Gothic and Architecture: Morris, Ruskin, Carlyle, and the Gothic legacies of the Lake Poets

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[C]ontrast … the Architecture which is a mere pedantic imitation of what was once alive, and that which after a development of long centuries has still in it … capacities for fresh developments … [W]hen the modern world [comes to] a change as wide and deep as that which destroyed Feudalism … the style of architecture will have to be historic in the true sense; it will not be able to dispense with tradition; it cannot begin at least with doing something quite different from anything that has been done before; yet … the form of it … as well as the spirit, must be Gothic; an organic style cannot spring out of an eclectic one, but only from an organic one. In the future, therefore, our style of architecture must be Gothic Architecture. (Morris 1993: 347-8)

**I**

This vision of the ‘Gothic’ future comes from the end of a lecture by William Morris to the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society. Morris was speaking in 1889, the year before the publication of his ‘Utopian Romance’, *News from Nowhere* (1890). I take it as my point of departure because it suggests three practical ways of going forward in this subject – as well, of course, as back.

The first way forward relates to the strange and dislocating ‘and’ that sits at the heart of my title. Morris’s title is ‘Gothic Architecture’, and his prediction of the future ends on this common-sense (and, until the 1970s, long-dominant) collocation. But what Morris does in his lecture is to open up a similar space within the phrase. As I shall suggest in more detail in a moment, his lecture ends up not really talking about ‘Gothic Architecture’ at all. The centre of interest lies rather in the ‘and’ – in the notion of a ‘style […] historic’ and ‘the future’.

According to Morris’s master, John Ruskin, in his enormously influential chapter *The Nature of Gothic* (1853), architecture had a special status among the arts. Not ‘merely a science of the rule and compass’, it was one of the highest and most distinctively *human* and ‘poetic’ of the arts: ‘more than any other subject of art, the work of man, and the expression of [his] average power […] born of his necessities, and expressive of his nature’ (Ruskin 1837: 505; 2004: 56). ‘[T]he common expression of our life’, adds Morris the ‘practical Socialist’. The ‘true architectural work’ is a ‘harmonious’ and all-inclusive ‘co-operative […] art’: ‘a genuine thing’ (Morris 1993: 331, 345).

Ruskin’s *Nature of Gothic* may be, as Dinah Birch puts it, ‘largely distinct from the historical context of Gothic buildings’ (Birch 2017). Articulating the ‘psychological’ novelty of a ‘wolfish life’ that is *therefore* ‘ennobling’, Ruskin’s work is also, as Richard Adelman suggests, widely separate from the ‘Gothics’ of Ann Radcliffe and ‘Monk’ Lewis, which rather deploy ‘extreme moral depravity’ within a rusticated discourse of enlightenment (see Adelman 2017: 153; and see Brodey 2008: 12-20; and Miles 2000: xviii-xxv). But *The Nature of Gothic* is arguably – as Birch’s subtitle suggests – ‘more relevant than ever’. As Lars Spuybroek suggests in *The Digital Nature of Gothic* (2011), Ruskin’s approach forecasts a contemporary programme of ‘digital’ architecture in the broadest sense. ‘[I]mplanting craft into machinery’ will not mean slowing ‘modern’ modes of replication to human speeds, but resuming the ‘complex motor schema’ of Ruskin’s ‘clumsy […] old Venetian’, working with pre-modern tools in a way productive of both ‘imperfection’ and ‘transfiguration’ at once (Ruskin 2004: 46, 39-41). Extending his reading all the way to the ‘cut-and-paste’ paradigm of the modern word-processor, Spuybroek’s ‘vital’ rereading of Ruskin leads towards a reconception of the computer ‘not as a machine [but as] a way of positioning […] inside matter itself’ digital processes of ‘stepwise’ ‘iterative’ change (Spuybroek 2011: 15, 26-9). With its failing ‘majesty’, its ‘exhortation’ to advance *beyond* mere ‘engine-turned’ efficiency (Ruskin 2004: 39, 41, 48), Ruskin’s account of ‘Gothic’ is not only ‘human’ and poetic, but (as Morris put it in his 1892 preface) most characteristically ‘ethical and political’, indeed inherently social (Morris 1993: 369). ‘And it is, perhaps’, says Ruskin of this ‘dignifying’ aspect of this ‘subject of art’,

the principal admirableness of the Gothic schools of architecture, that they thus receive the results of the labour of inferior minds; and out of fragments full of imperfection, and betraying that imperfection in every touch, indulgently raise up a stately and unaccusable whole. (2004: 39)

To discuss Gothic *and* Architecture under the rubric of ‘Gothic and the Arts’ could therefore be to trace the social history of a particularly important artform, linking post-eighteenth-century Gothic back into the ‘long centuries’ of medieval artistic practice. A second approach might instead pick out the intriguing – Gothic or ‘medievalist’ – temporality on display in Morris’s lecture, and the contradictions involved in the ‘organic’ resumption of an artistic practice, cut off from its material and social conditions and contexts. In *News from Nowhere*, set in the London and Oxfordshire of the year 2102, Morris indulges himself in a revenge upon ‘complacent’ Victorian modernity. It is, the narrator William Guest learns, ‘the nineteenth century, of which such big words have been said’, that ‘count[s] for nothing’ among people ‘who read Shakespeare and ha[ve] not forgotten the Middle Ages’ (1993: 84). The frontispiece of the Kelmscott edition draws similar mental brackets around the ‘modern’ world, presenting the ‘old house’ in the ‘hereafter’ (see figure 1) – and the end of the story in the beginning. This casting of the modern world as the true ‘dark age’ generates pathos and a pleasing historical ‘shape’, picking up on Ruskin’s own classification of the historical sense into ‘Classicalism, Mediaevalism, and Modernism’, with ‘medievalism’ embodying a ‘Gothic form’ of society, fusing ‘architecture’, ‘religion’ and ‘national life and character’ (Ruskin 1854: 21, 193; 1866: 48, 56-7). But the access of historiographical pathos comes at the cost of opening Morris’s desired Gothic resumption to the same charge of ‘simulation’ that he levels at neo-classicism. The ‘brick box’ nineteenth century being, by Morris’s own account, almost as profoundly cut off from the ‘graceful […] fourteenth-century type’ of architecture (Morris 1993: 344, 226) as was the ‘New Birth’ from classical Rome and Greece, how could his Gothic Architecture be anything other than a rehearsal of dead ‘forms’ without their animating ‘spirit’?

The idea of a ‘style […] historic in the true sense’ seems to be Morris’s solution of the problem. In *News from Nowhere*, the buildings of the new society ‘embrace the best qualities of the Gothic of northern Europe’ and of ‘the Saracenic and Byzantine’ (Morris 1993: 62). But they do so without any ‘copying’. The architecture of 2102 is thus not Gothic in particular ‘form’, but in underlying historical identity – so as, ironically, much better to deserve the (apparently forgotten) name. (There are only four uses of the word ‘Gothic’ in the text, and all of them are Guest’s). In the lecture on ‘Gothic Architecture’, however, Morris is obliged to give practical consideration of means to ends. ‘In the future …’ he (almost) concludes, suggesting with the phrase both ‘going forwards’ and ‘in the end’, and hinting at the possible legitimacy of an initial phase of Gothic ‘copying’, distinct from the mere ‘imitation’ of neo-classicism. The way has already been prepared for this suggestion by oblique phrasing that seem to pulls in a direction opposite to its content, and so to mime the induction of a fresh creative energy (‘it cannot begin at least *with* doing something quite different from anything that has been done before’).

The ‘historic’ character of Morris’s resumed Gothic, one might say, consists in its double time-signature, the backward-looking futurity of *departing from* the ‘form’ and ‘style’ of what has gone before. Morris thus adumbrates the transumptive sense of the Gothic Revival – not quite present in Ruskin or Pugin, and more nearly there in Carlyle – that a yet *better* spirit lies in waiting in the external forms of a reinvented tradition. ‘Nay, after all’, wrote Carlyle in his 1829 essay ‘Signs of the Times’:

our spiritual maladies are but of Opinion; we are but fettered by chains of our own forging, and which ourselves can also rend asunder. […] Are the solemn temples, in which the Divinity was once visibly revealed among us, crumbling away? We can repair them, we can rebuild them. The wisdom, the heroic worth of our forefathers, which we have lost, we can recover. That admiration of old nobleness, which now so often shows itself as faint dilettantism, will one day become a generous emulation, and man may again be all that he has been, and more than he has been. (Carlyle 1971: 53-4).

Taking this second approach to the subject of Gothic *and* Architecture would involve picking up on the ways in which ‘Gothic’, carrying associations of Commonwealth politics and horror novels, Nordic tribes and Elizabethan plays, is a *zeitgeist* term – a word that becomes, through contestation and self-contradiction, a ‘concept’, and more specifically, a category of historiographical reflection (see Koselleck 2004: 75-92). But the third possible approach, implicit in and perhaps comprehending those already discussed, would focus on the underlying claim of Morris’s lecture: that all art is essentially *dead* until society is revolutionized by and for art (see also Frith 2005: 118). An art that is not in touch with social being – that does not, like Wordsworth’s ‘real language of men’, arise from common ‘repeated experience’ – is really anti-art; ‘arbitrary and capricious’ ‘poetic diction’ and not poetry (Wordsworth 1974: I, 144, 152). And this isolation of the domain of art does indeed – our reflexive scepticism being an index of the true depth of the problem – have practical social consequences. As Raymond Williams suggested in relation to second-generation Romanticism, there is a lapse in the ‘culture’ argument as ‘art’ – expanded from Poetry ‘as Wordsworth would have approved’ – comes to denote something ‘special’ rather than something characteristic of a ‘whole way of life’:

The positive consequence of the idea of art as a superior reality was that it offered an immediate basis for an important criticism of industrialism. The negative consequence was that it tended, as both the situation and the opposition hardened, to isolate art, to specialize the imaginative faculty to this one kind of activity, and thus to weaken the dynamic function which Shelley proposed for it. (Williams 1963: 59-60)

Morris’s version of this cultural defeat is a sort of architectural ‘Norman Yoke’ theory (see Hill 1968: 79). Neo-classicism, the ‘arbitrary’ and ‘pedantic imitation of what was once alive […] a style which had long lost all elements of life and growth’, is also a sort of mental curfew bell:

[S]trange to say, to [the] living body of social, political, religious, scientific New Birth was bound the dead corpse of a past art. On every side it [i.e. the Renaissance] bade men look forward to some change or other, were it good or bad: on the side of art [however] it bade men look backward […] in scorn of [their immediate forefathers] to an art that had been dead a thousand years before. Hitherto, from the very beginning the past was past, all of it that was not [unconsciously] alive in the present […] Henceforth the past was to be our present, and the blankness of its dead wall was to shut out the future from us. (Morris 1993, 344)

Thus arbitrarily installed in the heart of society by the ‘new’ forces of ‘commercialism’ and ‘contract’, neo-classicism *mortifies* – that is, it works both to *infect* and to *shame* – human nature in all its ‘incapability’ and lurking ‘transfiguration’ (Ruskin 2004: 41). Making a mere ‘simulation’ of the present, turning ‘the people’ from ‘artists’ to unthinking ‘human machines’, the ‘blank’ neo-classical ‘wall’ kills imagination and serves to ‘shut out the future’ (Morris 1993, 346-7).

But as Morris put it in his 1894 account of his ‘socialist’ conversion, the triumph of the ‘eyeless vulgarity’ had itself set ‘revolution stirring’ (1993: 382). ‘Now we are no longer complacent’, he suggests in ‘Gothic Architecture’, ‘but are grumbling in a dim unorganised manner. We feel a loss, and unless we are very unreal and helpless we shall presently begin to try to supply that loss’ (1993: 348). Morris’s conclusion recalls the language of his master, John Ruskin, on the ‘greatness’ lurking within the ‘strange *disquietude* of the Gothic spirit’. It also recalls Ruskin’s own master, Thomas Carlyle (Wilmer ed., xxxv) in his Past and Present (1843), preferring ‘cloudy-browed, thick-soled, opaque Practicality’, in near-dumb ‘Congruity with the Unuttered’, to the facile clarity of ‘all logic-utterance’ (2005: 161). There is, Morris suggests, hope in such ‘dim unorganised’ unrest:

Art cannot be dead so long as we feel the lack of it, I say: and though we shall probably try many roundabout ways for filling up the lack; yet we shall at last be driven into the one right way of concluding that in spite of all risks, and all losses, unhappy and slavish work must come to an end. In that day we shall take Gothic Architecture by the hand, and know it for what it was and what it is. (1993: 348)

**II**

Over eighty years before Morris, in a Bristol lecture series beginning in January 1818, Samuel Taylor Coleridge had aimed at much the same end. It was already late in the day. Nearly two centuries of analogical thinking had gone over, from Nathaniel Bacon in 1647 declaring that earth had nothing to show more Gothic than English law (Bacon 1647, 96), to William Blackstone in the 1760s likening that law to the ‘winding and difficult’ ways between the ‘commodious’ apartments of an ‘old Gothic castle’ (Blackstone 1765-9, III, 17), and Edmund Burke in the 1790s comparing ‘reflections’ arising from deeply ingrained reverential habits to modern arts and sciences growing from the ‘Gothic and monkish’ institutions of the Universities (Burke 1987, 87-8). But Coleridge’s lectures are perhaps still more remarkable than Morris’s for the way they dissolve – in order to recreate – the closed collocation and the given associations of ‘Gothic Architecture’. And they suggest still more clearly – as I will suggest – where ‘we’ may turn in search of an ‘art’ still not dead.

Coleridge’s overarching subject, as presented in the *Literary Remains* published by his nephew Henry Nelson Coleridge, was not quite ‘Gothic and the arts’ but rather the ‘General character of the Gothic Mind in the Middle Ages’ – with a focus first on the ‘Gothic mind’ and architecture, and then, in lecture two, on ‘Gothic Literature *and* Art’ (Coleridge 1836-9, I, xvi). Lecture 14, headed simply ‘On Style’, defines the ‘Gothic structure’ – as manifested in both ‘government’ and ‘language’, as distinguished from the architectonic mode of ‘the Greek’, and as exemplified by England and the English tongue – as a ‘structure … complete in each part’ that preserves ‘the rights and interests of the individual in conjunction with those of the whole’ (Coleridge 1987: II.231). Gothic buildings, Gothic governments, and Gothic languages – all were patterned upon such ‘*community* of feelings’ (231’ my emphasis). ‘Gothic’ in these lectures is thus not so much a ‘tree’ with different branches as what the fined and refined gothicism of Gilles Deleuze would call a ‘rhizome’ (see Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 3-28; and Spuybroek 2011: 9) – or (Coleridge’s own term) an ‘assemblage’.

Coleridge may have been speaking relatively late in the history of the Gothic, but he was also speaking at a unique historical juncture in the development of the concept: after Waterloo and the end of the widespread rupture and ruin of the French Revolution, and in the midst of the unreal ‘Gothic restoration’. In *The Friend*, the short-lived periodical of 1809-10 that he was revising at the time of his lectures towards book publication (pub. Nov. 1818), Coleridge had represented himself as a man out of time, immersed in the ‘*old Faith*’ that was ‘*modern Heresy*’, ‘upholding some Principles both of Taste and Philosophy, adopted by the great Men of Europe from the Middle of the fifteenth till towards the Close of the seventeenth Century’ (1969: II, 17). *The Friend* also pictured the period as one of unprecedented agitation, with a ‘soul-sickening sense of unsteadiness’ and an ‘infectious feelin[g] of Insecurity’ spreading through ‘the whole Edifice of civil Society’:

And could we bring within the field of imagination, the devastation effected in the moral world, by the violent removal of old customs, familiar sympathies, willing reverences, and habits of subordination almost naturalized into instinct […] though the […] whole War were brought together before our eyes in one disastrous Field, [it] would present but a tame Tragedy in comparison. (II, 83)

The years after 1815 saw what Stephen Bann describes as a very real effort to ‘bring back the past’, accompanied by an upsurge in self-conscious ‘historical representation’ and ‘staging the past’ (Bann 1995: 110-12). In France, under a new constitution ‘assimilated to the British’, disrupted ‘monastic communities and […] traditional dynasties’ were hurriedly restored (see *Gentleman’s Magazine* 84 [1814], 396; and Bann, 110-12). But the deeply felt need to add the gleam of historical continuity through art also suggests, as Bann puts it, a ‘widespread conviction that the reinstatement of the trappings of the ancien regime’ was ‘no more than superficial’.

Coleridge’s Gothic grows out of this context of social instability and the felt need for imaginative art. As R.J. Smith notes of Coleridge’s 1830 work of social and political theory, *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, his particular contribution was to re-conceptualize the ‘prescriptive claim’ in Burke and other historically-minded constitutional writers, suggesting that what mattered was not an ‘unbroken chain’ of transmission, but rather ‘conformity with the Idea’ of the Constitution (Smith 1987: 153-5). Generalizing the English common-law mode of analogical reasoning whereby a judge ‘discovers’ and interstitially ‘develops’ an unwritten but supposedly pre-existing law (Lord Goff 1999), Coleridge envisaged an ‘insular’, ‘self-evolving Constitution’ that retained historical dynamism in proportion as its institutions remained to some degree ‘potential, latent, dormant’, submerged within ‘the Idea, unevolved’ (1976: 85-103). Gothic architecture was essential to this conception, for Coleridge in his lectures anticipates Ruskin in thinking of ‘Gothic’ as a quality or a mode of self-changefulness, the ‘strange *disquietude* of the spirit’, made visible in architecture. Coleridge also gives the term the historiographical charge that it was to retain in Morris. ‘Gothic’ here is not only a term in transition (from Nordic tribes to Elizabethan plays and ‘Jacobin’ novels), but the mode of transition itself, presented in the incipiently monstrous form of the Gothic cathedral: emergently ‘harmonious’ but composed from ‘strange grotesques’ (74).

The ‘Middle Ages’, for Coleridge, in some sense simply *was* the conceptual development of the Gothic: the action of the ‘all-transforming’ spirit of Christianity upon the diverse civilizational legacies of the Greeks, Romans and Goths. ‘Place before your eyes’, Coleridge told the audience at his second lecture, the city of Ravenna, ‘with the Palace of the imperial Goth the great Theoderic, frowning opposite to the Christian Temple’. And after this ‘commencement’, he asked them:

[I]magine […] a Cathedral, of York, of Milan or of Strasburg, with all its many Chapels, its pillared stem and leaf-work Roof, as if some sacred [pagan] grove […] had been awed into stone at the approach of the true divinity […] [while] the chaunt of penitence and holy pity from consecrated Virgins sobbed and died away in its dark recesses […] [A]nd behold at the high Altar the warrior Monarch kneeling with bowed and bared head, he and his attendant Peers, and with child-like awe receiving from the aged Bishop or mitred Abbot the precepts, the blessing, and the sacramental Pledge of Peace and Mercy, – and in this assemblage thus collected before your imagination you will see and recognize the completion of the Æra –. (1987: II, 74-5)

In this view, Gothic architecture was less a symbol of English nationhood than a synecdoche of a ‘dark’ human history: one of those ‘things’ which, in Foucault’s phrase, remained ‘capable of reflecting’ back a history understood in the nineteenth century not to exist except as ‘interwoven in [‘man’s’] own being’, his habits and acts (Foucault 2002: 402). ‘[A] creation of his own’, as Ruskin would put it, ‘born of his necessities, and expressive of his nature’ (2004: 56). And so, Coleridge suggested in the first lecture, to enter a Gothic cathedral was not only to experience ‘sublime art’, but to see into the heart of human historicity, to lay hands on the raveling strands:

The contemplation of the works of antique art excites a feeling of elevated beauty, and exalted notions of the human self; but the Gothic architecture impresses the beholder with a sense of self-annihilation; he becomes, as it were, a part of the work contemplated. An endless complexity and variety are united into one whole, the plan of which is not distinct from the execution. A Gothic cathedral is the petrifaction of our religion. (1987: II, 60)

Coleridge’s claims may look less exalted when seen from the perspective of Ruskin and Morris. But they should be taken in the context of the still-dominant eighteenth-century associations of ‘Gothic’ with ‘Dark, Melancholy and Monkish Piles’, not ‘Architecture’ but Mountains of Stone’ (Evelyn, 1707; qtd. in Frew, 316), and the sort of mental indexing ‘under the heading of Gothic’, as Goethe recorded in his essay ‘On German Architecture’ (1772), of ‘all the synonymous understandings concerning the ill-defined, the disordered, unnatural, pieced-together, patched-up, and overladen’ (qtd. Bann 1995: 83).

Coleridge’s self-dramatizing scene of ‘self-annihilation’ is a vivid example of what Stephen Bann refers to, in his argument about ‘staging the past’, of the desire-for history built over a feeling of being irrevocably emptied-out. The specific ‘text’ in relation to which Bann develops his claim is Francois-Marius Granet’s ‘large painting’, *The Choir of the Capuchin Church, Rome* (1817), executed against the ‘background’ of Napoleon’s ‘abrupt’ dissolution of the religious houses during Granet’s twenty-year residence there. The ‘personal and psychological’ dimensions of the widespread ‘feeling’ of being ‘emptied of history’ are made visible in the withdrawn figures of the friars (‘their foreheads calm and resigned after bidding the world farewell’), on the one hand, and in the over-compensatory ‘glisten’ in the surfaces and surrounding ‘woodwork’, on the other (Bann 1995: 110; and Granet, qtd. Bann 1995: 108). Implying a ‘deep ambivalence’ about the ‘relative importance’ – and one might add, about the relative *temporalities* – adhering to both ‘people and objects’, Granet’s painting successfully courts the ‘desire for history’ by presenting the novel historical pathos of a communal ‘machine for living in’ suddenly vulnerable to human abandonment. About to become the foster child of ‘solitude’ and the ‘mind’s eye’ (Granet, qtd. Bann 1995: 108), the seventeenth-century church appears, in the Foucauldian terms that Bann employs, to have undergone the discovery, unbeknownst to those past human figures temporarily populating it, of its nonhuman temporality – so as to appear suspended in a ‘double existence’ and ‘shifting from past to present in the very strangeness of its material identity’ (124).

‘No English artist’, Bann argues, ‘had an experience of the curtailment of history and tradition comparable with that of Granet’ (1995: 112). It is, however, in relation to the British artist R.P. Bonington and his *Restes gothiques* (1823-4) that Bann fully develops the notion of the Gothic building in artistic representation as a ‘shifter’, a subject uniquely suited to gradations of ‘pastness’, approximating to the movement in historical narration between the different ‘temporal systems’ of ‘discourse’ and ‘history’, enunciation and statement (Bann 1995: 39, 80, 120-1). The effect is visible in Bonington’s image of Rouen cathedral with its old wooden spire ‘as it was before the 1822 fire’ (figure 2). ‘[L]iterally frosted with […] the finest Gothic work’, according to the account of the fire in the *Edinburgh Annual Register* (293), the cathedral appears almost withdrawn into its own ornamentation. ‘[A] single Gothic thing over time’ – Spuybroek’s phrase for Monet’s 1890s Rouen series – would be an appropriate caption for Bonington’s historical articulation, too. And Bann elsewhere suggests that the relative absence of such a ‘curtailment of tradition’, keeping the English historical imagination deeper in the antiquarian fountain, makes the adaptive shifts of such English artists in the face of the new-found ‘exigencies of historical representation’ all the more potentially ‘illuminating’ (Bann 1995: 112). The problem arrives *late*, one might even say, hauntologically, as a recursively missed experience, forever re-enactment *and* first time (Derrida 1994: xvii–xix, 2–10).

This point leads back to Coleridge, and also towards Wordsworth. For Wordsworth, almost uniquely among English artists, *had* had the revolutionary experience of historical ‘curtailment’ that informed Coleridge’s ‘Gothic’ lectures – and contrived to ‘miss’ it, too. This, at least, was how Wordsworth re-told his experience of Paris in 1791-2 in books nine and ten of the 1805 *Prelude*; ‘the poem to Coleridge’, as it was long known in the Wordsworth circle. In a telling of the story that omits the facts of his love affair and fathering of a child with the royalist Annette Vallon, Wordsworth suggests that he was literally ‘compelled’ to return to England in late 1792 – facing either an ‘absolute want / Of funds’ (X, 190-1) or sacrificial death in the armies of the Revolution: ‘A poor mistaken and bewildered offering’, dying with all his ‘resolutions’ and ‘hopes’ still upon him, ‘A poet only to myself, to men / Useless’ (X, 190-200). But the ‘missing’ of the experience was also more fundamental than this, for his education and self-conscious identity as an English republican – engrafted by both the ‘ancient homeliness’ of the Lakes and Cambridge University’s ‘something […] / Of a republic’ – meant that the ‘curtailment’ of the Revolution could not be experienced *except* as continuity. His imagined death would, Wordsworth suggests, have been in ‘common cause’ but not quite identity with that of the Revolution. His ‘Creed which ten shameful years have not annulled’ being that a more Carlylean ‘old nobleness’ might yet have ‘quelled’ the Jacobins, popular ‘ignorance’ and external foes, and ‘Have cleared a passage for just government / And left a solid birthright to the state, / Redeemed according to example given / By ancient lawgivers’ (X, 178-88). ‘[T]hough impaired and changed / Much, as it seemed’, Wordsworth suggests after narrating the crisis he experienced when beholding the Revolution from afar, ‘I was no further changed / Than as a clouded, not a waning moon’ (X, 915-17). The continuity masked, however, a qualitative change:

A veil had been

Uplifted. Why deceive ourselves? – ’twas so,

’Twas even so – and sorrow for the man

Who either had not eyes wherewith to see,

Or, seeing, hath forgotten! Let this pass,

Suffice it that a shock had then been given

To old opinions, and the minds of all men

Had felt it – that my mind was both let loose,

Let loose and goaded.

(X, 855)

As Coleridge suggested in ‘To William Wordsworth’, his own poetic response to hearing Wordsworth read the whole *Prelude* aloud in December 1806, the burden of the poem was thus precisely the deep absorption and redirection – ‘Now in thy hidden life, and now abroad’ (l. 15) – of the ‘shock’ of Revolution. Wordsworth’s achievement, indeed, was to have gone about the rebuilding of that lost social ‘hope’ ‘abroad’ into a ‘dread watch-tower’ of individual, ‘homeward’ art:

Theme as hard as high!

Of smiles spontaneous, and mysterious fear […]

Of more than fancy – of the hope of man

Amid the tremor of a realm aglow,

Where France in all her towns lay vibrating […]

Thence summoned homeward – homeward to thy heart,

Oft from the watchtower of man’s absolute self,

With light unwaning on her eyes, to look

Far on – herself a glory to behold,

The angel of the vision!

(Coleridge 1985: 125-8; ll. 9-10, 21-3, 32-6)

Coleridge had published these lines shortly before his Gothic lecture series, in *Sybilline Leaves* (1817). But they appeared under the anonymous title ‘To a Gentleman’. And only a back-number of the (then-bookifying) *Friend* made the link: the number for 28 December 1809 had used three lines of Coleridge’s unpublished poem to introduce a two-page extract from ‘an unpublished Poem on the growth and revolutions of an individual mind, by Wordsworth’ (see Coleridge 1969: II, 258-9; I, 368-9). ‘To William Wordsworth’ was thus an almost entirely personal context for Coleridge’s account of Gothic art in 1818. But the grand claims of the poem surely anticipate the idea of Gothic architecture as the inscription of the history of the human mind. In ‘That Lay / More than historic, that prophetic Lay’, Coleridge suggested, Wordsworth had made a ‘permanent’ addition to ‘the archives of mankind’, telling adequately and for the first time ‘Of the foundations and the building-up’ of an individual ‘spirit’ (ll. 2-3, 5-6).

Coleridge’s lines are capable of the ‘modern’ interpretation – as in Victor Hugo – that ‘the book will destroy the edifice’. ‘Foundations’ and ‘building’ are metaphorically shifted in a way that seems permanent; the terminology of architecture is appropriated to ‘the archive’. The poem thoroughly pre-empts the ‘Gothic’ lectures on the ‘sense of self-annihilation’. It ends with the poet, his ‘being blended in one thought’, rising into a still-more profound obeisance: ‘Absorbed, yet hanging still upon the sound – / And when I rose, I found myself in prayer’. It would thus be possible to read Coleridge’s Gothic lectures as ultimately tending towards ideas of private enclosure and away from Morris and a genuine *social* resumption of Gothic art. But the dynamic nature of the analogical transferences in Coleridge’s writing leave him enmeshed, I would suggest, in a more mixed condition. Wordsworth’s discovery of a ‘More than historic’ mode of inner architecture suggests the lurking potential for a real and practical resumption of the ‘æra’ of the ‘all-transforming’ spirit.[[1]](#footnote-1) To Coleridge, Wordsworth was himself a modern Goth: already living at Grasmere the‘most august & innocent Life’ that formed the future-past vision of ‘Frost at Midnight’, seeing and hearing the ‘eternal language’ of God among ‘the crags / Of ancient mountain and beneath the clouds’. The two poets quarreled irreparably in 1810. But ‘Frost at Midnight’ was revised for inclusion in *Sybilline Leaves* (1817), along with the anonymized ‘To a Gentleman’. And another recording of Coleridge on the Gothic architecture and art in 1818 suggests just how physical and personally embodied his idea of the Gothic was, and just how far Wordsworth’s poetry seemed to portend a second coming of the spirit of the Goths:

[T]he Gothic art is sublime. On entering a cathedral, I am filled with devotion and awe; I am lost to the actualities that surround me, and my whole being expands up into the infinite; earth and air, nature and art, all swell up into eternity, and the only sensible impression left, is, ‘that I am nothing!’ This religion, while it tended to soften the manners of the Northern tribes, was at the same time highly congenial to their nature. The Goths are free from the stain of hero worship. Gazing on their rugged mountains, surrounded by impassable forests, accustomed to gloomy seasons, they lived in the bosom of nature, and worshipped an invisible and unknown deity. Firm in his faith, domestic in his habits, the life of the Goth was simple and dignified, yet tender and affectionate. (1987: II, 79)

**III**

It was not for the Lake Poets – not for Wordsworth or Coleridge, and still less for Southey – that Morris kept the key role in his historiographical narrative of Gothic resumption. Morris’s taste in books was for those – as he put it – ‘far more important than any literature’: ‘bibles’ that seemed to have ‘grown up from the very hearts of the *people*’ (qtd. Morris 1993: xxix). Ruskin’s *Stones* – ‘one of the very few necessary and inevitable utterances of the century’ (367) – was evidently such a book. Ruskin had grasped that in ‘the element of sensuous pleasure, which is the essence of all true art’, lay the intrinsic solution to the problem of ‘pain’ in ‘labour’ and the ‘general unhappiness and universal degradation’ accompanying the economic subjugation of ‘material nature’ (1993: 367). For to ‘feel’, as Ruskin put it, ‘their souls withering within them […] to be counted off into a heap of mechanism […] – this, humanity for no long time is able to endure’ (2004: 43). And from the ‘lesson’ thus taught ‘that art is the expression of man’s pleasure in labour’, for Morris it followed ‘that the hallowing of labour by art is the one aim for us at the present day’ (1993: 367).

‘I know indeed’, Morris conceded in his preface, ‘that Ruskin is not the first man who has put forward the possibility and the urgent necessity that men should take pleasure in Labour; for Robert Owen showed how by companionship and goodwill labour might be made at least endurable’ (1993: 368). The reference is to Robert Owen ‘of Lanark’ (1771–1858), ‘that […] most practical of all enthusiasts’, as Southey called him (2018: 33), whose industrial ‘villages of union’ united in opposition both the establishment and the forces of plebian radicalism. For William Cobbett, writing in the crisis year of 1817, Owen’s progressive-regressive utopian ‘villages’ looked more like a paternalist plot against the rights of the people: less communities of goods than ‘parallelograms of paupers’ (see *Political Register*, 2 August 1817). In Morris’s account, Owen was too much a man of his time – at once too idealistic and too mechanistic – to have provided his system with an inherent ‘motive power’. The difference in Ruskin’s work, Morris claimed, was specifically the laying hold of the ‘key’ of ‘art’, which Owen in his ‘tim[e] […] could [not] possibly have found’ (1993: 368-9).

It should be clear from the foregoing discussion that much of what Morris saw in Ruskin was, however, already present in first-generation Romanticism. Indeed, Morris’s ‘culture’ claim for Ruskin’s originality vis-a-vis Owen involves overlooking specific works of Romantic social criticism such as Coleridge’s *Church and State* and – Raymond Williams’s ‘contrast’ for Owen – Robert Southey’s illustrated book of ghost-dialogues with the original utopian, *Sir Thomas More: or,* *Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society* (1829). In *Colloquies*, published in late spring 1829, Southey sought to pick up the dropped historical thread of the 1530s, embodying Coleridge’s ‘old faith’ in the ghostly figure of Sir Thomas More – the once-and-future form of the English Catholic statesman. A spirit of ‘patriotism’ as well as of History, Sir Thomas speaks of being ‘English at heart’; enforces an appropriate reverence for the ‘old house’ of the constitution; and echoes Burke’s lament for the death of chivalry and succession of economists:

A trading spirit thus gradually superseded the rude but kindlier principle of the feudal system: profit and loss became the rule of conduct; in came calculation, and out went feeling. (2018: 16, 258, 43; see also Burke 1987: 66)

When Ruskin read the *Colloquies*in 1843, he found himself ‘much pleased’ (Ruskin 1956: I, 252). And as Joseph Bizup has suggested, Ruskin’s Gothic chapter may indeed be modelled directly on Southey’s work, adopting its rhetorical ‘strategy’ of equating individual and social causes and contrasting medieval and modern ways of ‘feeling’ (2003, pp. 19, 84, 180-1). Morris may have fallen foul of Southey, the ‘Jacobine poet’ turned poet laureate, as his political anti-type, travelling an opposite political road. In his list of the ‘basically conservative’ ingredients from which Morris brewed his radical form of medievalism, Richard Frith lists Southey alongside Scott, Cobbett, Carlyle and Ruskin, and observes that ‘all of these writers were important influences on Morris’ – with ‘the exception of Southey’ (2005: 118).

An ingredient but not an ‘influence’, Southey’s *Colloquies* is nevertheless a haunting precedent for Morris’s ‘bible’ because it strikingly anticipates Ruskin’s finding of the ‘key’ of ‘art’. Southey’s work adds a motivating ‘artistic’ dimension to an argument in favour of Owen’s utopian plans – and was known and criticized for so doing by Morris’s forbears in the socialist tradition (see Morgan 1834: II, 26-50). In Colloquy VI, Southey’s characters agree that Owen ‘has shown how a beginning might be made’ towards ‘extending [civilization] to those classes who are brutalized by the institutions of society’ (Southey 2018: 75). In Colloquy VII, ‘The Manufacturing System’, Southey goes on to develop the picturesque ‘contrast’ format – also suggested in answering images of prehistoric and medieval monuments (see figures 3 and 4) – as he juxtaposes the cottages of the farming and the manufacturing poor in the ‘hamlet of Millbeck’. The former, ‘built of the native stone without mortar’, appear ‘beautifully’ ‘old’, ‘adjusted’ to ‘their place’ by the ‘scene’ and ‘time’. But for the ‘new cottages of the manufacturers’, built ‘upon the manufacturing pattern … naked, and in a row’, Southey foresees no such reversion: ‘Time cannot mellow them; Nature will neither clothe nor conceal them; and they remain always as offensive to the eye as to the mind!’ (Southey 2018: 96).

The same Colloquy also provides the template for Ruskin’s case against ‘mechanism’, as the following brief exchange may suffice to suggest:

**Sir Thomas More:** There is an example before our eyes. Yonder children are on the way to a manufactory, where they pass six days out of the seven, from morning till night. Is it likely that the little they learn at school on the seventh, (which ought to be their day of recreation as well as rest,) should counteract the effects of such an education, when the moral atmosphere wherein they live and move and have their being, is as noxious to the soul, as the foul and tainted air which they inhale is to their bodily constitution?

**Montesinos [i.e. Southey]:** Yet the most celebrated minister of the age [i.e. William Pitt] made his boast of this very evil, and congratulated Parliament that the nation had a new source of wealth and revenue in the labour of children: so completely had the political system in which he was trained up seared his heart and obscured his understanding. (2018: 92; see also xxxiii-xxxiv, xliii, lxv)

Morris’s overlooking of Southey’s *Colloquies* is all the stranger because it was not only a ‘Romantic’ precursor for Ruskin, but also for Ruskin’s own precursor, Thomas Carlyle. Indeed, as Philip Connell has suggested, quoting Stefan Collini, the reception of *Colloquies* constituted a key episode in the development of the supposed ‘dichotomy’ within ‘Victorian thought and sensibility’ between ‘political economy’ on the one hand, and ‘cultural critique’ in its ‘Carlylean […] Ruskinian or Morrisian’ affinities on the other (Connell 2001: 5). And it is the Southeyan and the ‘Carlylean’ path that I want now to follow back to Morris, and to the question of Gothic *and* Architecture.

Southey’s *Colloquies* were, as the Cincinnati-based *Western Monthly Review* for March 1830 put it, ‘much talked of in England’ (see Southey 2018: 819). Going on transatlantic hearsay and positive reviews like the one in the *Quarterly* for July 1829, the *Western Monthly* imagined Southey to have produced a sustained historical contrast – liable to ‘stagger’ even the best-trained ‘young republican’ – between the age of ‘faith’ and its ‘huge gothic buildings’ on the one hand, and the ‘present times’ of ‘canals’ and ‘*evidence* for every thing’ on the other (see Southey 2018: 819-20). The Benthamite *Westminster Review* castigated the book as Tory obscurantism, seizing on opening comments about the social consequences of the loss of ‘old instinctive belief’:

Th[is] sentence […] supplies the pith of [the book], in respect to the religion and morale of a certain class of politicians. Physical phænomena are to remain uncanvassed, mental diseases to be left uninvestigated, and children brought up in the belief of ghosts, because fear and ignorance are docile; and the mind which gets rid of one species of delusion may be disposed to encounter another. (2018: 2-3, 711)

Similar attacks were repeated in *The Examiner* and – with more lasting consequences – in the *Edinburgh Review*. Thomas Macaulay’s essay in the *Edinburgh* for January 1830 ridiculed Southey as a still-more ‘extravagant’ Burke with none of his ‘reason’, professing a political philosophy of the ‘picturesque’ that mistook ‘Government’ for ‘one of the fine arts’ (Southey 2018: 788-9, 797). ‘It is not’, Macaulay concluded,

by the intermeddling of Mr Southey’s idol – the omniscient and omnipotent State – but by the prudence and energy of the people, that England has hitherto been carried forward in civilisation […] Our rulers will best promote the improvement of the people by strictly confining themselves to their own legitimate duties – by leaving capital to find its most lucrative course […] by maintaining peace, by defending property, by diminishing the price of law, and by observing strict economy in every department of the state. Let the Government do this – the People will assuredly do the rest. (see Southey 2018: 816)

Macaulay’s essay became a ‘classic’ of laissez-faire liberalism, and stole a march on the conservative *Quarterly* by appropriating to liberal discourse the loyalist ‘let there be’ formulation previously developed by Southey as a way of urging – without appearing to agitate for – government-led reforms (see Carnall 1960: 180; and Gilmartin 2007: 218-19). But the unintended long-term effect of Macaulay’s essay was, as Connell suggests, to consolidate the Romantic critique of political economy into the countervailing ethos of Victorian medievalism (see Connell 2001: 9-10). As Macaulay’s apparent inattention to some of the detail of Southey’s text may also suggest, his real target was perhaps less Southey than Carlyle and his essay in the *Edinburgh* of June 1829, ‘Signs of the Times’.[[2]](#endnote-1)

By the late 1820s, Carlyle was moving from youthful contempt to qualified admiration for Southey as a public writer, and came eventually to think of himself as a second – albeit a greater – self for the laureate. In his *Reminiscences*, Carlyle represented Southey the *Quarterly* reviewer in much the same way that Morris would later represent Owen. The Romantic precursor was still too tied into eighteenth-century orthodoxies – such as what Southey referred to in *Colloquies* as ‘the Protestant Constitution of these kingdoms’ (Southey 2018: lxxxiii) – to grasp real truth:

In spite of my Radicalism, I always found very much in these Toryisms, which was greatly according to my heart; things rare and worthy, at once pious and true, which were always welcome to me, though I strove to base them on a better ground than his, – his being no eternal or time-defying one, as I could see. (Carlyle 1997: 387-8)

Having been ‘keen to review the *Colloquies* himself’ (Connell 2001: 9), Carlyle begins ‘Signs’ by mocking Southey in just these terms, bewildered by the submergence of the rough historical beast:

The repeal of the Test Acts, and then of the Catholic disabilities, has struck many of their admirers with an incredible astonishment. Those things seemed fixed and immovable; deep as the foundations of the world; and lo, in a moment they have vanished, and their place knows them no more! Our worthy friends mistook the slumbering Leviathan for an island […] But now their Leviathan has suddenly dived under; and they can no longer be fastened in the stream of time; but must drift forward on it, even like the rest of the world […] (32-3)

As ‘Signs’ goes on, however, it becomes gradually closer to Southey’s own evocation in *Colloquies* of a time-sense that may be ‘fastened in the stream’, but is far from ‘fixed’. The ghost of More announces in the first Colloquy that he is haunting Southey specifically in order to help him to produce a dynamic historical parallel:

By comparing the great operating causes in the age of the Reformation, and in this age of revolutions, going back to the former age, looking at things as I then beheld them, perceiving wherein I judged rightly, and wherein I erred, and tracing the progress of those causes which are now developing their whole tremendous power, you will derive instruction, which you are a fit person to receive and communicate; for without being solicitous concerning present effect, you are contented to cast your bread upon the waters. (Southey 2018: 11)

Carlyle’s ‘Signs’ echoes the words of Southey’s character on the ‘political system’ that ‘sears’ the heart and mind, decrying the ‘mechanical character’ of ‘our whole manner of existence’. And the essay asserts – against the discursive foundation of the journal in political economy (see Schoenfield 2009) – a still-more ‘Dynamical’ sense of time, with each ‘Day’ the ‘conflux of two Eternities’, in amongst which we might seek ‘wisely’ to ‘adjust our own position’ (1971: 37, 46, 33-4). Much of Carlyle’s later assault on ‘laissez faire’ was given here. And so, as Connell remarks, by ‘defending the value of political economy against Southey’s reliance upon “taste and feeling”, Macaulay was also discreetly, but firmly, rebutting Carlyle’s recent attempt’ to shift the *Edinburgh* towards the proto-medievalism of the ‘Lake school’ (2001: 10).

The ‘Dynamical’ view advanced in ‘Signs’ found full expression in Carlyle’s later works, perhaps especially in *Chartism* (1839) and *Past and Present* (1843). In *Chartism*, Carlyle evokes the carrying of the past in and beyond the present and any momentarily-realizable ‘value’: England in the time of James I and VI ‘had property valuable to the auctioneer; but the accumulate manufacturing, commercial, economic *skill* which lay impalpably warehoused in English hands and heads, what auctioneer could estimate?’ (177). ‘Insincerity, Unbelief’, growing out of ‘donothing routine’ and ‘*laissez-faire*’, Adam Smith and ‘the Eighteenth Century’ (pp. 169, 158-9), was now the declared enemy. And ten years before Ruskin’s *Stones*, in his 1843 prose-poem on the ruined abbey at Bury St Edmunds and the twelfth-century *Chronicle* of the monk Jocelyn, Carlyle launches a sustained assault on the curtailment of history by ‘Dryasdust’ and ‘Dilettantism’, contrasting the ‘infinite incredible gray void’ of the antiquarianism of the last century with a ‘dynamic’ effort to realize the equal or greater reality of that ‘other world’. The explicit presentation of the work in the historical dimension – *Past and Present* – reads on one level like a blunting of the social critique – in the way diagnosed by Williams as portending the long-term defeat of art. But in context the effect is to release the always-lurking potential of something indeed – as ‘Signs’ had imagined was possible – yet better than what has been done before. What matters here is indeed not architecture as such but the recovery of a ‘style […] historic’ and the eternity flowing back from the future:

Their architecture, belfries, land-carucates? Yes, – and that is but a small item of the matter. […] Beautifully, in our earnest loving glance, the old centuries melt from opaque to partially translucent, transparent here and there; and the void black Night, one finds, is but the summing up of innumerable peopled luminous *Days*. (Carlyle 2005: 51-3)

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1. *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, II, 1034. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Macaulay’s review is a compromised text, despite its ‘classic’ status. This was exposed at the time by the Tory periodical *Blackwood’s Magazine*. In the *Noctes Ambrosianae* of *Blackwood’s* for August 1830, the character of the ‘English opium-eater’ (i.e. Thomas De Quincey) shows that Macaulay had seriously misrepresented the text of *Colloquies* in the attempt to represent Southey as taking a merely ‘picturesque’ view of ‘all moral questions’ (see Southey 2018: 784). Macaulay had ‘fallen foul’ of Southey ‘for an alleged libel on butchers’, inserting a ‘forty-line page of high moral vituperation’ against Southey for dismissing them, against ‘every principle of sound and manly morality’ as ‘men who are necessarily reprobates’, ‘[m]erely’ because ‘he cannot abide the sight of their apparatus […] from certain peculiar associations’ of his own (see Southey 2018: 784-5 [*Blackwood’s*]; 794-5 [*Edinburgh*]). But ‘the charge is entirely false’, as the figure of De Quincey points out: ‘For there is an alternation – an interchange of sentiment […] between the two interlocutors’. The ‘unthinking’ view of butchers as hard-hearted is corrected three times over: by contradictory criminal statistics; by a reminiscence of Thomas Beddoes’s *Essay on […] Pulmonary Consumption* (1799); and by Thomas More suggesting a more likely cause in the benign ‘tendency’ of the son to follow the father (see Southey 2018: 74, 579-80n). The passage on butchers was omitted in the text as republished in a collection of Macaulay’s essays in the 1840s (Macaulay 1843: I, 217–69). The text of the review was here patched straight into discussion of ‘the manufacturing system’, and a footnote inserted to mark the change: ‘A passage in which some expressions used by Mr. Southey were misrepresented, certainly without any unfair intention, has here been omitted’ (1843: I, 229). There is no question, however, of Macaulay having been immediately ‘corrected’ by the ‘exposure’ in *Blackwood’s*, or of his retraction of the ‘vituperative’ passage affecting the short-term reception of the *Colloquies*. The text of the 1830 review was republished unexpurgated in the 1833 *Selections from the Edinburgh Review: Comprising the Best Articles in that Journal* (II, 506–34). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)