

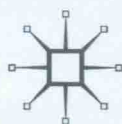
forms of english history in literature, landscape, and architecture



JOHN TWYNING

LANGUAGE, DISCOURSE, SOCIETY

Series Editors: Stephen Heath, Colin MacCabe and Denise Riley



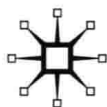
Forms of English History in Literature, Landscape, and Architecture

John Twyning

University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA



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To Amy, my love, my life, my critic

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Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	viii
<i>List of Plates</i>	x
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xii
Introduction: Reproducing Englishness	1
1 In Pursuit of an English Style: The Allure of Gothic	13
2 Gothic Adaptations and Reprisals	37
3 Tracing the Wild Man in Shakespeare's England	67
4 The English Country Estate and the Landscape's Nation	108
5 Thomas Hardy's Architecture of History	143
6 <i>Dracula</i> and Gothic Tourism	185
<i>Notes</i>	221
<i>Bibliography</i>	236
<i>Index</i>	248

List of Figures

1.1	James Wathen, <i>N. W. View of Hereford Cathedral</i> , 1789. By permission of the British Library.	14
1.2	James Wathen, <i>View of West Tower and Front of Hereford Cathedral</i> , 1788. By permission of the British Library.	15
1.3	<i>Hereford Cathedral, south west view with Cloisters</i> , engraved by B. Winkles from a study by Benjamin Baud, depicting James Wyatt's initial repair following the collapse of the West Tower. By permission of the British Library.	17
1.4	James Wathen, <i>West End View of Hereford Cathedral</i> , revealing the Romanesque, or "the Norman Style," of the nave. By permission of the British Library.	19
2.1	St. Mary's Church, Fairford, Gloucestershire, 1497. Photograph by John Twynning.	38
2.2	<i>Biblia Pauperum</i> , Annunciation, circa 1454.	46
2.3	<i>Biblia Pauperum</i> (1885), title page, special edition ascribed to John Wycliff. By permission of John Twynning.	48
2.4	In the foreground, left, a section of the wall of Henry VII's Lady Chapel, Westminster Abbey; in the background, on the right, is the Palace of Westminster. Photograph by John Twynning.	58
2.5	Westminster Abbey, Lady Chapel Interior. Photograph by permission of Eric Parker.	60
2.6	Joris Hoefnagel, <i>Nonsuch Palace</i> (1568), begun by Henry VIII in 1538. By permission of the Bridgeman Art Library.	64
3.1	Ely Cathedral, Lady Chapel, c. 1349, with arches scoured and defaced by sixteenth-century Protestant reformers. Photograph by John Twynning.	68

3.2a–f	Ely Cathedral, Lady Chapel, figure-foliage (detail). Photographs by John Twyning.	70
3.3	Hereford Cathedral, ceiling boss, green/wild man. Photograph by John Twyning.	72
3.4a–b	Hereford Cathedral, ceiling boss, wild nobleman in the woods. Photograph by John Twyning.	75
3.5	(a) Lincoln Cathedral, The Lincolnshire Imp carved in spandrel. Photograph by John Twyning; (b) Ely Cathedral: Manticore carved in spandrel. Photograph by John Twyning.	79
3.6	The Masquerade of Orson and Valentine, anonymous after Pieter Bruegel the Elder.	88
3.7	Ripon Cathedral: Upside-down fool/wild man in the Woods. Photograph by permission of Amy Twyning.	100
4.1	Penshurst Place, Great Hall.	114
6.1	The Palace of Westminster, built 1840–70. Photograph by John Twyning.	187
6.2	Tintern Abbey, Monmouthshire, S. Wales. Photograph by John Twyning.	187
6.3	Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, Norwich, ‘complete’ with empty niches. Photograph by John Twyning.	190
6.4	Whitby Abbey. Photograph by permission of Frank Twyning.	191

List of Plates

- Plate 1 The Great West Window, St. Mary's, Fairford.
Photograph by John Twynning.
- Plate 2 St. Mary's, Fairford, Window 9, detail depicting John 21:6. Photograph by John Twynning.
- Plate 3 Golden *Biblia Pauperum*, scene seven, Christ driving Moneychangers from the Temple. By permission of the British Library.
- Plate 4 St. Mary's, Fairford, Window 1, the lower lights.
Photograph by John Twynning.
- Plate 5 St Mary's, Fairford, Window 5, the Passion depicted in the East Window. Photograph by John Twynning.
- Plate 6 St Mary's, Fairford, Window 6, detail depicting the Deposition, Christ's descent from the Cross.
Photograph by John Twynning.
- Plate 7 Ely Cathedral, Lady Chapel, gouged and destroyed niches absent their statuary. Photograph by John Twynning.
- Plate 8 Ely Cathedral, Lady Chapel, Drama of the Life of Mary (detail) surrounded by complex carving of woodland and foliage. Photograph by John Twynning.
- Plate 9 Hereford Cathedral, misericord, wild man or wodewose grappling with lion. Photograph by John Twynning.
- Plate 10 (a) Norwich Cathedral, cloister ceiling boss, green/wild Man. Photograph by John Twynning; (b) Ely Cathedral, capital, hybrid creature and foliage. Photograph by John Twynning.
- Plate 11 Ripon Cathedral, misericord, wild man/wodewose emerging from woods. Photograph by John Twynning.
- Plate 12 Penshurst Place, Kent, rear entrance to the Great Hall (red roof). Photograph by John Twynning.
- Plate 13 Stowe Gardens, pastoral scene. Photograph by John Twynning.

- Plate 14 Stowe Gardens, Buckinghamshire, Temple of British Worthies. Photograph by John Twynning.
- Plate 15 Stowe Gardens, Temple of Ancient Virtue. Photograph by John Twynning.
- Plate 16 Stowe Gardens, Palladian Bridge leading to Gothic Temple. Photograph by John Twynning.
- Plate 17 Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Peasant Dance*, c. 1568. By permission of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.
- Plate 18 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *La Donna della Fiamma*, 1870. By permission of the Manchester Art Gallery.
- Plate 19 Gloucester Cathedral, Great East Window. Photograph by John Twynning.
- Plate 20 J. M. W. Turner, *The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons, 16th October, 1834*, 1835. By permission of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.
- Plate 21 John Constable, *Salisbury Cathedral from the Bishop's Grounds*, 1823. By Permission of the Victoria and Albert Museum.
- Plate 22 John Constable, *Salisbury Cathedral from the Bishop's Grounds*, 1825. By permission of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- Plate 23 John Constable, *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows*, 1829. By permission of the National Gallery, London.
- Plate 24 J. M. W. Turner, *Melrose Abbey*, 1822. By permission of the Sterling & Francine Clark Art Institute.

Introduction: Reproducing Englishness

*And I know a grove
Of large extent, hard by a castle huge
Which the great lord inhabits not: and so
This grove is wild with tangling underwood,
And the trim walks are broken up, and grass,
Thin grass and king-cups grow within the paths.
But never elsewhere in one place I knew
So many Nightingales: and far and near
In wood and thicket over the wide grove
They answer and provoke each other's songs
With skirmish and capricious passagings*
Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "The Nightingale"¹

A ruined seat of hereditary authority provides a landscape through which the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge looks to reshape meaning, history, sensibility, and our affective bonds to place. Transformed from Milton's "'Most musical, most melancholy' Bird!," Coleridge gives us a communicative and inquisitive bird: a "merry Nightingale / That crowds, and hurries, and precipitates / With fast thick warble his delicious notes" (ll. 13 and 43–5). In the grove, night-time becomes a canvas for the imagination, a space to see with different senses. Worship and devotion are brought out of doors and given to wild nature. Coleridge's speaker's somewhat polemical stance on the aesthetics of the past nevertheless uses and incorporates the material forms and the discursive products of preceding generations. The poem asks us to re-organize our senses and rethink our associations, to close our eyes so that we can "perchance behold [the nightingales] on the twigs" (l. 65) and to forgo the mannered appropriation of the natural world. That these signature

elements of the Romantic revolution lie “hard by” the fragments and ruins of past institutions tells us something, ultimately, about the way that national consciousness and national identity cohere over generations and eras, absorbing discontinuities, and weaving a stable sense of ethnic nationhood out of disparate threads. Coleridge’s empty castle, the ruins that belong to times gone by, the monuments that memorialize a different age, histories’ fragments, whether they be artifacts intact or broken, whether they be texts lost or continually passed from one generation to another, are strewn throughout any succeeding era. Often they mark historical discontinuity but they may also be yoked to the contemporary moment through a more or less harmonious re-interpretation. Making things signify something else, or even maintaining the meaning they have borne over time; these are the active processes by which, this book argues, English culture constructs itself.

Not by any means a survey, the following pages examine the role of “the Gothic” in the making of English consciousness, how it functions, even against fact and official record, as a marker and touchstone for a receding but recoverable “authentic” English style. Such a found, “true,” English consciousness, serves in turn to rearticulate the nature of the Gothic. Chapter 1, “In Pursuit of the English Style: the Allure of the Gothic,” recounts the ways that heterogeneous Gothic architectures are reconstructed, both actually and virtually, in ecclesiastical renovations and aesthetic discourse, as a proto-national and crypto-national style. The chapter examines the successive and sometimes competing aesthetic Gothic revivals beginning in the late eighteenth century and progressing through the nineteenth century without conceding their claims to the discovery of a true English style. Instead of seeking to unearth England’s architectural past to discover an origin for its own version of the European-wide Gothic order, this chapter observes and analyzes the discursive products of such excavations. Beginning with the collapse of Hereford Cathedral’s west tower in 1786 and its subsequent renovations, we follow the cathedral’s quixotic Dean, John Merewether, in his pursuit of the building’s original architectural core. In consequence, we find ourselves in the midst of a national and historical debate between restorers and preservers of ancient structures. Preservationists like William Morris, John Ruskin, and Thomas Hardy, ostensibly opposed to alterations of the extant state of ancient buildings, vilified the practices of restorers who sought to unify the aesthetic face of such structures by replacing outcroppings of other orders with the features of a chosen coherent style. While preservationists venerated heterogeneity as authenticity, restorationists sought authenticity

in the reconstruction of a homogeneous structure rooted in either the most prominent architectural order or in that which was deemed the most intentioned. What neither camp could comfortably settle was the question of a so-called origin precisely because such monumental edifices exist as aggregates that resist any secure determination of their origins. A Norman building might form the core of an early Gothic structure, though the eventual completion of that structure might see it finished in the radically different aesthetic and form of the so-called Decorated Gothic style. To the annoyance of many and perhaps to Hereford Cathedral's peril, Merewether's search for the Cathedral's original style, had it not been arrested, could have proven to have been more disastrous than merely a fool's errand. Unstopped, the dean's tunneling behind walls and under floors in search of the building's origins, heedless of structural consequences, promised at least a bad end for the cathedral's structural integrity. The more permanent work produced by the wave of Gothic revivalism to which Merewether's restorationist efforts and desires belong, however, was the (re)construction of an equation in the national consciousness between a multifarious Gothic and a cohesive Englishness.

Architectural historians of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have produced intricate studies of the variations of Gothic styles both in the history of English architecture and European architecture. Some of this work has been dedicated to discovering the exact moment when English Gothic architecture parted ways with, especially, French Gothic architecture to become a particular national style. Valuable contributions to the study of Gothic architecture as they are within the frameworks of their discipline, such an endeavor runs into problems of how to deal with racial identification implicit in the search for origins of national styles. My own archeological quest draws upon the rich work of influential scholars, antiquarians, and architects while discounting the nationalistic project that formed the very categories they deploy. For instance, one of Gothic architecture's seminal figures, Thomas Rickman, whose *Gothia Architectura* supplies the nomenclature for different versions of the Gothic style still in use today, is hardly shy about claiming Gothic architecture for the English. He gives us the following anatomization: "the Norman style"; "the Early English style"; "the Decorated English style"; and "the Perpendicular English style." All those named "English" correspond to what Rickman deems Gothic. It is not difficult to see the permanence of this identification in something like the over-determined title of Niklaus Pevsner's mid-twentieth-century Reith lecture series: "The Englishness of English Art." A foreign import himself, Niklaus Pevsner