1

Strawberry Hill: Performed Architecture, Houses of Fiction and the Gothic Aesthetic

The duc de Nivernais visits Strawberry Hill

In the April of 1763, Louis-Jules-Barbon Mancini-Mazarini, duc de Nivernais, visited Horace Walpole at Strawberry Hill, Walpole’s home in Twickenham. Nivernais and Walpole, who were almost exact contemporaries, had much in common. For a start, they were both politicians. Nivernais, an experienced diplomat, was acting in England as ambassador extraordinary, and earlier in the year had been involved in the negotiations for the Peace of Paris, one of the two treaties that concluded the Seven Years War.1 Walpole was the son of the eminent eighteenth-century first minister, Robert Walpole, and an MP in his own right, with what he called (using an Old English term to refer to parliament) a ‘Gothic passion ... for squabbles in the Wittenagemot.’2 Besides politics, Walpole and Nivernais had many other mutual interests. Walpole was a francophile and Nivernais an anglophile. Both were connoisseurs of art, devotees of the landscape garden, and, above all, men of letters.3 The two were to remain in contact for many years afterwards (the last surviving letter that passed between them dates from 1792, by which time both men were in their mid-seventies). Nivernais’ visit to Twickenham in 1763, however, was not primarily social. His reason for calling was as much to see Strawberry Hill as to see Walpole.

Receiving tourists into one’s home, in this period, was certainly not unknown. One has only to think of Elizabeth Bennet touring Darcy’s Pemberley with her aunt in Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice (1813). But travellers who made visits to Pemberley, or, in the real world, Chatsworth or Hampton Court (where Nivernais was heading for), did so for reasons different from those of visitors to Strawberry Hill. Not only did the former want to see impressive collections of paintings and
rare and beautiful objects (which Strawberry Hill had in plenty), but they also wanted to see houses that were either brilliant examples of new building or hallowed by age and historic associations. Chatsworth, for example, had been rebuilt in the baroque style at the turn of the century. Hampton Court was famed for its association with the monarchy: Henry VIII had taken the palace from Cardinal Wolsey; Edward VI had been born there; Elizabeth I had been imprisoned there as a young woman by her half-sister Mary I. Strawberry Hill, although it had some exquisite objets d’art and historical relics, was neither a celebrated historic house nor a stunning new build. It was not even large. Strawberry Hill was a converted dairy, which had been substantially extended and mocked-up.

Nivernais had a great deal of respect for Walpole’s taste in the fields of literature and design. An anecdote of Walpole’s shows Nivernais, the following month, at a party given by a mutual friend at Esher, ‘absorbed all day and lagging behind, translating [Walpole’s] verses’. In 1785, Nivernais was to translate Walpole’s ‘Essay on Modern Gardening’ into French. Despite these promising indications, Nivernais was doomed not to ‘get’ Strawberry Hill. In a letter to Horace Mann, Walpole notes: ‘I cannot say he flattered me much, or was much struck by Strawberry.’

The crisis came when the duke walked into the room Walpole called the Tribune, which held many of Walpole’s greatest treasures (see Figure 1.1).

What was the Tribune like? Fortunately for scholars of Strawberry Hill, Walpole left a very detailed description of the room and its many contents in a catalogue A Description of the Villa of Horace Walpole, Youngest Son of Sir Robert Walpole Earl of Orford, at Strawberry-Hill, Near Twickenham: With an Inventory of the Furniture, Pictures, Curiosities, &c (1774). In this work, we learn that the Tribune (or ‘the Cabinet’ as it was also known) featured windows from the ‘great church at Saint Alban’s’, that its roof was taken from the chapter house at York and was ‘terminated by a star of yellow glass that throws a golden gloom all over the room’, and that the room contained an ‘altar of black and gold, with a marble slab of the same colours’. Not all the objects in the Tribune had religious associations. The Tribune was a ‘cabinet’ in the eighteenth-century sense in that it contained many and varied objects. There were secular portraits and statues, many of them of historical figures, including kings and queens of England and of France, and some of the Walpole family past and present. There were various objets d’art (‘a fine old enamelled watch-case, after Raphael and Dominichino’, for example); a substantial number of objects from the classical world (examples include a ‘small bust in bronze of Caligula, with silver eyes’