Revolution as exploration of the soul: Charles Robert Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*

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1. Melmoth, *Ireland and Revolution*

Melmoth the Wanderer by Charles Robert Maturin starts off in a tame, almost innocent manner:

> In the autumn of 1816, John Melmoth, a student in Trinity College, Dublin, quitted it to attend a dying uncle on whom his hopes for independence chiefly rested. John was the orphan son of a younger brother, whose small property scarce could pay John's college expences; but the uncle was rich, unmarried, and old; and John, from his infancy, had been brought up to look on him with that mingled sensation of awe, and of the wish, without the means to conciliate, (that sensation at once attractive and repulsive), with which we regard a being who (as nurse, domestic, and parent have tutored us to believe) holds the very threads of our existence in his hands, and may prolong or snap them when he pleases.
> On receiving this summons, John set immediately out to attend his uncle.
> The beauty of the country through which he travelled (it was the county Wicklow) could not prevent his mind from dwelling on many painful thoughts, some borrowed from the past, and more from the future. (7)

This very ordered opening hints at a mildly eerie story set in rural Ireland at the beginning of the 19th century, featuring hidden secrets of the past and anxieties about what's to come. However, the novel swiftly transforms into the most claustrophobic and terrifying tale of the Romantic age, surpassing even the notorious *Monk* (1796) by Matthew Gregory Lewis. In that sense,

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this opening paragraph misleads its readers, luring them in, only to expose them to one of the most psychologically unsettling fictional works of the age. First published in 1820, *Melmoth* is a late addition to the classic canon of Romantic Gothic fiction and one of the greatest works of Irish Gothic. While Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a sophisticated reflection on Romanticism as a whole and the hubris of the Romantic genius in particular – and could thus be called a meta-gothic novel – Maturin's text explores the psychological and claustrophobic potential of the Gothic to an extreme level. To some extent, the opening scene already betrays this sense of anxiety bordering on panic, as John Melmoth is "dwelling on many painful thoughts" (7) – directing the focus towards psychological pain rather than eerie excitement or a simple political context.

In this paper I aim to demonstrate that the intense and extreme psychological dimension of the novel is to some extent a result of, and a commentary on, the revolutionary element of the Romantic period. Written in 1820, the French Revolution might seem like an event that has become part of history, yet upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that this is not entirely the case. The Revolutionary and the Napoleonic Wars were still a fresh memory. Shelley made his famous remark on the French Revolution as the "master theme of the epoch in which we live" (Shelley, Letters I, 504), only four years before, in 1816. During these years, social unrest appeared to be on the rise, posing a threat to the ruling classes in England, potentially leading to a revolution in England as well. The Peterloo Massacre, which took place in Manchester in 1819, happened because the authorities were apparently afraid of large gatherings of people. A peaceful protest for parliamentary reform on St. Peter's field in Manchester, at which some 60,000 men and women attended, was violently dispersed by the cavalry: "More than ten people were killed and several hundred were injured when the local magistrates ordered the Manchester yeomanry cavalry to arrest Henry Hunt, the chief radical orator" (McCalman 643). This social tension would eventually lead to the passing of the Great Reform Bill of 1832 to prevent a revolution in England.

Melmoth the Wanderer, however, is an Irish and not an English novel, and this needs to be taken into account as well. The situation in Ireland was different and potentially more perilous. Ireland had become part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland on 1 January 1801. The Act of Union was the result of a failed revolution in 1798 under Theobald Wolfe Tone, yet it came with the promise to lift the burden off the shoulders of the

Catholic majority of the Irish population who were still subject to the Penal Laws. However, when these were not repealed, social unrest threatened to break out. And indeed, in the years leading up to Catholic emancipation, mass meetings were held all over Ireland.

Charles Robert Maturin wrote his novel in this atmosphere. Maturin was a stout Protestant, and *Melmoth the Wanderer* begins as a fiercely anti-Catholic text bordering on anticlericalism. The constant threat of a revolutionary outbreak contributes to the sense of danger during the first two volumes at least. However, it would be wrong to label the novel as merely conservative propaganda against the Catholic majority in Ireland. Rather, it captures and displays a variety of psychological anxieties symptomatic of a revolutionary time. In the context of Irish Gothic fiction, *Melmoth* is therefore much more than an anti-Catholic text but has, just like the Irish Gothic itself, a much more nuanced perspective on the sectarian question. It is therefore not surprising that *Melmoth* would go on to influence many great psychological novels of the 19th century, as David Punter remarks:

> *Melmoth* was a vastly influential book, although it was overtaken eventually by the decline in those reading habits which sustain works of such length and complexity; Balzac, Baudelaire, Poe and Robert Louis Stevenson all bear the marks of *Melmoth*, and Scott was willing to testify to Maturin's power … (124)

To comprehend the novel's stance and its idiosyncratic oscillation between conservatism and revolution, it is important to consider the importance of genre. Renate Lachmann, in her study of the fantastic, highlights the characteristic anxieties within the genre of the Gothic as an expression of the revolutionary tensions around 1800, when she describes the Romantic fantastic as an "expression of a crisis, the transitions in light of the tensions between enlightenment and counter-enlightenment, in which the other, the alien, and the inexplicable become disquieting objects." (14)[1]. In this context, Lachmann emphasises the importance of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque for an understanding of the Gothic. In what follows, I will use some of Bakhtin's key theories to discuss Maturin's novel in the context of this Romantic revolutionary tension.

2. Melmoth *and Bakhtin's theory of the novel*

In order to provide a historical as well as theoretical context to Maturin's novel, I will examine the connection between *Melmoth* and the atmosphere of revolution using Bakhtin's theory of the novel as developed in his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1963, trans. 1973). The connection between Bakhtin and the Gothic, however, is not a new discovery. Renate Lachmann's significant study of horror and gothic as part of fantastic literature links Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, particularly the Menippean satire, with the gothic genre. She states:

> Bakhtin's genre-specific definition of the Menippean satire, in whose tradition he also places authors of the romantic and post-romantic fantastic, and whose ancient expression he connects with authors such as Lucian, Apuleius, Varro, Petronius, and others, includes thematic and stylistic characteristics as well as peculiarities of subject composition, time-space treatment, and character inventory. Violations of what is commonly considered acceptable, the usual course of events, and the established norms of behaviour and verbal etiquette, like scandals, adventures, and eccentric events in the Menippean, lead to the disruption of the integrity of the world that was still upheld in epic and tragedy. The Menippean takes hallucinations, dreams, madness, and metamorphoses as its themes, incorporates extraterrestrial realms (underworld and 'upper' world), and designs characters with unstable identities (*doppelgänger*, shapeshifters). As a protean genre, it disregards the canonized genres in terms of their closedness and structural purity by crossing borders and hybridizing. The rules prescribed by the Aristotelian techniques of rhetoric and poetics are suspended, just as the reasonable assumptions oriented to the knowledge of nature and its laws are snubbed by the positing of the impossible. (15, my translation)[2]

Bakhtin particularly focusses on a how a work is situated in the historical development of a specific literary genre. He considers genre to be both inherently traditional and revolutionary at the same time: literature can only develop if it absorbs the conventions of a given genre which it simultaneously transforms. He states:

> A literary genre, by its very nature, reflects the most stable, "eternal" tendencies in literature's development. Always preserved in a genre are undying elements of the archaic. True, these archaic elements are preserved in it only thanks to their constant renewal, which is to say, their contemporization. A genre is always the same and yet not the same, always old and new simultaneously. Genre is reborn and

renewed at every new stage in the development of literature and in every individual work of a given genre. This constitutes the life of the genre. (106)

In his reading of Dostoevsky's works, Bakhtin outlines several features that became staple concepts of 20th- and 21st-century literary theory. Among these, the idea of the dialogic nature of the word – later developed into the idea of intertextuality by Julia Kristeva – and the concept of the carnivalesque are particularly important. Carnival and the carnivalesque, which are further explored by Bakhtin in *Rabelais and his World*, are read as subversive concepts set out to undermine hegemonic power relations, turn them upside down and create a counter discourse. Disorder takes the place of order, and chaos replaces a uniform hierarchical arrangement of power:

Carnival is the place for working out, in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play-acted form, a *new mode of interrelationship between individuals*, counterposed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of noncarnival life. The behaviour, gesture, and discourse of a person are freed from the authority of all hierarchical positions (social estate, rank, age, property) defining them totally in noncarnival life, and thus from the vantage point of noncarnival life become eccentric and inappropriate. *Eccentricity* is a special category of the carnival sense of the world, organically connected with the category of familiar contact; it permits – in concretely sensuous form – the latent sides of human nature to reveal and express themselves. (123)

It is necessary, however, to historize Bakhtin's point of view itself. Writing about Rabelais and Dostoevsky in Stalinist Russia, he used literary history and literary theory to write against dictatorship, despotism, and autocracy. This revolutionary dimension of 19th-century literature – that Bakhtin identifies – characteristically takes the form of a mixture of styles, narrative techniques, and voices:

… characteristic is the deliberate multi-styled and heterovoiced nature of all these genres. They reject the stylistic unity (or better, the single-styled nature) of the epic, the tragedy, high rhetoric, the lyric. Characteristic of these genres are a multi-toned narration, the mixing of high and low, serious and comic; they make wide use of inserted genres – letters, found manuscripts, retold dialogues, parodies on the high genres, parodically reinterpreted citations; in some of them we observe a mixing of prosaic and poetic speech, living dialects and jargons (and in the Roman stage, direct bilingualism as well) are introduced, and various authorial masks make their appearance. (108)

Against monologic form and autocratic style, Bakhtin sets dialogue and a non-hierarchical multiplicity of voices and meanings. This heterogeneity is also what is typical of the Gothic genre, as Michael Gamer points out: "By nature heterogeneous, gothic texts regularly contain multiple modes of writing, shifting from novelistic prose into poetry, inset oral narratives, didactic fables, or pantomimic and dramatic spectacles." (3-4)

If this heterogeneity and dialogic nature is typical of the Gothic, then *Melmoth* takes it to extremes. The novel is written from the point of view of the Protestant ascendancy and therefore of the ruling class in Ireland, a perspective that fundamentally differs from the English Gothic terror of a Catholic and aristocratic past that nevertheless haunts the present. Despite showing similarities regarding the anti-Catholic sentiment, *Melmoth* nonetheless undermines its own political outlook by exhibiting an anxiety that goes back to the days of Oliver Cromwell's conquest, when the English took the land from the Catholic Irish or Old English and handed it to loyal Protestant Englishmen (see Morin 1-4). Christina Morin points out that Irish Gothic does not paint a black-and-white picture of traditional anti-Catholic readings but is in fact much more nuanced: "Not just an allegorical expression of its Anglo-Irish writers' fear of the repressed past and its people (the Catholic majority), the Irish literary gothic in this period proves a dynamic, cross-sectarian, and cross-cultural enterprise." (Morin 4) Although most of the novel is set in Spain rather than Ireland, this historical context shapes the entire narrative. In what follows, I will analyze *Melmoth the Wanderer* as a carnivalesque and thus counter-hegemonic work that undermines the political mode dominant at the beginning of the novel.

3. Carnivalesque elements in Melmoth the Wanderer

In order to assess the carnivalesque elements in *Melmoth the Wanderer*, it is important to consider the novel in the context of its genre. The genre of the Gothic novel was certainly influenced by the political changes brought about by the French Revolution. This influence, however, was by no means unambiguous. Jerrold E. Hogle states that "Gothic works hesitate between the revolutionary and conservative." He goes on the maintain that

> no other form of writing or theatre is as insistent as Gothic on juxtaposing potential revolution and possible reaction – about gender, sexuality, race, the colonizer versus

the colonized, the physical versus the metaphysical, the abnormal versus normal psychology – and leaving both extremes sharply before us and far less resolved than the conventional endings in most of these works claim them to be. (Hogle 13)

In this context it is vital to bear in mind that the French Revolution was widely and very controversially discussed in the 1790s and, to a lesser extent, in the following decades still, and that this discussion has a wide range of facets and nuances. Two aspects of the discussion have to be emphasized in this context: the importance of the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the question of religion. Conservative thinkers like Edmund Burke stressed the fact that England had its own revolution in the 17th century, and that love for the Protestant religion prevented the English from having their own rebellion. This conservative position also had a major impact on the development of Gothic fiction. Punter argues, that the role of religion is often underestimated in studies of the Gothic: "the sense in which, although the French Revolution may be important to Gothic, more important was the Glorious Revolution and the formation of an (admittedly diverse) Protestant orthodoxy which essentially generates all the major symbols of the Gothic tradition." (214)

The Gothic novel, which "has always been a self-consciously impure genre" (Killeen 2014, 16), should therefore be seen as conservative and progressive at the same time: both repelled and fascinated by the revolution. In this sense, the entire genre of the Gothic is inspired by the appeal and the fear of revolution. From the onset in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, Gothic novels are full of Catholic priests and evil aristocrats, a thematic feature which betrays the Protestant bourgeoisie's fear that the overcome Catholic and aristocratic past still haunts the present. In a novel set in Ireland, this anxiety was even more immediate, because the Catholics were not the past but rather a potentially revolutionary element of the present. This may also explain why, although the framing narrative is set in the present, most of the novel takes place in a temporally and spatially remote fictitious Spain.

Thus it is important to take a closer look at the Irish Gothic in contradistinction to the primarily English literary tradition of the Gothic novel. Traditionally, Irish Gothic had been read as a late addition to the Gothic canon, beginning with Maturin's *Melmoth* and comprising Victorian authors like Joseph Sheridan le Fanu and Bram Stoker. This view has been challenged more recently, particularly by Jarlath Killeen (2014) and Christina Morin (2018). Killeen and Morin claim that the origins of the Irish Gothic are to be found in the middle of the 18th century, and both point

out the importance of the colonial experience. According to the traditional image, Irish Gothic is a rather clear-cut affair, as Morin argues: "'Irish Gothic' thus speaks of fiction that explores the mixed fears and desires of a minority Anglo-Irish population threatened – imaginatively if not actually – by the unsettled native Catholics over whom they maintained precarious control." (1-2) As indicated above, a look at the actual historical context shows a much more complex picture. Morin states: "Not just 'a belated tradition coming out of English gothic', Irish gothic literature actively contributes to and informs a wider, cross-cultural gothic literary production in this period." (8) In the same vein, Killeen highlights the significance of the the colonial experience:

> According to many critics, one of the connecting tissues between many of the writers of the Irish Gothic is their link to the colonial powers in Ireland […]: most of them were part of what used to be termed the 'Anglo-Irish', though we need to acknowledge that this term elides much in the way of class, theological and political difference. […] [H]istorical details indicate that the burden of colonial history is wider than we initially expect, and we should not be surprised to find that this burden is one of the main issues Irish Gothic revolves around. (Killeen 2006, 14)

Seen from this perspective, it is not surprising that Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* is not simply an anti-Catholic narrative, but rather a complex investigation of hegemonic power structures.

Melmoth the Wanderer is an immensely dense and multifaceted novel. David Punter has highlighted its "extraordinary complexities." (84) Despite the fact that the multi-layered narrative may appear confused and disordered – Chris Baldick describes it a "preposterously convoluted contrivance" (viii) that is an "embarrassment" (viii) – David Punter maintains that the design of the novel is anything but chaotic:

> Melmoth, despite its size and its extraordinary narrative structure, is a highly organised work, and to understand it requires the uncovering of that heavily encrusted principle of organisation which sustains its rococo decoration. (124-125)

The novel is very complex indeed. The frame narrative only serves to open up a universe of embedded stories, all linked by the figure of Melmoth, the Wanderer, a cross between the Wandering Jew and Faustus, a haunted figure who wishes to get rid of his curse by passing it on to his victims. In the end, he fails and is taken by his demons and dragged into what is presumably hell.

The narrative sets in with the death of Old Melmoth, John's uncle. John discovers a half-destroyed manuscript, dating back to the 17th century, in the old man's study, next to a mysterious painted portrait of the same age. It depicts the Wanderer whom John sees for the first time right after discovering the painting:

> Melmoth was silent from exhaustion, and there was a death-like pause for some time. At this moment John saw the door open, and a figure appear at it, who looked round the room, and then quietly and deliberately retired, but not before John had discovered in his face the living original of the portrait. His first impulse was to utter an exclamation of terror, but his breath felt stopped. (20)

This seemingly immortal and supernatural figure remains mysterious for most of the story. An absent presence, he haunts all of the stories and all of the characters within the novel. One characteristic, however, that unites all of them, is, as Punter rightly points out, the fear of losing one's sanity or the fear to be declared insane (see Punter 128). The first victim is a man called Stanton, the protagonist of the found manuscript. This first embedded story already lays the groundwork for the strange and uneasy form of narration, as the manuscript is not merely included and thus remediated but rephrased in the words of young John Melmoth. This creates an uncanny effect, as the psychological result of the reading process thus displayed becomes just as important as the story itself, more so than in an embedded story told by an intradiegetic narrator. This double logic of psychological terror becomes clear in the following passage set in an asylum where Melmoth visits his victim:

> "Who are you, and whence come you?" said Stanton, in a tone that was meant to be interrogatory and imperative, but which, from his habits of squalid debility, was at once feeble and querulous. His intellects had become affected by the gloom of his miserable habitation, as the wretched inmate of a similar mansion, when produced before a medical examiner, was reported to be a complete Albinos.—"His skin was bleached, his eyes turned white; he could not bear the light; and, when exposed to it, he turned away with a mixture of weakness and restlessness, more like the writhings of a sick infant than the struggles of a man."
>
> Such was Stanton's situation; he was enfeebled now, and the power of the enemy seemed without a possibility of opposition from either his intellectual or corporeal powers.
>
> * * * * * * * *

> Of all their horrible dialogue, only these words were legible in the manuscript, "You know me now."—"I always knew you."—"That is false; you imagined you did, and that has been the cause of all the wild * * * * * * * * * (54-55)

The claustrophobia that threatens to destroy the character's sanity is not only caused by Melmoth himself. Rather, it is created by the boundaries of a corrupt and tyrannical society. Most of the time, this tyranny is linked to Catholicism. The Catholic scenes are mostly set in Spain, yet it is clear from the onset that this theme is also a reflection on Ireland. The claustrophobia has a twofold cause: on the one hand, it is the fear that Catholicism might once again become a dominant force in Ireland; on the other, it is linked to the tyranny of the Protestant ruling class, which oppresses not only the Catholic majority but also the Catholic past. The terror is therefore also a display of a repressed subconscious guilt. As I argue in this paper, this clear-cut interpretation is however undermined by the complex structure of the novel itself, which turns out to be on the nature of oppression in general rather than merely on the nature of Catholicism.

The first half of the novel is dominated not by Stanton's story but by "The Tale of the Spaniard", an embedded narrative told by Alonzo Monçada, who was rescued after being shipwrecked off the Irish coast. This tale is informed by an anti-Catholic prejudice linked to the Early Modern anti-Spanish propaganda of the Black Legend. The story tells how Monçada, as a young boy, was confined to a convent and forced to become a monk. The monastery immediately is reminiscent of a prison-house, and the monks and later the members of the Spanish Inquisition turn out to be torturers rather than devout believers. Contemporary readers, before delving into the story itself, would be reminded of another famous Gothic novel: Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* and its more immediate references to the frenzy of the French Revolution. Towards the end of Lewis's famous novel, the masses gather in the streets and attack the Prioress of the Convent of St. Claire, tearing her to pieces. In 1796, the scene would have been recognized as a direct reference to the French Revolution. Maturin's novel is more nuanced in this respect.

Melmoth takes the setting of a Spanish monastery and the claustrophobia it intertextually evokes and turns it into a psychological condition. In the novel, imprisonment is directly linked to the fear of madness:

> All was uproar from the palace de Monçada to the convent, and back again. I was mad, *contumacious*, heretical, idiotical, – any thing – every thing – that could

appease the jealous agony of my parents, the cupidity of the monks, or the ambition of the ex-Jesuits, who laughed at the terror of all the rest, and watched intently over their own interests. Whether I was mad or not, they cared very little; to enroll a son of the first house of Spain among their converts, or to imprison him as a madman, or to exorcise him as a demoniac, was all the same to them. (94)

It is quite clear from the start that Catholicism and monastic life are synonymous with a system of surveillance and total control. The claustrophobia of the place merges completely with the psychological state of insanity once Monçada is imprisoned:

I awoke in *the darkness of day*. I was to behold the light no more; nor to watch those divisions of time, which, by measuring our portions of suffering, appear to diminish them. When the clock strikes, we know an hour of wretchedness is past, never to return. My only time-keeper was the approach of the monk, who every day renewed my allowance of bread and water; and had he been the object I loved most on earth, the sound of his steps could not have made more delicious music. These æras by which we compute the hours of darkness and inanity are inconceivable to any but those who are situated as I was. You have heard, Sir, no doubt, that the eye which, on its being first immersed into darkness, appears deprived of the power of vision for ever, acquires, imperceptibly, a power of accommodating itself to its darkened sphere, and even of distinguishing objects by a kind of conventional light. The mind certainly possesses the same power, otherwise, how could I have had the power to reflect, to summon some resolution, and even to indulge some hope, in this frightful abode? Thus it is, when all the world seems sworn to hostility against us, we turn friends to ourselves with all the obstinacy of despair; – and *while all the world is flattering and deifying us, we are the perpetual victims of lassitude and self-reproach*. (144-145)

The novel's level of psychological self-reflection is remarkable, as this passage demonstrates clearly, linking physiological cause and psychological effect. The fear of being haunted or confined, or both, is present throughout the story, especially in scenes involving long underground escapes[3]: "The day that followed I have no more power of describing, than of analysing a dream to its component parts of sanity, delirium, defeated memory, and triumphant imagination." (187) The most astonishing aspect of the novel, however, is the sheer length of those passages that convey an atmosphere of terror. The young boy, who has been forced to become a monk for reasons that will be revealed to the reader much later, tries to escape with a companion through a long hidden underground passage to reach his brother, who is waiting for him

outside the monastery. The escape, however, takes the form of a descent into madness under the pressure of the claustrophobic circumstances:

> In darkness, total darkness, and on my hands and knees, for I could no longer stand, I followed him. This motion soon affected my head; I grew giddy first, then stupified. I paused. He growled a curse, and I instinctively quickened my movements, like a dog who hears the voice of a chiding master. (194)

The "unnatural atmosphere, combined with the intensity of my emotion" (194) ultimately becomes not just a critique of Catholicism but rather of tyranny in general. When his brother is killed and his companion, with whom he had fled for days through the tunnel, turns out to have betrayed him from the start, the feeling of helplessness in a system characterized by total surveillance is complete. The "Tale of the Spaniard" does not end reaching some form of closure, but halts to introduce yet another nested story. After being imprisoned by the Spanish Inquisition, Monçada has his first encounter with Melmoth, who nevertheless fails to pass on his curse. Monçada successfully escapes from his place of confinement during an outbreak of fire. After meeting the Jewish scholar Adonijah, he copies the said embedded story, entitled the "Tale of the Indians." This is the first narrative that truly focusses on Melmoth, and specifically on his tormented soul. In other words, the resolution of Monçada's story is yet another story, and thus the formal structure of the narrative resembles a Russian doll. At one point or another, readers cease to search for a resolution on the story level. Rather, the narrative structure itself takes centre stage as it mirrors the intricate levels of the human psyche – especially those related to suppression and the effects on the subconscious. All of this culminates in a complete rejection of authority and tyrannical power. The narrative structure represents a carnivalesque shape of revolution against reason which held sway as the dominant power during the Enlightenment. Punter remarks on this:

> Certainly the overall impression derived from the book is that Maturin vastly exceeds his brief against the Catholic Church, and brings most of the edifice of religion down on his head. Like *Caleb Williams*, *Melmoth* is a book in which sheer intensity and savagery of feeling – antityrannical feeling – overwhelms fine doctrinal discrimination. (127)

The feeling of claustrophobia, which always has the effect of destroying the sanity of the characters, is therefore linked to a feeling of oppression

created by the narrative. When read through Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, the novel becomes a multifaceted and many-voiced critique of tyranny in general, not merely an anti-Catholic narrative. The "Tale of the Spaniard" is already the third story of uncanny dread – preceded by the frame narrative and Stanton's manuscript –, yet all of these narratives remain open, and at the same time they are haunted by an uncanny presence of dread: Melmoth himself. It is a great quality of the narrative to leave the readers in the dark for hundreds of pages regarding the influence of the Wanderer who unites all the narrative threads. The many levels of narration and different voices, combined with the feeling of total surveillance, create a sense of terror that appears to be universal. At the same time, these many voices and levels turn the novel, in its form itself, into a fundamental critique of power structures and the anxiety that is caused by a system of total surveillance. As mentioned above, the many different interrelated narrative levels, media, and textual genres "reject the stylistic unity" of 19th-century authorial or realist narratives. The form itself, thus, rejects the idea of absolute authority.

All of these elements culminate in the obscure, yet omnipresent figure of Melmoth. As just mentioned, the haunted eponymous character miraculously visits Monçada in his prison cell. As the Gothic villain, one might expect him to be either on the side of the Catholic Church or to instrumentalize it for his aims. The latter is certainly true to some extent, but the former must be completely rejected, as the description of the figure makes clear:

> This man visited me for several successive nights; and I could not help noticing three extraordinary circumstances in his visits and his appearance. The first was, that he always (when he could) concealed his eyes from me; he sat sideways and backways, shifted his position, changed his seat, held up his hand before his eyes; but when at times he was compelled or surprised to turn their light on me, I felt that I had never beheld such eyes blazing in a mortal face, – in the darkness of my prison, I held up my hand to shield myself from their preternatural glare. The second was, that he came and retired apparently without help or hindrance, – that he came, like one who had a key to the door of my dungeon, at all hours, without leave or forbiddance, – that he traversed the prisons of the Inquisition, like one who had a master-key to its deepest recesses. Lastly, he spoke not only in a tone of voice clear and audible, totally unlike the whispered communications of the Inquisition, but spoke his abhorrence of the whole system, – his indignation against the Inquisition, Inquisitors, and all their aiders and abettors, from St Dominic down to the lowest

official, – with such unqualified rage of vituperation, such caustic inveteracy of satire, such unbounded license of ludicrous and yet withering severity, that I trembled. (227-228)

This is a puzzling passage. Melmoth turns out to be a figure who is impossible to capture, who subverts the rules of the genre by refusing to conform to any accepted definition of the Gothic villain in the tradition of Montoni, the prototypical antagonist in Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho*. Melmoth seems to stand outside the logic of the genre, both haunting the victims of oppression and fervently hating the totalitarian system that persecutes them. His supernatural powers seem to suggest that it would be easy for him to seduce the victims – and the fact that he never succeeds suggests that he himself is torn inside and ultimately unwilling to pass on his curse. Although the character has traces of the melancholy Byronic villain in the tradition of Polidori's *Vampyre*, his ultimate character trait is that of a satirist:

It is partly through the lips of Melmoth the satirist that Maturin passes his commentary on religion, and this causes problems. To Melmoth, all religions are equally delusory; the only reality behind religion is divine vengeance. Maturin's position is clearly against Catholicism in particular and all its works, but time and time again particular characters go beyond what is necessary to defend this position. (Punter 126)

Melmoth thus creates a satirical distance to the system of oppression – which is mirrored in the novel's complex form. The Menippean structure of the "multi-styled and heterovoiced nature" (108) that Bakhtin describes as typical of later 19th-century novels like Dostoevsky's is also the defining element of *Melmoth the Wanderer*. This creates a satirical distance which is a form of resistance against power – and thus a quiet revolution. This satirical attitude transforms *Melmoth the Wanderer* from mere Gothic genre fiction into one of the first great psychological novels of the 19th century.

4. Conclusion

Melmoth the Wanderer is arguably the most eccentric of the Romantic Gothic novels. Written and published after the genre had gone out of fashion, it is nevertheless not a meta-fictional commentary on the genre.

Rather, it uses the genre in order to achieve something else: a complete rejection of tyrannical systems and authoritarian power. Ultimately, the novel takes the form of an exploration of the depths of the human soul. The theme of revolution is present in the novel's rejection of totalitarian absolute authority. Although the anti-Catholic stance and the Irish background seem to be the immediate social context, the novel soon transcends the immediate political circumstances. Revolution as a theme in the novel, therefore, does not take the form of a political opposition and does ultimately not express conservative fear of an outbreak of rebellion. Rather, it takes the form of a satirical distance to power structures and eventually takes an inward, introspective turn. The novel explores the human psyche through its many layers of narration, which represent the depths of the unconscious.

The Bakhtinian analysis of the carnivalesque as a narrative mode that turns the traditional order of power upside down and allows misrule to dominate focusses on the great psychological novels of the late 19th century, especially the works of Dostoevsky. Yet it is not difficult to see that Maturin's late Romantic masterpiece should be read in this context as well. *Melmoth the Wanderer* is a tour de force in its exploration of the depths of the human mind, which defies any uniform and tyrannical system.

1 …Ausdruck von Krise, Umbruch im Widerspiel von Aufklärung und Gegenaufklärung, in dem das Andere, Fremde und Unerklärliche zum beunruhigenden Gegenstand wird… (14)

2 Zu Bachtins genrespezifischer Bestimmung der Menippea, in deren Tradition er auch Autoren der romantischen und postromantischen Phantastik sieht, und deren antike Ausprägung er mit Autoren wie Lukian, Apuleius, Varro, Petron u.a. verbindet, gehören thematische und stilistische Charakteristika ebenso wie Besonderheiten der Sujetfügung, der Zeit-Raumbehandlung und des Personeninventars. Verletzungen des allgemein Akzeptierten, des üblichen Gangs der Ereignisse und der etablierten Normen des Verhaltens und der verbalen Etiquette führen wie Skandale, Abenteuer und exzentrische Ereignisse in der Menippea zur Störung der in Epos und Tragödie bewahrten Integrität der Welt. Die Menippea macht Halluzinationen, Träume, Wahnsinn und Metamorphosen zum Thema, bezieht außerirdische Bereiche (Unterwelt und ‚Ober'-welt) mit ein und entwirft Figuren mit instabiler ldentität (Doppelgänger, Verwandelbare). Als proteisches Genre mißachtet sie die kanonisierten Gattungen bezüglich ihrer Geschlossenheit und strukturellen Reinheit durch Grenzüberschreitung und Hybridisierung. Die Regeln, die die aristotelischen Techniken der Rhetorik und Poetik vorschreiben, sind außer Kraft gesetzt, ebenso wie die vernünftigen, an den Kenntnissen der Natur und ihrer Gesetze orientierten Annahmen durch die Setzung des Unmöglichen brüskiert werden. (15)

3 For a reading of caves and vaults as metaphorical explorations of the human subconscious, see Clinger 85-104.

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