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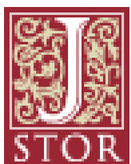

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Melmoth the Wanderer: Paradox and the Gothic Novel

LEVEN M. DAWSON

Paradox is inherent in Gothic fiction; seven essential elements of the Gothic novel are basically paradoxes: the enjoyment of fear, erotic terror or horror, beauty in terror or the sublime, the Gothic hero, savage women and nuns, incest, and certain recurrent attitudes toward religion. *Melmoth the Wanderer* by Charles Maturin contains characteristic examples of these paradoxes. Such paradoxes are antinomies, paradoxes which successfully attack traditional use of language and therefore traditional ways of thinking by showing that oppositions based on language may be oppositions in fact. Through such use of paradox, Gothic fiction foreshadows subsequent discoveries of science and makes contact with romanticism, which also attacks conceptual oppositions, seeking through intense emotion to achieve a more unified attitude toward reality.

IN THE FOLLOWING discussion, using *Melmoth the Wanderer* as my example, I will show the numerous ways in which paradox is a central part of Gothic fiction and finally attempt to show that it is just here, in the use of paradox, that Gothic fiction has its greatest philosophical depth and value, and makes contact with what is most valuable in romanticism. Since paradox is a difficult word to define, some discussion of its meaning is necessary before one considers its importance to the Gothic novel. A paradox is a statement or combination of words which appears at first glance to be patently false or to imply a contradiction but which is found, on closer examination, to be true in fact. The apparent absurdity of the assertion often is a result of the language employed in stating it; the contradictory nature of reality in relation to our initial evaluation of this statement often reveals a certain crudeness or inaccuracy in the way we use language or in the abstractions on which we base our language and therefore our thought. At the initiation of logical thought in history, Aristotle, in his typical, disarmingly elementary way, described the dangers latent in language as the vehicle of thought: "It is impossible in a discussion to bring in the actual things discussed; we use their names as symbols instead of them; and therefore we suppose that what follows in the names, follows in the things as well, just as people who

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calculate suppose in regard to their counters. But the two cases (names and things) are not alike."[1]

As a result of this disparity between "words and things," paradox—over and above being a common device for exhibiting ingenuity—can be a philosophical tool for destroying traditional and erroneous ways of thinking and for shedding light on the dangers latent in words themselves. W. V. Quine in a recent discussion of paradox and its effect on the history of thought concludes that "Of all the ways of paradoxes, perhaps the quaintest is their capacity on occasion to turn out to be so very much less frivolous than they look."[2] He further asserts that: "The argument that sustains a paradox may expose the absurdity of a buried premise or of some preconception previously reckoned as central to physical theory, to mathematics or to thinking process. Catastrophe may lurk, therefore, in the most innocent-seeming paradox. More than once in history the discovery of paradox has been the occasion for major reconstruction at the foundations of thought."[3]

The paradoxes which are philosophical tools in the way described above, which bring on crises in thought, are antinomies and are to be distinguished from veridical paradoxes, which are true at both a verbal and factual level, and falsidical paradoxes which are false at both a verbal and a factual level. Quine distinguishes among the three types of paradoxes in the following way: "A veridical paradox packs a surprise, but the surprise quickly dissipates itself as we ponder the proof. A falsidical paradox packs a surprise, but it is seen as a false alarm when we solve the underlying fallacy. An antinomy, however, packs a surprise that can be accommodated by nothing less than a repudiation of part of our conceptual heritage."[4]

Hence, paradox, and from now on by paradox I mean antinomy, is a method of moving from language and traditional ways of judging events—from our "conceptual heritage"—to fact. As the hero of *Melmoth the Wanderer* must admit—in regard to the first strange and paradoxical event of the novel, the death of his practical and miserly uncle through

[1]Aristotle, *De Sophisticus Elenchis* in vol. I of *The Complete Works of Aristotle: Translated into English*, edited by W. P. Ross, (London, 1937), paragraph 65a.
[2]W. V. Quine, "Paradox," *Scientific American*, 206 (April, 1962), 96.
[3]Quine, p. 84.
[4]Quine, p. 88.

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"a ridiculous fright that a man living 150 years ago is alive still"—"facts will confute the most stubborn logician," (*Melmoth,* p. 14). This movement, the movement of paradox from logic to experience, from language to reality, is basic to the period of the Gothic romance, to the Gothic novel generally, and to Charles Maturin's Gothic masterpiece, *Melmoth the Wanderer* especially.

To say that Gothic fiction includes such a movement seems a rather grandiose claim for this genre, which is generally considered to be a kind of "pulp" literature. Admittedly the goal of Gothic literature in its early stages was usually easy popularity through sensationalism, but in this regard, also, paradox was suited to the Gothic writers. No matter how enthusiastic and cerebral one becomes about paradox it must be kept in mind that its primary characteristic is a pleasing, theatrical display of cleverness. Paradox is a verbal version of the rabbit in the hat and derives its appeal from those reliable attractions—surprise and strangeness. Thus it is certainly an appropriate characteristic of the Gothic novel, which seldom ignores strangeness, surprise, cleverness, and theatrical "high-jinks."

Various critics have recognized paradoxical qualities in some of the conventions of the Gothic novel, without using the term or attempting to exploit the concept of paradox to unify these conventions. Most critics recognize the essentially paradoxical character of the Gothic hero, hero-villain, or Byronic hero. Lowry Nelson in an article, "Night Thoughts on the Gothic Novel," goes so far as to assert that the Gothic hero is a part of a pervasive paradoxical confusion of conventional good and evil basic to Gothic literature.[5] J. M. S. Tompkins in *The Popular Novel In England 1770-1800* emphasizes the effective incongruency of the interaction, and almost equation, of terror and beauty in the Gothic tale, notably in Ann Radcliffe's romances. William Axton in his introduction to *Melmoth the Wanderer* approaches an association of the function of paradox to Gothic fiction when he implies that the tales basically seek the "inapparent relations and qualities of things."[6] Mr. Nelson in the article cited above comments that

[5]Lowry Nelson, "Night Thoughts on the Gothic Novel," *Yale Review,* LII (1956), 247.

[6]Charles Robert Maturin, *Melmoth the Wanderer,* introduction by William Axton, (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1961), p. VII.

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the Gothic novel manipulates and examines a basic problem of all great literature, the disparity between appearance and reality. He confronts the basic ways in which Gothic fiction reveals the reality behind appearance when he states that the Gothic writers prepared the way for later "psychological" writers who "demonstrated that sadism, indefinite guiltiness, mingled pleasure and pain (Maturin's "delicious agony"), and love hate were also deeply rooted in the minds of the supposedly normal."[7]

Extremely revealing and provocative is Devendra Varma's quotation from Macaulay cited in *The Gothic Flame.* Macaulay states that the wit of Horace Walpole—the author of the first great Gothic tale, *The Castle of Otranto*—"was, in its essential properties, of the same kind with that of Cowley and Donne. Like them, Walpole perpetually startles us by the ease with which he yokes together ideas between which there would seem at first to be no connection."[8] Here Macaulay has noted a connection with the masters of verbal paradox, the metaphysicals, and with their central type of paradox, as described by Samuel Johnson, the "yoking" of dissimilars or opposites.

The most obvious and also the most easily overlooked instance of the relation of paradox to the Gothic novel is associated with the consistent and striking commercial success of this type of fiction. It would seem that the primary reason for this success is the paradoxical fact that we, the readers, enjoy being frightened and horrified. The characters within Gothic fiction are themselves acutely aware of this apparently contradictory association of emotions. In *Melmoth the Wanderer* John Melmoth is described as listening to the old crone's relation of the story of his strange ancestor with "varying and increasing emotions of interest, curiosity, and terror, to a tale so wild, so improbable, nay, so actually incredible, that he at last blushed for the folly he could not conquer" (*Melmoth,* p. 18). The villainous tool of the Inquisition in the Spaniard's narrative, which constitutes a large part of Maturin's novel, seeks the opportunity of hearing a condemned couple starve to death and refuses to eat, saying that he "reserved the appetite of his soul for richer luxuries," the luxuries of hearing the man and woman's last agonies (*Melmoth,* p. 164). The Spaniard himself admits in his description of the horri-

[7]Nelson, p. 237.

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ble death of this villain and parricide that "It is a fact, Sir, that while witnessing this horrible execution, I felt all the effects vulgarly ascribed to fascination. I shuddered at the first movement—the dull and deep whisper among the crowd. I shrieked involuntarily when the first decisive movements began among them: but when at last the human shapeless carrion was dashed against the door, I echoed the wild shouts of the multitude with a kind of savage instinct," (*Melmoth*, p. 196). It is undoubtedly with this odd mingling of "interest, curiosity and terror" that we allow Gothic tales to effect their paradoxical fascination on us.

Another basic and central way in which the Gothic romance is related to paradox originates from a necessary characteristic of events designed to evoke horror in a reader. If a tiger attacks a small boy and devours him, this event is certainly frightening, but the emotion elicited by the description of this action does not compare with the power exerted over the mind by the contemplation of the same child being attacked and intricately mutilated by its mother. We expect some cruelty from tigers, but we conventionally expect affection between parent and child. Evil or naturally terrible creatures engaged in evil deeds are not nearly so disturbing as good or naturally meek and kind creatures committing evil acts; there is something natural and predictable about the former, and therefore less terrifying, and something unnatural and strange about the latter, and therefore more terrifying. Melmoth, if we keep in mind his perverted feelings, exemplifies this strange characteristic of human psychology. His enjoyment of the calm sea is in contemplating the possibility of "a gaudy and gilded pleasure barge" containing a "Rajah and the beautiful women of his haram" being "overturned by the unskillfullness of their rowers" since "their plunge, and dying agony, amid the smile and beauty of the calm ocean, produce one of those contrasts in which his fierce spirit delighted," (*Melmoth*, p. 230). For Melmoth, and for each reader, the horror of an event is in inverse proportion to its naturalness.

In this relationship of horror to unnaturalness or "contrast," we have one reason for the savage, evil, and satanic women, monks, and nuns, and the incestuous crimes, both sexual and homicidal, of the Gothic stories. In the scene described above in which the parricide working for the Inquisition delights in

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the agonies of the starving pair, it is revealed that the woman is actually his sister. The heroine of Maturin's novel is forced by despair to find happiness in the cruel death of her own infant; she says "It moaned all night—towards morning its groans grew fainter, and I was glad—at last they ceased and I was very—happy!" (*Melmoth,* p. 404). Earlier in the novel there is the deathbed confession of the monk "of a temper and manners remarkably mild and attractive," who explained his motivation for doing evil in this way: " 'I was a monk, and worked for victims of my imposture to gratify my pride! and companions of my misery, to soothe its malignity.' He was convulsed as he spoke, the natural mildness and calmness of his physiognomy were changed for something that I cannot describe—something at once derisive, triumphant, and diabolical," (*Melmoth,* pp. 84 and 87).

We find, again, the exploitation of the horrible effects of contrast, incongruity, and unnaturalness in the imaginative description of the vaults beneath the convent; "the horror of being among those who are neither the living nor the dead—those dark and shadowless things that sport themselves with the reliques of the dead, and feast and love amid corruption,—ghastly, mocking, and terrific," (*Melmoth,* p. 144). It is not enough that these imagined creatures live among the dead or commit violent acts there; the paradoxical effect of their "sporting" and "loving" in such a place must be exploited.

This mention of love among the dead in a discussion of the Gothic novel brings us naturally to a discussion of love in the Gothic romances and how it becomes involved in paradox. "Love in a sepulchre," an idea exploited by Shakespeare, becomes a stock "gimmick" in Gothic romances. A good example of this paradoxical, subterranean romance is the famous "seduction" scene from Matthew Lewis's *The Monk,* in which Monk Ambrosio asserts, as he ravishes the heroine, Antonia, in the burial vaults beneath St. Claire's convent, that "This sepulchre seems to me Love's bower." This strange appeal of love hate or love horror is present in Maturin's hero's relationship to the innocent Indian maid—"Amid this contrasted scene of the convulsive rage of nature, and the passive helplessness of her unsheltered loveliness, he [Melmoth] felt a glow of excitement, like that which pervaded him when the fearful powers of his 'charmed life' enabled him to penetrate the cells of a madhouse or the dungeons of an Inquisi-

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tion," (*Melmoth,* p. 241). Later he contemplates her and his eyes "flash" upon her "the brightest rays of mingled fondness and ferocity," (*Melmoth,* p. 248).

Possibly this association of fondness and ferocity—this association of love with violence, terror and destructive forces —derives from the traditions of amorous lyric poetry of the preceding two centuries. These traditions can be easily perceived in the satirical treatment of the convention in the following sonnet from Thomas Nashe's *Unfortunate Traveler:*

> If I must die, O let me choose my death
> Sucke out my soule with kisses cruell maide,
> In thy breasts christall bals enbalme my breath,
> Dole it all out in signs when I am laide.
> Thy lips on mine like cupping glasses claspe,
> Crush out my winde with one strait girting graspe,
> Stabs on my heart keepe time whilest thou doest sing.
> Thy eyes lyke searing yrons burne out mine,
> In thy faire tresses stifle me outright,
> Let our tongs meete and strive as they would sting,
> Like Circes change me to a loathsome swine,
> So I may live for ever in thy sight.
> Into heaven joyes none can profoundly see,
> Except that first they meditate on thee.

In much the same manner as Nashe has done in this poem for a humorous effect, the Gothic romancers have distorted and subverted the typical metaphor of courtly love; instead of exploiting metaphorically the fact that intense love is terrible and painful, they emphasize the fact that terror and pain can be erotic and generically involved in romance. The Gothic writers assert not only that terror is strangely involved in love but that eroticism is an attribute of terror itself. Every satanic or Byronic hero, of course, derives his interest from this "strange but true" merging of positive and negative emotions. The very erotic and ambivalent description of Melmoth's "approach" to his victims is worth noting in this regard: " 'I have heard,' said one of the company, 'that a delicious music precedes the approach of this person when his destined victim—the being whom he is permitted to tempt or to torture—is about to appear or approach him,' " (*Melmoth,* p. 12). In the hero of Gothic literature, and Melmoth is a prime example, the central paradox of feminine sexuality is tapped in order to produce one of the most successful heroic types of fiction.

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The confused derivation of love is further stressed in the novel when Melmoth says of love that "passion must always be united with suffering" and the Indian maid goes further and asserts that she loves him because he has "taught" her "the joy of grief" and granted her "delicious tears," (*Melmoth*, pp. 221, 279). It is obvious that any attempt to justify these paradoxical attitudes toward love and eroticism by an appeal to psychological reality would reveal facts of the uncharted realms of the subconscious. The effective exploitation of the passionate attraction of horror or the involvement of horror and distinction in "fondness" and eroticism is either flagrant sensationalism or an important and disturbing discovery of psychological truth.

In other words, if an examination of these paradoxes of Gothic fiction does reveal anything strange and new about the mind, then they are successfully executing the basic function of paradox, the creation of mystery through the destruction of commonly held opinion, the demonstration of the ineptness or inadequacy of existing abstractions by showing that oppositions based on these abstractions may not be opposite in fact. If love is terrible and fear is pleasant then there must be something amiss with the words themselves or the way we feel about them. If the paradoxes mentioned above are real paradoxes,—that is, if they only appear to be contradictions when verbalized and are actually not contradictory in fact— then they are rather successful attacks on rationalism and logic because they are rather successful attacks on language. If the results of these attacks are no longer disturbing we should not therefore depreciate them, for, as W. V. Quine suggests, powerful antinomies have a way of dissipating into "tamer" veridical or falsidical paradoxes, given a sufficient length of time. He notes, in this regard, that "there was a time when the doctrine that the earth revolves around the sun was called the Copernican paradox even by the men who accepted it."[9]

The Gothic writers' attack on conventional ways of thinking and their questioning of rational attitudes through an appeal to the truth of the emotions is typical of the romantic period. Their work merges with the powerful content of subsequent romanticism through their use of paradox, in another

[8] (London, 1957) p. 156.
[9] Quine, p. 89.

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way also. The Romantics typically sought a unity of experience, a resolution of opposing attitudes, a satisfying union through intensity of emotion, intensity of aesthetic involvement, and through their characteristic use of striking but appropriate metaphor. In "A Defense of Poetry" Shelley describes, in just these terms, the function of aesthetic involvement: "Poetry turns all things to loveliness: it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed; it marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change; it subdues to union under its light yoke all irreconciliable things."[10] The Gothic novel, especially *Melmoth the Wanderer*, effects a union of opposing emotions or sentiments through the paradoxical but valid juxtaposition and mingling of incongruous emotions.

In the Gothicists, as in the Romantics, oxymoron of this type is most often involved with aesthetics. We get this effect strongly in the Indian Maid's response to nature:

> When the rains descended in torrents, the ruins of the pogoda afforded her a shelter; and she sat listening to the rushing of the mighty waters, and the murmers of the troubled deep, till her soul took its colour from the sombrous and magnificant imagery around her, and she believed herself precipitated to earth with the deluge—borne downward, like a leaf, by a cataract—engulphed in the depths of the ocean—rising again to light on the swell of enormous billows, as if she were heaved on the back of a whale—deafened with the roar—giddy with the rush—till terror and delight embraced in that fearful exercise of imagination. (*Melmoth,* p. 215)

Thus for the Gothicists the intense "exercise of the imagination" can produce a response in contemplation where "terror and delight" can "embrace." Within Maturin's discussion of the temptation of the Wallburgs is a passage which reflects an important artistic and metaphysical goal of the romantics, the presentation of terrible beauty or the beauty in horror: "So he lay, as Ines approached his bed, in a kind of corselike beauty, to which the light of the moon gave an effect that would have rendered the figure worthy the pencil of a Murillo, a Rosa, or any of those painters, who inspired by the genius

[10]Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Defense of Poetry" in vol. 7 of *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley,* edited by Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, (New York, 1930), p. 137.

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of suffering, delight in representing the most exquisite of human forms in the extremity of human agony," (*Melmoth*, p. 322). In these passages it is evident that the aesthetic goal of the Gothicists and the romantics—the sublime—is in essence a paradox, an oxymoron which requires a sufficiently intense response to experience to entail a merger of emotions —or, at least, juxtaposition of symbols—which are traditionally considered to be in opposition if not mutually exclusive.

Occasionally in most Gothic tales, and often in Maturin's novel, the union effected by paradox and oxymoron is at a much higher and less sensational level than in the treatment of love and terror or horror and enjoyment, and in addition to comments on aesthetics, interesting comments on traditional ethics sometimes result. These disrupting comments on ethics are antinomies which place in question some basic beliefs about psychology and motivation which are the foundations of ethical theory. In places they attack Plato's ethical fallacy that each man will seek his own good. Stanton, one of the victims of Melmoth, admits that his "incessant and indefatigable" pursuit of Melmoth is the "master passion" but also "the master torment of his life," (*Melmoth*, p. 144). The Spaniard describes his motivation in similar terms: "I went no longer shrinking from, and depreciating *their worst*, but defying almost desiring it, in the terrible and indefinite curiosity of despair," (*Melmoth*, p. 125). The confused and paradoxical nature of motivation is emphasized also in the Spaniard's description: "This man was criminal, and crime gave him a kind of heroic immunity in my eyes. Premature knowledge in life is always to be purchased by guilt. He knew more than I did,—he was my all in this desperate attempt. I dreaded him as a demon, yet I invoked him as a god," (*Melmoth*, p. 152). A denial of the strict distinction made between pain and pleasure, a distinction necessary for many formal ethical systems, is suggested also by these paradoxes. Immalee acknowledges after introduction to her "demon-lover," Melmoth, that, "Formerly I wept for pleasure—but there is a pain sweeter than pleasure, that I never felt till I beheld *him*," (*Melmoth*, p. 221). In this way theories of motivation, and consequently formal ethics, are disrupted by the paradoxical handling of language in this novel and in many Gothic tales.

Maturin, in his discussion of the Indian maid's introduction to religion, makes an ethical judgment on traditional religion

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and in so doing captures the paradoxical quality of historical religion more strikingly than I have encountered elsewhere: "Such was the picture that presented itself to the strained, incredulous eyes of Immalee, those mingled features of magnificence and horror,—of joy and suffering—of crushed flowers and mangled bodies—of magnificence calling on torture for its triumph,—and the steam of blood and the incence of the rose, inhaled at once by the triumphant nostrils of an incarnate demon, who rode amid the wreck of nature and the spoils of the heart!" (*Melmoth*, p. 225). Here we have finely and frankly conceived the union within religion of the power of beauty and the power of violence and terror.

In Maturin's description of the Indian we find an attempt to express an emotional and ethical union, which is even more strongly sought by the romantics, the union of passion and purity of earthly and ideal love, "as she spoke, there was a light in her eye,—a glow on her brow,—an expansive and irradiated sublimity around her figure,—that made it appear like the rare and glorious vision of the personified union of passion and purity,—as if those eternal rivals had agreed to reconcile their claims, to meet on the confines of their respective dominions, and had selected Isidora [Immalee or the Indian maid] as the temple in which their league might be hallowed, and their union consummated—and never were the opposite divinities so deliciously lodged. They forgot their ancient feuds, and agreed to dwell there forever," (*Melmoth*, p. 280).

Thus we see that many of the central conventions of Gothic fiction—the enjoyment of fear, terrible love or love terror, beauty in terror or the sublime, the Gothic hero, the savage women and nuns, incest and some of the recurrent attitudes toward religion—can be grouped and understood as paradox. Paradox, of course, is a natural result in a search for more and more intense and emotional effects. But much of the paradox of the Gothic novels, especially that of Maturin's masterpiece, does not derive from or terminate with sensationalism. Where the paradoxes are valid and exploit and reflect a truth of the mind, they execute two rather profound functions: one, a function which might be called scientific and the second, a function which might be called metaphysical. These paradoxes in one sense explore and reveal the subconscious in the important areas of sex and fear; in another sense they seek

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to unify experience by showing that any rational, logical attempt to analyze and distinguish the realities of experience and emotion cannot succeed fully. The Gothicists, in places at their very best, as the romantics at their best, seek to unify the world through a resolution of the opposites and disparities which exist in our attitudes towards experience. The Gothic novel—over and above its "persistent" popularity in popular forms of entertainment—involves a great, if confused, step forward in psychology, aesthetic theory, and our total approach to understanding ourselves—a step which could probably only have taken place violently in an uninhibited sensational literature such as this.

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