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Obsessing about the Catholic Other: Religion and the Secularization Process in Gothic Literature

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Perhaps it was totally predictable that the past year has seen both the publication of a major book by Lennard Davis entitled *Obsession*[1], as well as a new two player board game called "Obsession" in which one player wins by moving his ten rings along numbered slots. Interest in obsession, it would seem, is everywhere in high and low cultures. For Davis, obsession is both a cultural manifestation of what modernity has wrought, and a psychoanalytical phenomenon: in fact, he defines it as a recurring thought whose content has become disconnected from its original significance causing the dominance of repetitive mental intrusions (Davis 6). Recent studies have revealed that there are five broad categories of obsession: dirt and contamination, aggression, the placing of inanimate objects in order, sex, and finally religion[2]. Another recent study, however, claims that obsessive thoughts generally center on three main themes: the aggressive, the sexual, or the blasphemous (qtd. Davis 9). It is that last category – the blasphemous – that I think emerges in British gothic literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, particularly as seen in the persistent anti-Catholicism that plays such a central role in so many of those works (Radcliffe's *The Italian*, Lewis's *The Monk*, and Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* being only the most obvious). Perhaps it is naïve to try to neatly separate these three impulses, for there is a good deal of the aggressive and the sexual continuously operating in the gothic as well, and not below the textual surface. Gothic literature can be understood, I would claim, as an obsession with secularizing or perhaps it is best to say that it is cultural work that reveals the secularizing obsession on the part of the middle classes throughout Europe, from roughly 1780 to 1850. In order to modernize and secularize, the British Protestant Imaginary needed an "other" against which it could define itself.

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1   Lennard J. Davis, *Obsession: A History*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007.

2   Praying, Davis notes, is a repetitive mental process that is obsessional by its very nature (Davis 11).

In gothic literature a reactionary, demonized, and feudal Catholicism is constructed in order to stand in opposition to the modern Protestant individual who then alternately combats and flirts with this uncanny double in a series of cultural productions that we recognize as gothic novels.

As Davis notes, "Religious scrupulosity and obsessive thoughts were more clearly problems for earlier times... Obsessive thoughts were tied to possession by the devil until the end of the seventeenth century when, at least in England, demonic possession was legally banned [because] it was seen as tied up with Catholicism and popery" (13). The devil, of course, was the ultimate external and assaulting force on the soul of humanity, and for centuries Western consciousness was preoccupied with battling this wily opponent. A major move in displacing the devil from his dominance occurred in 1736 when the British Parliament banned all laws that would have allowed courts to convict anyone of demonic possession or witchcraft. Certainly, the passage of this law was a Protestant triumph because, as Davis notes, the "Catholic Church was seen as having the inside track on exorcisms, and banning the idea of possession was in effect a way of banning popery in general" (Davis 33). This one episode illustrates well what Foucault has noted about the major "biocultural" transition that occurred in the eighteenth century, claiming that it was based on moving societal controls from outside the body to inside through an increasingly successful system of internalized self-regulations. Given the decline in traditional religious beliefs, structures, and external mechanisms like confessions, something like a "massive, cultural building up of a collective superego" (Davis 14) and a fetishization of the nervous system (Davis 33-34) began to emerge as the basis for a new disciplinary system. Modern and secularized subjectivity can be understood, then, as by definition obsessive, and one of its major obsessions is, I will claim, what was left behind: traditional religious beliefs that were atavistic, focused on the devil, saints, and magical rituals that allowed the believer a sense of control over the uncontrollable, *i.e.*, the omnipresence and power of death.

I would like to begin by invoking Pieter Breughel's epic canvas *The Battle of Carnival and Lent*, because it depicts the denizens of an early modern village engaged in a variety of activities that would have occurred on that specific day of transition between carnival and lent, including, off in the left corner, gawking at a public performance of a popular carnival pantomime *Valentine and Orson*. This legendary tale of separated noble twin brothers, one of whom is raised in the wild by a literal mother-bear who dies at the conclusion of

the work so that her "son" Orson can return to society with his brother, stages in a very real manner how theatrical performances enacted a ritualistic "civilizing" process throughout early modern Europe. It is also no coincidence that *Valentine and Orson* was typically performed by traveling theater troupes on the cusp of the religious calendar, during that period when carnival excess becomes Lenten penance and abstinence. In telling a tale that foregrounds a variety of transitions (from rural to urban; from "raw to cooked"), as well as the struggles and pain that occur when a son betrays his "primitive" and "animalistic" mother in order to return to the patriarchy, the play literally makes the maternal forest home of Orson a place of *das Unheimliche*, the uncanny, and reintroduces him to his original but lost family in society, his fraternal bond with Valentine. *Valentine and Orson* was a street play and chapbook for hundreds of years before it was once again adapted as a drama by the Londoner Thomas Dibdin in 1794 and again in 1804 and then published yet again as a chapbook that same year. Its resurgence in popularity during this period and for the next several decades suggests that the "civilizing" and secularizing processes that began with the development of urban centers in Breughel's period were ongoing, although by this time the transformations that were occurring throughout Europe were largely internal ones: in subjectivity and belief systems.

I am interested in positioning *Valentine and Orson* as representative of my larger argument because what I would call the secularizing agenda of the gothic imaginary arose and flourished during this particular period throughout Britain, France, and "Germany". All three of these developing nation-states were assailed by religious, political, and social changes that they were ill equipped to accommodate so quickly and, as a result, the world of early modern Europe, a society dominated by the religious calendar and the festivities that we saw depicted in Breughel's painting, was transformed. Religious liturgies, texts, and doctrinal beliefs that had been followed and practiced for close to two thousand years and had functioned for this culture as its structuring principle were now either abolished or secularized through a variety of popular cultural forms. It is clear, though, that the lower-class and the emerging bourgeoisie were loath to discard their traditional beliefs, and we can see their search for a sense of order and meaning in life in the continuing popularity of gothic productions, May-day celebrations, Halloween, and the Christmas harlequinades, highly stylized and almost ritualistic theatrical performances based on fairy tales or myths, all events that demonstrate that there was more than a residue of a religious calendar still operating in the public performative realm.

In addition, I want to argue that the gothic aesthetic emerged during this period as an ideologically contradictory and complex discourse system, a secularizing of the uncanny, and by that I mean a way of alternately expressing and at the same time repressing the realms of the supernatural, the sacred, the maternal, the primitive, the numinous, and *das Unheimliche*. Defining *das Unheimliche* is frequently done by contrasting it with *heim*, literally meaning, as Freud reminds us, a home or secure space, and as in Grimm's *Dictionary*, a place "free from ghostly influences". Typically, theorists of the uncanny conceive of it as a repetitive, disturbing, haunting figure that intrudes into a largely secular domain, so that a culture in which religion still thrives does not organize itself much around the uncanny as a category. But I would argue that the uncanny is not a strictly modern trope; certainly it was not invented by Freud, just labeled by him. The uncanny has always existed as Sophocles well knew, and it seems to be something that is inherent in religious practice itself. Because this culture could not turn away from God, it chose to be haunted by his uncanny avatars: priests, corrupt monks, incestuous fathers and uncles. The gothic was, in fact, extremely effective at keeping all of the *ne plus ultra* of the supernatural alive, for instance, ghosts, witches, necromancy, exorcism, the occult, and the devil.

The repetitious trappings of the uncanny and what I would identify as animism or magical thinking continue to permeate the reading materials and theatrical performances that the lower class and newly bourgeois citizens attended in Britain, France, and Germany, but they did so in performances that sometimes explained away the supernatural in favor of the codes of the Enlightenment: reason, order, and clarity, and sometimes they did not. There is no question that the bourgeoisie and elites of Enlightenment Europe sought to embrace the secular codes of modernism as they understood them: commercial enterprise, education and the values of literacy, nationalism, legal rights, and civic values like "virtue" and "reason". In fact, the novel as a genre developed to reify this very ethos. The gothic imaginary, however, seems to be distinctly modern, neither purely a novel form nor purely a romance. A hybrid that could assume different shapes and accomplish contradictory ideological work, the gothic could be Protestant as well as Catholic at the same (confusing) time. It also could present a "pre-modern epistemology" at the same time it denounced such nonsense. In a similar manner, the process of secularization that occurs in the gothic is not a simple forward-moving trajectory that we could recognize as the Enlightenment project, but more of an oscillation in which traditional religious beliefs and tropes are alternately preserved and reanimated and then blasted and condemned. The gothic aesthetic anxiously splits,

then, between an evocation of the religious and feudal past and a glimpse of the almost-present secular, between the importance of the pre-capitalist human community (Brueghel's vision) and the newly modern individual in the public sphere.

As the Canadian gothicist Robert Miles sees it, England and I would claim, Germany viewed the Protestant Reformation as "unfinished business", and so the gothic became popular because it displayed "the deformities of Catholicism[,] held them up to the reader for the purposes of Protestant delectation" (84). But, as Miles notes, "anti-Catholicism is frequently a screen for national concerns", meaning that for him the gothic is actually much less concerned with religion per se and much more focused on anxieties about the new sources for political and social legitimacy, or the lack of them, in a society that had suspended the Divine Right of Kings and had no plausible replacement on hand. In post-revolutionary France, of course, anxieties toward England and the German states were all the more intense, with the added complication of Napoleonic censorship and military aggression during the Empire period. In the German principalities, we can see fear of political violence oscillating with an incipient drive toward nationalism, all of this complicated by Protestant and Catholic factionalism. In short, I read the gothic as a highly stylized, ritualized discourse that attempts to legitimate emerging nationalism by transferring a quasi-religious status to the newly developing nation-states and the modern bourgeois individual. This act of apotheosis creates the ideal secular domain ("the city on the hill") as the locus of power in the newly-constructed nation-state, and substitutes the modern bourgeois citizen for the antiquated and corrupt church, aristocracy, and clergy.

Although it has long been standard to claim that one of the defining features of the gothic is its persistent use of the "explained supernatural", it is in fact more accurate to recognize that explaining away the supernatural in gothic discourse is another way of privileging its talismanic force. Many scholars have identified what they have called the "natural supernaturalism" or the "naturalized Gothic" of the period, but no one (to my knowledge) has analyzed the gothic as one of the major modes of easing the transition from a religiously-inflected culture to a secular one. Although it has long been a critical truism to claim that the gothic is "anti-Catholic" and anti-clerical, I will argue that the issue of religion's uncanny presence in the period's literature is much more complex and conflicted. Yes, the "whiggish" gothic aesthetic is anti-Catholic, but in its bid to establish a (false) pedigree for itself, it is also nostalgic, reactionary, and in thrall to the lure of an earlier feudal, aristocratic,

and Catholic past. There is no question that British writers recognized the power of the gothic to seduce its readers with ambivalent and confusing messages. An analysis of many gothic works reveals that the gothic needs to be understood as a powerful ideological discourse-system that kept spectres and apparitions of the sacred as well as the demonic alive at the same time that it castigated the failings of formal, institutionalized religion. As a major component of the secularizing process, the gothic aesthetic anxiously looked both backward and forward at the same time, torn between reifying the past and anxiously embracing a future it could not quite envision.

As the embodiment of a nightmarish past that could only uncannily recur in increasingly horrific manifestations, the gothic imaginary haunts itself with its own increasingly hyperbolic and compulsively violent reenactments of the past. In some ways we can read the gothic as an avatar of what Freud labeled as the uncanny, *das Unheimliche* (1919), a representation of the ambivalent attraction and repulsion to the primitive feudal past of Europe, the animistic heritage of "magical thinking" found in Catholicism. Strange and yet familiar, the uncanny is most frequently associated in Freud's essay with the mechanisms by which that which is most familiar to us – our families, homes, and our own bodies – suddenly seem strange or possessed by a force that we do not recognize or control.

The gothic secularized the uncanny by making traditional religious beliefs and values both familiar and strange, both minimal and powerful at the same time. As Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007) observes, "there has been a titanic change in our western civilization. We have changed not just from a condition where most people lived 'naïvely' in a construal ([that was] part Christian, part related to 'spirits' of pagan origin) as simple reality, [but] to one in which almost no one is capable of this, but all see their option [all beliefs, their own included] as one among many". For Taylor, this transition occurred when the concern for and emphasis on earthly "human flourishing" replaced the high value that had been placed on accumulating "merit" in the afterlife: "I would like to claim that the coming of modern secularity in my sense has been coterminous with the rise of a society in which for the first time in history a purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option. I mean by this a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing. Of no previous society was this true" (18).

Although Taylor does not specifically address the gothic, he might well have, for Europe both before and after the French Revolution was in the grip of both religious angst and political terror, and the emergence and transmutation of the gothic mapped those

fears on a broad cultural terrain. Certainly by 1780 the "philosophic" movement in France had built an extremely strong case against religion as a species of "superstition" and the prop on which a corrupt political apparatus rested. Proponents of a variety of Enlightenment ideologies – scientific experimentation, mechanistic philosophy, materialism, Naturalism – challenged the animistic conception of the universe that had been constructed by traditional Christian beliefs. In their attempt to establish a new society based on the realities of matter or the organic cycle of birth, growth, and decay, these epistemologies endorsed the scientific principle and the notion that the processes of life and matter occurred without recourse to a belief in spirit or the supernatural. But as various theorists of the decline of magic and superstition have noted, one cannot simply attribute the changes in beliefs that happened at this time to the success of the scientific revolution, the increase in urbanism, or the spread of various Protestant self-help ideologies. As Keith Thomas has concluded, "if magic is to be defined as the employment of ineffective techniques to allay anxiety when effective ones are available, then we must recognize that no society will ever be free from it". Indeed, as Thomas notes, explanatory supernatural theories were rejected throughout most of England well before effective techniques to explain medical and natural events were developed. And it is precisely in this historical gap –between the decline of magic and the rise of science– that the gothic imaginary emerges.

Another possible way to approach the secularization thesis would be to ask, how did the West, at least ideally, evolve the values of universal human rights, suffrage, equality between the sexes, companionate marriage, and toleration of religious and cultural differences? Jürgen Habermas has claimed that the crucial component in explaining modernization can be found in the development what he called a textual society in which readers were unified rather than divided into hierarchical social classes. The development of this broad-based literate public sphere was characterized by a print-based culture and literary texts that extolled the "whiggish"-bourgeois values of individuality, duty, loyalty, equality under the law, public education, and freedom of choice. But these social, political, and legal developments did not occur seamlessly or without a fairly contentious interaction with previous modes of largely religiously enforced patterns of behavior and thought, and this is where the vexed topic of secularization enters the discussion.

That is, in order to modernize, the newly bourgeois citizen of the secular city (the newly evolving nation-state) had to reject the archaic and superstitious beliefs of the past and embrace a brave new world of reason and "natural supernaturalism", a society in which

the increasingly feminized and domesticated middle class family replaced the hierarchical family proffered earlier by the Church and King. What I am calling the earlier, feudal, aristocratic, and ecclesiastical family/clan (or way of positioning and understanding oneself in a hierarchical cultural structure) was replaced during this period by a new political and familial structure –nationalistic, bourgeois, individualistic, personal, and conjugal– and it was in the oscillation and struggle between these two competing "families" –these two social, religious, political, and cultural formations– that the uncanniness and anxiety in the gothic imaginary was created.

I should begin by noting that England was certainly not unique in anti-Catholic sentiments during this period. In Leipzig in 1783 an anonymously published romance entitled *Die Päbstinn Johann* appeared, presenting a female Pope Joan who was exposed as a woman only when she gave birth to a child in the streets of Rome during a saint's day procession. Thrown into a prison, she died there, abandoned in her misery. Henri de Latouche's *Fragoletta, ou Naples et Paris en 1799* (1829) is somewhat similar in theme, for it is an anti-Catholic political allegory in which the "heroine" turns out to be a hermaphrodite who has masqueraded as a man throughout the novel. This anti-Catholic device of revealing a supposedly male ecclesiastic to be a female in disguise was also used in Isabella Kelly's *Lusignan, or The Abbaye of La Trappe* (4 vols., Minerva: 1801). In this work, Brother Ambrose turns out to be the long-lost heiress Emily, living in disguise in the aforementioned Abbey of La Trappe in Normandy. As Jacqueline Howard has observed, popular fiction in the 1790s had "a strong anti-Catholic bias" (229), and dwelt almost obsessively on the motifs of the secret society (read: Jesuits or Illuminati), clandestine political organizations (again, read: Jesuits or Illuminati), bandit outcasts, wicked and scheming clerics, mistaken identities, underground passages and vaults, imprisonments and murder plots gone awry, and spirits mixed with erotica. Other anti-catholic German gothic works that were particularly popular include Cajetan Tschink's *Victim of Magical Delusions*, (trans 1795), a three volume novel that denounces apparitions and praises Martin Luther for restoring reason to religious belief; Karl Grosse's *The Genius* (1796; translated as *Horrid Mysteries*), and Veit Weber's *The Sorcerer* (1795). There is in all of these works an intense distrust of Catholicism, but there is also in these male-authored novels, more than a whiff of misogyny.

Speaking of misogyny, Horace Walpole, author of the first gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, went so far as to call himself a "Protestant Goth", and referred to Catholicism as "Superstition's papal gloom". He was, however, fascinated with Catholic ritual and

was a descendant of Father Henry Walpole, executed as a Jesuit in 1595. The gothic, as I have noted, seeks simultaneously to exploit and highlight superstition at the same time it condemns it. Walpole's case is particularly interesting, though, because he was familiar with Henry Spelman's *History of Sacrilege* (1698), a book that discussed the fates –including supernatural penalties– of twenty-four families that that had profited from moving into former monasteries that had been seized by Henry VIII during the Dissolution. According to Spelman, all but two of the monasteries had "flung out their Owners with their Names... by grievous Accidents and Misfortunes". The Walpole family at Houghton is presented as one of the "good" families that Spelman discusses, one that did not profit from seizing holy property and defaming it in "sacrilege", but his neighbors in this area included "the named and shamed", those who "walked in a landscape where certain buildings and parcels of land were thought to carry God's curse" (Shell 35). Walpole may have intellectually sided with those who usurped church property, but there is clearly an approach-avoidance dance that we can see enacted in *The Castle of Otranto* and certainly we hear alternately of his attraction and repulsion to Catholicism in his letters.

The passage of the Catholic Relief Act in 1829 in Britain meant that the popular British imaginary had to find another subject population (as "Other") that they could oppose or demonize in order to cement their national identity. Africans and lower-class women who frequented circulating libraries and assumed airs of intellectual equality seem to have become the next groups to be scapegoated by the masculinist, bourgeois, Protestant imaginary. But Catholics as potential and persistent threats were never far from the edges of besieged British consciousness. In 1824, Walter Scott was adding his voice to the issue, praising the novels of Ann Radcliffe for exposing the Catholic threat to the nation: "She selected the new and powerful machinery afforded her by the Popish religion, when established in its paramount superiority, and thereby had at her disposal monks, spies, dungeons, the mute obedience of the bigot, the dark and denominating spirit of the crafty priest,—all the thunders of the Vatican, and all the terrors of the Inquisition". For Scott, Catholicism posed a political and nationalistic threat to Britain, stating that he believed that "feudal tyranny and Catholic superstition continue to exercise their sway over the slave and bigot, and to indulge the haughty lord, or more haughty priest, that sort of despotic power, the exercise of which seldom fails to deprave the heart and disorder the judgement". By the time John Henry Newman converted to Roman Catholicism in 1845, fear of a traitorous faction within had increased yet again to a fever pitch in Britain.

In an era that was negotiating political reform, gender relations, print culture, and the claims of nationalism, colonialism and imperialist expansion, religion was yet another highly contested and ambivalent topic that was being fought out, literally, over the dead bodies that began emerging on the marshy river banks of Paris and London. If, as Protestantism asserted, there was no purgatory, then there was only either heaven or hell, not some murky purgatorial place where the dead went to wait until the living prayed them into heaven. Anxieties about the rituals connected with Christian burial and the need to clearly define who could and could not be buried in a Christian church and the attached cemetery began to be played out, first in Germany, and then in England, after the Protestant Reformation. In the absence of purgatory, it became crucial to determine where someone's soul was going to reside, and with the rise in population and the premium placed on space in urban centers, not everyone could be buried in a parish cemetery in the middle of a city. Competition for real estate, so to speak, in the afterlife (with a berth in a parish church or graveyard) was fierce. Proving that one deserved such a spot actually became an issue of great importance to all classes who did not own their own mausoleums. More importantly, however, if there was no purgatory, then the living no longer had any connection with the dead, except to fondly remember them.

In England the new Chantries Act of 1547 not only closed chantry colleges, hospitals and free colleges, but it also aggressively attacked Roman Catholic doctrines, particularly imposing a ban on the belief that anyone could be prayed out of purgatory. Theologically, it denounced the existence of purgatory and effectively ended one of the church's largest money-making schemes (Daniell, 198). Purchasing indulgences or buying masses for the dead in order to buy them out of purgatory became just so much nonsense, but if one no longer had a way of continuing to worry about and care for one's dead then that cut the living off from their ancestors in an abrupt manner that the popular religious imagination could not easily accept.

In many gothic works we consistently see a dying bride with an infant in her arms, and I think such a representation became during this period a powerful way of reversing and secularizing traditional Christian iconography. Let me explain: if Christianity is predicated on salvation through the miracle of a mother who gives birth to a son whose conception is spiritual, and then both mother and son ascend bodily to heaven where they have the power to intercede at the hour of death for their believers –then that constellation of representations– maternity, virginity, anti-body, eternal life – is of central importance in the understanding of that religion. For Protestantism to effectively remove the mystique and power of a clergy who had set themselves

up as celibate servants to such a powerful virgin mother, then that representation had to be not simply dethroned, but actually demonized for the process of secularization to continue to progress. Besides removing statues and windows of Mary and the infant Jesus from churches, literature –like ballads, popular dramas, fairy tales, and gothic works– assisted in blasting that representation of its sacred associations. The defeat and desecration of the mother became vital steps in moving the lower class away from their earlier deification of such a woman and child.

And it is worth remembering that even at this late date, the mid-nineteenth century, the Roman Catholic Church understood what was at stake in the assault on the Virgin. After centuries of silence on her status, in 1854 Pope Pius IX declared the Virgin Mary to have been the only woman born without original sin, herself the result of an "immaculate conception". Effectively elevating Mary to the status of a goddess, Pius IX knew that the Church's investment in Mary was crucial to holding its popular, lower-class base, and he was proved correct only four years later when the Virgin appeared at Lourdes to introduce herself to an illiterate peasant girl as "the Immaculate Conception".

To return now to Germany, I want now to mention that one of the most famous sources for much German fantasy writing was Friedrich von Schiller's *The Ghost-Seer* (1788; trans 1795), a fragmentary prose romance in which a mysterious, handsome stranger turns out to be an associate of the Holy Inquisition, a conspiratorial secret society engaged in trying to force Princes and other important people to convert to the cause of Roman Catholicism. *The Ghost-Seer* was clearly influenced by Jacques Cazotte's *Le Diable amoureux* (1772) and was later in its turn the major Germanic source for both *The Monk* and *Melmoth the Wanderer*, as well as a number of novels like K. F. Kahlert's *Der Geisterbanner*, 1790 (*The Necromancer*, translated into English by Peter Teuthold in 1794). *The Ghost-Seer* is a scathing portrait of the real-life Masonic charlatan, Count Cagliostro, a Sicilian who performed across Europe in the late 1780s as a fortune teller and séance leader. He was finally arrested and executed in Rome by the Inquisition in 1795. Rumored to be a member of the Illuminati, a revolutionary group of Freemasons who used a number of sensory tricks like magic lanterns, exploding powders to gain power over its gullible victims, the Freemasons' aim was to assume control over the property of their bamboozled adherents, usually convents of easily duped nuns. By extension, the fear of the Illuminati was that they could use these same techniques on powerful "Princes" in order to gain power over nation-states.

The Ghost-Seer tells the tale of a young German prince driven by a mysterious monk first to religious skepticism, then to libertinism, and finally to murder in the religiously paranoid atmosphere of Venice. Raised in a strict Protestant society, the Prince's naturally good feelings and impulses are corrupted so thoroughly that he easily falls prey to the superstitious mysteries and displays that the mysterious Armenian monk offers to him. *The Ghost-Seer* is almost a textbook study of the "explained supernatural", except that all of the supernatural powers of the so-called "Incomprehensible" Armenian monk are finally not explained fully, nor is the work finished. In its scathing portrait of the Illuminati as dealers in hocus pocus, superstitions, and tricks to dupe the gullible, the reader was invited to make the clear analogy and see them as interchangeable with the Jesuits, and certainly Schiller like other German gothicists, intended to depict the Catholic Church as a force for social and political reaction and evil in Europe.

I might also mention that a later British gothic dramatist, Thomas Lovell Beddoes, left England for Germany in the 1820s and, after being driven out of Germany for political rabble rousing, he occupied himself in 1844 with writing a series of anti-Jesuit poems that were published in the Swiss newspaper the *Republikaner*. Vehemently anti-Catholic, his last political crusade was to work for the abolishment of the Jesuit order in Switzerland. And to be fair, the Jesuits were not exactly innocent victims of persecution from 1757 through the mid-nineteenth century. Perhaps one of the most dangerously political of all Jesuits was the Abbé Augustin Barruel, whose *Memoirs, Illuminating the History of Jacobinism* (1797) attempted to expose Masonic, Rosicrucian and Illuminati activities in France, tracing "the origins of the French Revolution from the Illuminati in Ingoldstadt to the Freemasons, philosophers and Jacobins, and then to the mobs on the street". His *Mémoires* (first translated into English in 1798) blamed anti-clerical novels and plays for the political and religious violence that had been unleashed, and he depicted secret societies like the Illuminati as "precipitators of the French Revolution based on an anti-monarchical and anti-ecclesiastical conspiracy". Feeding the political and religious paranoia of the times, Barruel's work depicts a Europe filled with secret cabals of revolutionary Freemasons, conducting assaults on individuals through "secret tribunals" of torture and sadistic punishment, and finally engaged in plotting the overthrow of governments.

In the British imaginary as well, the Illuminati were interchangeable with the Jesuits because both groups were secretive, fanatical, and anti-Protestant. Novels like Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1797), Mrs. Patrick's *The Jesuit* (1799), and

Godwin's *St. Leon* (1799) all capitalized on the vogue for anti-Catholic hysteria ("The 1790s", 52). The killing of Catholicism in England took more than two hundred years, and the gothic charts that murder in all its convoluted and complicated moves. One of the most persistent tropes in the gothic is the exposure, punishment, and usually death of a corrupt duke or monk, and certainly in this repetitive action we can see ritualized the killing of a bad, illegitimate king (read: legitimation of a *British* king) or the erasure of a God of superstition (read: fidelity to a *Protestant* God). The rationality and self-control that was so highly prized by Protestant individualism and Enlightenment ideology moves to center stage in the gothic, creating a new cultural ideal that chastised idolatry, superstition, hierarchy, and popery in all its forms. But one would hardly characterize the gothic as a uniformly consistent Enlightenment genre. In fact, the gothic is actually a series of nostalgic and ambivalent gestures, conflicted and contradictory poses, a mode of writing composed by authors who mixed piety with equal parts of political and social anxiety. Whereas Catholicism was accused of using the confessional to absolve the most heinous of sins, Protestantism insisted on the unmediated internalization of individual conscience (*i.e.*, that no clergyman could absolve anyone of their sins, as this could only be done within the "closet" of one's own conscience). But how can a society be based on trust in each individual's conscience if, in fact, our own life experiences inform us all too clearly that evil or at least ill will towards others lurks in every bosom? Whereas the sentimental ethos clung to the notion of the "noble savage" or the inherent perfectibility of the untainted human subject, the gothic was willing to confront the inadequate explanations provided by Protestantism to basic spiritual concerns: how to understand the persistent mystery of human cruelty, corruption, and finally, death.

The issues of religion, the supernatural, and "God" take on the forms of atavistic mania in a number of gothic works, such as James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* or Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*, both published during the height of pamphleteering for and against the cause of Catholic Emancipation in England. Hogg's *Confessions*, for instance, satirizes the Calvinist doctrine of the internalized conscience as being above the laws of society or, in fact, the Ten Commandments, for the "saved" characters in that novel fancy themselves as answerable only to their own (rather peculiar) consciences. It also presents the devil, Gil-Martin, less as a supernatural being and more as a psychic projection of the hero, Robert Wringhim, an actual physical manifestation of his religious mania. Maturin, a Church of Ireland clergyman, was so invested in the anti-Catholic agenda that he published a tract entitled *Five Sermons*

on the *Errors of the Roman Catholic Church* (1824), while his *Melmoth* depicts a man who has sold his soul to the devil and then spends his expanded lifespan of 150 years trying to find someone else who will relieve him of his bargain.

Strikingly similar to the plot of Giacomo Meyerbeer's opera *Robert le Diable* (1831), *Melmoth* reveals how clearly the gothic was committed, even if ambivalently, to charting the evils of the old world of Catholicism, communalism, feudalism, and the rise in its place of the Protestant subject. An epic work that contains five concentric novels within the master narrative, *Melmoth* presents eternity, the soul, the devil, and the riddle of human suffering very literally and, one is tempted to observe, at the same time as components of an almost magical or performative belief system. At one point in the text, Monçada is tortured in a monastery by the temptations proffered by artificial demons and he exclaims, "When art assumes the omnipotence of reality, when we feel we suffer as much from an illusion as from truth, our sufferings lose all dignity and all consolation" (157). Shortly later, however, the narrator explains how that illusion has replaced truth when he notes, "In Catholic countries... religion is the national drama" (165). But the publication date – 1820 – was late and by the time Balzac wrote his own satiric and ironic sequel to the novel, *Melmoth Reconcilié à L'Eglise* (1835), the date was even later. France during the 1830s had been racked by anti-Catholic riots and attacks on Catholic churches that recalled those of the earlier Revolution. Balzac's novel is in fact less a *hommage* than a bitter retort, suggesting how absurdly impossible it would be for a writer like the Huguenot Maturin, who had spent hundreds of pages depicting the horrors of the Inquisition or of scheming Jesuits attempting to steal a young man's inheritance, to ever be reconciled to such a monstrously corrupt institution.

Traces of an almost cartoonish Catholicism –like the public deathbed confession, the belief that the dead can return as spirits (usually carrying blue lights) to demand vengeance or at least a decent burial, the notion that suffering is inevitable and serves a purpose in the cosmic scheme of things, or that the devil can assume the form of a beautiful young woman in order to trick people into losing their everlasting souls– continue to appear in gothic works as what I would identify as the residual uncanny, the persistently strange and yet seductive elements of this earlier system of belief. The secularizing of the uncanny, then, is an attempt by a modernizing, Protestant-inflected social imaginary to strip these atavistic practices of their power and, indeed, the magical properties that they still seemed to hold over the public imagination.

We can also recall here that Eugene Sue's *The Wandering Jew* (1844-45) contains a long attack on the Jesuits, who, in fact, had been expelled from France in 1757, almost a century earlier. In fact, Sue was writing under the Restoration of the Bourbon monarchy which had resumed the throne in 1814. After the assassination in 1820 of the Duc de Berry by a fanatical Republican, France had become increasingly conservative and was in the grip of a counter-reformation style Catholicism. Lewis's *The Monk* was a banned book in France at this time, and it was widely believed that the Jesuits were quietly being invited back into France by the monarchy in order to once again open schools. Sue's hysteria toward the Jesuits can be seen when he compares them to the Thuggee Society in the East. In one incident, an Indian thug says to the Jesuit Rodin: "you [Jesuits] kill the soul, and we the body. Give me your hand, brother, for you are also hunters of men... And what are bodies deprived of soul, will, thought, but mere corpses? Come– Come, brother; the dead we make by the cord are not more icy and inanimate than those you make by your discipline. Take my hand, brother, Rome and Bowanee are sisters".

Literary critics have long been puzzled by the gothic. Hyperbolic, sprawling, embarrassingly melodramatic and sentimental, ideologically contradictory, the genre has been the unwanted stepchild of the Romantic movement since its inception. For many years, in fact, the gothic was quietly ignored, tucked away like some odd family relation that was better off kept in an asylum. And when the gothic was brought into the light of day, dusted off, and scrutinized, critics were confused about exactly what they were examining. As Sade suggested, the gothic arose during a time of not simply political revolution, but of rapid intellectual, social, economic, and religious upheaval, and in many ways the new discourses of Sentimentality, melodrama, and the gothic contained within themselves both their ostensible concerns –containment of anxiety about the forces of change –as well as their opposites– rampant flirtation with and exploration of those fears. Foucault has observed on this issue that as a paranoid nineteenth-century middle-class imaginary attempted to control the dangers of all of the challenges that it confronted, "these same dangers, at the same time, fascinated men's imaginations and their desires. Morality dreams of exorcising them, but there is something in man which makes him dream of experiencing them, or at least approaching them and releasing their hallucinations". The gothic became the genre *par excellence* of alternately approaching and then fleeing the dream of immortality, or should I say mortality.

But while early critics like Joyce Tompkins conclude by seeing the demonization of Catholicism as motivated by the Protestant reading public's attraction to the "lurid", the devoutly Catholic Montague Summers (1880-1948) boldly pronounces in his *Gothic Quest* (1938) that the gothic should be read as a nostalgically romantic "revival" of the supernatural beliefs of Catholicism. Writing in opposition to anti-Catholic Surrealists such as André Breton (1896-1966), who had claimed the gothic's use of dreams and the irrational as the basis for Surrealism, Summers noted that "there is no true romanticism apart from Catholic influence and feeling" (390).

According to Baldick and Mighall, the gothic is a political discourse that uses religion in order to condemn "the twin yoke of feudal politics and papal deception, from which [Protestants] had still to emancipate themselves" (219):

> Gothic novels were set in the Catholic south because, "without great violation of truth," Gothic (that is, 'medieval') practices were believed still to prevail there. Such representations drew upon and reinforced the cultural identity of the middle-class Protestant readership, which could thrill to the scenes of political and religious persecution safe in the knowledge that they themselves had awoken from such historical nightmares. (219; internal quotation from Walter Scott)

While I certainly think there is no question that many of the period's gothic texts conform to this pattern, there is also a concurrent residue of looking backward to the lost traditions of the past with nostalgia, or with "the pain a sick person feels because he wishes to return to his native land, and fears never to see it again".

To not recognize that cultural productions contain both strands, that is, both nostalgia and reform, is to fail to recognize how easy it is to be haunted by that which we have supposedly left behind. I could note that it is as difficult to repudiate the power of the past as it was for Orson to embrace Valentine and leave the forest home of his "bear" mother. Indeed, it would seem that one of history's most vital lessons is that cultures require hundreds of years to absorb radical change into their social imaginaries, and the changes that Western Europe underwent, moving from the world of Brueghel's painting to the "modern" society of the 1848 revolution, were traumatic indeed. From the religious and intellectual upheavals that occurred during the reign of Henry VIII to the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688, England entered the eighteenth century in the grip of both scientific rationalism and spiritual uncertainty and anxiety. France and Germany went through similar, although certainly not identical, reformations, revolutions, and transformations. As Maurice Lévy has observed, the 1688 Revolution by which the Protestant

ascendancy was finally established was much more important for the development of the gothic than was the French Revolution because "in some sense the fantastic is a compensation that man provides for himself, at the level of the imagination, for what he has lost at the level of faith". For Lévy, the gothic is not, however, a simple textual substitution for discredited religious beliefs but instead "a genuine expression of profound religious malaise".

The gothic arose at a time when this culture was attempting to school itself in a variety of empiricist protocols and repudiate a long-standing system of "magical" beliefs, superstitions like ghosts, witches, the mysterious powers of saints, the Virgin Mary, confessions, bread and wine, and perhaps the existence of God and the soul itself. While Hogarth's famous print, "Credulity, Superstition, and Fanaticism" (1762), satirizes the notoriety of a number of contemporary superstitions, it also reveals ironically that reforming Protestant sects were as invested in a variety of superstitions as Catholicism had been. Hogarth's print represents one side of the secularized mind's disdain for antiquated beliefs of the past, in this case Methodist enthusiasts, but it clearly does not represent the full range of the European imaginary, as witnessed by any number of popular and widespread gothic illustrations and performances that suggest that the Enlightenment world-view was not a psychic space that everyone was quite so quick to enter. Indeed, there were no talismans against that ultimate embodiment of the uncanny, our consciousness of our own eventual deaths, and it was this realization that emerged so clearly in the majority of gothic works.

Dreams express our unconscious and irrational beliefs, *i.e.*, that there is no death, and so in a variety of ways gothic textuality explored both the latent and manifest content of that dream: that death could be negotiated with somehow, through religion, or politics, or science, or finally fantasy-formations of each. The rationalist may claim that only savages or the uneducated, like Catholics, continue to believe in primitive and animistic superstitions such as ghosts or demons, but for Freud as well as the majority of gothic authors, all human beings are irrational in their attempts to believe in the spectres that they visit nightly in their dreams. As this overview of the gothic indicates, death would appear to be the ultimate embodiment of the obsessive uncanny other, that aspect of our environment that we cannot control with recourse to charms, omens, or some sort of magic. This was a culture in which science had successfully provided many answers to questions that had been mysterious or inexplicable in the past, but the Enlightenment project could not explain the ultimate conundrum: how to live with the knowledge of our own eventual

demise. That question, as Freud and more recently Ernest Becker have shown, haunts the psyche to such an extent that there is no escape from it except through repression, rationalization, or finally demonization of others who threaten the "death-denying" ideologies that we have created in order to deny our knowledge of death. The gothic aesthetic arose when the plausibility and explanatory force of magic and superstitious beliefs declined and no clearly consistent or satisfactorily definitive system arose to answer the questions and anxieties that inevitably continued to persist. In its repetitive recourse to unresolved spiritual issues, the gothic mediates present and past, living and dead, Protestant and Catholic, modern and antiquated.

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