

Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism

NCLC

169

Volume 169

Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism

Criticism of the
Works of Novelists, Philosophers, and Other
Creative Writers Who Died between 1800
and 1899, from the First Published Critical
Appraisals to Current Evaluations



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Preface

Since its inception in 1981, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)* has been a valuable resource for students and librarians seeking critical commentary on writers of this transitional period in world history. Designated an “Outstanding Reference Source” by the American Library Association with the publication of its first volume, *NCLC* has since been purchased by over 6,000 school, public, and university libraries. The series has covered more than 450 authors representing 33 nationalities and over 17,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical reaction to nineteenth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as *NCLC*.

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NCLC is designed to introduce students and advanced readers to the authors of the nineteenth century and to the most significant interpretations of these authors’ works. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of this period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. By organizing and reprinting commentary written on these authors, *NCLC* helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in *NCLC* presents a comprehensive survey of an author’s career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Every fourth volume of *NCLC* is devoted to literary topics that cannot be covered under the author approach used in the rest of the series. Such topics include literary movements, prominent themes in nineteenth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

NCLC continues the survey of criticism of world literature begun by Thomson Gale’s *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* and *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*.

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the list will focus primarily on twentieth-century translations, selecting

those works most commonly considered the best by critics. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication. Lists of **Representative Works** by different authors appear with topic entries.

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- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
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Charles Robert Maturin

1780-1824

(Also wrote under the pseudonym Dennis Jasper Murphy) Irish novelist and playwright.

The following entry provides an overview of Maturin's life and works. For additional information on his career, see *NCLC*, Volume 6.

INTRODUCTION

A prominent Gothic novelist and playwright, Maturin was a clergyman as well as an author. He strove to explore profound religious themes in his writings, examining the complex relationship between transgression and guilt and investigating the impact of spiritual despair on the individual conscience. He remains best known for his novel *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), the story of a scholar who barter his soul to the Devil. The novel is founded on a number of literary and religious myths, including the legend of Doctor Faustus, the biblical allegory of Cain, and the tale of the Wandering Jew, and it remains striking for the complexity of its protagonist and the poetic quality of its language. *Melmoth the Wanderer* has earned comparisons with the most distinguished Gothic novels of its era, among them Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Italian*, and Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*. Although remembered primarily as a novelist, Maturin also authored three plays, one of which—the verse tragedy *Bertram* (1816)—enjoyed moderate success on the London stage. While Maturin received little popular or critical acclaim during his lifetime, he remains important, not only for his mastery of the Gothic form, but also for his deep, philosophical examinations of the nature of the human psyche. The mythic figure of Melmoth has claimed a place alongside Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's Faust and Lord Byron's Manfred as one of the most powerful literary characters of the nineteenth century. In many respects, Maturin's work forms a bridge between the supernatural horror novels of the Gothic movement and the poetical innovations of Romanticism. Maturin influenced such diverse writers as Charles Baudelaire, Honoré de Balzac—who published a sequel to *Melmoth the Wanderer* entitled *Melmoth réconcilié* (*Melmoth Reconciled*) in 1835—and Oscar Wilde.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Maturin was born in Dublin on September 25, 1782, to William Maturin and Fidelia (Watson) Maturin; he was



one of six children. His ancestors were French Huguenots—Protestants expelled from France during the reign of Louis XIV. Maturin's grandfather, Gabriel Jasper Maturin, was a distinguished clergyman who succeeded Jonathan Swift as the Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral. At the age of fifteen, Maturin entered Trinity College. After earning his B.A. in 1800, he studied to become an Anglican minister, receiving his ordination in 1803. That year he married Henrietta Kingsbury, and the couple moved to Loughrea, Galway, where Maturin served as curate of a rural parish. In 1805 he returned to Dublin to become curate of St. Peter's Church, a position he held for the rest of his life.

Struggling to support his wife and family on his meager salary, Maturin turned to writing in the hope of paying his numerous creditors. He published his first three novels—*The Fatal Revenge; or, The Family of Montorio* (1807), *The Wild Irish Boy* (1808), and *The Milesian Chief* (1812)—at his own expense, unable to find a publisher for them. Due to the exotic, often horrific nature of these early works, Maturin wrote under the

pseudonym Dennis Jasper Murphy to avoid provoking scandal within his parish. None of the novels earned any money, however, and Maturin's financial difficulties persisted. His problems were exacerbated in 1809 when his father lost a position at the post office amid false corruption charges, placing a greater financial burden on Maturin and his family. While most contemporary reviewers savaged his early works, Maturin managed to elicit praise from Sir Walter Scott, who wrote an anonymous review praising the imaginative power of *The Fatal Revenge*. An extensive correspondence ensued between the two authors, and they became life-long friends. In 1816, with the assistance of Scott and Lord Byron, Maturin produced his first play, *Bertram*, at London's Drury Lane Theatre, acknowledging himself as the author for the first time. Although the work proved a financial success, Maturin soon squandered his earnings from the play, driving himself deeper into debt. His subsequent plays, the tragedies *Manuel* (1817) and *Fredolfo* (1819), could not match the success of *Bertram*. During the same period Maturin published *Women; or, Pour et contre* (1818), a novel set in France at the end of the Napoleonic era.

In 1820 Maturin published his most famous novel, *Melmoth the Wanderer*. Although some reviewers praised the novel as a representative work of Gothic fiction, it alienated many contemporary readers with its labyrinthine plot and dark themes, and earnings for the book were minimal. Unable to achieve lasting success as a writer, Maturin spent his final years in abject poverty. He was never able to rise above the level of minor curate in the church because of both the sensational subject matter of his writings and his eccentric personality. In the last year of his life, Maturin published *The Albigenses* (1824), his sole work of historical fiction, and *Five Sermons on the Errors of the Roman Catholic Church* (1824), in which he outlined his critique of Roman Catholic practices. He died in Dublin on October 30, 1824.

MAJOR WORKS

Maturin's most significant work remains his 1820 novel *Melmoth the Wanderer*. The story revolves around the title character, a scholar who offers his soul to the Devil in exchange for an additional 150 years of life. As part of the agreement, the Devil offers Melmoth the opportunity to reclaim his soul by finding another human being willing to accept the same bargain. Thus begins Melmoth's arduous journey around the world and his continual striving to find someone to share his fate. A penetrating glimpse into the nature of sin, the novel depicts Melmoth's struggles to come to terms with his transgressions and his increasing horror at his own inner nature. In many respects, *Melmoth the Wanderer*

represents the quintessential Gothic novel, incorporating the imagery and many of the trademark motifs of the genre, including ruined castles, foreboding landscapes, and an evil protagonist. At the same time, the work surpasses the limitations of the Gothic form in a number of key aspects, notably in its psychological and theological depth and in the powerful originality of its central character.

Although none have elicited the same level of critical interest as *Melmoth*, Maturin's other novels and plays are still noteworthy for their explorations of Gothic and Romantic themes. His play *Bertram*, which enjoyed moderate success and was arguably his most popular work during his lifetime, follows the adventures of a fallen nobleman, Bertram, who becomes a notorious highwayman after he is dishonored. At once a villain and a hero, Bertram fit squarely within the Byronic tradition of the Romantic man-of-action, whose bravery and charm make up for an ambiguous morality. Such novels as *The Fatal Revenge* and *The Milesian Chief*, though largely ignored today, remain interesting examples of the Gothic genre. *The Albigenses*, a historical novel, examines the religious controversy surrounding Pope Innocent III's crusade against the Manichean sect in thirteenth-century France. Although *The Wild Irish Boy* is widely considered Maturin's least important book, in recent years scholars have taken an interest in it for its themes of Irish nationalism, as well as its debt to such Irish women authors as Lady Morgan and Sydney Owenson.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Maturin's works confounded many contemporary reviewers, who objected to the seemingly chaotic structures of his novels and plays, as well as to the author's preoccupation with dark themes. Writing in 1921, a reviewer for the *Quarterly Review* described *Melmoth the Wanderer* as "a clumsy confusion which disgraces the artist and puzzles the observer." Some critics, including Samuel Coleridge, objected to Maturin's work on moral and religious grounds; Coleridge viewed *Bertram* as "melancholy proof of the depravation of the public mind." Lord Byron, on the other hand, highly praised the play and played an important role in bringing it to the stage. The most prominent early champion of Maturin's writings was Sir Walter Scott, who lauded the potential of Maturin's first novel, *The Fatal Revenge*, citing in particular Maturin's "great command of language" and the originality of his imagination.

Maturin's work remained largely ignored until the middle of the twentieth century, when scholars began to take renewed interest in the psychological and religious themes in his writings. One of the first book-length

CRITICISM

studies of his career, Niilo Idman's *Charles Robert Maturin*, appeared in 1923. In the 1950s and 1960s critics began to examine the various mythological foundations of *Melmoth the Wanderer*, identifying parallels between Melmoth and Faust, Prometheus, Milton's Satan, Cain, and the Wandering Jew, among others. In his 1956 study *The Romantic Agony*, Mario Praz praised *Melmoth the Wanderer* as a "masterpiece of the 'tales of terror' school." Praz identified distinct aspects of Romanticism in the protagonist, who he saw as both a mythic hero and an individual tormented by feelings of guilt and despair. Other writers from these years, notably H. W. Piper and A. Norman Jeffares, recognized elements of both literary Romanticism and Irish nationalism in Maturin's body of work. In the 1970s and 1980s scholars David Eggenschwiler and Mark M. Hennelly, Jr. offered existentialist interpretations of Melmoth's character. Other critics during this period began to pay closer attention to the structural aspects of Maturin's novels. Writing in the journal *Papers on Language and Literature*, Jack Null argued that the book's convoluted plot was designed to serve as a mirror of Melmoth's troubled psyche, an argument reiterated by G. St. John Stott in a 1987 essay. In his 1988 study *Horror Fiction in the Protestant Tradition*, Victor Sage examined the strong anti-Catholic stance in *Melmoth*, arguing that Maturin's contempt for Catholic ritual formed part of a distinct strain of Protestantism during his era. Since the 1990s a range of new critical perspectives has emerged, examining Maturin's work within the context of British colonialism, Irish nationalism, and nineteenth-century theology.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- The Fatal Revenge; or, The Family of Montorio*. 3 vols. [as Dennis Jasper Murphy] (novel) 1807
The Wild Irish Boy. 3 vols. [as "The Author of Montorio"] (novel) 1808
The Milesian Chief: A Romance. 4 vols. [as "The Author of Montorio"] (novel) 1812
Bertram (play) 1816
Manuel (play) 1817
Women; or, Pour et contre. 3 vols. [as "The Author of Bertram"] (novel) 1818
Fredolfo (play) 1819
Sermons (prose) 1819
Melmoth the Wanderer: A Tale. 4 vols. [as "The Author of Bertram"] (novel) 1820
The Albigenes: A Romance. 4 vols. (novel) 1824
Five Sermons on the Errors of the Roman Catholic Church (prose) 1824; revised edition, 1826

Edinburgh Review (review date July 1821)

SOURCE: Review of *Melmoth the Wanderer*. *Edinburgh Review* 35, no. 70 (July 1821): 353-62.

[In the following review, the anonymous critic faults Melmoth the Wanderer as excessive and unrestrained, both in its prose style and its imaginative exuberance.]

It was said, we remember, of Dr. Darwin's Botanic Garden—that it was the sacrifice of Genius in the Temple of False Taste; and the remark may be applied to the work before us [*Melmoth the Wanderer*], with the qualifying clause, that in this instance the Genius is less obvious, and the false taste more glaring. No writer of good judgment would have attempted to revive the defunct horrors of Mrs. Radcliffe's School of Romance, or the demoniacal incarnations of Mr. Lewis: But, as if he were determined not to be arraigned for a single error only, Mr Maturin has contrived to render his production almost as objectionable in the manner as, it is in the matter. The construction of his story, which is singularly clumsy and inartificial, we have no intention to analyze:—many will probably have perused the work, before our review reaches them; and to those who have not, it may be sufficient to announce, that the imagination of the author runs riot, even beyond the usual license of romance;—that his hero is a modern Faustus, who has bartered his soul with the powers of darkness for protracted life, and unlimited worldly enjoyment;—his heroine, a species of insular goddess, a virgin Calypso of the Indian ocean, who, amid flowers and foliage, lives upon figs and tamarinds; associates with peacocks, loxias and monkeys; is worshipped by the occasional visitants of her island; finds her way to Spain, where she is married to the aforesaid hero by the hand of a dead hermit, the ghost of a murdered domestic being the witness of their nuptials; and finally dies in the dungeons of the Inquisition at Madrid!—To complete this phantasmagoric exhibition, we are presented with sybils and misers; parricides; maniacs in abundance; monks with scourges pursuing a naked youth streaming with blood; subterranean Jews surrounded by the skeletons of their wives and children; lovers blasted by lightning; Irish hags, Spanish grandees, shipwrecks, caverns, Donna Claras and Donna Isidoras,—all opposed to each other in glaring and violent contrast, and all their adventures narrated with the same undeviating display of turgid, vehement, and painfully elaborated language. Such are the materials, and the style of this expanded nightmare: And as we can plainly perceive, among a certain class of writers, a disposition to haunt us with similar apparitions, and to describe them with a corresponding tumor of words, we conceive it high

time to step forward and abate a nuisance which threatens to become a besetting evil, unless checked in its outset.

Political changes were not the sole causes of the rapid degeneracy in letters that followed the Augustan era of Rome. Similar corruptions and decay, have succeeded to the intellectual eminence of other nations; and we might be almost led to conclude, that mental as well as physical power, after attaining a certain perfection, became weakened by expansion, and sunk into a state of comparative imbecility, until time and circumstance gave it a new progressive impetus. One great cause of this deterioration is the insatiable thirst for novelty, which, becoming weary even of excellence, will 'sate itself in a celestial bed, and prey on garbage.' In the torpidity produced by an utter exhaustion of sensual enjoyment, the Arreoi Club of Otaheite is recorded to have found a miserable excitement, by swallowing the most revolting filth; and the jaded intellectual appetites of more civilized communities will sometimes seek a new stimulus in changes almost as startling. Some adventurous writer, unable to obtain distinction among a host of competitors, all better qualified than himself to win legitimate applause, strikes out a fantastic or monstrous innovation; and arrests the attention of many who would fall asleep over monotonous excellence. Imitators are soon found;—fashion adopts the new folly;—the old standard of perfection is deemed stale and obsolete;—and thus, by degrees, the whole literature of a country becomes changed and deteriorated. It appears to us, that we are now labouring in a crisis of this nature. In our last Number, we noticed the revolution in our poetry; the transition from the lucid terseness and exquisite polish of Pope and Goldsmith, to the rambling, diffuse, irregular, and imaginative style of composition by which the present era is characterized; and we might have added, that a change equally complete, though diametrically opposite in its tendency, has been silently introduced into our prose. In this we have oscillated from freedom to restraint;—from the easy, natural, and colloquial style of Swift, Addison and Steele, to the perpetually strained, ambitious, and overwrought stiffness, of which the author we are now considering affords a striking exemplification. 'He's knight o' the shire, and represents them all.' There is not the smallest keeping in his composition:—less solicitous what he shall say, than how he shall say it, he exhausts himself in a continual struggle to produce effect by dazzling, terrifying, or surprising. Annibal Caracci was accused of an affectation of muscularity, and an undue parade of anatomical knowledge, even upon quiescent figures: But the artist whom we are now considering has no quiescent figures:—even his repose is a state of rigid tension, if not extravagant distortion. He is the Fuseli of novelists. Does he deem it necessary to be energetic, he forthwith begins foaming at the mouth, and falling into convulsions; and this orgasm is so often re-

peated, and upon such inadequate occasions, that we are perpetually reminded of the tremendous puerilities of the Della Cruscan versifiers, or the ludicrous grand eloquence of the Spaniard, who tore a certain portion of his attire, 'as if heaven and earth were coming together.' In straining to reach the sublime, he perpetually takes that single unfortunate step which conducts him to the ridiculous—a failure which, in a less gifted author, might afford a wicked amusement to the critic, but which, when united with such undoubted genius as the present work exhibits, must excite a sincere and painful regret in every admirer of talent.

Whatever be the cause, the fact, we think, cannot be disputed, that a peculiar tendency to this gaudy and ornate style, exists among the writers of Ireland. Their genius runs riot in the wantonness of its own uncontrolled exuberance;—their imagination, disdaining the restraint of judgment, imparts to their literature the characteristics of a nation in one of the earlier stages of civilization and refinement. The florid imagery, gorgeous diction, and Oriental hyperboles, which possess a sort of wild propriety in the vehement sallies of Antar the Bedoween chieftain of the twelfth century, become cold extravagance and doudering fustian in the mouth of a barrister of the present age; and we question whether any but a native of the sister island would have ventured upon the experiment of their adoption. Even in the productions of Mr Moore, the sweetest lyric poet of this or perhaps any age, this national peculiarity is not infrequently perceptible; and we were compelled, in our review of his *Lalla Rookh*, a subject which justified the introduction of much Eastern splendour and elaboration, to point out the excessive finery, the incessant sparkle and efflorescence by which the attention of the reader was fatigued, and his senses overcome. He rouged his roses, and poured perfume upon his jessamines, until we fainted under the oppression of beauty and odour, and were ready to 'die of a rose in aromatic pain.'

Dryden, in alluding to the metaphysical poets, exclaims 'rather than all things wit, let none be there:'—though we would not literally adopt this dictum, we can safely confirm the truth of the succeeding lines—

Men doubt, because so thick they lie,
If those be stars that paint the Galaxy:—

And we scruple not to avow, whatever contempt may be expressed for our taste by the advocates of the toiling and turgid style, both in and out of Ireland, that the prose works which we have lately perused with the greatest pleasure, so far as their composition was concerned, have been Belzoni's *Travels*, and Salame's *Account of the Attack upon Algiers*. Unable, from their insufficient mastery of our tongue, to rival the native manufacture of stiff and laborious verbosity, these for-

eigners have contented themselves with the plainest and most colloquial language that was consistent with a clear exposition of their meaning;—a practice to which Swift was indebted for the lucid and perspicuous character of his writings, and which alone has enabled a great living purveyor of ‘twopenny trash’ to retain a certain portion of popularity, in spite of his utter abandonment of all consistency and public principle. If the writers to whom we are alluding will not condescend to this unstudied and familiar mode of communing with the public, let them at least have the art to conceal their art, and not obtrude the conviction that they are more anxious to display themselves than inform their readers; and let them, above all things, consent to be intelligible to the plainest capacity; for though speech, according to the averment of a wily Frenchman, was given to us to conceal our thoughts, no one has yet ventured to extend the same mystifying definition to the art of writing. It will be expected that we should support our animadversions upon Melmoth by a few extracts from its pages; and, as an illustration of the unmeaning rant which we have just deprecated, we select, amid many of similar sound and fury, signifying nothing, the following passage.

‘But I feel another pride,’ answered Melmoth, and in a proud tone he spoke it; ‘a pride which, like that of the storm that visited the ancient cities, whose destruction you may have read of, while it blasts, withers, and incrusts paintings, gems, music and festivity, grasping them in its talons of annihilation, exclaims, Perish to all the world, perhaps beyond the period of its existence, but live to me in darkness and in corruption! Preserve all the exquisite modulation of your forms! all the indestructible brilliancy of your colouring! but preserve it for me alone!—me the single, pulseless, eyeless, heartless embracer of an unfertile bride—the brooder over the dark and unproductive nest of eternal sterility—the mountain whose lava of internal fire has stifled, and indurated, and enclosed for ever, all that was the joy of earth, the felicity of life, and the hope of futurity!’

Vol. III. p. 307

Of extravagant fustian upon trifling occasions, the following is a sample, uttered by a monk, because he is displeased with the preternatural lustre of Melmoth’s eyes.

Who is among us? Who? I cannot utter a blessing while he is here. I cannot feel one. Where he treads, the earth is parched! where he breathes, the air is fire! where he turns, his glance is lightning. Who is among us? Who?

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After this, let us no longer smile at the furious hyperboles of Della Crusca upon Mrs. Robinson’s eyes. In the same strain we are told of a convent whose ‘walls sweat, and its floors quiver,’ when a contumacious brother treads them;—and when the parents of the same per-

sonage are torn from his room by the Director of the convent, we are informed that ‘the rushing of their robes as he dragged them out, seemed like the whirlwind that attends the presence of the destroying angel.’ In a similar spirit, of pushing every thing to extremes when he means to be impressive, the author is sometimes offensively minute; as when he makes the aforesaid persecuted monk declare, that ‘the cook had learned the secret of the convent, (that of tormenting those whom they had no longer hopes of commanding), and mixed the fragments he threw to me with ashes, hair, and dust;’—and sometimes the extravagance of his phrases becomes simply ludicrous. Two persons are trying to turn a key—‘It grated, resisted; the lock seemed invincible. Again we tried with crunched teeth, indrawn breath, and fingers stripped almost to the bone—in vain.’ And yet, after they had almost stripped their fingers to the bone, they succeed in turning that which they could not move when their hands were entire.

We have said that Mr Maturin had contrived to render his work as objectionable in the matter as in the manner; and we proceed to the confirmation of our assertion. We do not arraign him solely for the occasional indecorousness of his conceptions, or the more offensive tone of some of his colloquies, attempted to be palliated by the flimsy plea, that they are appropriate in the mouths that utter them. Dr Johnson, as a proof of the total suppression of the reasoning faculty in dreams, used to cite one of his own, wherein he imagined himself to be holding an argument with an adversary, whose superior powers filled him with a mortification which a moment’s reflection would have dissipated, by reminding him that he himself supplied the repartees of his opponent as well as his own. In his waking dreams, Mr Maturin is equally the parent of all the parties who figure in his Romance; and, though not personally responsible for their sentiments, he is amenable to the bar of criticism for every phrase or thought which transgresses the bounds of decorum, or violates the laws that regulate the habitual intercourse of polished society. It is no defence to say, that profane or gross language is natural to the characters whom he embodies. Why does he select such? It may be proper in them; but what can make it proper to us? There are wretches who never open their lips but to blaspheme; but would any author think himself justified in filling his page with their abominations? It betrays a lamentable deficiency of tact and judgment, to imagine, as the author of Melmoth appears to do, that he may seize upon nature in her most unhalloved or disgusting moods, and dangle her in the eyes of a decorous and civilized community. We shall not stop to stigmatize, as it deserves, the wild and flagrant calumnies which he insinuates against three-fourths of his countrymen, by raking in the long-forgotten rubbish of Popery for extinct enormities, which he exaggerates as the inevitable result, rather than the casual abuse of the system, and brands with an intolerant zeal, quite as

uncharitable as that which he condemns. These faults are either so peculiar to the individual, or in their nature so obviously indefensible, as to repel rather than invite imitation. But there is another peculiarity in the productions of this gentleman which claims a more detailed notice, because it seems likely to have extensive effects in corrupting others:—we mean his taste for horrible and revolting subjects. We thought we had supped full of this commodity; but it seems as if the most ghastly and disgusting portion of the meal was reserved for the present day, and its most hideous concoction for the writer before us,—who is never so much in his favourite element as when he can ‘on horror’s head horrors accumulate.’ He assimilates the sluggish sympathies of his readers to those of sailors and vulgar ballad readers, who cannot be excited to an interest in the battle of the Arethusa, unless they learn that ‘her sails smoaked with brains, and her scuppers ran blood;’—a line which threatens him with formidable competitors from before the mast. Mere physical horror, unalleviated by any intense mental interest, or redeeming charities of the heart, may possess a certain air of originality, not from the want of ability in former writers to delineate such scenes, but from their deference to the ‘*multaque tolles ex oculis*’ of Horace; from the conviction of their utter unfitness for public exhibition. There is, however, a numerous class of inferior caterers to the public, ready to minister to any appetite, however foul and depraved, if they be once furnished with a precedent; and we foresee an inundation of blood and abomination if they be not awed or ridiculed into silence. We have quietly submitted to these inflictions from two or three distinguished writers, whose talents may extenuate, though they cannot justify, such outrages upon feeling. When regular artists and professors conduct us into their dissecting room, the skill with which they anatomise may reconcile us to the offensiveness of the operation; but if butchers and resurrection-men are to drag us into their shambles, while they mangle human carcasses with their clumsy and unhallowed hands, the stoutest spectators must turn from the exhibition with sickness and disgust.

Were any proof wanting that this Golgotha style of writing is likely to become contagious, and to be pushed to a more harrowing extravagance at each successive imitation, Mr Maturin would himself supply it. Lord Byron, in his *Don Juan*, had described a set of sailors, strangers to one another, reduced to the dreadful necessity of destroying one of their number to supply food for the rest; an incident sufficiently horrible in itself, but which the monstrous imagination of the present author instantly seizes to invest with a new, more loathsome, and absolutely incredible hideousness. The scene of his cannibal repast is a subterranean dungeon, where a beautiful woman and her lover are buried alive, by monkish cruelty, to perish by starvation: of which pro-

cess, the following circumstantial account is given by a fiend in human form, who was stationed at the door, and relates the dread catastrophe with a hellish delight.

It was my penance (no,—my delight) to watch at the door, under the pretence of preventing the possibility of their escape (of which they knew there was no possibility); but, in reality, not only to inflict on me the indignity of being the Convent gaoler, but of teaching me that callosity of heart, and induration of nerve, and stubbornness of eye, and apathy of ear, that were best suited to my office.—But they might have saved themselves the trouble. I had them all before ever I entered the Convent. Had I been the superior of the Convent, I should have undertaken the office of watching the door. You will call this cruelty; I call it curiosity,—that curiosity which brings thousands to witness a tragedy, and makes the most delicate female feast on groans and agonies. I had an advantage over them,—the groan, the agony I feasted on were real. I took my station at *the door*—that door which, like that of Dante’s Hell, might have borne the inscription, “Here is no hope,”—with a face of mock penitence, and genuine cordial delectation. I could hear every word that transpired.—For the first hours they tried to comfort each other,—they suggested to each other hopes of liberation,—and as my shadow, crossing the threshold, darkened or restored the light, they said—“that is he!”—then, when this occurred repeatedly, without any effect, they said, “No, no, it is not he!” and swallowed down the sick sob of despair, to hide it from each other. Towards night a monk came to take my place, and to offer me food. I would not have quitted my place for worlds; but I talked to the monk in his own language, and told him I would make a merit with God of my sacrifices, and was resolved to remain there all night with the permission of the superior. The monk was glad of having a substitute on such easy terms, and I was glad of the food he left me, for I was hungry now; but I reserved the appetite of my soul for richer luxuries. I heard them talking within. While I was eating, I actually lived on the famine that was devouring them, but of which they did not dare to say a word to each other.’ . . . ‘All that night, however, I heard their groans,—those groans of physical suffering that laugh to scorn all the sentimental sighs that are exhaled from the hearts of the most intoxicated lovers that ever breathed.’—‘Then the agony of hunger increased; they shrunk from the door, and grovelled apart from each other. *Apart!*—how I watched that.—They were rapidly becoming objects of hostility to each other. Oh, what a feast to me!—The second night they raved and groaned (as occurred); and, amid their agonies (I must do justice to women whom I hate as well as men), the man often accused the female as the cause of all his sufferings; but the woman never—never reproached him. Her groans might indeed have reproached him bitterly, but she never uttered a word that could have caused him pain. There was a change which I well could mark, however, in their physical feelings. The first day they clung together, and every movement I felt was like that of one person. The next, the man alone struggled; and the woman moaned in helplessness. The third night—how shall I tell it?—but you have bid me go on. All the horrible and loathsome excruciations of famine had been undergone; the disunion

of every tie of the heart, of passion, of nature, had commenced. In the agonies of their famished sickness, they loathed each other;—they could have cursed each other if they had had breath to curse. It was on the fourth night that I heard the shriek of the wretched female;—her lover, in the agony of hunger, had fastened his teeth in her shoulder;—that bosom, on which he had so often luxuriated, became a meal to him now.

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We have omitted this miscreant's flippant allusion to Madame de Sevigné and his own damnation, uttered in a spirit which (to use the author's own words upon another occasion), 'mingled ridicule with horror, and seemed like a Harlequin in the infernal regions flirting with the furies:'—But we must not forget to mention, as little characteristic touches in this scene of preposterous horrors, that the monster who describes it was also a parricide, and that the female, on whose dying agonies he had feasted, was his only sister! After this appalling extract, we need not pursue our quotations from pages which, as more than one of the personages say of themselves, seem to swim in blood and fire; and we shall conclude with the following passage from a dream.

The next moment I was chained to my chair again,—the fires were lit, the bells rang out, the litanies were sung;—my feet were scorched to a cinder,—my muscles cracked, my blood and marrow hissed, my flesh consumed like shrinking leather,—the bones of my leg hung two black withering and moveless sticks in the ascending blaze;—it ascended, caught my hair,—I was crowned with fire,—my head was a ball of molten metal, my eyes flashed and melted in their sockets:—I opened my mouth, it drank fire,—I closed it, the fire was within,—and still the bells rang on, and the crowd shouted, and the king and queen, and all the nobility and priesthood looked on, and we burned and burned! I was a cinder, body and soul, in my dream.

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These, and other scenes equally wild and abominable, luckily counteract themselves;—they present such a Fee-fa-fum for grown up people, such a burlesque upon tragic horrors, that a sense of the ludicrous irresistibly predominates over the terrific; and, to avoid disgust, our feelings gladly take refuge in contemptuous laughter. Pathos like this may affect women, and people of weak nerves, with sickness at the stomach;—it may move those of stouter fibre to scornful derision; but we doubt whether, in the whole extensive circle of novel readers, it has ever drawn a single tear. The Society for the Suppression of Mendicity has fortunately cleared our streets of the offensive vagrants who used to thrust their mangled limbs and putrid sores into our faces to extort from our disgust what they could not wring from our compassion:—Be it *our* care to suppress those greater nuisances who, infesting the high ways of literature, would attempt, by a still more revolting exhibition, to terrify or nauseate us out of those sympathies which they might not have the power to awaken by any legitimate appeal.

Let it not be imagined, from any thing we have now said, that we think meanly of Mr Maturin's genius and abilities. It is precisely because we hold both in respect that we are sincerely anxious to point out their misapplication; and we have extended our observations to a greater length than we contemplated, partly because we fear that his strong though unregulated imagination, and unlimited command of glowing language, may inflict upon us a herd of imitators who, 'possessing the contortions of the Sybil without her inspiration' will deluge us with dull, turgid, and disgusting enormities;—and partly because we are not without hopes that our animadversions, offered in a spirit of sincerity, may induce the Author himself to abandon this new Apotheosis of the old Raw-head-and-bloody-bones, and assume a station in literature more consonant to his high endowments, and to that sacred profession to which, we understand, he does honour by the virtues of his private life.

***New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal* (essay date May 1827)**

SOURCE: "Conversations of Maturin—No. 1." *New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal* 19, no. 77 (May 1827): 401-11.

[In the following essay, the anonymous critic offers an analysis of Maturin's character, while examining the impact of his life circumstances on the development of his art.]

Gentle reader, you and I have met to talk of Maturin. You have known him in print, as I have at the social table: you have communed with him in the embodied imaginings of his spirit—and I when the workings of that spirit were upon him: you have conversed with him at the dim distance of a poetic vision—and I when he was invested with its reality. We are both, therefore, under our different knowledge of him, equally entitled to devote an hour to his memory; so, without parade, let us begin.

There were few men of real ability more subject to vicissitudes of temperament than Maturin. The circumstances of his private fortune, which generally harassed his spirit, worked visible changes in the tone of his writings, and can be identified in that over-wrought excitement under which he sought to escape their influence. He chose the track of the marvellous and the terrible because they afforded an ideal refuge from the positive ills that surrounded him; and having freely indulged in the cup of romantic terrors and extravagant delusions, he was forced to continue the stimulants to keep up the tone of his mind. It is folly to say that our minds do not take the colour of the channel in which