VIRTUE AND TERROR: THE MONK

BY PETER BROOKS

"Le gouvernement républicain a la vertu pour principe; sinon, la terreur."
—Saint-Just

Matthew Gregory Lewis' The Monk is not only the aberrant masterpiece of the Gothic novel. It is also one of those works of literature that demonstrate a remarkable understanding of their own historical situation, of the epistemological moment to which they belong and to which they contribute. Published four years before the close of the eighteenth century, at the intersection of revolution and reaction, The Monk contains an important dramatization, an acting out of the passage into a new world—modern, frightening, our own—of moral transvaluations in which, at the dead end of the Age of Reason, the Sacred has reasserted its claim to attention, but in the most primitive possible manifestations, as taboo and interdiction, and ethics has implicitly come to be founded on terror rather than virtue. The novel can in fact be read as one of the first and most lucid contextualizations of life in a world where reason has lost its prestige, yet the Godhead has lost its otherness; where the Sacred has been re-acknowledged but atomized, and its ethical imperatives psychologized.

The precondition of the ethical universe explored by Lewis is Enlightenment secularism, the decision that man should be understood in terms of mankind alone. The Gothic novel, as its best historians and critics have recognized, stands in reaction to the pretensions of rationalism. It reasserts the presence in the world of forces which cannot be accounted for by the daylight self and the self-sufficient mind. The works of Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelley, Maturin, Lewis, all suggest what D. P. Varma has

accurately called the "quest for the numinous": the search to
discover within, beneath, beyond the phenomenal world larger
occult issues and spiritual forces. Yet these writers all discover
that reaction against the secularization of the world cannot take
the form of a resacralization. As The Monk and Frankenstein
(probably the two most intelligent Gothic novels) most strikingly
demonstrate, the Sacred in its traditional Christian form, even in
the more purely ethical version elaborated by Christian human-
ism, is no longer operative. Of the mysterium tremendum, which
Rudolph Otto defines as the essence of the Holy, only the tremen-
dum can forcefully be reasserted. Rationalism and desacra-
lization have left a decisive mark, and the Gothic re-exploration of
the numinous will necessarily entail a radical redefinition of the
spiritual forces at play in the universe.

The problem of the Sacred in The Monk comes to crisis in its
ethical relation, in the problem of guilt and its definition. The
question is articulated in acute terms when the Monk's temptress,
Matilda, proposes to call upon diabolical aid in the seduction of
Antonia, so ardently desired by Ambrosio. Ambrosio at first
refuses this momentous step: if he has sinned grievously, he is
nonetheless unwilling to renounce all hope of eventual salvation:
"No, no, Matilda, I will not ally myself with God's enemy." In
reply, Matilda shows herself a fierce logician:

Are you then God's friend at present? Have you not broken your
engagements with him, renounced his service, and abandoned yourself
to the impulse of your passions? Are you not planning the destruction
of innocence, the ruin of a creature whom he formed in the mould of
angels? If not of daemons, whose aid would you invoke to forward
this laudable design? Will the seraphims protect it, conduct Antonia
to your arms, and sanction with their ministry your illicit pleasures?

Absurd! But I am not deceived, Ambrosio! It is not virtue which
makes you reject my offer; you would accept it, but you dare not.
'Tis not the crime which holds your hand, but the punishment; 'tis
not respect for God which restrains you, but the terror of his ven-
geance! Fain would you offend him in secret, but you tremble to
profess yourself his foe. Now shame on the coward soul, which wants
the courage either to be a firm friend, or an open enemy! 

Varma, The Gothic Flame, p. 211.
Rudolph Otto, The Idea of the Holy (Das Heilige), tr. John W. Harvey (Oxford:
Galaxy Brooks, 1958), chapters iv and v. Otto's classic study, first published in 1917,
remains a penetrating and important analysis. Also valuable—and conceived as a
corrective to Otto—is Mircea Eliade, Le Sacré et le profane (Paris, 1965).
Subsequent page references will be given in the text.
The argumentation here—as so often in Lewis’s nightmare world—is rigorously demonstrative. It is a logic of the excluded middle, typical of melodrama, which tends to resolve life into large polarized gestures, symbolically extreme moral commitments. If Ambrosio is no longer friend to God, whose aid shall he invoke if not that of God’s enemies? For Matilda the lines are clearly drawn: the seraphim have their appointed task, which is surely not to abet the seduction of the innocent. It is the daemons who are relevant here. If recognition of the Holy means, on the psychological plane, a feeling of dependence—what Otto calls “creature feeling”—and a sense that one is “covered” by the numinous, Matilda understands that Ambrosio has moved out from under this cover, that a new relationship of dependency has been established, and must be acknowledged. Her exclamation—“Absurd!”—points to the logical inconsequence of Ambrosio’s position, his failure to understand this shift in relationships and allegiances. If he can advance so illogical an argument, it is because he retains a vestigial belief in the Christian paradox of salvation. He is unclear about the premises of morality in the post-sacred universe in which he has chosen to live. These Matilda proceeds to elucidate: Ambrosio’s refusal is motivated not by virtue but by fear; he no longer respects God, he is in terror of his vengeance.

The essential point here is the passage from virtue to terror so accurately described by Matilda. Her statement images a world in which God exists still, but no longer as holy mystery and as moral principle eliciting love, worship, and respect. No longer the source and guarantee of ethics, “God” has become rather an interdiction, a primitive force within nature that strikes fear into men’s hearts but does not move them to allegiance and worship. God as experienced by Matilda is no longer symbol and incarnation of the Sacred, but rather of the nature of a taboo. The way in which she brings him to bear on the situation—and it is a way that Ambrosio will accept—suggests a world where there is a no longer an operable idea of the Sacred or Holy, but rather a set of supernatural forces in the universe which must be acknowledged, combatted, propitiated, conjured with. “God” is simply one figure in a manichaeistic daemonology.

The traditional idea of the Sacred as the numinous, as Otto's *mysterium tremendum*, depends on man's recognition of a "wholly other," of something radically beyond himself. The origin of religious feeling, according to Otto, lies in "religious dread," or awe, which has as its antecedent stage "daemonic dread." The root emotion is indeed a feeling of the "weird," the "eerie," the "uncanny"; this is elaborated into the *mysterium tremendum*, where dread, the idea of "awfulness" and majesty exist in relation to the *numen*. Matilda's theology starts from the same point, in dread and a feeling of the uncanny, but it evolves toward what Otto would call a "perversion," into something like "ghost fear." It is as if, coming out of the Enlightenment, man had to reinvent the sense of the Sacred from its source—but discovered it now as skewed and narcissistically fascinated by its point of origin. Within the context of the debate about "belief" carried on in *The Monk*, the revival of spiritualism in reaction to the desacralization wrought by the Enlightenment cannot mean reassertion of the Sacred, which has lost its unity, its force, and its ontology as the "wholly other," the designation of a realm of being and value recognized as apart from and superior to man. Instead, there is a reassertion of magic, taboo, superstition, a recognition of the diabolical forces which inhabit our world and, indeed, our inner being. For since the numinous forces which Matilda evokes are on the level of spooks and spirits, interdictions and taboos; since they achieve no sacred status as wholly other, they are—in ways we shall consider in a moment—inhabiting both within nature and within man himself. In other words, if the *tremendum* has reasserted its presence and force against the reductions of rationalism, the *mysterium* which it should modify has been displaced from without to within, has been de-reified and internalized. This displacement has ethical consequences. The Sacred, Otto argues, is not primarily an ethical concept. But in its existence as wholly other, as the numinous and awful, it stands as the source and guarantor of ethics. When the Sacred has been atomized into a complex of taboos and interdictions, when virtue has been replaced by terror, guilt is no longer related to a sense of unworthiness in relation to the Godhead, but rather to the fear of retribution entailed by transgression.

My argument here concords with that of Robert D. Hume, who, in urging his distinction between Gothic and Romantic, notes that writers in both modes are concerned with "ultimate questions
and lack of faith in the adequacy of reason or religion to make comprehensible the paradoxes of human existence.” Whereas the Romantics, according to Hume, tend to find an answer in a revealed religion derived from nature through an act of the imagination, the Gothicists have “no faith in the ability of man to transcend or transform [the everyday world] imaginatively” (p. 289). Hence they remain caught in paradox, ambiguity, conflict and contradiction. It is true that the Gothic novel refuses transcendence, not, I think, from any failure of the imagination, but from a more pessimistic view of “nature” than we find in most of the Romantics—a point to which I shall return. In The Monk, the paradoxes and ambiguities noted by Hume are linked, I believe, to the way in which the existence of the numinous is reasserted: not as a unitary and reconciling Sacred, but as a complex of supernatural forces within the world.

It is worth dwelling briefly on the way in which the novel introduces these forces: the way in which the numinization of the world is wrought fictionally. This of course chronologically (and logically) precedes the question of the Sacred which we have evoked, and in fact prepares it. From the outset of the novel, Lewis takes pains to make his fictional world accommodating to the dramatization of the numinous by consciously exploding both an excessively rationalist world view and the traditional eighteenth-century novel’s framework of “manners.” The Monk, like many other novels aware of their newness and importance, contains indications of the principles to be used in its explication, and within its own frame deliberately dramatizes the coming to life of the supernatural forces with which man must deal. Lewis carefully and progressively makes his world receptive to the solicitations of the supernatural; the first half of the novel moves toward creation of an imaginative framework within which these forces can have a real existence.

This movement is evident from the start, in the play of false appearances and dark realities, in the use of dreams as premonitions and, more, as discoveries about the true nature of things. But the most decisive representation of passage into a realm where the rational and social self must renounce its claims to the mastery and interpretation of life comes in the episode of the

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Bleeding Nun, in the narrative told by Don Raymond to Lorenzo. This narrative begins at the moment of the novel's first major crisis, when Ambrosio has succumbed to Matilda's seductions and spent his first riotous night in her arms, and the reader at first reacts with some annoyance to the intercalation of nearly one hundred pages which initially appear tangential to the main plot. Yet it eventually becomes apparent that the narrative has an indispensable functional role in the novel, and that through the subplot (Raymond and Agnes) Lewis is transforming the universe in which all the characters will move. By the end of Don Raymond's narrative, all is changed utterly.

The narrative begins by situating us explicitly in a world where the proper study of mankind is man: Don Raymond is charged by his father to undertake a grand tour for the observation of manners and instruction in the varying ways of the world. "Examine the manners and customs of the multitude," his father specifically commands, "enter into the cottages; and, by observing how the vassals of foreigners are treated, learn to diminish the burthens, and augment the comforts, of your own" (p. 114). This charge to observe the habits of the humble motivates Don Raymond's acceptance of shelter with the woodcutter Baptiste, in the forest near Strasbourg, an incident which then quickly leads us from the observation of social conditions into nightmare. Baptiste is a bandit who with his two loutish sons kills rich and unwary travellers who traverse the Alsatian woods, and Don Raymond, along with the Baroness Lindenberg, barely escapes the bloodbath. When his rescue of the Baroness, Donna Rodolpha, procures Raymond an invitation to Lindenberg Castle, we seem momentarily to return to the world of social manners, and to the tone of social comedy: when Donna Rodolpha mistakes the object of Don Raymond's affections, and flatters herself to be the occasion of tender addresses in fact directed to her niece Agnes, we seem to be moving in the medium of a Sheridan comedy. But the grandiose intensity of Donna Rodolpha's resentment quickly transforms this, and reorients things definitively toward nightmare. Agnes proposes to elope with Raymond under the disguise of the Bleeding Nun—a legendary figure in whose existence she and Raymond disbelieve, but whose machinery of terror will be a useful safe-conduct out of the castle: the servants once a year leave the gates open for the ramblings of the restless ghost. Thus Raymond and Agnes assume the posture of mockery toward the
world of spirits. And as happens more than once in *The Monk*, the forces which we deny, mock, put down, are precisely those that assert their reality and smite us (a situation familiar to Euripides: for instance, in the *Hippolytus* and *The Bacchae*). Agnes is supplanted by the real Bleeding Nun, who receives Raymond’s marriage pledge and drives off in the nuptial coach.

It is in fact possible to specify within this episode the point of intersection of the natural world and the supernatural, the moment at which the natural yields, cedes, gives way to the imperative solicitations of the supernatural. The moment of passage comes as Raymond waits for the stroke of one o’clock and the appearance of what he expects to be Agnes, and will in fact be the ghost:

While I sat upon a broken ridge of the hill, the stillness of the scene inspired me with melancholy ideas not altogether unpleasing. The castle, which stood full in my sight, formed an object equally awful and picturesque. Its ponderous walls, tinged by the moon with solemn brightness; its old and partly ruined towers, lifting themselves into the clouds, and seeming to frown on the plains around them; its lofty battlements, overgrown with ivy; and folding gates, expanding in honour of the visionary inhabitant, made me sensible of a sad and reverential horror. (pp. 165-66)

The passage exploits the Gothic emotion—a delection in chiaroscuro, in the experience of ruin, mystery, awe—in order to imply the capacity and aptitude of the natural world to receive and produce the supernatural. Nature is primed, readied to produce things beyond its phenomenological appearances. With the entry of the Bleeding Nun into Raymond’s coach begins a wild ride which quickly becomes the stuff of diabolism: “Uttering a loud shriek, the drivers were hurled upon the ground. Immediately clouds obscured the sky: the winds howled around us, the lightning flashed, and the thunder roared tremendously” (p. 167).

The natural world has given birth to something else; and after this point, the rest of Raymond’s adventures—the nightly visitations of the Nun, the revelation of her bloody history, the exorcisms of the Wandering Jew, the mystic rites to lay the Nun’s bones to rest—follow with perfect appropriateness and plausibility. And not only Raymond’s adventures: when we return to the main plot, to Ambrosio, Matilda and Antonia, we move with ease into the evocation of diabolical agents, the use of magic mirrors and magic myrtle branches and subtle opiates.

The intercalated narrative of Don Raymond, then, is not simply

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a vestigial intrusion from the roman à tiroirs, with its successive narrators and tales, but a necessary breakthrough within the novel itself, from a world which has, despite dreams and grandiose passions, up to this point been largely natural and social. After the Bleeding Nun episode, the world has expanded to accommodate itself to shadows from without this world, and the consciousness of both characters and reader must expand to encompass this new dimension of experience. Lewis has managed a demonstration on stage that we do live in a world charged with forces beyond our rational grasp, that our gestures do unwittingly call spirits from the vasty deep. By showing within the frame of the novel itself the generation, the production of the supernatural, its imposition on characters who have professed incredulity, and its congruence to the natural world rightly conceived, Lewis has fictionally "proved" the terms of the rest of his novel, and prepared us for the continuation of the tale to be played out amidst forces which are both beyond man's control (as they are beyond natural explanation) and yet inhabiting within man, as they inhabit within nature.

The status of these forces and the method of their generation is important to what we have been saying about the degeneration and transmutation of the Sacred. The Bleeding Nun is a ghost, a supernatural presence who refers us not to the mysterium but to the tremendum: to the complex of omens, interdictions, taboos which must be acknowledged if man is to survive. Genealogically, she is the product of an ancient familial crime which links, centuries back, the families of Agnes and Raymond in a tale of criminal passion. Hence she must stand in opposition to their love until her bones are recovered from Lindenberg Hole and given proper burial, and her vexed spirit laid to rest. She can most immediately be read as a product of their love, an interdiction created by the very excess of their passion and their insistence upon its satisfaction, their claim to erotic fulfillment. Throughout the novel the state of exacerbated passion—nearly always erotic passion—is what leads to the production and intercession of the supernatural. Tzvetan Todorov has argued that the fantastic, especially in its diabolical manifestations, is born of the psychological experience of limit situations, extreme moments of desire.1 In The Monk, the forces of the supernatural

enter the realm of human experience in response to man’s excessive erotic drives, as a representation of the forces within himself which he must recognize and struggle with.

The erotic derivation of the supernatural places us once again before the problem of the Sacred. If the “erotic” and the “uncanny”—feelings which Otto finds at the source of religious experience—do exist and assert their presence as tremendum, yet have lost their status of “otherness,” have ceased to be perceived as mysterium, they of necessity have taken up their abode within man. For Otto, the crudest, elementary religious feeling, the “primal numinous awe,” is underivable: it is sui generis, it is of and in itself the experience of religious belief. But for us, this experience of the eerie and the uncanny coincides so closely with Freud’s description of the Unheimliche (the uncanny) that we are impelled to consider the Freudian derivation. For Freud, the Un—this sign of negation which makes the heimisch into something strange—represents an act of censorship which turns into the weird and uncanny what is in fact too familiar, too close to home: a repressed primal experience. So in The Monk: the novel makes it clear that the world of the supernatural which it has evoked, from the Bleeding Nun to Matilda’s satanic satraps, is interpretable as a world within the characters themselves, and that Ambrosio’s drama is in fact the story of his relationship to the imperatives of desire. His tale is one of Eros denied, only to reassert itself with the force of vengeance, to smite him—in the manner of folktale and Greek tragedy—through and in his very claims to superiority, which are in fact denials, repressions, psychic disequilibrium. Matilda, disguised as the innocent and adoring young novice Rosario, makes her first approach to Ambrosio precisely through his piety and loathing for the impurity of the secular world, and works his downfall through his confidence in his own purity, his failure to recognize the repressions that it represents. The narcissism of his proud chastity will lead to—lead back to—the erotic narcissism which is incest. Matilda’s masterstroke is to have her own portrait painted in the disguise of the Madonna: underneath Ambrosio’s passionate adoration of the sacred icon there will be, unbeknownst to him, a latent erotic component, which Matilda will need only to make explicit. The painting of the Madonna/Matilda is in fact a kind of witty

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conceit demonstrating why God can no longer be for Ambrosio the representative of the Sacred: spirituality has a latent daemonic content; the daemonic underlies the seemingly Holy. And the daemons represent, not a wholly other, but a complex of interdicted erotic desires within us. The tremendum is generated from within. Lewis’s consistent understanding and demonstration of this generation constitutes his major claim to our attention.

It is notable that toward the end of the novel, all the major characters are impelled to descend into the catacombs of the Convent of St. Clare, and that it is deep in this multi-layered sepulchre that the climaxes of all the different plots in the novel will be played out: here Agnes has been imprisoned by the Domina, here Ambrosio has sequestered Antonia in order to rape her, and here the nuns of St. Clare retreat as the incensed mob sacks and fires their convent. The sepulchre, into which the Domina descends for her sadistic punishments, and Matilda for her diabolical conjurations, has come in the course of the novel to represent the interdicted regions of the soul, the area of the mind where our deepest and least avowable impulses lie, and at the novel’s climax the characters are driven unconsciously, but all the more powerfully, to go to confront their destinies in the sepulchre. The force of this drive is imaged in the description of Lorenzo’s decision to descend: this arch-rationalist of the novel is “impelled by a movement secret and unaccountable” into the “labyrinth” of the sepulchre (p. 347). He then discovers the trap-door into the lowest depth, a “yawning gulph” which he must go on to explore “alone . . . and in darkness” (p. 354). That the young lovers of the novel will eventually find a measure of peace and tempered happiness is no doubt a product of this experience in and of the central darkness of the soul: their exploration of the content of the unconscious will be curative.

The erotic implications of the sepulchre and its labyrinth are patent, for it is here, down below the daylight world, that Lewis can indulge the richest, and most sadistic, urgings of his decidedly perverse imagination. The descriptions of Agnes’s attachment to the putrified corpse of her baby become almost unbearable. But Lewis’s exploitation of sepulchre and labyrinth also confirms our sense of his intuitive understanding of his psycho-historical moment. It is easy to document that there was a veritable explosion of “claustral” literature at this period, especially in France from the onset of the Revolution. We know in fact that
shortly before starting to write The Monk, Lewis had seen one of the most celebrated and melodramatic plays on the theme, Boutet de Monvel’s Les Victimes cloîtrées—which he later translated—and he probably also knew Olympe de Gouges’ Le Couvent, ou les Vœux forcés. Part of the epistemological moment to which The Monk belongs, and which it best represents, is this opening up of sepulchral depths, the fascination with what may lie hidden in the lower dungeons of institutions and mental constraints ostensibly devoted to discipline and chastity. What does lie hidden there is always the product of erotic drives gone beserk, perverted and deviated through denial, a figuration of the price of repression.

Lewis’s psychic architecture, then, offers further confirmation of what we have suggested about the nature of the supernatural in the novel, and the transformation of the Sacred into taboo. Ambrosio’s story is most centrally a drama of conquest by a desire made terrific by its freight of repression. Its liberation will have to be equally terrific: unconsciously and inexorably he will be led to commit both matricide and incest. That is, through the play of repression, erotic pleasure has been necessarily tied to the idea of transgression, violation of taboo; and Ambrosio, once he has given himself over wholly to his erotic drive, will manage to transgress the most basic of them. Particularly, Ambrosio with growing urgency discovers the need to violate, defile, to soil and profane the being who has come to represent for him the sumnum of erotic pleasure precisely because she is most clothed in the aura of the Sacred, and most protected by taboo.

The virginal Antonia first attracts him by her contrast to Matilda: after his first view of Antonia, Matilda appears by contrast “disgusting” and a “a prostitute” (pp. 243-44). Yet if he is aroused by Antonia’s purity, his desire can conceive this purity only as something to be despoiled. In the etymological spirit of seduction, he is attracted by the idea of being the agent of corruption of innocence, of bringing the plague of erotic knowledge to a being not yet sensually aware. Seduction is inevitably destruction, and when deep in the sepulchre he last accomplishes her rape, he is seized with revulsion: “The very excess of his former eagerness to possess Antonia now contributed to inspire him with disgust . . .” (p. 368).

*See Georges Bataille’s analysis of the relation of eroticism to the transgression of prohibition in L’Érotisme (Paris, 1957).
The word "disgust" demands immediate attention, for it has recur- red with remarkable frequency throughout the novel every time an imperious desire has been satisfied. Typically, desire blocked and frustrated becomes "phrensy," out of which desire is satisfied in a moment of violence, which then leads to disgust. A notable moment is the murder of Elvira (Ambrosio's and Antonia's mother), a moment of frenetic passion which culminates: "Ambrosio beheld before him that once noble and majestic form, now become a corse, cold, senseless, and disgusting" (p. 297)—and the object which he sought to gain by the murder, Antonia's possession, now equally appears to him "an object of disgust" (p. 298). Nor is it only Ambrosio's desires that participate in this dialectic—when the mob is moved to passionate anger at Sister St. Ursula's revelations of the crimes of the Domina, its rage seeks satisfaction in the brutal torture and de- gradation of the Domina, a description which goes on for a long paragraph and ends: "Yet though she no longer felt their insults, the rioters still exercised their impotent rage upon her lifeless body. They beat it, trod upon it, and ill-used it, till it became no more than a mass of flesh, unsightly, shapeless, and disgust- ing" (p. 344).

One notes here Lewis's typical laying-on of horrors. Excess in horror, leading to revulsion and disgust, does not, however, seem gratuitous. It points to an attitude toward the dialectic of desire and satisfaction found in that master of the horrific, Sade. It is clear that Sade is obsessed by extreme outrage because he is obsessed by the indifference and impassibility of nature: its lack of ethical content and transcendent value, and man's utter im- potence to make his mark upon it. As he argues frequently—perhaps most explicitly in La Philosophie dans le boudoir—nature permits everything and authorizes nothing. The only principle inherent in nature is in fact destruction, and desire is both inflamed and frustrated by the recurrent discovery that its logical outcome is destruction. Desire, that is, follows a logic which discovers the inevitable destruction of everything it depends upon, its own inherent destructiveness and self-destructiveness. This is what Ambrosio, too, discovers deep in the sepulchre amidst the decomposing corpses, in the morbid nuptial bower where he rapes Antonia:

The storm of passion once over, he would have given worlds, had he possessed them, to have restored to her that innocence of which his
unbridled lust had deprived her. Of the desires which had urged him to the crime, no trace was left in his bosom. The wealth of India would not have tempted him to a second enjoyment of her person. His nature seemed to revolt at the very idea, and fain would he have wiped from his memory the scene that had just passed. (p. 370)

This outcome of the most imperious desire in the novel suggests that "nature" is profoundly a source of despair, for in its mirror we ultimately discover only our own death and decomposition. Antonia raped images the impossibility of the existence of purity, incorruption, immutability. Her dishonor sums up the inevitable pollution and destruction of the world, and fixes the desirer, Ambrosio himself, in the damned identity of pollutor. In tortured words of accusation to Antonia, he expresses the logic by which her attractiveness as unsullied innocence has insured his necessary identity as pollutor:

What seduced me into crimes, whose bare remembrance makes me shudder? Fatal witch! was it not thy beauty? Have you not plunged my soul into infamy? Have you not made me a perjured hypocrite, a ravisher, an assassin? Nay, at this moment, does not that angel look bid me despair of God's forgiveness? Oh! when I stand before his judgment-throne, that look will suffice to damn me! You will tell my judge, that you were happy, till I saw you; that you were innocent, till I polluted you. (p. 369)

The emphatic I's express a sense of entrapment in his damned identity. There is no escape, for Antonia's "angel look" assures him of the reality of innocence lost, purity polluted. His anguish derives from this fact of loss: loss as an inevitable factor of innocence, pollution as a necessary factor of desire. The "solution" he now proposes is telling: holding Antonia prisoner in the sepulchre, "There he proposed to visit her every night, to bring her food, to profess his penitence, and mingle his tears with hers" (p. 371). These tears are the tears of things: an unassuageable grief at a world which destines all its best creations to defilement, corruption, loss of innocence and erotic destruction. But this elegiac solution, envisioned for a moment, is not possible; its tense equilibrium cannot be maintained in the face of the continuing processes of desire. Ambrosio is obliged, inevitably, to murder Antonia in a last attempt to hide or erase his identity as the pollutor.

The climatic confrontation of Ambrosio and Antonia—brother and sister, though they don't know it, who share a common

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obsession with purity—gives the novel's final definition of what guilt means in this world. Guilt is essentially pollution, impurity, violation of the taboo of untouchability. This is of course a very "primitive" conception of guilt. On the one hand, it makes guilt reside in the transgression of taboos, in the profanation of idols. On the other hand, since such pollution is inevitably bound up with the very condition of mortality, it makes guilt incorporate with the very definition of life and of man. As the story of Oedipus the riddle-solver suggests, the sin which must be so terribly expiated is finally that of being a man, the creature whose upright presence on the earth can never be justified.

In pursuing the question of Ambrosio's guilt, we discover finally an ethics of terror. *The Monk* on the one hand tends to assert that the world is inhabited by irrational and supernatural forces which act upon man, are implicated and brought into play by man's actions and gestures, whether he consciously acknowledge them or not, and on the other hand suggests that these forces do not derive, or no longer derive, from a traditional conception of the Sacred. What has in fact been left after the desacralization of the world is not its rationalization—man's capacity to understand and to manage everything in terms of a rational epistemology and a humanistic ethics—but rather a terrifying and essentially uncontrollable network of violent primitive forces and taboos which are summoned into play by the dialectics of man's desire. Without any operable idea of the Sacred to refer himself to, yet surrounded by supernatural forces with which he must reckon, Ambrosio is at last constrained to see himself, by the process of his desiring, as a man trapped in this network of forces which he can neither control nor deny, which he cannot worship, but must sacrifice to.

*The Monk*, then, seems to give an especially clear and forceful symbolic representation of passage into a world—the Romantic and post-Romantic world, our world—in which the confident rationalism of the Enlightenment has been called into question, yet recognition of the force of the irrational is not accompanied, cannot be accompanied, by reestablishment of the Sacred as true *mysterium tremendum*. The epistemology of the irrational leads rather into ourselves, into the realm of dreams, spooks, interdicted desires. The "primal numinous awe" puts us in touch, not with Godhead, but with the unconscious. Ethically, this universe is one where the support of morals in the Sacred is gone, and the
definition of guilt and innocence has to do rather with a primitive and irreducible opposition of purity and pollution. There is no guarantee that in his struggle with his inner daemons man will succeed in asserting his innocence. On the contrary, Matilda’s logic looks forward to that of Ivan Karamazov, to the posing of the damned question of whether in a world where there is no Sacred, everything is not permitted. In the sense that there is no respect due to a “wholly other,” everything is permitted. But if virtue need not be acknowledged, there is nonetheless Terror, which has been shown to inhabit nature, and nature’s creature, man.

One could close by adducing a statement from another novel situated at the same historical juncture, imaging other contingencies of the world of post-Sacred epistemology, Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein. In his eulogy over the body of the creator whose life he has destroyed, the Monster judges: “Blasted as thou wert, my agony was still superior to thine. . . .” His words may be taken to suggest that the final, unpardonable “agony” is the fact of monstrosity itself, the possibility of its existence within nature. For as the whole of the relationship between Victor Frankenstein and his created daemon makes clear, this monstrosity is latent within us, awaiting only the impulses of our desire to come to hideous birth. “Nature” is everything; and it is not a source of comfort and reconciliation. The creature feeling of dependency, the perception of a noumenal realm conferring value on life, have been supplanted by a struggle with this non-principle. And the perception of the Sacred will be supplanted by a return to the sources of the feeling of the uncanny, in the processes of desire and repression described by Freud.

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