No Substitute for the Soul: Melmoth, Kierkegaard, and the Existential Gothic

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Abstract

This essay reads Charles Robert Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* through Søren Kierkegaard's conceptions of subjectivity, despair, and faith in order to maintain that Maturin's novel refashions Gothic damnation as a drama of existential self-relation. The essay suggests that the bargain which Melmoth strikes offers substitution instead of salvation, deliverance instead of inwardness, possibility without responsibility. The work's structure of contained narratives, its scenes of temptation, the cruelty of its institutions, and its eventual dissolution, together demonstrate a world where social Christianity only exacerbates despair, without removing personal answerability. Ultimately, the essay contends, *Melmoth the Wanderer* articulates a specifically existentialist Gothic, a form of terror born not only from otherworldly vengeance, but from the soul's longing to withdraw itself. Kierkegaard assists in revealing

why Maturin's most terrifying insight should be that an individual may truly wish to disappear from all suffering while still responsible for the form his disappearance will take.

Keywords: Charles Robert Maturin; Søren Kierkegaard; existential Gothic; Kierkegaardian despair; indirect communication; Gothic theology; Romantic Gothic.

Introduction

The unnerving endurance of Melmoth makes *Melmoth the Wanderer* a Gothic fiction of subjective extremity, of how a wish for transcendence and for surcease always clashes with the stubborn imperative of spiritual responsibility. Maturin transforms the Gothic pact into a drama of self-relation in which the desire for immediate deliverance becomes spiritually dangerous when it substitutes escape from suffering for an inward transformation of the self. This problem is announced before it is proved by plot: *Melmoth the Wanderer* follows a condemned wanderer who can only escape his fate if another person voluntarily agrees to exchange destinies with him. Melmoth faces multiple figures at moments of confinement, poverty, religious coercion, and psychological extremity and he offers them release at the price of spiritual self-betrayal. It is in the sight with which John Melmoth is entranced, a portrait with eyes "such as one feels they wish they had never seen, and feels they can never forget" (Maturin 1998, 17-18). This relation is internally adhesive, an effect intensified by the text's gothic palimpsest structure, where prior acts of witnessing and narrative remain "active within" subsequent perception and narrative (O'Sullivan 2016, 74-85). Søren Kierkegaard, with an apt vocabulary, provides a phrase for this adhesive inwardness: subjective truth as the subjective, "selfhood" as "the primary locus point of truth" and as a revelation of

Pre-print version

"How does this truth relate to my being?" (Jothen 2014, 117). In its dialogue with Kierkegaardian thought, this article examines the novel's engagement with existential agony, the aesthetic, ethical, and religious stages, and the double bind in which "the desire for salvation turns spiritually treacherous when directed not at subjective transformation, but at subjective deliverance."

In his own preface, Maturin portrays his tale not so much as a narrative of the supernatural fright and marvel but as a theological exercise in temptation. The sermon-passage that contains the seed from which the romance blossoms inquires, "who would, at this moment, accept all that man could bestow, or earth afford, to resign the hope of his salvation?" (Maturin 1998, 5). Victor Sage's introduction situates the novel at a historic turning point when he remarks that the Gothic "often marks the end of the Gothic romance proper" and it arises in an age when "Faust was in the air" (2000, 10-11). In the light of recent studies of the transnational circulation of Maturin's work, the reason the Faustian bargain in Melmoth cannot be attributed solely to the context of one national literature or generic tradition is also explained because its narrative plot, structured as a drama of temptation, is traversed by the broader Romantic field of religious, colonial and literary exchange (Morin 2024, 115-31). Therefore, the present study combines close reading, philosophical interpretation, and historic contextualization: it uses the Gothic scenes in Maturin as existential tests, Kierkegaard's notions as analytic tools, and the early 19th-century atmosphere of Faustian concern as the cultural milieu in which salvation, freedom, and desire are subjected to a narrative examination. The first act of the novel thus transforms durability into horror, rendering Melmoth's continued existence not an instance of prolonged existence, but a scandal of prolonged inwardness. The dying uncle insists to John that "the original is still alive" rendering the portrait a spiritual exhibit (Maturin 1998, 18). Kierkegaardian explanation of despair may shed light on the meaning of this

Pre-print version

disturbance: “a relation which relates itself to its own self”, a synthesis of “the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity” (Kierkegaard 2013, 146). Melmoth’s long life becomes failed eternality, excess duration that discloses, rather than transcends despair.

The aesthetic mode enters the novel as a seductive temptation of possibilities, the possibilities of not being bound by place, boundary, and embodiment; the possibility of not being harmed. Monçada’s experience of being visited by Melmoth epitomizes this fantasy: he appears “One whom these walls can never exclude” and one who can offer “services beyond the power of man” (Maturin 1998, 155). Kierkegaard writes that the self can be “seen fantastically reflected in the possible,” thus being seen as a “false mirror” instead of the process of becoming (2013, 170). That is why the Wanderer’s tempting of Monçada seems similar to the demonic despair that Kierkegaardian ethics refers to, a state in which the self seeks to preserve itself through the denial of dependence, an affirmation of selfhood through that denial (Fremstedal 2023, 705-710).

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For this reason, the novel’s sufferers must be treated ethically. Monçada’s story begins with the belief that he is “alone on the earth, without sympathy and beyond relief” (Maturin 1998, 72). Doyle’s reading of Maturin’s Gothic wanderer demonstrates how imprisonment, terror, and coercive structures place the afflicted subject on the fringes of political, as well as theological, order (2011, 513-47). In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard gives us a way of identifying the shape of this moment; anxiety is “the dizziness of freedom” where the freedom “looks down into its own possibility” (2014, 75). The theological stakes are made most clear in the Wanderer’s confession, in which the whole narrative is brought together retrospectively in a singular catastrophe: “No one has ever exchanged destinies with Melmoth the

Wanderer" in order to gain that world, "would lose his own soul!" (Maturin 1998, 538). The Wanderer's tragedy is the loss of that capacity in the failure to translate it into repentance, for even at the end, he pleads "my existence is still human!" (538). In his description of healing, Kierkegaard offers the needed relation: the sufferer is delivered from despair when the self is "by willing to be itself" and "grounded transparently in the Power which posited it" (2013, 147). Melmoth's journey through the world thus constitutes the essential problem of this study; the human creature may be hungry for salvation from his torments, but that salvation lies in another form of transit altogether, in the soul's responsible turn to the Power by which he stands.

Maturin, Melmoth, and Kierkegaard in the Nineteenth Century

While late Gothic in origin, Maturin's 1820 novel has a decided awareness of its ancestors, but spends most of its more sober energies in trying to convert a system of Gothic properties into a system of damnation, temptation, and the soul's culpability. Chris Baldick places the novel in the context of Gothic novel's decline after Radcliffe and Lewis, but also cautions that to read 'Melmoth' as either last, or best, of the Gothic novels is to ignore that Maturin's accomplishment is not about a closure, but about a revival that will explore how the supernatural is born out of psychological distress, theological wavering, and Faustian temptation and transgression (1998, viii-ix, xvi). The prologue reveals this debt to Gothic when Maturin states that 'the Spaniard's Tale' was criticized for 'too much attempt at the revivification of the horrors of Radcliffe-Romance, of the persecutions of convents, and the terrors of the Inquisition' (Maturin 1998, 5). This manipulation of abundance makes the work compelling, as Maturin consistently makes the

Pre-print version

horror of Gothic narrative recursive, rather than melodramatic, and asks the reader to critically engage with the ethics of the terror (Leach 2011, 21-37).

Maturin's argument is less about over-the-top anti-Catholic spectacle and more about the psychology of extended institutional abuse. As Maturin himself writes in his preface to defend the argument, "The misery of conventual life" depends upon the constant operation of that "irritating series of petty torments which constitutes the misery of life in general" (1998, 5). This sentence describes the Gothic terror in terms of its repetition, its duration, and its intimacy, as well as focusing on the "petty" abuses rather than the dramatic displays. It is because the anti-Catholic feeling in the novel is not just a theological one, but a more sweeping criticism of organized, global authority and bureaucracy that Dermot Ryan describes the assault as political-theological in nature (2014, 20-32). Sage's discussion of Maturin's Calvinist perspective explains the strongly emphasized relationship between the soul and God in the text, clarifying the finally theological nature of its argument, despite its strident anti-institutional stance (2000, 3); it is a criticism of institutional control over spiritual grace that leads to spiritual ruin. This idea of moving from institutionalized authority to internal damage is crucial in Ralf Haekel's work as he argues how Maturin's rejection of tyrannical systems results in an introspective conclusion as the multiple levels of narrative provide a means to investigate the human psyche (2023, 95).

Pre-print version

The form of narrative nesting gives this theological conflict a narrative structure. Monçada explains this form concisely: "you will find we are all beads strung on the same string. Why should we jar against each other? our union is indissoluble" (Maturin 1998, 298). Sage summarizes Maturin's practice of nesting or embedding of narratives, an aesthetic technique that sabotages the desire for a stable viewpoint and authority (2000, 18-21). Kelly's study of circumlocution in and around Melmoth also provides a

compelling vocabulary for discussing how the novel's structure constantly circles around speech, meaning, and testimony rather than allowing confession to reach its listener smoothly or directly (2024, 165-79). Narrative, then, becomes a chain of moral responsibility. Patrick R. O'Malley adds to this idea of instability by describing how the stories are embedded and constitutive. The narrative spaces therefore become histories as well as stories (2017, 82-83).

The nineteenth-century project of Kierkegaard provides an aesthetic terminology to account for this form, as writing becomes a vehicle for inducing self-reflexivity. Peder Jothen claims that Kierkegaard's aesthetic fragments serve as critique, provocation, and upbuilding, a means of calling the reader to "a deeper consciousness of the form and content of one's being" (2014, 11). The narrator's assurance that the story will be provided "in mercy to the reader" without the "endless interruptions, and queries, and anticipations of curiosity, and starts of terror" that had previously fragmented it emphasizes the novel's awareness that testimony reaches the recipient mediated by both postponement and disruption (Maturin 1998, 73). Kierkegaard's method of indirect communication relies on the same understanding; the truth that religious claims present cannot simply be relayed as information, but must be assimilated inwardly and through one's relation to oneself (Kellenberger 1984, 153-60). By proceeding through the voices of the characters, Maturin, like Kierkegaard, requires his reader to struggle for conclusions, to come to understanding through encounter with competing testimonies.

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Kierkegaard's categories for existence also illuminate the ethical demand of Maturin's Gothic situations. Jothen summarizes Kierkegaard's stages as "the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious", each requiring a responsible relationship "to the world in action, thought, choice, and desire" (2014, 11).

Toward the end of the novel, Melmoth describes his gift as an ability to tempt his victims "in their fearful hour of extremity, with the promise of deliverance and immunity, on condition of their exchanging situations with me" (Maturin 1998, 538). Kierkegaard's categories work here precisely: faith "is not the first immediacy but a subsequent immediacy", while "the first immediacy is the aesthetical" (2013, 92). Kierkegaard sees the sin as despair to God in a non-being itself that does not wish to be one's own self, or even "willing to be oneself" stubbornly (209). Monçada is instructed that his voice "must never be raised"; that even "cries, exclamations of any kind, or even coughing too loud" would be infringements of the order of his institution (Maturin 1998, 218). The novel then returns to the ethical imperatives of its Gothic mode: horror is not simply a stimulus for sensation, but is structured such that the reader must consider the relationship among suffering, narrative, and responsibility (Leach 2011, 21-37). Read together, these texts establish Melmoth as a nineteenth-century inquiry into the soul's flight from itself and into the terror of its enduring accountability.

Pre-print version

Melmoth as Existential Figure: Despair and the Self

Melmoth appears as the existential figure insofar as his ceaseless wanderings do not simply catalogue crimes but concretely trace the despair that constitutes his flawed relationship with himself. Three species of despair listed by Kierkegaard can be observed throughout Maturin's novel: "at not being conscious of having a self", "despair at not willing to be oneself," and "despair at willing to be oneself" (Kierkegaard 2013, 146). For instance, Hennelly asserts that Melmoth shares the existential preoccupations of isolation, failed communication, lost freedom, and lack of agency common to all instances of desperate human attempt, such as that in which Melmoth forces another individual to bear his own affliction (1981, 665-79). In this context, Kierkegaard's assertion that "Faust … embodies both Don Juan and the Wandering

Jew (despair)" helps account for the philosophical charge carried by Melmoth's boundless pacing, for wandering is simply the spatial metaphor of a self unable to reach itself (1987, 460). Melmoth's punishment allows his protracted existence to be one of anti-redemptive temporality, and continuously places individuals in a position to engage in morally damnable trade (Lampert-Weissig 2019, 45-56). She connects this temporal monstrosity to the Wandering Jew tradition, in which unnatural longevity becomes a curse because the figure exists out of sync with ordinary human and Christian temporal order (45-47).

In Stanton's encounter with Melmoth, despair is first staged as ignorance of the self: consciousness is in play, but its course is erratic and mistaken. The critical moment arises with Melmoth's remark, "'You know me now.' — 'I always knew you.' — 'that is false; you imagined you did'" (Maturin 1998, 55). He "imagined" it because what has passed for his relationship to Melmoth has in fact been aesthetic and speculative, motivated by obsession with an external object. The writer observed that the enemy's power was there without any prospect of being counteracted either by "his intellectual or corporeal powers" (55). The anguish here can be clarified through Kierkegaardian despair: "A self which has no possibility is in despair, and so in turn is the self which has no necessity" (Kierkegaard 2013, 169). The analysis by Oaks identifies despair as a certain kind of overextension to one side of certain polarities that are meant to be combined, including the polarity of possibility and necessity (2016, 110-21).

Pre-print version

The proposition made to Stanton is less an external agreement than an assault on the self's own relation to possibility. The tempter's call "Escape - escape for your life," compresses the moment into a choice, "There is the door, and the key is my hand. Choose — choose!" (Maturin 1998, 58). Melmoth provides Stanton with the possibility in its most enticing form: the immediate abolition of bodily constraint, social

shame, and mental deterioration. “The mirror of possibility is not an ordinary mirror,” Kierkegaard warns, for in the highest sense it is “a false mirror” (2013, 170). Stanton’s cry, “Begone, monster, demon!” (Maturin 1998, 58), is a refusal that may neither heal him nor be sentimentally celebrated by the rest of the novel, but it confirms the fact that despair has not entirely consumed his being. He has been able to refuse an offered possibility because, even disguised as escape, it promised annihilation.

Monçada’s narrative is a more complex version of despair, as his crisis moves through truth-telling. In the convent, his defiance of coerced vocation ends in this proclamation, “These are the first words of truth I ever uttered since I entered these walls” (Maturin 1998, 97). When he declares himself, “a creature whom despair has driven to utter desperate truth” (1998, 97), the phrase does not free him from violence or irrational haste, but shows how despair impels the self to confess its internal conflict. Monçada’s crisis begins when he is no longer able to inhabit the mode of existence which requires him to speak against his internal self.

Pre-print version

Nonetheless Monçada is also susceptible to despair of possibility, for instance when hope begins to detach the self from actuality. Following Juan’s letter he recounts how “A new world of hope was opened to me” and how he begins to imagine freedom so vividly that the convent itself seems to promise a future liberation; “You shall soon expand to me for ever” (Maturin 1998, 131). The problem arises when possibility outruns necessity, and when that happens “the self runs away from itself” and has no way of returning to the real world where it must constitute itself (Kierkegaard 2013, 169). While Monçada’s hope is not morally suspect, it becomes dangerous and makes the subsequent collapse of the self a ruinous event since the self already dwells in a future which has refused to materialize.

The failure of the appeal is the intrusion of necessity in the shape of institutional coercion. While Monçada holds the packet which contains his fate, he confesses that he "felt every corner, weighed it over and over again," seeking "to catch an omen from its very shape" (Maturin 1998, 172). When the appeal fails, the accusation is explicitly collective; "if this succeeds, we shall have all the monks in Spain appealing against their vows" (173). Monçada describes his desperate situation, when stepping out of escape, as a temporary "magnanimity of despair" that joins cowardice and courage at their antipodes (262). In Melmoth's testimony to John and Monçada at the end of the novel, there is perhaps the most vivid demonstration of the self in extremity of despair: "The secret of my destiny rests with myself...I alone must sustain the penalty" (537). In Kierkegaardian terms, demoniacal despair is "the most potentiated form", the state where the self "with hatred for existence … wills to be itself, to be itself in terms of its misery" (2013, 208). Fowler notes how Maturin repeatedly invokes scripture as an interpretive force to meld suffering, inscription, and judgment (1986, 521-39). More specifically, Fowler identifies the Book of Job as the novel's central biblical subtext, with Maturin dispersing Job's single ordeal across multiple sufferers who face misery, temptation, and the possibility of maintaining faith near despair (526-27).

Pre-print version

His journey is thus the exterior manifestation of a self which has become its own refutation. Melmoth himself poses the question of whether, having eaten of the tree of forbidden knowledge, he is "driven from the presence of God and the region of paradise, and sent to wander amid worlds of barrenness and curse for ever and ever" (Maturin 1998, 537). This is all that Lampert-Weissig's concept of Melmoth's monstrous temporality elucidates, that the horror of the Wanderer is not simply of immortality but of his length of life becoming an empirical offense to mundane time, to historical time, to redemption time (2019, 45-56). Kierkegaard's vision of the defiant despairer as an error in the clerical books who refuses to leave the page and shouts "I will stand as a witness against thee" most nearly captures this philosophical position

(2013, 208). Melmoth's life has become that witness: he can find no respite in oblivion, and no comfort lest it erase the self it has created out of torment.

The final dream lays out the structure which has been at work in the novel. The damned soul rises with "torturing hope," and is hurled down to burst with "on the rock in despair," and finally sinks "to rise again — in vain, and — for ever!" (Maturin 1998, 539). The final image of the novel shows us that what John Melmoth and Monçada are left with on the crag is but a handkerchief, "the last trace of the Wanderer" (542).

The Stages of Existence in the Novel: Aesthetic, Ethical, Religious

Melmoth the Wanderer does not reproduce the three stages of Kierkegaard's work as a direct and systematic allegory, but the novel does center the whole of the human experience on these exact points of stress: sensation with no accountability, obligation without the power to renew obligation, the religious intensity without the full paradox of faith. Faith is attained only through silence, freedom and the unintelligibility of the absolute relation with God and cannot be seen as a stage that follows merely the prior aesthetic and ethical stages (Procyshyn 2026); we found Jothen's definition of the stages helpful in this regard because they show the relation of the self "to the world in action, thought, choice, and desire" (2014, 11), a relation of points, that the novel tests by calling characters to the limits of the speechless divide of desire, duty and salvation.

Pre-print version

The earliest manifestation of the aesthetic stage in Melmoth is the choice of sensation over form. She encounters Melmoth with delight, who teaches her "the joy of grief," where affect itself becomes an addictive medium: sensation in the form of sorrow provides a new way of feeling (Maturin 1998, 309). The dynamic is well described by Paolo reading of Immalee's passage "from innocence to experience" as

an epistemic seduction and aesthetic intrusion in which she is led to knowledge through sorrow rather than ethical formulation (2022, 197-207). The role of desire as a non-ethical, non-religious principle of action becomes clearer with Jothen's explication of the Don Juanic aesthetic: in this category of experience, desire is the "principle of action" and dictates the direction of the self without any ethical system or religious principle (2014, 14). While Immalee is not morally guilty in this sense, her innocent receptivity makes her vulnerable to the intrusion of another will into her very self.

Melmoth's own aesthetic force requires a spectacle of the world. At the scene of mothers killing children that Immalee witnesses, she throws away her telescope and exclaims, "The world that thinks does not feel. I never saw the rose kill the bud!" (Maturin 1998, 293). Now that Immalee is returned to her European identity, her transformation into Isidora, Melmoth's seduction shifts from purely metaphysical tutelage into a transparent claim of ownership: the sentence "That you are its possessor, is its only value in my eyes" (349) is a statement in its agony of aesthetic clarity about the function of the second movement. Petr Vaškovic helps focus the analysis: in the aesthetic sphere of Kierkegaard, seduction stops the spiritual journey of a woman by locking her into a passive state of reflection and dependence upon the terms of the seducer (2022, 354-76). Kierkegaard's concept of aesthetic rescue in *Fear and Trembling* is striking: "Aesthetics throws the cloak of love over the merman, and so everything is forgotten" (2013, 107). Isidora's tragedy occurs when love throws that cloak over something judgment cannot assimilate; the attachment is powerful, pure, and brave, but it is driven toward possession rather than responsible love.

Pre-print version

Love makes its entrance into the novel by demanding an answer to it on the part of the family, church, law and social recognition. When Melmoth desires to have her completely for himself, she claims: "Wed me by the rites, and in the face of the church" (Maturin 1998, 354). The summary provided by Jothen in

his account of Judge William's thought of marriage institutions serves as a point of reference: romantic love may "be united" with and exist in marriage as "its true transfiguration" (2014, 189). Jorge's discussion of Melmoth and Immalee-Isidora's union as a "satanic marriage" is particularly apt here, because in this marriage Maturin turns the institution of the blissful wedding upside down, revealing it as a means to personal, spiritual, and erotic control (2020, 81-94).

Guzman's story shows the ethical from the opposite perspective as duty, distorted by pride, sectarian bigotry, and possessive property. The narrator claims that Guzman's sister "made many efforts to soften the heart and open the hand of her brother," but Guzman was inflexible because she had married a Protestant (Maturin 1998, 399-400). Jothen shows that it is not sufficient that duty has been commanded; it must have been imbued with love, "duty alters passion and vice versa" (2014, 189). His Orthodoxy is, therefore, a false ethical existence.

Pre-print version

Walberg's family represents an aggravated case of this ethical failure because Guzman's subsequent benevolence does not repair the damage done by delayed obligation. The priest declares, "We have the will", and the Walberg family members are declared "heirs to all his wealth" (Maturin 1998, 432). Yet Walberg's reply: "Wealth! — wealth! — it comes too late" shows how property, not a promise of salvation, becomes a condemnation (433). The ethics presented in Melmoth is a real one and a real imperative, though we encounter it again and again as irrevocably incomplete without charity and act.

Isidora's family seems to be the most brutally overthrown version of the ethical stage. This stage and language is invoked by her brother Fernan: "Where do you drag my sister?" (Maturin 1998, 520). Immediately we see the way in which this ethical imperative can become ruinous when a demonic force

is engaged through pride and violence, and Isidora's own cry "Save my brother - save my husband" (521) shows the unbearable division she is caught in: brother and husband, family and marriage, blood and vow are competing claims rather than reconcilable obligations. The duel represents a failure of the ethical form to contain a relationship contracted outside of its authority.

The religious stage comes into being whenever the characters are faced with an absolute relation over and above pleasure, law, or social commitment. Kierkegaard claims in *Fear and Trembling* that faith is not "an aesthetic emotion"; faith demands resignation in the face of a paradox in which the finite is recaptured "by virtue of the absurd" (2013, 58).The Wanderer's final testimony announces the novel's implicit governing premise: "No one has ever exchanged destinies with *Melmoth the Wanderer"*, because none would be damned to "lose his own soul" to gain the whole world (Maturin 1998, 538). The knight of faith recaptures the finite through reliance on God, while Maturin's refusers retain their selves even if they are destroyed.

Pre-print version

Melmoth is also the novel's most extreme anti-knight of faith. He reassures Isidora that he will be a far more "resplendent illustration" than "no martyr of the Christian church", because he is condemned to bear witness to the gospel amidst "fires that shall burn for ever and ever" (Maturin 1998, 389). In Kierkegaard's *Sickness unto Death* this state is designated as the religious extension of despair: sin is the despair over the self in the face of God. Sin is the despair over the fact that it is what it is, or the despair over the fact that it does not have itself in the right sense, or does not have itself in its rightness (Kierkegaard 2013, 208-9). He is religiously conscious but damned.

Isidora is closest to the solemnity of religion, but not necessarily to a Kierkegaardian faith. In the prison scene, she replies to Fra Jose "as I would answer at the tribunal of God," and the remark lends her

utterance an absolute seriousness that is separate from romance, family and institutional investigation (Maturin 1998, 526). Procyshyn notes that the knight of faith cannot simply embody visible refusal or solemnity of conduct, because faith consists of an absolute relation that can only be realized internally, and not entirely in terms of the ethical and aesthetic (2026). The knight of faith can "transform the leap of life into a walk" and thereby perform "the sublime in the pedestrian" (Kierkegaard 2013, 52). Isidora cannot return to the pedestrian; she can only confess, endure, and love, though the ordinary life through which a Kierkegaardian faith can be enacted has been rendered impossible.

No character in *Melmoth the Wanderer* fully attains Kierkegaardian faith, though a few come very close to it. If faith is conceivable in Melmoth, it has very few human enactments to recommend it.

Temptation, the Pact, and Indirect Communication

The devil's temptations are a dark parody of Kierkegaard's indirect communication: he does not teach a doctrine of condemnation and he does not command his victims with brute force; he directly targets each person's individual inward agony and requires the individual's desire to confirm its own willfulness. Near the end of the book Melmoth relates that his power enables him: "to tempt wretches in their fearful hour of extremity, with the promise of deliverance and immunity, on condition of their exchanging situations with me" (Maturin 1998, 538). Kierkegaard's indirect communication aims at true inward appropriation for the formation of selfhood; it acts as a heuristic for the reader to ask: To what do I, the world, and God stand relative to myself, and to one another? (Jothen 2014, 169-70). Edwards's contrast of direct and indirect communication in Kierkegaard's writing explains this inversion; Kierkegaardian indirectness should have an aim, like the maieutic education described in Edwards's account: to directly call to selfhood

Pre-print version

by provoking an inner transformation in the self's relation to God (2017, 280-300). He makes each self intimately aware of what he or she will have to bear as it stands before God, at the moment when he or she is least able to do so. Melmoth first understands the plight of his victim, and then he uses language which feigns to be the voice of rescue: "Escape - escape for your life," and then an elaboration of the potential consequences of this choice, "Your social happiness, your intellectual powers, your immortal interests, perhaps, depend on the choice of this moment" (Maturin 1998, 58). The true temptation is the word "choice." The discourse of anxiety for Kierkegaardian subjects makes this more clear; Possibility forms man, but this possibility, i.e. if the individual is held captive by anxiety, is precisely the condition of its being kept within possibility and will be transmitted either to faith or to perdition (Kierkegaard 2014, 191-92). Melmoth's "key" to the asylum can be nothing less than a parody sacrament of the self, designed to open outward, not inward, where the self stands face-to-face with God.

Pre-print version

The issue of Maturin's presentation of the manuscript is important here because the precise nature of Melmoth's proposal to Stanton is omitted. As Stanton inquires, "what is the condition of my liberation?" the manuscript dissolves and "the explanation occupied several pages, which, to the torture of young Melmoth, were wholly illegible" (Maturin 1998, 58). Sharon Ragaz aptly points to Maturin's fascination with the process of narrative transmission and communication and the formalization of that fascination within the fiction as broken texts, interrupted testimonies, and transmissions gone awry (2006, 359-73). This is akin to Kierkegaard's notion of the demonic, the divine power that "reserves itself" from speech, the spirit that has to be compelled out of silence to reveal itself (Kierkegaard 2014, 150-151). The pact cannot bear intelligibility, for its power over Stanton comes from his personal and internal crisis rather than rational suasion.

The notion of temptation, of course, predates the explicit suggestion of the supernatural for Monçada. Adonijah remembers Monçada's recollection of the tempter who was "beset by a power that tempted thee to renounce the Most High" (Maturin 1998, 429). Adonijah later generalizes this matter, speaking of a rumored "being sent abroad on earth to tempt Jew and Nazarene, and even the disciples of Mohammed" with "offers of deliverance at their utmost need and extremity" (Maturin 1998, 269). That it lists the religious subjects of the monotheisms indicates that Melmoth does not stand for a specific, sectarian argument alone; it points to the fact that he targets a shared vulnerability, a physical and social exposure that all religious subjects must face under oppression and abandonment. This interconfessional structure is explained by Lisa Lampert-Weissig's work on the novel's relation to the Wandering Jew tradition and its Faustian adaptations, by which Maturin is able to draw upon the theological problems inherited from those traditions while constructing a distinctly novel form of temptation (2024, 180-197).

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The sin of this order, though, lies in how Melmoth's agency arises only once the failure of previous human will has taken place. He arrives only after some family, church, state, or community has failed. The most potent case study is that of Walberg, whose family prior to their fall is imaged in prayer and mutually sustained care: his prayer to God is for them to "pass through things temporal, that they might not finally lose the things eternal" (Maturin 1998, 406). We see Melmoth later remembering Walberg as the father who watched "who saw his children perishing with want" (538), a phrase that captures the full scandal of this order. He does not make paternal love, hunger, or desperation; he waits until the principle of love itself has been broken into a state of vulnerability.

Indirectness operates in a similar fashion in Isidora's seduction, for Melmoth transforms love into secrecy, and secrecy into acquiescence. After Melmoth returns and whispers, "He is here - ready to unite us", Isidora is such a wreckage of terror that she "leaned on the arm that she felt, not in confidence, but

for support" (Maturin 1998, 394). As Kierkegaard asserts, "truth makes man free" only to the extent that it is produced in an action and exists inwardly in the person (2014, 167). Isidora is blocked from this process, and her subsequent torment derives from union under the sign of erasure between vow, violence, dream, and damnation.

The transmission of spiritual ruin, it seems, operates by relationship in Melmoth. Melmoth's final assertion is juridical and theological simultaneously: "None can participate in my destiny but with his own consent - none have consented - none can be involved in its tremendous penalties, but by participation" (Maturin 1998, 538). Alison Milbank gives this exchange a more explicitly sacrificial logic: Melmoth's burden can only be transferred to another, so that rescue from physical suffering is purchased by closing the possibility of salvation and making the sufferer his scapegoat (2018, 201). Trial involves an active self engaging a temptation that seeks to unravel his or her connection to God (Shi 2026, 3) Shi distinguishes spiritual temptation from spiritual trial: temptation draws the individual away from an absolute God-relationship, whereas the trial requires an active decision continually to resist that temptation (3). Kierkegaard's explanation of despair over sin similarly helps illuminate Melmoth's solitude: despair attempts to make the self "consistent in itself" and barricade itself against repentance and grace (2013, 240-41). He seeks a surrogate who would take his place rather than a witness before whom he would confess, repent, and transform.

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And so the bargain itself becomes the moral grammar by which the novel operates, and it is not reducible to the existence of a single document or to a solitary Faustian pact, but informs the dynamic between suffering and possibility throughout the frame story.There is absolutely no other way the story of *Melmoth the Wanderer* rests than on this ghastly survival of human freedom, and no other path even for the maddened self, than the path to the particular shape of salvation that it desires.

Redemption, Failure, and the Conclusion of the Novel: Kierkegaardian Readings

The ending of *Melmoth the Wanderer* leaves us in a final aporia rather than certain revelation. In the last part of the novel, the Wanderer re-enters the story with "'his eye was dim,"

> His 'natural force was not abated,' but 'his eye was dim,''—that appalling and supernatural lustre of the visual organ, that beacon lit by an infernal fire, to tempt or to warn the adventurers of despair from that coast on which many struck, and some sunk—that portentous light was no longer visible—the form and figure were those of a living man, of the age indicated in the portrait which the young Melmoth had destroyed, but is eyes were the eyes of the dead." (Maturin 1998, 535-36)

This description continues to develop the symbol of the eye, which has structured so many of the novel's prior passages. The idea of Melmoth's "global afterlives" (Lawrenson and Foley 2024, 105-14) is important in conceptualizing the end of Melmoth, which is not an ending but an immediate scattering; the figure itself is withdrawn from the narrative and made available for cultural, theological, and Gothic reinvention. What the ideas on Christian truth within Kierkegaard's system suggest about the necessity of an internally unresolved ending is that Christianity is characterized not by what it is but by what the Christian is; the 'what' of the Christian is the reception of truth into paradoxical inwardness (Jothen 2014, 239-40). Maturin grants his reader the 'what' of Melmoth's damnation but denies his reader the 'how' of any saving reception: the Wanderer exists at the border of the final judgment; his final truth will not be revealed in his visage.

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He knows the existence of the punishment and the unsearchably greater value of the soul; he knows religious truth but cannot adopt the relationship of faith as that of an obedient humility. His guilt, furthermore, is exclusively egocentric and almost juridical: "The secret of my destiny rests with myself";

and then, after affirming that no individual may be dragged into his misfortune against their will, he says, "I alone must sustain the penalty" (Maturin 1998, 537). As Paul K. Moser writes, religion is not mere possession of a certain body of propositions, and a religious commitment to religious truth implies far more than the acceptance of truth claims: it involves participation in a relation to God, which surpasses and overreaches the acceptance of any theological propositions (2021, 135-46). The true depth of this particular failure, as Kierkegaard describes the severity of despair, is that the self cannot "attain and remain in equilibrium and rest by itself" but may only be healed "by relating itself to that Power which constituted the whole relation" (2013, 147). His "I alone" is both true and damnatory because it is a turning away from relation into a self-enclosed, private truth.

This failure is epitomized in the ensuing dream. In the "fiery ocean," each wave borne by "agonizing soul" arises, "in torturing hope," against "on the rock in despair", and sinking only "to rise again" (Maturin 1998, 539). Even hope seems to persist, but only as repetition of torment; after resignation to impossibility has faced impossibility, faith is the impossible return received "by virtue of the absurd" (Kierkegaard 2013, 48, 58). It is, in effect, the opposite of Kierkegaardian faith: inwardness bound in eternal self-reflection, a consciousness whose non-stop hope never meets with salvation since it has lost its object.

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The upward gesture in the dream seems even to illuminate this lack of fulfillment more starkly: Melmoth "looked upward," and "the upper air (for there was no heaven) showed only blackness unshadowed and impenetrable" (Maturin 1998, 539). This looks rather like Kierkegaard's picture of the despairer on the religious path, who is profoundly aware of religion, deeply religious and having a strong relation to God," who "loves the torment" and would under no circumstances humble himself "in faith" (2013, 209). Blackness exists for Melmoth as God's judgment upon him, a judgment that his very existence appears to defy in that the accusation remains on both sides.

Alternatively, the dream and ending can be read as an indictment of Christian society. A description of the ceremony at which Monçada makes his vows highlights this fact. After the service, he proclaims, "I vowed chastity, poverty, and obedience, and in a few moments my destiny was decided" (Maturin 1998, 99). Emptiness instead of sanctification fills Monçada who notes that he has gone about his daily affairs "with a regularity that left nothing to be blamed, and an apathy that left nothing for praise" (99). Matthew T. Nowachek observes that Kierkegaard's criticism was mostly leveled at those religious orders that publicly proclaim themselves as Christian but have successfully abolished the inner call to becoming a Christian as an individual before God (2016, 159-86). In his critique of Danish Christendom, Kierkegaard attacked precisely a mode of Christianity that rendered becoming a Christian an aspect of Danish civics rather than an individual matter of concern (Jothen 2014, 2). Maturin's Catholic convent and Kierkegaard's Danish Christendom are historically distant phenomena, yet they share in their condemnation of spiritual conformity and emptiness in the face of what genuine faith demands.

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This institutional perspective also alters how one reads the ending's assessment of Melmoth's success and failure as tempter. Monçada's abortive plea translates his personal vow into a dangerous system risk: as a counterargument, "if this succeeds, we shall have all the monks in Spain appealing against their vows" (Maturin 1998, 173). Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety*, for instance, insists on the priority of the individual before inherited categories and decries an erroneously applied historical '*de te fabula narratur*' where an individual "without further ado mistakes itself for the human race and its history" (2014, 90). Monçada has become dangerous because he has asked to exist as an individual, rather than as a disposable element of the monastic system.

After the sounds disappear, John Melmoth and Monçada are the ones to enter the room and discover that it was empty, that there was no longer "a vestige of its last inhabitant" in it and then following the footprints that lead from it out of doors, they find only "the handkerchief which the Wanderer had worn about his neck" (Maturin 1998, 542) which serves as the "last trace of the Wanderer". Potter's study of Melmoth within Irish Gothic convention is crucial here as she frames the Wanderer's physical disappearance and symbolic persistence as constitutive of his persistence as Gothic revenant, his removal from the human scene rather constituting a release into a continued availability to haunt future Irish Gothic fiction (2024, 198-213). Maturin's conclusive terror comes from this dual truth: though Christendom may warp the conditions of human spiritual formation, no system may take ownership of an individual's faith, or indeed, despair.

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Conclusion

Kierkegaardian reading of *Melmoth the Wanderer* reveals the Gothic labor that is most fundamentally exhibited in the Gothic text: an exchange of condemnation into a condition of self-relationship in which it is not a divine retaliation that instills horror, but the failure or refusal of the subject to come to terms with oneself, with one's own species, and with the Creator. Melmoth's final confession binds together the isolated narrative episodes and formulates the existential grammar, when he states: "none can participate in my destiny but with his own consent," (Maturin 1998, 537), showing that the transplanted or inherited curse can neither be imposed upon one from the outside. The conceptual rigor that a Kierkegaardian interpretation offers comes from the latter's articulation of despair in *The Sickness unto Death* as a sickness of self-relation which is curable only when the self is "grounded transparently in the Power which posited

it" (Kierkegaard 2013, 147). That the mature Melmoth is terrifying has to do precisely with his volitional, conscious and yet transparently ungrounded selfhood.

What has been attempted in the argument above, then, has been to read the incidents of the novel not as so many digressions but as existential examinations. The leap required in faith (in *Fear and Trembling*) must not only be fueled by intensity or longing but requires receiving the finite "by virtue of the absurd," avoiding impossibility (Kierkegaard 2013, 48). Its spiritual accomplishment lies in its negation: the refusal of the soul to be bought, even while unable to be saved.

This reading in turn hones the position of Maturin in Gothic fiction the study endeavors to make for it. Baldick cautions against reading *Melmoth the Wanderer* simply as the final, perhaps supreme, exponent of a depleted Gothic tradition since its strength derives from its invigorating of the Gothic convention through the alliance of Gothic paraphernalia with psychological turmoil, doctrinal incoherence and inward tension (1998, ix). Baldick's treatment of the *Wanderer* as both Faust and Mephistopheles is illuminating

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on this front, presenting Melmoth as a figure whose punishment is also to become the tormentor of others, thus turning damnation into a performance of self-repetition and perverted mediation (xvi). Similar reasoning lies behind the invocation of Baudelaire's verdict that *Melmoth the Wanderer* is a "living contradiction"-its energy is born from the contradictions of its protagonist's theological situation, his dual longing for salvation and refusal of grace, and his creation of an alienated modern character out of Gothic wickedness (xvi).

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