THE CLASSICAL AND THE ROMANTIC



Belsay, Northumberland. Early nineteenth century.

Visiting with Bianca (Carpeneti).

As pure a contrast between the Classical and Gothic Romantic as can be imagined.









Here is something I have written to appear in my forthcoming book “The Archaeological Imagination” – to my embarrassment and frustration still in (final) revision.

Sir Charles Monck decided not to restore his family castle of Belsay in the south east of Northumberland. This very fine fourteenth century tower was extended with a Jacobean wing after the union of the crowns in the early seventeenth century and was the home of the Middleton family. Monck inherited in 1795 together with another estate from his maternal grandfather (which prompted his change of name from Middleton to Monck). In 1804 he set off on a two year honeymoon that included a tour through Germany and a long stay in Greece. He had had a traditional classical education at Rugby school and clearly got caught up in the current enthusiasm for all things ancient and Greek: his sketched various new neo-Classical buildings in Germany, and in Athens fell in with William Gell at the time of his publication of his *Topography of Troy* and when he was working on what was to be his *Itinerary of Greece*. The experience was revelatory: on his return to Belsay Monck set about designing a new house inspired by his first hand experience of Classical Greek architecture. Ten years of building produced one of the most consistent applications of contemporary

understanding of the geometry of ancient Greek architecture to a modern residence.

The two hundred and more drawings for the project that still remain – the plans and ideas that lay behind the house – show that this was very much a personal project. One architectural drawing for the hall was by Gell, though Monck's zeal for accuracy led to something quite different to the optical consistency I have discussed in Gell's topography. The theme is the Doric order, very much interpreted in what is almost a meditation on proportion and geometry. The house is exactly one hundred feet square. Exactly – Monck insisted that the proportional ratios of the design were calculated to three decimal places, forcing masons to abandon their conventional measurements in eighths of an inch.There are few direct quotations from the original Greek, though the Tower of the Winds appears at Belsay as the octagonal lantern on the stables. This is more a rationalist reworking of what people like Monck and Gell (and William Wilkins, another antiquary and architect friend) thought that Greek architecture represented. The fronts of the house are exceptionally severe, wholly plain apart from the fluted Doric

columns at the entrance and the pilasters: the emphasis is simply on proportion, line and surface; the roof was low-pitched so as to be invisible from ground level, kept from intruding upon the rectangular geometry. There is even evidence that the library bookcases echo the proportions of the Erechtheion on the Acropolis in Athens, as measured by Monck.

The nearby village was demolished and the site turned over to being a quarry for building stone; the locals were rehoused in a model village on the main road between Newcastle and Jedburgh. Monck abandoned the castle and old house, turning them into a ruin. The quarry was then converted into a garden, connecting the new house with the ruin: it looks like a painting by Salvator Rosa, on the wild side of the picturesque, tumble-down grottoes, seating niches by springs in the rock faces, and a look of natural abandon in the ferns and undergrowth. Formal gardens immediately around the house become parkland in the manner of Capability Brown and Repton, as at Alnwick, with much use of ha-has that open up views across the estate, and to the hillside opposite, forested with exotic conifers, Scot’s Pine and native hardwoods. Monck’s variation on the Theseion

in Athens, his temple to rational system, is a focus of human order in a landscape that was less cultivated and more suggestive of chaos and decay the further it was from the house, just as the modern finds new life in the ancient, and the ruin of history becomes a charming after-dinner walk through the picturesque.

The theme in the archaeological imagination given different inflection in these building projects is one of the possibility, feasibility and, crucially, the desirability of rebuilding the past, making good the loss of time and ruin. A key archaeological task is to sort through the debris of history. And then what? To witness the loss by consolidating ruins as just that, ruins in a new landscape. To rebuild and restore, to fill in the gaps. To replicate exactly. Or to build again, incorporating the past into the present. Does authenticity lie in the original fragment, the broken stone statue itself, or in the principles of proportion and order of an ancient culture? Or even in a sentiment such as baronial splendor?



The walk through the quarry garden



Original painted plaster in the great hall of the medieval tower