature:

"Do you know, I saw the prettiest hat you can imagine, in a shop window in Milson-street just now, next door to Forbidden Planet. I quite longed for it. But my dearest Catherine, what have you been doing with yourself all this morning? Have you gone on with The Lord of the Rings?"

"Yes, I have been reading it since I woke, and am got to the Morgul-Vale."

"Are you indeed? How delightful! Oh, I would not tell you what is beyond Morgul-Vale for the world! Are you not wild to know?"

"Oh! Yes, quite, what can it be? But do not tell me, I would not be told on any account. I know it must be a dragon, I am sure it is a winged dragon. Oh, I am delighted with the book! I should like to spend my whole life reading it. I assure you, if it had not been to meet you, I would not have come away from it for the world!"

"Dear creature! How much I am obliged to you; and when you have finished The Lord of the Rings, we will read The Silmarillion together; and I have made out a list of ten or twelve more of the same kind for you."

"Have you indeed? How glad I am! What are they all?"

"I will read you their names directly; here they are in my pocket-

book. The Belgariad, The Malloreon, The Fionavar Tapestry, the Discworld series and The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant. Those will last us some time."

"Yes, pretty well, but are they all horrid, are you sure they are all horrid?"

"Yes, quite sure, especially Thomas Covenant, for a particular friend of mine, a Miss Andrews, one of the sweetest creatures in the world, has read every one of them."

History, or Jane Austen, does not relate what was the nature of Catherine's feelings on reaching Cirith Ungol and discovering the true nature of "the monstrous guardian of the pass". However, she appears to have survived the experience with her sensibilities intact, for we find her going for a walk around the environs of Bath, several chapters farther on, and while doing so, carrying on a discussion on the subject of fantasy literature with Henry Tilney and his sister.

"They determined on walking round Beechen Cliff, that noble hill, whose beautiful verdure and hanging coppice render it so striking an object from almost every opening in Bath."

"I never look at it," said Catherine, as they walked along the side of the river, "without thinking of Rivendell."

"You have been there, then?" said Henry, a little surprized.

"Oh! no, I only mean what I have read about. It always puts me in mind of the country that Bilbo and the Dwarves travelled through in The Hobbit. But you never read solennee fiction or fantasy, I dare say."

"Why not?"

"Because they are not clever enough for you - gentlemen read better books."

"The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good fantasy, must be intolerably stupid. I have read all Mr. Tolkien's works, and most of them with great pleasure. The Lord of the Rings, when I had once

begun it, I could not lay down again; - I remember finishing it in two days - my hair standing on end the whole time."

"I am very glad to hear it indeed, and now I shall never be ashamed of liking *The Lord of the Rings* myself. But I really thought before, young men despised science fiction and fantasy amazingly."

"It is amazingly, it may very well suggest amazement if they do - for they read nearly as many as women. I myself have read hundreds and hundreds. Do not imagine that you can cope with me in a knowledge of *Elves and Hobbits*. If we proceed to particulars, and engage in the never-ceasing inquiry of 'Have you read this?' and 'Have you read that?' I shall soon leave you as far behind me as - what shall I say - I want an appropriate simile, - as far as Frodo himself left the others of the Company when he went with Samwise into Mordor."

The author to whom Jane Austen does actually refer, in the passages just misquoted and mishandled, is, as "Janeites" will know, Mrs. Anne Radcliffe (1764-1823); the book mainly concerned is her most famous novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). This represents, in literary history, the "type" for the "Gothick" novel of fantasy, mystery, horror and suspense. The genre of "horrid novels", as Jane Austen describes them (using the word in the now obsolete sense of "hair-raising"), reached the height of its vogue just at the time when she began to write her own masterpieces. I have indulged in the above passages of parody as a light-hearted way of likening certain fashions current at the end of the eighteenth century to their successors of our own time. This is not to pretend that Mrs. Radcliffe qualifies, or deserves, to be thought of as the J.R.R. Tolkien of her day; one might perhaps be somewhat closer to the mark if one thought of her as the Agatha Christie of it. The comparison, besides having its picturesque and entertaining aspects, does however have a more serious side to it. It throws some valuable light on the way certain long-standing traditions, both literary and visual, left their mark on Tolkien's imaginative writings, most notably on *The Lord of the Rings*. This of course happened at a great many removes, and no doubt without his being consciously aware of their having

done so.

There is one direction in which a direct parallel can be drawn between the two authors. They both stand in the same kind of historical relationship with the respective genres with which each of them is associated. Tolkien has indelibly stamped his identity on the fantasy genre which has become associated with his name, but he did not originate it. The "Gothick" novel, similarly, is usually held to have started with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (published in 1764). The novels of Mrs. Radcliffe, beginning with *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* (1789), attained, in the last decade of the eighteenth century, the status of a "cult" or "eraze" (the effects of which can be seen in *Northanger Abbey*), a cult which in the next couple of decades was to produce a crop of followers and imitators. The "campus cult" following of *The Lord of the Rings* in the 1960s - "my deplorable cultus", as Tolkien himself referred to it - had similar after-effects, presenting the spectacle of a kind of parasitic growth invading the true and appreciative readership of the books. Similarly, quite an amusing comparison can be drawn between the legends that accumulated about Mrs. Radcliffe during her lifetime, and the cannibalisation of her literary reputation then and after her death, and the vicissitudes of Tolkien publishing history in the years that followed the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, particularly the "cult years" of the 1960s. The reality, as far as Mrs. Radcliffe was concerned, was comfortably prosaic. She grew up in Bath, married at the age of 23, and spent the rest of her life in respectable and uneventful domesticity. Her romances were written as a means of diversion through long evenings at her fireside; at the end of her life she died of nothing more sensational than a severe attack of asthma. She had, however, ceased to publish for a considerable number of years before her death, and while still at the height of her popularity. Fictitious reports of her death had become widely circulated long before the event actually happened. Other tales, equally fictitious, but more picturesque, had preceded them. One such had it that the inspiration for her "horrid novels" was derived from nightmares deliberately induced by the authoress herself with the aid of a late-night diet of underdone pork chops (one

might, or might not, like to speculate on the dietary practices of certain present-day authors of "fantasy epics" on such a basis). Hack writers were encouraged by reports of the authoress's death to pass off their own productions under her name. A delightful, if decidedly incredible, tale has it that one such, a certain Robert Will, provoked her into taking direct counter-measures. She dressed herself in flowing draperies and, so disguised, made her appearance at Will's rooms. Here she found him at work in a room heavily draped in black, decorated with skulls, daggers and similar emblems, and lit only by one guttering candle. Uttering only the words, "Robert Will, what are you doing here?" she took his manuscript, held it in the candle flame, and reduced it to ashes, subsequently making her exit as mysteriously as she had entered. The terrified scribe rushed round to his publisher on the following day and reported that the ghost of Mrs. Radcliffe had appeared to him, and burned his masterpiece. *Se non e vero ...* One may, perhaps, regret that it never occurred to Tolkien to take a similar line with regard to the unauthorised edition of his work circulated by Ace Books ...

Mrs. Radcliffe's own works, "horrid" though they may be, preserve a highly moral tone and refrain from allusions or suggestions which might shame the cheek of maiden modesty. This was very far from being the case with the best-known of her immediate successors, Matthew Lewis, who, in *The Monk* (1795), went well "over the top" in his defiance of contemporary sensibilities. This lurid (or lewd, as contemporaries saw it) tale of the career and eventual damnation of its eponymous hero had to be withdrawn almost immediately after its publication, to re-appear only in a heavily bowdlerised form. Nowadays there are hardly, it seems, any such sensibilities left to defy, and the crop of camp followers, would-be imitators and other successors of Tolkien, writers of "fantasy", "sword-and sorcery", or however one likes to describe it, have been free to develop his example in ways which would have disconcerted him, or worse. But Mrs. Radcliffe's popular success and immense following, to pursue the comparison with "The Tolkien phenomenon" a stage further, was similarly not just a passing "craze" confined to a large but unsophisticated reading public. (This does, of course, occur, how many people, one wonders,

recall even the name of Marie Corelli?) She was widely admired and envied in serious literary circles. Coleridge called *The Mysteries of Udolpho* "the most interesting novel in the English language". Keats paid homage to her example in *The Eve of St. Agnes*, while Walter Scott called her "the first poetess of romantic fiction". Hazlitt's remarks about her make it plain how pervasive and innovatory her influence was in relation to a great body of Victorian and later authors of "tales of mystery and imagination". "In harrowing the soul", he wrote, "with imaginary horrors, and making the flesh creep and the nerves thrill with fond hopes and fears, she is unrivalled." It hardly needs emphasising how extensive and widely scattered the literary after-effects have been ever since her time in the work both of "popular" and of more "serious" writers; though if there is a "direct line" of succession following her, it reaches its conclusion not with Tolkien and *The Lord of the Rings* but with the *Gormenghast* fantasies of Mervyn Peake.

It was Mrs. Radcliffe's promotion of descriptive atmosphere to a leading role in her narratives that represented her truly distinctive, innovatory attribute and contributed most to her immense popularity. The "scenery" almost acts the characters off the stage. It is in this respect that one can see her work reflected, even if distantly, in Tolkien's, and particularly, of course, in *The Lord of the Rings*. In her case the atmosphere is compounded of a rich brew of enticing imagery: mountain peaks frowning above remote and secluded valleys; grim and sinister castles perched on forbidding precipices; faint moonlight filtering through "Gothick" casements into tapestried galleries (a window is never just a window, always a "casement"); dank and gloomy subterranean vaults full of the bones of confined ancestors; ruined monasteries through whose cloisters glide spectral processions of cowed monks; "all that sort of rot", as one Wooster, B., would express it. "Childe Roland to the dark tower came, sir," says Jeeves to Bertie when, under a name not his own, he arrives to stay at a stately home where he expects to have to face a frosty reception and a difficult and testing time. It is just the same with the much put-upon heroine of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* when she arrives at the fortress so

named. The passage that describes her first sight of it is worth quoting nearly in full, as it conveys the flavour of a great deal of the author's writing.

The sun ... streamed in full splendour upon the towers and battlements of a castle that spread its extensive ramparts along the brow of a precipice above. The splendour of these illumined objects was heightened by the contrasted shade, which involved the valley below.

"There," said Montoni, speaking for the first time in several hours, "is Udolpho."

Emily gazed with melancholy awe upon the castle, which she understood to be Montoni's, for though it was now lighted by the setting sun, the gothic greatness of its features, and its mouldering walls of dark grey stone, rendered it a gloomy and sublime object. As she gazed, the light died away on its walls, leaving a melancholy purple tint, which spread deeper and deeper, as the thin vapour crept up the mountain, while the battlements above were still tipped with splendour. From these, too, the rays soon faded, and the whole edifice was invested with the solemn duskiness of evening. Silent, lonely and sublime, it seemed to stand the sovereign of the scene, and to frown defiance on all, who dared to invade its solitary reign. As the twilight deepened, its features became more awful in obscurity, and Emily continued to gaze, till its clustering towers were alone seen, rising over the tops of the woods, beneath whose thick shade the carriages soon after began to ascend.

The Tolkien buff may well feel a sense of kinship with such a passage as this, familiar as he is with the emotions aroused by Barad-Dur with its towers, battlements and "gaping gates of steel and adamant", or by the grinning walls of Minas Morgul with their windows "like black holes looking inward into emptiness". But Mrs. Radcliffe herself was doing no more than exploiting, or cashing in on, ideas which, at the time she was writing, had been current in art and literature for nearly a century. The passage just quoted is typical of her writing in its use of magniloquent phrases; "gazed with melancholy awe", "a gloomy and sublime object", and the like. The background of the style is the concept, widely popular throughout much of the eighteenth century, of a hierarchy of literary and artistic modes, with, at its summit, that of "The

Sublime", ranking slightly, but definitely, above that of "The Beautiful". The former mode was associated with the emotions of fear and terror experienced in a positive, quasi-religious sense, "awe-inspiring", as we still say. Edmund Burke, in his *Inquiry into the Origins of the Sublime* (1755), established it on a philosophical basis; Sir Joshua Reynolds, in the series of Discourses he delivered as the first President of the Royal Academy, placed the depiction on the grand scale of biblical, historical or legendary subjects at the highest "rank" to which the painter could aspire, that of the "sublime", represented most plainly of all by the art of Michelangelo, as that of the "beautiful" was represented by that of Raphael. In so far as landscape painting was concerned, the representatives of each "rank" were, quite clearly, the heroic subjects depicted in the landscapes of Nicolas Poussin (1594-1655) and the dramatic "wild and rocky" landscapes of Salvator Rosa (1615-1673), of the first rank; and of the second, the Arcadian pastoral scenes depicted by Claude Lorraine (1600-1682). Both Claude and Salvator Rosa are frequently mentioned by Anne Radcliffe in her novels, and acknowledged as a source of inspiration. Shortly before her time the English artist Richard Wilson (1712/4-1782) had taken over the "Claudean" type of landscape, and combined it with subject matter taken from myth or legend in a way that encouraged some contemporaries to see him as having improved on Claude by having taken him into the realm of "the sublime".

The art of Claude Lorraine has a certain significance in relation to Tolkien, for the reason that his pictures have inspired and influenced generations of Englishmen in the way they have looked at and thought about the landscape of their own country. The middle and late eighteenth century saw the actual importation into England of works by Claude in considerable quantity, brought back by those who had visited Italy on the "Grand Tour". It likewise saw the flowering of the art of "picturesque" landscaping and landscape gardening at the hands of William Kent, and associated later with the name of Capability Brown, who continued the task of converting the visions of Claude the artist into physical reality. (Even a "Claude glass" was invented, through which those who

used it could see the landscapes before them overlaid with a patina which converted them into "Claudean views". From our point of view it is interesting that there seems to be a decidedly "Tolkienian" quality about a number of the landscapes of Claude, and this is even more noticeable in his drawings than in his large-scale oil-paintings and classical set-pieces. One or two of his drawings may even bring some of Tolkien's own drawings to mind, even though the latter may be classified as "naïve art", and not be comparable in any technical sense. Everyone who knows one of Claude's landscapes (in England we have a good many) will remember his enormous distances, often bathed in evening sunlight and always backed by distant, inviting ranges of hills. Their equivalents frequently appear in *The Lord of the Rings*, stretching out into illimitable distances, with Mindolluin, say, or the Misty Mountains, quivering on the edge of sight. Equally, the landscape of Ithilien, as Tolkien presents it, in its "dishvelled dryad loveliness", has a decidedly "Claudean" feeling about it.

The impression made by the art of Claude Lorrain on the English visual sensibility is seen at its plainest in the work of J.M.W. Turner, and all admirers of Turner will know how constantly he returns to Claude as a source of inspiration and matter for re-interpretation. The concept of "the sublime", as manifested in the feeling of awe inspired by the grandest of scenery, affected him profoundly, and was likewise evident in his recurring preoccupation with the spectacles presented by storm, tempest and shipwreck. The concept of weather, particularly in its more hostile and savage aspects, as a source of "the sublime" goes back to James Thomson's long four-part pastoral poem *The Seasons* (1725-6), another key text for eighteenth century ideas in this sphere; it provided an important source of reference for Turner, who frequently annotated his paintings with verses of his own in a similar manner and metre; it is also quoted from time to time by Anne Radcliffe in chapter headings and elsewhere. Turner's "Alpine" drawings and watercolours are particularly rich in "Tolkienian" scenes; the famous snowstorm in *Hannibal Crossing the Alps* 2 could easily be the one that engulfs the Company below Caradhras. Sometimes, as one reads *The Lord of the Rings*, a like comparison, but in the opposite direction, may suggest itself.

There is a decidedly "Turneresque" quality about the storm which passes over Edoras at the point where Theoden, at Gandalf's insistence, emerges into the sunlight which follows it.

In Mrs. Radcliffe's writing these categories of "the sublime" and "the beautiful" are presented in what seems like a deliberately calculated contrast. Her lengthy and elaborate descriptions of Alpine or Pyrenean mountain scenery make use over and over again of suitable epithets: "sublime", "awe-inspiring grandeur", and so on. In her equally extensive and flowery descriptions of smiling pastoral countrysides she does not characterise the peasants inhabiting them without making them perform rustic dances in the manner of Claude Lorrain; an account of a party or a ball at some noble house is liable to turn into a *fête champêtre à la Watteau*. It is interesting to note how something of the same dichotomy survives in Tolkien, notably in *The Lord of the Rings*. One side of it is inhabited by the landscape of the Shire, a sort of evocation or distillation of the English landscape as it was about the period of Turner and Constable, and also, in another way, by the "classical" landscape of Ithilien. The other side is represented by the "sublime" scenery of the Misty Mountains, Caradhras or the Redhorn Gate, or by the forbidding gloomy range of the Ephel Duath and the feelings of terror inspired in general by the approaches to Mordor. The first sight at close quarters of the high peaks of the Misty Mountains strikes Bilbo or the hobbit members of the Company of the Ring with the same sort of emotions as those that must have been experienced by English travellers of two centuries ago on their first encounter with the Alps.

There may be similarity in the roles respectively played by the "scenic" element in Tolkien and in the novels of Anne Radcliffe, but there is much less similarity about the respective ways they are played. So many of Tolkien's scenic descriptions, of Weather-top, for instance, as of the lands on each side of the Anduin as the Company travel down it, before they reach the Argonath, convince not by emphatic literary imagery, but in a straightforwardly circumstantial way, as though Tolkien had been a reporter armed with camera and notebook, briefed to accompany the travellers on

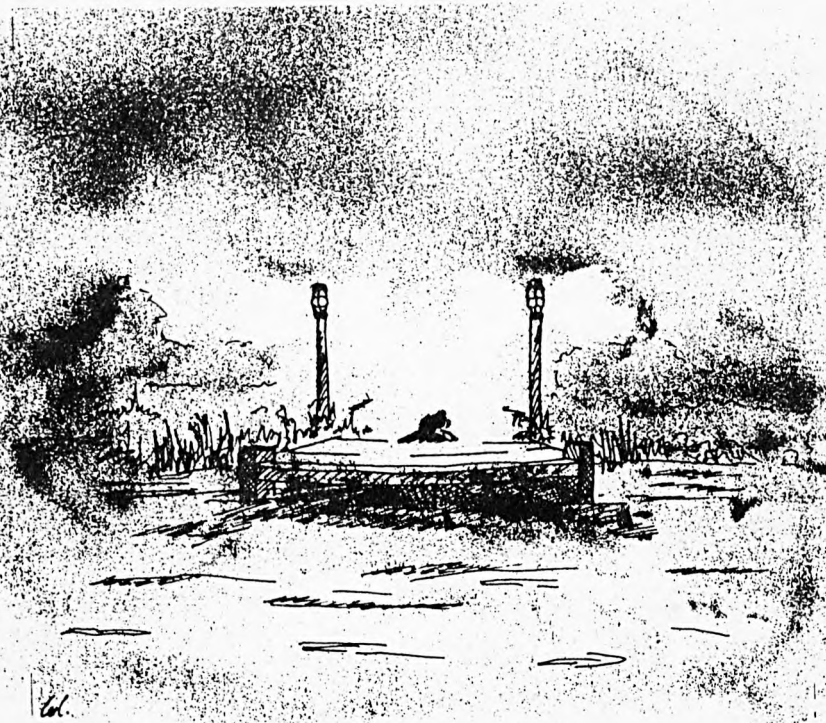
all their journeys. He can call on plenty of evocative imagery of his own when he needs it, for scenes like that of the slag-mounds of the Morannon, which makes a startling impression just by contrast with the tone of so much of the descriptive writing that has come earlier. Such emphasis naturally becomes more frequent in the later stages of *The Lord of the Rings* as the story's progress, and Frodo and Sam's towards Mount Doom, move towards their joint climax.

Little enough of all this, no doubt, occurred to Tolkien himself. Probably he was "sublimely unconscious" of it, to use the word in a present-day sense. There is the tale, familiar from Tolkien's letters³, of the visitor who brought him reproductions of "old pictures" which he felt "to have been designed to illustrate *The Lord of the Rings* long before its time", and Tolkien's disclaimer of any knowledge of them. (It may be a little strange that, bearing in mind his own talent, still insufficiently evaluated, as evident in his drawings and paintings of Middle-earth, Tolkien was, as he said, "not well

acquainted with pictorial Art".) Still, he implicitly agreed with his visitor's conclusion that, "you don't suppose, do you, that you wrote all that book yourself?" He was exercising the faculty of re-interpreting past traditions whose existence he took for granted, as artists generally do. And without the existence of the English tradition of observation and scenic representation, of which the novels of Anne Radcliffe are an earlier manifestation, the whole world of Middle-earth, its lands, topography and scenery, would have worn quite a different shape from the one we all know.

NOTES

1. Her last novel, *Gaston de Blondeville*, written in 1802, remained in manuscript until her death and was published posthumously.
2. In the Tate Gallery; first exhibited in 1812. The storm was said to have been based on one actually observed by Turner on a visit to Yorkshire. For examples of "Tolkienian" views in the work of Turner generally, see especially: Wilton, Andrew *Turner and the Sublime* British Museum Publications, 1980.
3. *Letters* pp. 412-414



Look back Mr. Frodo!