

Published in a special issue of *The European Legacy*, ed. Michael Neth (Volume 24, No. 3 [January 2019]), on “Hybridity in English Romantic Writing”

## **The Gothic-Romantic Hybridity in Mary Robinson’s *Lyrical Tales***

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English Romantic poetry is still famous, in some quarters, for attaining the kind of organic unity, a healing and transcendence of hybridity, proposed in the best-known theoretical statements of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. But it remains a question, even in their own poems, whether he and his best-known contemporaries achieved this ideal in all their works. In his definitive reconnection of Romanticism to the Modernism that often disavowed that ancestry, Robert Langbaum is canny enough to see that most English Romantic writing is more hybrid than it claims. As he puts it in *The Poetry of Experience*, many Romantics project images of “ourselves [in the West] as emancipated to the point of forlornness”; such literature is “both anti-traditional and traditional,” celebrating “the ruins of the [most] official tradition[s]” in Western cultural understanding through revolutionary acts of imagination, even as it exposes a melancholic longing for many figures or texts from “the past” that might still be used to “give meaning” to what threatens to be a “meaningless world” after the death of those older beliefs, a ““charnel house with spectres”” in words quoted from Thomas Carlyle.<sup>1</sup> Langbaum’s *Mysteries of Identity* makes a similar point by way of another key definer of Romanticism in Britain: “Wordsworth gives us poetry by being Lockean and anti-Lockean at the same time” as he *both* “recall[s] John Locke’s description of the mind as a dark closet penetrated by certain rays of light from the outside world,” by the basic sense-

perceptions that become remembered ghosts of themselves in Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), and employs that *Essay's* "concepts of memory and association" to build up an increasingly "unified" vision of the "organic" self over time, often as a "retrospective construction" formed out of those fragmentary ingredients as they are continually re-perceived and re-connected, a production of an imagined "identity," paradoxically, out of "the changing memory of change."<sup>2</sup> The self-fashioning of Romantic "identity," Langbaum shows, is therefore underwritten by a mobile awareness that opens onto to new, progressive transformations of perception and association *and* harkens back to specters of earlier impressions and re-combinations, some personal and some cultural, much like the ancient Roman god Janus with two faces, one looking backward while the other turning forward, at the same time.

How much the most canonized male Romantics admit this instability within their own works and proclaimed aspirations has long been a subject of scholarly debate, to which Langbaum remains a major contributor. What is less debatable, I want to argue, is how forcefully at least Wordsworth and Coleridge are asked to confront the unresolved inconsistencies in their own poetic agendas – the hybrid, Janus-faced undercurrents within them -- by the late writings of Mary Darby Robinson, the still-scandalous, but ultimately respected, author of abundant poetry, fiction, and criticism across the decade-and-half leading up to her death in December 1800. She may have been a Drury Lane actress (1776-80) and mistress of the Prince of Wales (1780-82), but, in *having* to write to stave off poverty in her later years, she emerged by the 1790s, for the Godwin-Wollstonecraft circle and in Coleridge's words, as a "genius" worthy of being called "the English Sappho," a sobriquet she boldly adopted for herself in her book of sonnets

*Sappho and Phaon*, published in 1796.<sup>3</sup> Even bolder is the turn-of-the-century challenge to her fellow Romantic poets that I want to focus on here: the collection she dubbed *Lyrical Tales*, poems for which first appeared in London's *Morning Post* as parts of a printed conversation among poets, Robinson and Coleridge especially,<sup>4</sup> but all of which were published in November 1800 just a month before she died. As many excellent scholars have shown,<sup>5</sup> this book is a direct answer, at times poem-for-poem, to Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798, for many still the most "founding" volume in the development of English Romanticism.

The challenges Robinson poses to that now-iconic collection, in part with her only half-similar title, take many forms, several of which counter claims of organic unity in the *Lyrical Ballads*. Robinson, first of all, draws the *Ballads*'s claim of a "new realism" in poetry towards the more vernacular "materialism" of Robert Southey's "English Eclogues" (1799) so as to highlight, even more than Southey or the *Ballads* did, the "endemic injustice and abuse of power . . . thwarting [the] potentiality" of the war-torn and the dispossessed whom several *Ballads* strive to ennoble by emphasizing the power of the mind over material conditions.<sup>6</sup> The *Lyrical Tales* also refuse the *Ballads*'s attempt at "conceptual homogeneity" by employing a wide-ranging profusion of different "stanzaic and sonic patterns."<sup>7</sup> These expand the number of perspectives and styles through which readers can see, among other inequities, "the trauma and isolation that young people and women experience" before, during, and after the 1790s.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Robinson signals with *Tales* in her title that the frequent drive in the *Ballads* to make the lyric rise out of sensation and temporal life towards a "spirit healed and harmonized/By the benignant touch of love and beauty"<sup>9</sup> can and should be countered by the concrete

temporality – including the *inconsistencies* over time – manifested in “more *narrative*” stories-in-verse that detail “personal histor[ies]” of the “gross realities” of 1790s Britain that were and remain wrenchingly “at odds with Wordsworth’s idealization of the figures of humble, rural life.”<sup>10</sup> Yet all of these dis-articulations, I would argue, are bound up with and filtered through another dimension that allows them to suggest even deeper levels of Janus-faced inconsistency in what this collection half-echoes from the *Ballads*: Robinson’s use, throughout the majority of her *Tales*, of pointedly Gothic images and allusions that descend from 1730s-‘40s “graveyard poetry” and particularly from Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), the first prose fiction to be subtitled *A Gothic Story* in its Second Edition (1765), as its features had been continued and expanded on the stage and in such later “romances” as *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) by Ann Radcliffe and *The Monk* (1796) by Matthew Lewis. It is this strain of writing, the “conventions” of which were by this time “commonplaces,”<sup>11</sup> that Coleridge condemns as a “low and vulgar” mix of incompatible styles in his 1797 review of *The Monk*,<sup>12</sup> and that Wordsworth goes on, in his Preface to the Second Edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (published January 1801), to include among the “deluges of idle and extravagant stories” that the *Ballads* were fashioned to rise above in their manifestations of a more “discriminating” and “organic sensibility.”<sup>13</sup>

To be sure, as scholars have noted for decades, the poetry in the 1798 *Ballads* is often rife with the very Gothic that its authors castigate. Such is the case, of course, in Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere” but also, if more subtly, in poems by Wordsworth on rural desolation such as “The Thorn,”<sup>14</sup> where the petrified plant of the title high on a promontory is like a haunted Gothic ruin, a “mass of knotted joints . .

. [that] stands erect . . . like a stone/With lichens . . . overgrown” (ll. 8-11), from which, indeed from the whole “mountain-head,” many “voices of the dead” seem to emanate (ll. 171-74).<sup>15</sup> Robinson’s penchant for the Gothic, too, is not as surprising, since she was the author of the highly Radcliffean novel *Hubert de Sevrac* (1796), among other Gothic efforts, that embraced so many Walpolean Gothic features that it is a veritable “Gothic library”.<sup>16</sup> But her deployments of the Gothic in *Lyrical Tales*, nonetheless, as I want to show in the rest of what follows, do not merely play out her preference for what the *Ballads* later claim to reject. By calling forth the more sublimated Gothic in the *Ballads*, they act as haunting, and even Janus-faced, specters that undermine – or, more precisely, bring out the “knotted” undercurrents already in -- the attempts at full imaginative coalescence in several of that collection’s poems. Robinson’s opening lyric in the *Tales*, for example, “All Alone,”<sup>17</sup> responds most of all to Wordsworth’s “We Are Seven” in the 1798 *Ballads*.<sup>18</sup> In the latter, the eight-year-old girl beheld by the speaker somewhere near a “Church-yard” demonstrates her native powers of imagination, which the poem finally celebrates in the face of her many losses, by speaking of all six of her siblings as present, still together at a level that transcends one place, even though all of them are scattered and absent, two of them within visible graves that are “green” and “Beneath the church-yard tree” (ll. 1, 32, 37). By contrast, the speaker who addresses the orphan boy in “All Alone” laments that “Thy cheek is now grown deathly pale,” as though the lad were a ghostly Gothic figure hovering between the living and the dead (l. 20). The speaker even adds that “Thy pillow now [is] a cold grave stone,” as if the boy can sleep only on the slab where his mother’s corpse lies buried, making him almost indistinguishable from that body which “withers under yon grave stone,” even as he

withers too while the dead mother “sleeps” just on the other side of the same “pillow” (ll. 28-29, 11).

Besides suggesting the starvation of abandoned country children that Wordsworth fails to mention in “We Are Seven,” this image-cluster sees the foundation of the orphan’s loneliness as blurring the conventional boundaries between life and death. Robinson’s child is and is not already a ghost, already half-dead, and the distance between his bed and his mother’s is only the short one between two sides of one-and-the-same gravestone. Among the several implications here, as we look back at the *Lyrical Ballads* through the filter of the *Lyrical Tales*, is that the child of “We Are Seven” could not place her absent and buried siblings on the same level with herself if she were not fully analogous to them, inclining, like Robinson’s orphan, towards their death-state *and* towards the lost past when they were all in one location, while she also maintains their one-time, current, and future presence as equivalent to hers when Wordsworth’s speaker encounters her. The Gothic overtones that are quite muted, though still there, in the “church-yard” and “graves” in “We Are Seven,” and possibly the six ghosts that the girl sees standing beside her, are dredged up and brought into the foreground of Robinson’s “All Alone.” As a result, their ghostliness and their pull towards the past are transferred into the “All Alone” orphan himself, into his looking ahead in a repetitive way that can connect the future only to the losses in his past that have left him, and will henceforth keep him, alone until he dies. This conundrum then sets the stage – since Robinson, the one-time actress, cannot resist making this boy the speaker of a soliloquy in a scene set decisively “by the Church-yard side” (l. 1) -- for multiple narrative flashbacks about those he has lost (ll. 73-110) that convey far more temporality and retrospection than we

find in “We Are Seven.” Reinforced by these ghost-like story-portraits, the boy in *Lyrical Tales* continually uttering forms of “ALONE” becomes even more of a Janus-faced specter. He thereby helps us now see Wordsworth’s “cottage girl” as really this kind of figure too (“We are Seven,” l. 5) as he haunts the speaker and Robinson’s readers long after “All Alone” ends.

This riposte to Wordsworth, though, is not simply “Gothic” in the sense that it emphasizes ghostliness and gravestones more than “We Are Seven” does. Such allusions could as easily recall eighteenth-century “graveyard” poetry, well known to be as influential on Wordsworth as it was on Robinson. Yet, in making her orphan boy a living-dead specter, as well as Janus-faced, on a Gothicized stage-set, the *Lyrical Tales* are doing more: they are looking back to the quintessential tug-of-war in the Gothic image and mixture of genres inaugurated most decisively by Walpole in *The Castle of Otranto* four decades earlier. The images of the specters that appear at Otranto, after all, are, like Robinson’s orphan, figures of death-in-life and life-in death, neither one nor the other completely. They include the fragmented ghost *of an effigy* (not the corpse) of the Castle’s original owner (Walpole, 21-22), the silent walking-forth of the figure in a *portrait* of a deceased grandfather (26), and the reappearance of the long-dead Hermit of Joppa as the long-standard skeleton that faces down sinners in *danse macabre* paintings of the Middle Ages (106-07).<sup>19</sup> Even if Walpole and Robinson give more motion to these ghost-figures than their “originals” have, the latter are themselves still images of the dead that have survived the dead body, again like Robinson’s orphan. They occupy an above-ground world of living beings who interact with them (as Robinson’s speaker interacts with that boy) while those ghost-figures call the living towards the past in a

present where the future seems but another time for drawing the half-dead into the oblivion of an already-dead world, another form of what is past.

Moreover, this fundamental contradiction in the Gothic image, always looking backwards and forwards without being securely in any one time-frame, very like the specters of remembered perceptions in Locke, asserts itself for Walpole, as it does for Robinson, in openly theatrical spaces (such as Walpole, 105-07) where such ghosts act out their hauntings through hyperbolic actions or utterances in deliberately antiquated settings, be they castles or old church-yards. What else should we expect for a Horace Walpole heavily influenced by Shakespeare (Walpole, 10-14) and *opera seria*<sup>20</sup> and soon to write a Gothic play, *The Mysterious Mother*, in 1768? *The Castle of Otranto* thereby helps establish the mixture of genres in the Gothic – prose narrative, poetry, and theater all at once -- that made Coleridge complain about excessive mixings of styles when he reviewed *The Monk* and led the *Lyrical Ballads* to restrict its range of forms far more than one of its primary inspirations, also one inspiration for the Gothic: Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765). Mary Robinson, though, inspired by the Gothic's inherent crossing of generic boundaries, furthers her challenge to the *Ballads* by making most of her *Tales* as dramatic, poetic, and narrative simultaneously as "All Alone" is by itself. She thereby poses another indirect query to the *Lyrical Ballads* about what underlies their sense of human thought and character, a quandary raised by Walpole too in his *Castle's* rapid, discordant shifts between indirect discourses about hidden thoughts and stagey speeches for a public audience (as in Walpole, 22-23): are motivations formed internally, by way of Lockean perception and associations over time, or are they formed performatively, by actions, reactions, and counter-reactions, mostly in



the theatrical give-and-take of a visible external world – or are both operating at once? With the girl in “We Are Seven,” the *Ballads* try to make the imaginative presence of her siblings grow out of her internal gatherings of memories. In “All Alone,” however, it is hard to decide whether the orphan’s “looks forlorn” (l. 21), behind which we never see because we only hear what he says, result from all that has been done to him from outside him (as “Fate had left thee,” the speaker suggests at l. 18) or from his internal reactions to the series of deprivations that make up his experience (which perhaps he *chooses* to think of as leading to one end: “When I am hid in yonder grave!” [l. 148]). Robinson thus truly anticipates Professor Langbaum in posing – and Gothically ex-posing – the problem of Romantic quests for identity being torn between conflicting ideologies about them around 1800, much as the Gothic certainly was when Walpole tried to establish his “new species of romance” in 1764-65 (Walpole, 14).

Robinson, I would also argue, takes this suggestion of unresolved conflict even further in employing the Gothic to challenge Wordsworth and Coleridge as she does. When she has her “All Alone” speaker, on the one hand, highlight the boy’s “yellow hair/In silky waves” (ll. 13-14) and call him to “rustic sport” on “yonder hill” where “village bells are ringing” (ll. 43-44), the poem invokes the age-old imagery of pastoral romance, including how such a romance hero usually looks, going all the way back to the ancient Greek *Daphnis and Chloe* of Longus (2<sup>nd</sup> century AD). On the other hand, the same speaker turns just as often to graphic realism that refers us to our immediate senses and to hard facts about increased English poverty in the 1790s, as in “Thy naked feet are wounded sore/With naked thorns” (ll. 25-26), momentarily, yes, invoking a barefoot Christ on the road to Calvary crowned with thorns, but only as (literally) stripped down

without any suggestion of a future Resurrection or any discovery of a Daphnis' noble birth. In this and many other such juxtapositions, Robinson is echoing Walpole's definition of the "Gothic Story" in his 1765 Preface to the Second Edition of *Otranto* as working to "blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern" (Walpole, 9). The first of these recalls chivalric, pastoral, and often supernaturally-assisted narratives (connected to aristocratic and Catholic assumptions for much of their history), while the second invokes the more realistic, contemporary, and emergent "novel" of the eighteenth century in which empirical perceptions and self-development *not* necessarily determined by higher fates becomes increasingly the norm (particularly for middle-class and Protestant readers). There could hardly be a more self-divided aesthetic mode and hence none more suited, as Robinson clearly saw, to manifesting Janus-faced tugs of war between retrograde and progressive systems of belief, just the kind of deep conflict in the Western culture of the 1790s that she intimates when she draws on the Gothic in the first poem of *Lyrical Tales* to suggest that the same indecision really underpins her poetry and the *Lyrical Ballads* alike.

Even more to the point, Robinson's *Tales* make a great deal of Walpole's most radical aesthetic decision, which he really announces in the *first* Preface to *The Castle of Otranto* that has been reprinted with the second one in all subsequent editions. The ghosts viewed as "miraculous" omens, the "preternatural events," the close alliance of princes with priests, and the most medieval assumptions of titled aristocrats and their too-submissive women in Walpole's main text: all these are ingredients of what the first Preface calls "beliefs . . . exploded now" in 1764 (Walpole, 6) even as *Otranto*'s Crusades-era characters and the readers who identify with them feel compelled to still

believe in such tyrannical old saws while the tale lasts, as empty as these once-Catholic-based figures now are for the author's and, he hopes, his audience's Protestant and (we would now say) Enlightenment assumptions. By keeping this statement alongside his second Preface in 1765, Walpole establishes the "Gothic Story" as juxtaposing early-modern assumptions about "the natural" and human development with antiquated ideologies that have been hollowed out of their former grounds of meaning. Though now empty in that sense, the latter are still compelling to himself and his audience, especially to those increasing middle-class readers who long, not just for supernatural interventions, but for the powers and accouterments of the aristocrats and priests whom they would dethrone from a cultural supremacy based on an outdated class-structure while, paradoxically, they still think about the quest for supremacy, even as they fear the past, in its older terms.<sup>21</sup> Robinson's *Lyrical Tales*, following and intensifying this Gothic resistance *and* attraction to groundless old orders, counter the *Lyrical Ballads* by frequently configuring the world in exactly this Janus-faced way. The orphan in "All Alone" may be called towards the world of pastoral romance but sees that option as his author does, quite Gothically: as distant, dated, and empty for him in a world of lingering class-structures that have helped to cast him from a family-life of at least subsistence to a solitude of destitution, especially by "modern romance" standards.

The Gothic call to past structures and symbols for Robinson is, at least partly, a pull towards retrograde social orders that are indeed philosophically groundless because they are fundamentally oppressive, inequitable, and exploitative of poor children, unpropertied men, and of course women such as she has become as a "fallen" female degraded from being a Prince's consort to "singing for her supper" in print. In "The

Poor, Singing Dame” also in her *Tales*, something of an answer to Wordsworth’s “The Female Vagrant” in the 1798 *Ballads*<sup>22</sup> – where the title figure, also the speaker, ends up half-blaming her own choices “that I have my inner self abused” (l. 259) – Robinson opens with a stark contrast that she employs more than once in her final collection: an “old Castle . . . haunted, and dreary” set right next to a “poor little hovel” (ll. 1, 13). In the tiny cottage, a cheerful “old Dame . . . would merrily sing” as she works making food and clothing, in fact with such resonance that she fills the Castle’s empty “rich chambers” with sounds that increase their “haunted,” and thus sepulchral, quality (ll. 19-20, 13). “The Lord of the Castle,” envious of her happiness and therefore tormented by her singing in the face of his empty, half-dead existence, dispatches an “old Steward” to take her to a quick death in “Prison” (ll. 34-40) in an exercise of sheer aristocratic, as well as patriarchal, authority, for which *this* female bears no blame at all. Such a move is reminiscent, perhaps of the Prince of Wales and his agents in their dealings with Robinson (the “old Dame” *is* named “MARY,” l. 50), but certainly of Prince Manfred’s killing of the one woman who has most defied his authority (and who tragically turns out to be his daughter, Matilda) in *The Castle of Otranto* (Walpole, 108-09). Curiously, however, the consequences of this brutality remain within the world of “ancient romance” in “The Poor, Singing Dame.” From the “fatal moment” of old Mary’s passing, the Lord is haunted by “Screech-owls appalling,” reminiscent of the avenging female Furies in Aeschylus’ ancient Greek *Orestia*, and, because they “shriek like a ghost,” the Lord recalls the “All Alone” orphan in becoming ghost-like himself, “His bones . . . wasting, his flesh . . . decaying” (ll. 56-61) as he descends into a grave finally placed beside old Mary’s: a “tomb of rich marble” that now “O’ershadows” her simple

plot much as the Castle towered over the hovel, save that both characters are now equal in being buried and dead (ll. 63-64). Whatever the belated, post-medieval, poetic justice for an eighteenth-century woman that may be achieved by this “haunting,” the employment of Gothic in this lyrical tale does not want to leave the “ancient” Janus-face of Gothic behind. There is surprising, but definite, comfort, as well as irony, in the two different gravestones, as though the remembered stability of supernatural retribution, with owls assumed for centuries to be omens of impending death for the sinful, has again provided an *old-world* Gothic solution for inequalities of rank and gender that have lasted until the 1790s, even while they are now being questioned by Robinson and Mary Wollstonecraft, among others, as outdated and devoid of any real substance.

The Gothic for Mary Robinson, it turns out, and for Wordsworth and Coleridge as she reads them, is a symbolic mode of extreme betwixt-and-between-ness, what Jean-François Lyotard calls a *différend*, a “case of conflict” in which “judgments” about it are suspended “between heterogenous genres,”<sup>23</sup> here the norms of “ancient” and “modern romance.” Within this *différend* that is the Walpolean Gothic, the pulls towards the most archaic and the most revolutionary ways of thinking are of fearfully equal strength in a suspenseful haunting of would-be dominant beliefs by revelations of deep, Janus-faced, and unresolved ideological conflicts underlying what Wordsworth would call the common “language of men,” the norm he claims for his poems in the Second Edition of *Lyrical Ballads*.<sup>24</sup> This, as it happens, is the complex sense of the Gothic that we find when we look beyond the *Lyrical Tales* to Robinson’s uses of it both in her *Hubert de Sevrac* novel and in her *Memoirs* (left unfinished when she died in 1800 but edited and augmented by her daughter, Maria), where she unabashedly, as Anne Mellor puts it,

styles her life according to the Walpolean-Radcliffean “genre of gothic romance, with its plot of the tortured, long-suffering heroine [like Isabella *and* Matilda in *Otranto* or Emily St. Aubert in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*] . . . born and raised in a world of terrifying torments . . . who is at last able to speak her own story to a sympathetic listener.”<sup>25</sup>

In *Hubert de Sevrac*, the title character, a betwixt-and-between French aristocrat who has just escaped execution by the Revolution, flees to his ancestral “Chateau of Montnoir,” now legally owned by his devious foster brother, where he finds only a “melancholy asylum” full of relics from his family’s resplendent wealth and is forced to contemplate “all the phantoms of delight purchased by the sufferings of the people” that “now conspired to taunt his imagination” with what seems both rightfully *and* wrongfully his, depending on his choice of justifying discourse (1:5).<sup>26</sup> Deep within this Gothic pile, too, de Sevrac’s wife and his daughter, Sabina, discover an old Catholic chapel (suspect for Robinson’s Protestant readers, but realistic for French aristocrats) that arouses contradictory feelings in both women: “There was something so awful, yet so tranquil, so melancholy and yet so sacred, in the little chapel, that a silence for some moments followed their entrance” (1:52). As Robinson’s novel gradually reveals, this recess harbors, within one way of seeing, remains of an age-old aristocratic-and-Catholic dominance that has been “awful” in its tyrannical violence and secretive power-plays, which some still want to continue; within a different way of seeing, it also contains the potential of future tranquility because of the details about fraudulently-acquired ownership that it hides (very like the documentary evidence that solves the main mysteries in Walpole’s *Otranto* and Radcliffe’s *Udolpho*). These secrets, after all, once uncovered, eventually lead Sabina, and later her father, to “renounce the superstitions and

religious bigotry she learned in childhood,” realizing how empty they were as she now looks backwards, and to “become a fervent supporter of the revolution that has driven her family from France” in one of several progressive reversals of her, then his, beliefs.<sup>27</sup> This transition, still held in suspense between the past and the future in the “silence” of the chapel scene, an epitome of the Gothic *différend*, allows the “sacred” finally to be saved from once-Catholic constraints and to be carried forward into the more Protestant Enlightenment that has ultimately taken over and reformed old Gothic chapels. Only now can they be “tranquil” places under newer assumptions, while remaining “melancholy,” insofar as they make people recall and lament – and yet sometimes long for -- the “awful,” but also the securely predictable, past that still beckons in Gothic structures.

Similarly, in her *Memoirs*, Robinson keeps harkening back to just such a place as the site of her birth and as one of the Janus-faced foundations of her mind’s “melancholy propensities (1: 62).<sup>28</sup> The “Minster-house” in Bristol, where she “first opened [her] eyes” in 1758, “was built” out of both older and “modern architecture,” she writes, and its “back was supported by the ancient cloisters of St. Augustine’s monastery”; these, in turn, were parts of a “ruin,” one reminder of the many historical “ravages of time” throughout the whole “MINSTER” complex, “which never was repaired, or re-raised to its former Gothic splendors” and yet, precisely because of this condition, now joins with the half-preserved Bristol “Cathedral” to “fill the contemplative mind with melancholy awe” (1: 1-2). This *very* betwixt-and-between site of Robinson’s origins, a crossroads of imposing remnants and arresting transformations, explains why she later and often finds so “soothing” her visits to the “gloomy chapels” of the “sublime” Westminster Abbey (1:

62). Such moments, along with those in *Hubert de Sevrac*, clearly establish what the conflicted quintessence of Gothic melancholy comes to be for Robinson by the late 1790s. Like the terror-based “sublime” of Edmund Burke that she invokes from his *Philosophical Enquiry* of 1757, in which the fear of death aroused by vast scenes and ruins is made pleasurable by the safety of beholding them in surviving works of art,<sup>29</sup> the Gothic for her is ultimately a compelling articulation of the human passage from, through, and, she hopes, beyond the ruins of violent tyrannies rooted in a crumbling but still-attractive past. The remains of these monuments do pull us towards their fearful deathliness and false promises of age-old certainty, but they can be seen to be giving way, if only just, to more enlightened and as-yet unfinished, perhaps revolutionary, reflections that resist them -- the Protestant order incorporating and then surpassing the Catholic one, as in Westminster Abbey, or the scandalous royal mistress who became a major traditional *and* non-traditional writer -- all by way of aesthetic constructs underwritten by the Gothic as a *différend*, among them, she presumes, her “melancholy” works of poetry and prose and the *Lyrical Ballads* as well.

No poem exemplifies this sense of the Gothic’s recollective and revisionary power more than the variation on “All Alone” placed near the conclusion of Robinson’s *Lyrical Tales*: “The Alien Boy,” a counter to Wordsworth’s “The Idiot Boy” in the first *Lyrical Ballads*.<sup>30</sup> In Wordsworth’s piece, country mother Betty Foy, on a “March night” when an “owlet . . . Shouts from nobody knows where,” sends her “half-wise” young son, Johnny, on horseback “To bring a doctor from the town,/To comfort poor old Susan Gale,” the sick neighbor to whom Betty is tending, and Johnny never reaches the doctor because he gives way to his horse’s instinct to stop and graze by a “roaring water-fall” (ll.



1-4, 198, 130-31, 360-70). Because of his delay, parodies of anxious Gothic imagery, based mostly on country superstitions, rise up in the thoughts of Betty, Susan, and even the speaker/narrator, who speculates that Johnny might have become “like a silent horseman-ghost,” paralleling Betty’s fear that in the nearby “castle he’s pursuing,/Among the ghosts, his own undoing” (ll. 335, 239-40). But Johnny himself, suddenly discovered “upright on a feeding horse” like a miraculous apparition “such [as] we in romances read” (ll. 361-65), is so entirely free of such hauntings in his innocent imaginings within nature that all he can say, having “heard/The owls in tuneful concert,” is “The cocks did crow to-who, to who,” a return to the poem’s beginning as though he were about to rewrite it, but in a projection-ahead where night becomes day and the sun is just rising (ll. 452-59). The hauntings of old Gothic fears can be left behind, it turns out, in native, natural poetry uttered by a child whose “idiocy” is ultimately akin to a world-renewing Romantic imagination.

Robinson’s “Alien Boy” instead, strongly eschewing the sometimes condescending humor in Wordsworth’s poem, attaches the Gothic and its associations with violent and “sublime” historical change firmly to her title figure, who thereby recovers the Gothic from what seems a dismissive satire on it, drawing out the implications of what remains a Gothic undercurrent in “The Idiot Boy.” Her lad, “HENRY,” who, until recently, lived on a “Mountain” on England’s “Western” coast with his father, “saint HUBERT,” a fugitive from the French Revolution (an unabashed extension of her novel’s title character), has long wanted to know the history that has brought them both to this point, even if it means learning of “Proud mansions, rich domains, and joyous scenes/Forever faded” (ll. 1, 10, 42-43); Saint Hubert, by telling

Henry only some of that past, has been pleased to find his son moving beyond it in an “op’ning harvest rich/Of promised intellect” (ll. 28-30), a partial emergence on the other, better side of a Gothic *différend*. But the completion of that transition, from one Janus-face to the other, is tragically arrested by Saint Hubert’s drowning in a “wide domain of howling Death” as he strives to rescue a “poor shipwreck’d Man” from a furious storm in the sea below his dwelling (ll. 63, 79). Right at that moment, Henry is “fear struck, e’en to madness,” hearing little more than “the wisp’ring of a million souls/Beneath the green-deep mourning” (ll. 97-108), an echo of Coleridge’s “Ancyent Marinere” – and so he remains, another half-dead specter, through and past the end of “The Alien Boy”: “All alone . . . A maniac wild . . . melancholy proof that Man may bear/All the rude storms of Fate, and still suspire” (ll. 112, 128, 138-39). The attempted rising beyond the Gothic in “The Idiot Boy” has been brought back to the Gothic simmering at its base, even as this return, in its very Gothicism, powerfully fashions a figure for all the fugitive and dispossessed who, for Robinson, have accumulated over the last two decades of European history prior to the *Lyrical Ballads* and the *Lyrical Tales*. Robinson’s alien boy, then, fulfilling tendencies in many other figures of hers that lead into him, haunts us since 1800, like the *Tales*, as a Gothic *différend* suspended between the haunting past, the too-real present, future possibilities, and ideological conflicts about how to view all three. He is thus the best evidence I can offer for how Mary Robinson employs the Gothic with fulsome brilliance to tease out and recast at least some of the hybridities that Robert Langbaum has revealed so well in the founding fathers of English Romanticism.

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### Notes

1. Langbaum, *Poetry of Experience*, 9-13, 17.
2. Langbaum, *Mysteries of Identity*, 36-38, 31.
3. See Luther, "A Stranger Minstrel," 391-9
4. See Curran, "Mary Robinson's *Lyrical Tales*," 19-20.
5. See Curran, "Robinson's *Lyrical Tales*"; Cross, "From *Lyrical Ballads* to *Lyrical Tales*"; Labbe, "Deflected Violence"; and Bolton, "Romancing the Stone," 740-48.
6. Curran, "Robinson's *Lyrical Tales*," 23-26.
7. Curran, "Robinson's *Lyrical Tales*," 27-29.
8. Cross, "From *Lyrical Ballads* to *Lyrical Tales*," 595.
9. Coleridge's words in "The Dungeon" (1798), ll. 29-30, in Coleridge and Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, 114.
10. Bolton, "Romancing the Stone," 743-48 (emphasis added).

11. Bolton, "Romancing the Stone," 741.
12. Coleridge, "Review of *The Monk*," *Critical Review* 19 (February 1797), in Clery and Miles, *Gothic Documents*, 187.
13. Coleridge and Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, 175-77.
14. Hogle, "The Gothic-Romantic Nexus," 159-61.
15. Coleridge and Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, 103-08.
16. Brewer, "The French Revolution," 115-18.
17. All citations from the *Lyrical Tales* in this essay refer, with line numbers, to Robinson, *Selected Poems*, 182-288.
18. In Coleridge and Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, 100-02.
19. All citations from *The Castle of Otranto*, indicated by "Walpole," come from Walpole, *The Castle*.
20. See Williams, "Monstrous Pleasures."
21. See Fiedler, *Love and Death*, 131-34.
22. Coleridge and Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, 81-89.
23. Lyotard, *The Differend*, ix.
24. In Coleridge and Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, 178.
25. Mellor, "Mary Robinson," 250.
26. All my citations from this novel, with volume and page numbers, are from Robinson, *Hubert de Sevrac*.
27. Brewer, "The French Revolution," 118. See also Close, "Notorious," 175-80, and Setzer, "The Gothic Structure."

28. All citations from these *Memoirs* come from the 1802 two-volume edition of Robinson, *Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Robinson*.
29. See Burke in Clery and Miles, *Gothic Documents*, 120-21.
30. In Coleridge and Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, 118-32.

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