

# SEXUAL STEALING

BY

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TEMPORARY CULTURE

# 15

## PAUSE FOR THE DEAD

horizon of evening  
where story  
found the load  
the God with wealth wish  
wild robber waste  
of mercy poison'd  
a quiver very cold  
to startled limbs

level lines      morning  
old bells  
for steals children

- 2 And if thou refuse to let them go, behold, I will smite all thy borders with frogs:
- 3 And the river shall bring forth frogs abundantly, which shall go up and come into thine house, and into thy bedchamber, and upon thy bed, and into the house of thy servants, and upon thy people, and into thine ovens, and into thy kneading troughs . . .
- 13 And the Lord did according to the word of Moses; and the frogs died out of the houses, out of the villages, and out of the fields.
- 14 And they gathered them together upon heaps: and the land stank.

— Exodus, Chapter 8

## 16

### SUMMING UP

a society can return by pangs  
believe interrupted words  
not suspicion  
requiring new doubts  
what torture  
and relapsing

after airy night      otherwise the wreck  
all without sleep  
changed of purpose  
occupation   party   rank  
reach  
state illapsed  
now ruins  
with stern view  
might excuse  
difficulty of know  
O know reason  
impertinent of impertinents

“The war of St. Domingo reads us a memorable lesson; negroes organizing immense armies; laying plans of campaigns and sieges, which, if not scientific, have at least been successful against the finest European troops; arranging forms of government . . .

“This spectacle ought to teach us the effects of circumstances upon the human faculties, and prescribe bounds to that arrogance, which would confine to one race, the characteristics of the species. We have torn those men from their country, on the vain pretence, that their nature is radically inferior to our own. We have treated them so as to stunt the natural growth of their virtues and their reason. Our efforts have partly succeeded; for the West Indian, like all other slaves, has copied some of the tyrant’s vices. But their ingenuity has advanced apace, under all disadvantages; and the negroes are already so much improved, that, while we madly continue to despise them, and to justify the crimes which have transplanted them, it has really become doubtful how long they will suffer us to exist in the islands.”

— Charles Brockden Brown, “On the Consequences of Abolishing the Slave Trade to the West Indian Colonies,” *The Literary Magazine, and American Register*, November 1805.

impetuous nation  
could  
such arrival  
Count  
as of party very disliked  
because envied

## THE ABOLITIONIST'S COUNSEL

virtues shall bend  
Lady Action

propose morning to them  
proposal enforced by eternal hope  
come out against terror  
support sudden trembling once called person  
hand fortitude to firmness  
check prayer with truth  
conceal still cruel thoughts  
listen more  
let not imagination be recollecting  
a conflict between clandestine embarrassments

insensible many sighed  
many   replied  
come           proceed  
upon search and adjoining request  
look where black courtesy convinced disposed friends  
where one half of sometimes  
appeared solicitous  
while indisposed  
pressing back

rectify affected perplexity  
of resentment  
order conversation softened  
conciliating insulted spirits  
entered stately into voice  
notwithstanding accent  
renounce former reserve  
consent to difficult confidence  
resolve heartily various  
respect    would  
          but felt stopped  
report distress  
point way by report  
mention hope  
delicate foundation

presently awoke  
strange steady cadence  
instantly conversation  
on what made one window  
outline effulgent  
gradually unclosed now

## THE OPTIMIST VISIONARIES

opposition views without army  
address hoped journey  
into believing  
attempt new object  
by a gaiety subdued  
of defy  
little wars  
against measure  
by give

arms to hand  
all pause  
meeting reflection  
at something endeavoured  
and composed in hope  
approaching silence  
of certainty



travelers winding  
began sublimity  
of banished revived prospects  
    arisen in heart

## 19

### NOT FAR

“Strangers! . . . condescend to relate the adventures that have brought you to this fatal place; and we, in return, will acquaint you with ours, which deserve but too well to be heard. To trace back our crimes to their source, though we are not permitted to repent, is the only employment suited to wretches like us!”

— William Beckford, *Vathek*, 1782.

playful hills descended  
into woods below  
a little habitation  
not far to Beaujeu  
or now

daily the anxious  
Count nothing  
Count coolness  
in business  
in never  
mind    disguise  
usual objects that flash  
power  
enterprise  
approve the lament  
erroneous pistol-shot  
afterwards permission  
and caught pleasure    still wish  
                                 lengthen the disorder

fascinating apology  
passed into protest  
apology    flattered  
                                 mortified  
                                 awakened  
                                 thought  
though    never honour  
muttered regret pressed forward  
apology triumph  
                                 but run

former murmur  
roused firearms  
going offer  
fear  
not but be  
door  
to must resign  
if wretched  
bitterness declaration  
hope short in future  
I not now tranquility  
will allow resentful  
to have Ah unfinished fears  
will allow impropriety  
fatal to I influence  
abruptly despair of  
I possessed and impatiently died  
of my moment life

tonight think you remember

*then*

Now exiled      to once

a spot slowly fainter

night      fled

*ENVOI FOR ANNE RADCLIFFE*

I turn  
Goldsmith

close times passed  
press through scene  
    present  
despair cliffs  
under peeping pencil

early harassing  
presented affection  
left evils  
ever memory not settled  
told sorrows  
more nothing  
resignation  
decorum with   no  
little windows   saw heart awakened  
baggage without residence  
far-seen summits  
lighted herself

make  
find  
go over line  
blueish length  
branches  
valley not passed  
plain leading on  
to precipices and prospects  
just discovered  
bridge to  
have bridges  
paper my consolation  
prolonging purpose  
more consolation  
given received  
letter deeply hope  
in describe to indifferent  
just ideal returning  
therefore  
writer as lover  
happy letter  
dare going





## AFTERWORD: CLUES TO AN OCCLUDED STORY

I have long been interested in how new literary genres are born. They seem to arise when the existing genres provide no opportunity to express or channel deep and critical anxieties.

Gothic literature, the ancestor of the horror genre, arose, I believe, from profound anxieties about race, power, and queer sexuality. The need to express these anxieties pushed the authors of the first Gothic books to set their tales in worlds distant in time and space, safely away from the England of the late 18th century.

Horace Walpole was 46 when he wrote *The Castle of Otranto*.

William Beckford was 21 when he wrote *Vathek*.

Anne Radcliffe was 29 when she wrote *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.

Matthew Lewis was 21 when he wrote *The Monk*.

Lewis and Beckford were major slave owners in Jamaica. Walpole and Radcliffe had been involved with the abolition of the slave trade, then the major issue before the British public.

Their novels exhibit a recurrent narrative structure that I call “sexual stealing.” “Sexual stealing” is the forcible taking by a powerful entity of a libidinated object — a treasure, a work of art, virginity, land, freedom or life itself — from a less powerful figure or group with no recourse to justice. In this narrative structure, the revenge of the victimized is accomplished partly by supernatural means in a kind of daemonic terror. (More on this subject, including the complications of queer identity in relation to positions of power, can be found in the essay “Sexual Stealing and the Gothic.”)

*The Mysteries of Udolpho* is one of those novels of enormous influence that seem virtually unreadable today. Like Rousseau’s *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, it measures the chasm that separates the sensibility of its time from our own. Jane Austen deftly skewered *Udolpho* in *Northanger Abbey*, her humor and irony highlighting their absence from Radcliffe’s

text. That absence may largely account for the chasm, but the book's loss of readership owes more to the fact that its path-breaking elements have been borrowed and improved upon by so many writers so many times since. The originality of *Udolpho* is now almost impossible to see. So one reads on, tolerating the one-dimensional characters in the hope of coming upon a bit of the experience that spurred Byron to set the book beside the works of Shakespeare, and De Quincey to call its author "the great enchantress."

At length one does come upon that experience in her descriptions of mountain landscape, such passes as the St. Gotthard, its roilings of mist and light. These vertiginous scenes stirred the imagination of many artists, notably Turner, and changed the history of art. For the willing reader, Radcliffe's painterly longueurs still elicit anxiety and wonder. Sometimes called prose poems, their rhythm mimicks the weather. Their panoramas anticipate cinema.

I believe that every text embodies obsessions and anxieties of which the author is to varying degrees aware. The application of a simple constraint can be useful in prospecting for those obsessions. I have interrogated the vocabulary of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* as clues to an occluded story. *Sexual Stealing* does not gloss Radcliffe's narrative, but rather attempts to excavate what might have driven it.

The constraint I applied involved selecting one word from each printed line of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, never skipping a line and never using two consecutive words. Here is the opening of the novel with the words I chose marked in red:

On the pleasant **banks** of the Garonne, in the province of Gascony, stood in the year 1584, the chateau **of** Monsieur St Aubert. From its windows were seen the pastoral landscapes of Guienne and Gascony, stretching along **the** river, gay with luxuriant woods and vines, and **plantations** of olives. To the south, the view was bounded by the majestic Pyrenées, **whose** summits, veiled in clouds, or exhibiting awful **forms**, seen and lost again, as the partial vapours rolled along, were sometimes barren, and **gleamed** through the blue tinge of air, and **sometimes** frowned with forests of gloomy pine, that swept downward to their base. These **tremendous** precipices were contrasted by the soft green

of the pastures and woods that hung upon their skirts; among whose **flocks**, and **herds** and simple cottages, the eye, after having scaled the cliffs above, delighted to repose. To the north, and to the east, the plains of Guienne **and** Languedoc were lost in the mist of **distance** on the west, Gascony was bounded by **the** waters of Biscay.

M. St Aubert loved to wander, with his wife and daughter, on the **margin** of the Garonne, and to listen to the music that **floated** on its waves. He had known life in other forms than those of **pastoral** simplicity, having mingled in the gay and in the busy scenes of the world; but the flattering **portrait** of mankind, which his heart had **delineated** in early youth, his experience had too sorrowfully **corrected**. Yet, amidst the changing visions of life, his principles remained unshaken, his **benevolence** unchilled; and he retired from the multitude, 'more in *pity* than in anger,' to **scenes** of simple nature . . .

So the extracted text reads:

banks of the plantations  
whose forms gleamed  
sometimes tremendous  
flocks herds and distance

the margin floated  
pastoral portrait  
delineated corrected  
benevolence scenes

As I elicited the submerged text, I added images and quotations that contextualize and comment upon it. These images and passages are for the most part contemporaneous with the first Gothic novels.

*Sexual Stealing* is poetic in that its form reflects its subject; it searches for a way to write the voices that are buried in full view, and subverts available genres to talk about something widely felt and intuited but not discussed. This writing assumes that writing is a form of listening, rather than expression, and that it requires the subjugation of the ego, an almost unthinkable posture for an American writer today.

