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1 Charles Robert Maturin’s 1820 novel *Melmoth the Wanderer* opens with a striking Gothic trope, a painting that introduces the doomed wanderer to his naïve descendant—and thereby to the reader. The mysterious gaze follows the viewer as if the portrait came to life, as Hubert Teyssandier points out:

Dans le débarras encombré où le jeune Melmoth le découvre, le portrait au regard terrifiant apparaît comme la survie anormale du passé dans le présent, et, de surcroît, cette représentation picturale est celle d’un homme qui, ayant échappé mystérieusement à la mort, continue à hanter le monde de sa présence toujours vivante : « the original is still alive » [...] (Teyssandier 1993, 48)

2 The uncanny portrait foreshadows the way in which the cursed protagonist travels across time and space throughout the novel. The “abnormal persistence of the past within the present”, which Hubert Teyssandier lays stress on, may be read as a supernatural sign of evil, but also as a metaphor of intertextuality and historical trauma.

3 Hubert Teyssandier tends to be associated with writers like Henry James, George Eliot or Virginia Woolf rather than with the violence of the early Gothic; yet he returned to *Melmoth* at least three times in his career. Maturin, a poor Irish vicar who certainly was not part of the canon, was among the writers that he chose to explore, along with Austen or Scott, for his doctoral thesis (this was most unusual, and perhaps partly inspired by Maurice Lévy’s major work, *Le Roman “gothique” anglais 1764-1824*, published in 1968). Hubert Teyssandier kept his chapter on Maturin when he turned the thesis into a book; and the section on Maturin and Mary Shelley was republished under the title *Cercles infernaux* in 1993. It is easy to see how the novel’s intricate Chinese-box structure, its narratological complexity or its Faustian play on good and evil would appeal to a young scholar, just as the portrait with uncanny eyes was bound to fascinate a pioneer of intersemioticity. To pay tribute to Hubert Teyssandier’s presence as a trailblazer, to the rich diversity of his work, to his skill as a teacher (without which
I would never have become an academic) and to his warmth as a friend, I have therefore chosen to pick up this Gothic thread.

It is perhaps fitting that *Melmoth* should have fascinated a French scholar like Hubert Teyssandier. Though Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (published in 1818 and revised in 1821) has clearly eclipsed *Melmoth*, the latter feeds on multiple texts, has left an intertextual legacy of its own, and as Sarah Perry puts it, “has met with greater success in France than elsewhere” (Perry 2018, viii). Balzac parodied it, while Baudelaire and Lautréamont were fascinated by Melmoth’s dark laughter; Oscar Wilde, whose *Picture of Dorian Gray* owes much to the opening of *Melmoth*, called himself Sebastian Melmoth when he became an outcast in Paris after his downfall. Recently, though, this outcast of a novel has surfaced again in Britain through Sarah Perry’s striking 2018 rewriting, which redeploys and reaccentuates Maturin’s work. Following Hubert Teyssandier’s work on intertextuality, we shall see how Perry’s historical patchwork aims to revive the Gothic affect of horror, in order to engage with our twenty-first-century angst and our own legacy of violence and shame.

### The intertextual frame

In Maturin’s novel, Melmoth sells his soul to the devil and roams the earth for one-hundred-and-fifty years, seeking a victim who might accept to replace him. “Associé à l’orage, au feu, à la mort et au démoniaque” (Teyssandier 1993, 49) with his characteristic defiant laughter, Melmoth appears in dark places, such as a shipwreck, a lunatic asylum, the cruel dungeon of the Inquisition, that is to say in situations of extreme claustrophobic pain and unutterable horror:

Évoquée par les déplacements du voyageur anglais, l’immensité de l’espace se réduit en fin de compte à l’exiguïté d’un lieu clos, que délimitent les murs d’une cellule d’aliéné, et, dans l’encerclement d’une situation sans issue, la victime de l’injustice humaine devient une proie possible pour le personnage fantastique dont le pouvoir surnaturel peut faire s’ouvrir les portes les mieux verrouillées, à ceux qui accepteraient de sacrifier l’éternité au monde. (Teyssandier 1993, 50)

A mixture of Cain and the Wandering Jew, the cursed wanderer thus travels far and wide, but only to explore the narrowest circles of entrapment. He hovers on the margins of the text and appears in moments of acute alienation and terror, yet remains, as Botting puts it, “a particularly unsuccessful tempter” (Botting 70). He proves unable to convince anyone to replace him, so that he can find no relief: “I have traversed the world in the search, and no one to gain that world, would lose his own soul!” (Maturin 589). The overwrought, convoluted structure of embedded tales and crumbling parchments does not lead to a conventional ending dissolving the mystery of evil; instead, it “suggest[s] that the human condition is as inescapable as the narrative labyrinth itself, a relentless chain of cruel events without purpose, unity or meaning” (Botting 70).

Sarah Perry first read *Melmoth* in her early twenties, when researching her PhD on the Gothic. By then, she had fed on a steady diet of Gothic texts, yet she was still staggered by the power of Maturin’s text: “I often found myself so appalled by its contents that on occasion I pressed my hand to the page to cover the words, like a child viewing a film through her fingers” (Perry 2018, vi). This triggered her fictional response, years later. To pay tribute to the original, she keeps Maturin’s title and episodic structure, with
Melmoth offering temptation at the worst possible moment. There are signature allusions to the hypotext, such as the listing of Maturin among the witnesses’ accounts of Melmoth’s apparitions, and the presence of the original novel among a heap of books and papers, so that only “—ERT MATURIN” (M 68) may be glimpsed in “rubbed gilt type” (M 68).

From Melmoth to Melmotka

The clipped name re-presents and erases, a metonymy of the intertextual method that rubs out and relocates the original. Indeed, Perry switches gender and turns her eponymous protagonist into a woman, “the one they now call Melmoth, or Melmotte, or Melmat” (M 69), or Melmotka (M 79). In an interview, Perry explains that she has always felt annoyed by the fact that the great titular villains, like Frankenstein or Dracula, are male: “I remember thinking at the time that I wanted to write a tribute to Melmoth, but that my Melmoth would be a woman”. Thus the rewriting engages with the representation of women’s bodies and power, in ways that recall Hélène Cixous’s “Laugh of the Medusa”: “You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing” (Cixous 885). Perry also invents a new origin for her mythic character, disconnecting her from Maturin: this Melmoth has witnessed the resurrection of Christ, but failed to acknowledge it. She is doomed to wander with bleeding feet across the centuries, watching human cruelty and unbearable pain while waiting for someone to reach out to her. In a playful inversion, Perry’s Melmoth thus becomes older than Maturin, and she is the one who prompts him to write his novel.

Melmoth as a woman is an elusive character, flickering on the edge of vision. She stalks the novel’s characters, but mostly materializes through uncertain glimpses or evanescent elements, such as bits of black fabric that flutter and vanish, shadows that lurk or smoke that dissolves, or even the pervasive scent of lilies. The text thus creates a constant sense of threat, while playing on the hesitation that Todorov defines as the essence of the fantastic or the supernatural, since Helen, Albina or Thea seek to convince themselves that Melmoth is just a legend, that she cannot possibly exist, that such glimpses are mere figments of the imagination, just as the various texts mentioning her belong to the realm of legend, superstition and fiction. But Melmoth gradually acquires more tangible shapes. Every time a character senses that she is approaching, black blue-eyed birds flock by, peering at sinners with a piercing cry that seems to repeatedly ask why. Perry’s birds of ill omen never attack the human characters, yet their obsessional presence brings to mind echoes of witchcraft or of Alfred Hitchcock’s 1963 movie The Birds. Melmoth is also associated with a swarm of flies, perhaps recalling Sartre’s version of the Erinyes, the chthonic deities of revenge, in Les Mouches, a play performed during the German occupation of Paris. When she materializes in the flesh, so to speak, Melmoth is both threatening and seductive, as befits a temptress.

In fact, there is a metamorphic quality about Perry’s Melmoth, and she appears under two very different guises. She is a dark figure, but in the end she also turns out to have been, all along, the plain, shy, gentle nurse Adaya, who wears a little golden cross and seems so eager to help. The twist is a nod to the Gothic tradition, recalling for instance the transformation of Rosario, the shy novice in Matthew Gregory Lewis’s archetypal
1796 Gothic novel *The Monk*, into Matilda (the beautiful girl who looks just like Ambrosio’s painting of the Virgin, yet proves to be a seducer and an agent of the Devil). More striking is the portrait of the dark, formidable Melmoth, when she appears to shame and tempt those who bear the burden of guilt. She is both terrifying and enticing, begging for company to end her loneliness, just as she promises solace to those who can no longer bear their guilt. When the characters no longer expect her, Melmoth’s dark apparition creates a sudden supernatural dilation or suspension of time and space, in a chilling hallucinatory effect.

Such is the case when Helen has her first vision of Melmoth. The scene takes place when, after years of penance during which she has denied herself all pleasure and comfort, Helen finally accepts to go out to celebrate the birthday of her landlady, Albina. At the restaurant, Helen relishes the rich food and confesses her great fault. Thea, the former English judge whose name connotes divine powers, dismisses her sin, so that she feels that she has been tried and released. Relieved, elated, freed from atonement, she goes to the opera with Adaya, Thea and Albina, to see Anton Dvorak’s *Rusalka*. A Czech masterpiece which was first performed in Prague in 1901, *Rusalka* is a tale of failed metamorphosis and damnation. To quickly sum up the argument, Rusalka, the water-nymph who has fallen in love with a human prince, begs the witch Ježibaba to turn her into a human being. Ježibaba warns her that she will lose her immortality and her ability to speak, and that should the prince fail to love her, she will be damned (like Andersen’s *Little Mermaid*, *Rusalka* only gives free scope to female desire to crush it). The prince seems to fall in love but betrays her; as Ježibaba exacted, the prince dies and Rusalka returns to the lake as a will o’ the wisp, a spirit of death. Perry’s operatic scene plays with Rusalka’s lyrical song to the Moon, the famous aria where she voices her love before turning to Ježibaba. Prefaced by a harp and accompanied by strings and woodwinds, the song in G major has a magic of its own, with its play on the repetition of two motifs, on crescendos and decrescendos. The passage may remind us of Hubert Teyssandier’s analysis of Britten’s transposition of Henry James’s *Turn of the Screw*. In Perry’s scene, the characters are also “continually shifting from one tonal key to another, also associating definite keys with some of [the] characters, and bringing characters into tonal conflicts” (Teyssandier 2005, 4). Whereas Helen is spell-bound by the stunning visual display and the lyrical crescendo, Albina offers a grotesque counterpoint, swathed in white like an aged Miss Havisham, snoring and dropping her pearls one by one, as if scattering the last seconds of her life. As is often the case in operatic scenes in novels such as E.M. Forster’s *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, for instance, the spectacle is twofold, it occurs onstage and offstage, in the audience. The blend of magic and grotesque climaxes when the audience turns to point at Helen, while black birds gather and the formidable Ježibaba becomes, with her long floating black hair, her eyes like “spheres of smoky glass” (*M* 216), Melmoth herself. The audience is transfixed, while Rusalka’s aria remains stuck on a seemingly endless, impossibly high note. When the spell breaks, when Ježibaba dwindles into a badly dressed ordinary singer and Helen realizes that the audience has never actually turned to point an accusing finger towards her, Albina is dead. The spectral apparition of Melmoth provides here a further turn of the screw at a moment which seemed to promise liberation at last. To borrow Hubert Teyssandier’s words, the moment reflects a “sense of moral collapse”, like a “prophetic experience” that conveys the sense “that we are entering an age (what Yeats calls a gyre) in which innocence is no longer conceivable: ‘The ceremony of innocence is drowned’” (Teyssandier 2005, 17).
When Melmoth appears to Josef Hoffman, with her bleeding feet and dark hair swathed in a blue light, all the people in the street also remain caught in what they were doing, as if they were cursed and time had stopped. When Josef fails to take her hand and yield to the temptation of escaping from pain, the anaphoric repetition of “It was morning” (M 143) shows that time stops ticking again for all the hopeless victims in the street. Similarly, time seems to stand still when the final confrontation between Helen and Melmoth takes place “among the jackdaws’ hurl and eddy” (M 261). The sky darkens, a green light glows in the café, and Helen sees Adaya, gentle and dressed in plain wool, walk past the first window, then turn into a formidable female figure as she passes by the next windows, tall, with black hair and red lips, with bleeding feet and “eyes like oil spilled on water” (M 264). This shadowy figure is dressed in layers of diaphanous black cloth that spill like ink, suggesting temporal layers and a composite palimpsest. Thea remains awe-struck, petrified, while Helen seems alert and alive. The shadows thicken, the jackdaws break their beaks and wings against the window pane, shattering the glass as if piercing Helen’s resistance and sense of self. Melmoth, who seemed so tender, “lovely and dreadful” (M 133), coaxing her like a friend or a lover, begins to shriek, her hair lifted in greasy locks. This brings to the reader’s mind the hideous image of Medusa, petrifying or driving her victims mad with fright, and paintings like Arnold Böcklin’s Gorgon with her greyish tints and empty eyes, which may well have inspired Perry’s evocation of Melmoth’s staggering gaze resembling milky tea or smoke caught in a sphere of glass. When Helen manages to cling to hope rather than yield to Melmoth, the green light softens, the birds, the shadows and the female form vanish, and again it transpires that the other characters have seen nothing of the timeless moment of confrontation.

Engaging with history

Melmoth’s apparitions are also enhanced by the choice of Prague as the main setting of the novel, a fitting background for both the embedded tale of Hoffman and for the main plot revolving around Helen, the plain Englishwoman lost in her memories. Snow-clad Prague is a beautiful city with “her thousand spires”, “the stone apostles on the old Charles bridge” (M 5), the “lamp-lit castle high above the Vltava” (M 5), its magnificent squares that look like a theatrical backdrop, its churches, library and opera, its narrow alleyways. But when the novel opens, Christmas is over and night pours in “as if it were a soft black dust swept there by a broom” (M 5). The main landmarks prove ominous, like the astronomical clock with its wondrous mechanical figures that appear on the hour, delighting the tourists; but legend has it that the clock’s inventor was blinded, so that his feat would never be repeated (M 6). Helen enters a deconsecrated church, and stumbles on a thick red curtain, stressing the way in which thresholds and doors play a part in Gothic architecture, “in so far as they enclose space, confine, immune and encompass”, as Maurice Lévy puts it (Lévy 2004, 25). When she falls, she meets Adaya, who happens to be listening to a concert in the church, an apparent helper who later turns out to be an avatar of Melmoth. Besides, Helen often walks by the statue of Jan Huss, the Protestant martyr, wrapped in snow as if he were eagerly awaiting his ordeal on the stake. Rather than a picturesque shrine for tourists, Prague is a palimpsest whose dark history is slowly disclosed as the textual layers are peeled back.
To revisit history, the novel creates multiple plotlines, recalling Maturin’s *Melmoth’s* series of embedded tales. Indeed, Helen meets Thea’s husband Karel in the National Library, a fitting setting for a palimpsest of a novel. The novel begins as the scholar gives her some manuscripts to read, a typical Gothic trope. One of them takes place during Mary Tudor’s rule and deals with Alice, a young Dissenter, a girl doomed to the stake, whose hand was tortured to make her recant. In part, the episode is a pastiche of historical accounts and of Maturin’s Inquisition. It ties in with the deeply anti-Catholic English Gothic tradition, in which, as Victor Sage or Robert Miles explain, the reactionary, feudal Catholic Other is demonized: “The hated figure of the Catholic other is a projection of a complex ambivalence, a process of abjection, arising out of the nationalist politics of the home culture” (Miles 86). Perry slips into the genre all the more easily as she comes from a stern religious background, and was brought up on a diet of books like John Foxe’s 1563 *Book of Martyrs* (she borrows from Foxe the image of the tendons cracking as a cross is burnt into the hand of the girl).

The Inquisition, and its avatar in Mary Tudor’s England, is only one potential story arc; Perry, like Maturin, is fascinated by the way in which cycles of violence return; the masters killing today will be the victims tomorrow, and each generation seems to have its attempt at extermination. The shift to the twentieth century is symbolized by the magic of spontaneous translation. When Helen picks up the first text that Karel gives her (which was in turn given to him by the very old man who has just died in the library, a man called Hoffman), it is almost unreadable, full of crossings out and footnotes, written in German in “tilted copperplate”, like “a palimpsest pulled from museum archives, but the title page is dated 2016” (*M* 10). However, when Helen actually starts to read the Hoffman manuscript, the characters begin to seem familiar, and “actually to dissolve upon the page, the ink reshaping itself into plainly printed English: sans serif, twelve-point type” (*M* 28-29). The mysterious shape-shifting ink is a metatextual metaphor for the modern transposition of Maturin’s tale, in a plainer, less convoluted form, akin to sans serif font.²

Hoffman’s tale is introduced by a letter and split into two parts, with a long interruption that recalls, *mutatis mutandis*, the textual fragmentation and the blanks peppering Maturin’s novel. Through Hoffman’s tale, Perry revisits the troubled history of Prague from the late 1930s to the late 1940s, emblematized by the metaphor of the footprints: “Her feet were bare and bleeding and the Prague streets were marked with footprints in blood” (*M* 139). Here, Melmoth is used as a structural allegory to investigate patterns of behaviour: her bloody footprints re-enact countless feet whose blood has left no trace, including Hoffman’s mother’s.

This section of the novel explores the warped logic of separatism. Josef Hoffman, the homodiegetic narrator of this section, is of German origins, since his father was born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The father cannot bear to find himself in Czechoslovakia, after the post-World War One redistribution of territories. His patriotism is represented by a flawed bowl of red glass. The name of the narrator may recall both E.T.A. Hoffmann’s tales and the architect Josef Hoffman (1870-1956), who along with Koloman Moser and Gustav Klimt was part of the Vienna Secession art movement. The architect designed glass objects for the Moser glass factory, where Perry’s character’s father used to be employed. Besides, the fictional Joseph is given another symbolic object, a piece of green moldavite, a kind of silica glass formed by the impact of a meteorite some fifteen million years ago. A cross between stone and glass,
moldavite signifies collision but also fusion, perhaps a metaphor for some violent encounter, followed by integration and fusion through a new commonality. When they move to Prague, Joseph loses his piece of moldavite (that may or may not be the jewel later worn by Thea). He begins to carry a pebble in his pocket, the sign that he will cast the first stone instead of properly greeting the Other.

There are no safe spaces in Perry’s Melmoth. As the family struggles in Prague, and Josef cleans the glass windows of their mediocre shoe shop, he is drawn to the family opening a new bookshop opposite, and to the two fresh-faced children, Franz and Freddie Bayer. The Bayers own a radio, they listen to music, they laugh and dance, and jealousy begins to poison Josef’s heart. He refuses to ever visit them again, but occasionally watches them through the window. The cosmopolitan radio shows Franz’s desire to be on the same wavelength, to become friends with Josef, but also to occupy a space of air and music that knows no frontiers. This is opposed to the war machine of territorialisation, as Hitler’s troops move in to occupy Prague, defying Europe. Joseph’s parents greet the German troops with elation, as if they were coming into their own. The narrator begins to register bodies on the street and the disappearance of Jews, without qualms. Footnotes (presumably deemed necessary by the older Hoffman scribbling in the library) expand on the scale of violence; a footnote recalls how an entire village was burnt and obliterated, the men shot, the women and children sent to camps, the orchard uprooted, in retaliation for the death of one German officer; another depicts the visit of the Red Cross to the camp of Therensienstadt where, hoodwinked by propaganda, they filmed the camp as a playground where the Jews were fully fed and entertained, failing to see starvation and slaughter. Hoping to get the radio for his mother, the young Joseph denounces the Bayers to Policeman Novák, paying no attention to the black birds that gather and seem to ask why, why, the omen signalling the presence of Melmoth, or of guilt. The Bayers are sent to Therensienstadt.

Ironically, the wheel of fortune quickly turns: “Then the lights went out for the Hoffman family” (M 131). In May 1945, the bodies of women and children that crop up on the streets are those of Czechs of German origin, rather than of Jews. Hoffman’s father commits suicide with his old German sword, a botched rather than a glorious gesture. Joseph and his mother are forced to join the crowd of displaced people. Aimlessly, soldiers cut a square of flesh in the mother’s heel, a pointless act of cruelty which she fails to comprehend. This detail of gratuitous cruelty is typical of the Gothic genre and of Maturin’s Melmoth, aiming to arouse in the reader the feelings of horror and terror. But the Gothic paraphernalia is also significant. The square of flesh may be read as a metaphor for the rooting out of a part of the population deemed undesirable, maiming the body politic rather than healing it. Prejudiced hatred, Josef’s “inherited disease” (M 35), goes viral, spreads uncontrollably, turns against itself and dooms Joseph and Franz equally, with only one more small turn of the screw. On the way to Therensienstadt, where he will soon realize what he has actually sentenced Franz and Freddie Bayer to, Josef is tempted by Melmoth and performs his one irrational act of kindness, refusing to join her by telling the angry crowd that Novák is a Czech who disliked Germans, presumably preventing his martyrdom.

Prague is haunted by such unspoken memories. In the snow-clad city, a bereft Christmas tree brings no joy, suggesting that no resurrection may take place. The snow blinds and covers things, a metaphor for the attempt to obliterate the painful past; yet there is no ignoring Jan Hus’s statue, or the stone that Helen sees in the paved square,
on which she reads a name which she recognizes, echoing Hoffman’s tale; the skandalon, or stumbling stone, materializes the scandal of deportation and death. Helen is haunted by visions of Alice the Dissenter, Franz Bayer or Josef Hoffman; they accompany her, as if reading the tale turned her into a witness who cannot get rid of their traumatic experience. Such trauma is also embodied by the allegorical Melmoth, leaving as she does scraps of back garment and flickering on the edge of vision.

Perry then adds a further twist of the screw, turning away from Prague (through another embedded manuscript) to explore the Armenian genocide, and more specifically the events of 1915, during World War One (events which in part inspired the Nazis’ policy of extermination). Once again, Perry probes into the scapegoating and the revisionism that accompany mass killing. The tale comes at one remove, within a diary: a girl in Cairo has scribbled a tale told by a strange beggar; she has found herself compelled to listen, like the wedding guest drawn to the Ancient Mariner in Coleridge’s Rime of the Ancient Mariner, and to write the story down.

The tale of Nameless (whose true name we never learn) seems quite plain at first. It begins in Constantinople, in the waning Ottoman Empire. Along with his brother Hassan, Nameless joins a “minor bureau in a minor department” (M 228) where he drafts letters and documents to the best of his abilities. Dressed in a beautiful suit cut by his father, the “humble civil servant” (M 231) is precise and painstaking, while understatements veil the exact nature of his work: he “was instructed to compile, in the precise and unambiguous language for which he was so admired, a memorandum relating to the movement of certain elements of the population from one place to another” (M 232). Such commonplaces, here, thinly veil the fact that displacement means destruction, that the so-called “elements of the population” are the doomed Armenians. The veneer of plain language allows the brothers to delude themselves and believe they are doing no harm.

The confrontation with the Real occurs in Trebizond. The brothers see dozens of sacks washed up on the shore of the Black Sea; Melmoth appears and reveals that they contain dying children. The scene is a metonymy for the Armenian genocide, and for the massacre that killed 14 000 people in Trebizond in 1915, with the ruthless drowning of women and children in capsized boats. Denying what happened, Hassan drowns himself. As Melmoth nurses a dead child, her laughter is heard, echoing the corrosive laughter of Maturin’s Melmoth, which fascinated Baudelaire. For there is an ironic twist; the tale concludes with a letter disclosing that Hassan and Nameless’s parents were of Armenian descent, and that their father changed his name and his children’s names to protect them. Nameless loses his name, which we never hear, and horror destroys his eyes, that remained so blind to what he was doing.

Withdrawing the character’s name makes him more allegorical (the blind agent of fate faced with the return of the repressed), but also, simultaneously, more ordinary, plain and featureless. There is an aporetic tension between the carefully spelt, worded and folded official documents scripted by the brothers and the savage outcome on the beach. The brothers seem to have no idea that the document that they draft is actually performative. Hannah Arendt famously called this lack of ethical vision and responsibility “the banality of evil”. Arendt coined the concept because she was struck by the way in which, during the Nuremberg trial, Adolf Eichmann seemed unaware of the part that he had played as one of the organizers of the holocaust, as if he were incapable of reflecting upon his actions as a political subject. For Judith Butler, Arendt “feared that what had become ‘banal’ was non-thinking itself. This fact was not banal at all, but unprecedented, shocking, and wrong” (Butler). A grey civil servant, Nameless is
Perry’s version of this blurred consciousness, this process of “non-thinking itself”. The revelation that Nameless and his brother were actually of Armenian descent reflects how those who survived may have been forced to shed their culture and erase their own history. It is also, in a wider sense, a metaphor for the shared history and connection between the Turks and the Armenians, beyond dissent, and for the kinship of human beings, regardless of cultural prejudices.

23 Melmoth herself is not simply a Gothic monster looming in the shadows. Mocking and taunting the characters (“did you think there was no witness?”), she embodies the return of the repressed, the nightmare of historical trauma; she is the force that brings to light the horror that individuals and nations choose to cancel, erase, forget. Her flowing black hair may recall both Medusa and the wings of Benjamin’s Angel of History. As is well known, Walter Benjamin drew his concept from his very personal reading of Paul Klee’s “Angelus Novus” in his 1940 essay “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, written just before Benjamin committed suicide when attempting to escape from Nazi Germany. Benjamin offers a compelling ekphrasis of the small naïve picture, which he owned: “A Klee painting named Angelus Novus shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past” (Benjamin 249). The subjective reading is clearly influenced by the darkness shrouding the historical period. With his open mouth from which no sound will ever come, Klee’s stylized angel becomes a witness of the cycle of despair and disaster which so-called progress has brought.

Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin 249)

24 Alex Preston, when reviewing Melmoth in The Guardian, first suggested that it is “clear that behind the figure of Melmoth sits Benjamin’s Angel of History” (Preston). Indeed, the embedded texts in both Maturin’s and Perry’s Melmoth are the pieces of wreckage and historical atrocities that must be endlessly witnessed, so that we may go backward into the future.

25 Coming as it does after such moments of confusion, pain and terror in the manuscripts, the story of the protagonists themselves almost seems curiously bland. Though Albina might be said to embody greed, like one of the allegorical figures of Prague’s astronomical clock, and though Melmoth seems to hover around Thea and Karel, their plight differs from mass destruction. Karel escapes to England, where he is struck by a black man, who is made to walk in chains through Heathrow airport, towards a plane that will take him back to a country where he has no hope of surviving. This awakens Karel’s social conscience and he joins a group of young people defending illegal immigrants against expulsion.

26 As for Helen, her great crime turns out to have taken place years earlier in Manila, where she went to do voluntary work. Helen gave Rosa, a young woman scarred by an acid attack, some of the opium illegally brought by Arnel (Helen’s lover and a trainee doctor helping his own brother to bear the pain of an operation). Against all odds, since no one else came to see Rosa, who could not possibly last much longer and begged to
die, her death begins to arouse suspicion. When Arnel is arrested for Rosa’s murder, Helen fails to confess that she is the one who put her to death. Towards the end of the novel, Helen must face what Arnel has become, after years in an inhuman cell, little more than a cage containing a heap of prisoners, deprived of food, water and toilets. Helen’s cowardice may be a sin, but it hardly seems on a par with genocide. Thus Perry deliberately refuses to up her game, even granting Helen an apparent redemption as she and Arnel meet again. Surprisingly, it is this decrescendo which triggers the reader’s unease in the end.

For Perry’s point is not, or not simply, to write just another thrilling Gothic novel. The image of drowned children, of a migrant expelled at the airport, of eyes like an oil spill, of prisoners left to rot in a cell by some dictatorship, may resonate in today’s context, beyond the spatial and historical frames of each tale. Perry engages with what shames us, not simply the past, but very much the present. Perry wrote the novel when she was herself ill and wracked with physical pain; she also felt that fiction was child’s play compared with the ongoing migrants’ crisis. Despite the success of her previous novel, as she explains in an interview with Matthew Sweet, writing seemed like fiddling while Rome was burning. Melmoth became a way of rewriting the Gothic to implicitly engage with the present. Scapegoating the Other lies at the heart of rejection; the Armenian children washed up on the shore bring to mind Lampedusa or, as she explains to Sweet, the Syrian refugees washed up on beaches. The eyes of Melmoth, a blend of smoke and oil spill, suggest the spectral presence of ecological disaster. Ultimately, Helen is guilty not because of a mercy killing but because she gives up, she fails to speak out. In the library, when she muses on the tales of Hoffman and of the Dissenter under Mary Tudor, she has on her desk a German leaflet cautioning against the onset of cataract and blindness (M 97). Perhaps we, as readers, also fail to speak out and act, we also wish to remain blind to what is happening. One of the novel’s striking leitmotifs is the narrator’s constant call, from the very first line of the novel: “Look! It is winter in Prague [...]” (M 5). This is a recurrent device: “Look! It is evening now and no snow falling [...]” (M 97); “Look! It is midnight on the Vlata” (M 270). Such lines seem addressed to Helen, who cannot hear them but who is roaming through Prague; yet the narrative voice, obviously, also engages with the reader, who is thus prompted to look out for the unbearable, to become a witness too. And in a final twist, since the reader has also read the embedded manuscripts and shared the hermeneutic quest, s/he must face Melmoth too, longing to reach out with her hand:

My reader, my dear—you know her, you have been waiting for her: it is the witness, the wandering woman [...] it is I, Melmoth, whose voice you have heard all these hours, these days—who first put Hoffman’s letter into your hands! It was I who told you to read, and to bear witness—it was I who showed you how degraded we are, how far we have fallen from all that we ought to have been! Didn’t you know? Didn’t you guess? (M 270)

The stylistic play on rhetorical questions suggests the way in which the novel seeks to question the function of writing and reading today, probing into the way in which the Gothic may be revived as a mode of witnessing and testifying.

To conclude, Sarah Perry’s novel updates and repurposes Robert Maturin’s classic tale, leading the reader through the labyrinthine streets of snow-covered Prague and the maze of tales of darkness and cruelty. She thus engages with today’s radical crisis of witnessing, despite lavish media coverage, and with the relationship between trauma and ethics. As Shoshanna Felman and Doris Laub put it in Testimony, “[a]s readers, we
are witnesses precisely to these questions we do not own and do not yet understand, but which summon us and beseech us from within the literary texts” (Felman xiii). The image of the wondrous astronomical clock in Prague may be an echo of the way in which we must read implicitly our present crisis through such tales of the past. Again, this may well be an echo of Melmoth’s ending, and we must leave the last word to Hubert Teyssandier:

 [...] sur le cadran de l’horloge des siècles que Melmoth aperçoit au-dessus de l’abîme qui va bientôt l’engloutir, et, tandis que, dans sa course inexorable, l’aiguille se rapproche du terme fixé, deux bras gigantesques suggèrent, par leurs mouvements coordonnés, l’image d’une autre horloge apparaissant sous la forme d’une vision fantastique dans l’immensité des ténèbres [...] Tandis que le cadran de l’horloge mesure la durée dans laquelle s’inscrit le roman, le temps apparaît suspendu au-dessus de l’éternité, à laquelle appartiennent à la fois les deux bras gigantesques et l’océan de feu dans lequel l’homme errant sera précipité. (Teyssandier 1993, 56)

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES


2. “Serif” refers to the small embellishments used to make Gothic typography seem more dramatic and mysterious.


ABSTRACTS

To pay tribute to Hubert Teyssandier’s book on Mary Shelley, Charles Robert Maturin and the Gothic, this paper explores Sarah Perry’s 2018 rewriting of *Melmoth the Wanderer*. Perry’s *Melmoth* plays on Gothic tropes, such as haunting guilt, sudden apparitions, or religious persecution under...
Mary Tudor. But she also leads us back to the twentieth century’s own legacy of violence and terror. The beauty of snow-clad Prague or of the opera only foreshadows the apparition of a female Melmoth. Hovering between Medusa and the Angel of History, spying on the protagonists to offer temptation at the worst possible moment, Melmoth becomes the Witness of History-in-the-making, prompting the reader, like the characters, to question what remains unsaid as much as what is being told.

Pour rendre hommage à l’ouvrage qu’Hubert Teyssandier a consacré au gothique, et en particulier à Mary Shelley et Charles Robert Maturin, cet article se propose d’analyser la réécriture intertextuelle du roman de Maturin publié par Sarah Perry en 2018. Le *Melmoth* de Perry reprend en effet les tropes gothiques de la hantise, de l’apparition/disparition, de la persécution religieuse sous Mary Tudor. Mais c’est pour mieux basculer vers le vingtième siècle et sa violence, notamment lors du génocide arménien. La séduction de Prague sous la neige, de l’opéra, prélude à l’apparition d’une Melmoth au féminin, entre Méduse et Ange de l’Histoire, qui épie les protagonistes et leur offre la tentation d’échapper à l’insupportable. Elle s’érige avant tout en Témoin, pour inciter le lecteur, comme les personnages, à remettre en question le silence et la voix.

**INDEX**

**Mots-clés:** culpabilité, gothique, guerre, Histoire, surnaturel, trauma

**oeuvrecitee** Melmoth

**Keywords:** gothic, guilt, history, supernatural, trauma, war

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