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Introduction

THE REQUEST of the publishers of the present volume for a preface raises the question: What reason is there to justify a new edition of Lewis's *Monk*, a book that has been reprinted very rarely since the time of its first appearance, and even so only in the form of abridged, or more or less surreptitious, editions? It may be admitted at once that this erst belauded romance has little claim to perpetuation on its own merits. Only disappointment awaits anyone who has taken too seriously the praise bestowed by his contemporaries on Lewis's genius and supposed gifts of powerful and unearthly imagination, and has been deceived by the story of his sudden leap into fame, and of his literary friendship with Byron and Shelley, into fancying *The Monk* in any way a great book. But the most notorious exemplar of the 'Gothic' school of romance, the novel that summarized most concisely the idiosyncrasies of its kind, and gave so forcible a stimulus to the manufacture of tales of terror, has historical importance enough to be saved from the oblivion that waits upon very scarce books. Those, again, who pay any attention to the course of popular taste in reading, no unimportant factor in the literary history of a nation, will find *The Monk* worth examining at first hand. There is food for thought in the case of a man of mere average ability who, on the strength of one crude production written in his teens, was able to find publishers and a market for a miscellaneous series of works that would daunt the hardihood of the most indefatigable researcher to read now, and who not only won with ease the success of such a writer as the late Guy Boothby, but was widely regarded as among the leading men of letters of his day. Perhaps, after all, it is reason enough for a reprint that the book is one everybody knows by name, yet few indeed have read.

A life of Matthew Gregory Lewis (1775-1818) is extant in two volumes octavo; but to the fatuous indulgence of the anonymous biographer most readers will prefer the brief notice in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, which easily takes in all that has any interest in a very ordinary career. Born rich, he never had to face adversity in any shape, unless we except the differences between his father and mother, in which he took his mother's part, and had his pocket money reduced in consequence. He never had to write a line for profit, though his gains from this source must have been considerable. He enjoyed his life, his letters leave no doubt on that point, but it was not a life worthy of commemoration in two volumes octavo. Prefixed to the two volumes there is a portrait, which might have served all the purposes of a memoir. It is the face of a good-natured, insignificant young man, who never made an enemy; a man who shone in private life, was kind to his slaves, and never had a brilliant idea in his life. His only qualification for writing books was an insatiable ambition, the *cacoethes scribendi* in its most vulgar form, combined with an indomitable industry that, by the grace of Providence, is not often allied to it. But there was no conceit, no egotism of any kind, in Monk Lewis: he looked upon his gift for enthralling his readers by making their flesh creep as an unaccountable endowment of Nature, and his letters show how conscious he was of his lack of any personal impressiveness to support the dignity of his reputation. This amiable modesty of his must have been the trait that pleased Shelley and Byron, who were, no doubt, very much amused at the spectacle of this little man overwhelmed by the greatness thrust upon him by his friends.

Lewis wrote *The Monk* in 1795, just before he was twenty; he devoted ten weeks to the performance, rather more than, according to the best accounts, had been given by another wealthy scribbler to the composition of *Vathek*, some ten years before, a tale of the same kin as *The Monk*, but far more original, and unquestionably a work of imagination. Lewis's book had a successful sale, and made a great sensation—two things that are not always mutually dependent. Worse books of the same character as *The Monk* would, at the present date, command a lucrative sale, but would create no sensation—we are too well acquainted with the species. But although Lewis avowedly made no attempt to be original, borrowing his effects from sources candidly pointed out in his preface, and although he made no secret that he was incited to write *The Monk* by his perusal of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, which he considered 'one of the most interesting books that has (sic) ever been published'; in spite of all this his book was a new thing, at least to the reading public of his own time and country. It was new in that instead of the mild titillation of the nerves produced by Mrs.

Radcliffe's timid trifling with the world of phantoms and nameless terrors, it threw away all restraint. There is nothing supernatural in Mrs. Radcliffe's novels; her ghosts are all make-believe, and the reader's alarm is carefully soothed before it exceeds the point of pleasant excitation. There is no mistake, on the contrary, about Lewis's ghosts: they are the most blood-curdling creations that a crude fancy can depict. And if you do not believe in ghosts, he has yet more efficacious means of shaking your nerves at his disposal, in the more palpable shape of charnel-house horrors, the most repulsive incidents of disease and mortality, loathsome crimes and diabolical men. He outdid Mrs. Radcliffe, and in the same way he outdid every writer from whom he borrowed. One of the most superlative gifts of the literary mind is the faculty of reticence, the instinct that tells what to omit. Lewis's peculiar gift was the negation of reticence; he is most forcible and emphatic where other men are silent. To write in complete defiance of the literary canons requires cleverness of a sort, and this is how *The Monk* is such a curiosity in the literary annals of that period.

An excellent example of Lewis's contrarious reading of the rules of good writing is a certain 'monodrama' called *The Captive*, in which he pursued his own methods so thoroughly, that he put to flight an audience met together with the most kindly expectations of applauding him. This piece of unmitigated realism was in the form of a monologue, with scenery, and two or three additional actors, who come in, and in dumb show perform just those revolting parts of the action which the wise feeling of the Greeks and most modern playwrights carried out behind the scenes. Mrs. Litchfield recited it at Covent Garden to a large and fashionable assembly. It represents the mental torments of a miserable woman, imprisoned as a lunatic by her inhuman husband, and, before the very eyes of the audience, driven by terror and agony into actual madness. No wonder that it threw a portion of the audience—whose nerves were unable to withstand the dreadful truth of the language and the scene—into hysterics, and the whole theatre into confusion and horror. . . . Never did Covent Garden present such a picture of agitation and dismay. Ladies bathed in tears—others fainting—and some shrieking with terror—while such of the audience as were able to avoid demonstration like these, sat aghast, with pale horror painted on their countenance. It is said that the very box-keepers took flight. . . .

Praise and denunciation greeted the appearance of *The Monk*, and reading between the lines one can see that Lewis was not displeased with either. He was, indeed, so much affected by the attacks on the immorality of the book that, when a new edition was demanded, he brought it out in an expurgated form, or what he called expurgated. But

he was never really ashamed of *The Monk*. His father took him to task, and there is a contrite letter to be seen in the two volumes octavo, acknowledging his error and promising amendment. But his repentance was very half-hearted. He always prided himself on the cognomen of 'Monk,' with which he had been immediately dubbed, and cultivated it by dropping the second initial of his signature, 'M. G. Lewis,' and not correcting those who ignorantly addressed their letters to 'Monk Lewis, Esq.'

Of his later works, poems, plays, tales, translations and other effusions, very little need be said. One of his 'Wardour Street dramas,' 'Alfonso, King of Castile,' was the subject of an amusing review by Sydney Smith, in the *Edinburgh Review*, in 1803. The best even Lewis's admiring biographer can say for his poetry is that: 'Our author's muse seldom soared to a very high flight, and was therefore the less liable to those sudden "sinkings" which Johnson pronounces to be bathos.' How many who are familiar with the sweetly sentimental melody of 'The Banks of Allan Water' are aware that the words were composed by the notorious Monk Lewis? Many of these works, little known as they are, have long been easier to obtain than the more famous *Monk*, which has been out of print, except in an abridgment, since the earlier half of the last century.

In the preface to *Frankenstein*, Mrs. Shelley, after describing the ghastly nightmare that gave her the idea of that gloomy romance, exclaims: 'Oh! if I could only contrive one (story) which would frighten my reader as I myself had been frightened that night!' This might be taken for their general motto by manufacturers of the novel of terror, or, as it was loosely called from Horace Walpole's time onwards, 'The Gothic story.' But to contrive a series of incidents is not enough to frighten us, the writer has to see that they make a strong impression on our mind. There are two chief ways of doing this, the realistic method and the poetic. The writer tries to produce a semblance of fact, either by apparent truth of description or by the presence of logical reasoning; or else he aims, not at convincing us, but merely at poetic faith, defined by Coleridge as the willing suspension of disbelief for the moment; that is, he stimulates the imagination of the reader by means of the suggestive powers of language. Edgar Poe's *Descent into the Maelstrom* or *The Case of M. Valdemar* is a good instance of the first method, and his *Fall of the House of Usher*, or *Silence, a Fable*, of the other. Whichever method is adopted, the writer may reinforce his effects to a vast extent by agitating the feelings skilfully and powerfully; and the portrayal of mental states, emotions especially, not only enlarges the field to be exploited, but is an invaluable aid to both realist and poet, helping to make more credible by awakening sympathy, and adding depth and

harmony to the narrative. One useful auxiliary overlooked by Lewis, although Mrs. Radcliffe had wielded it with masterly skill, is suggestion instead of description, the employment of vague hints in lieu of plain statements. Monk Lewis had no sense of the unnerving power of the terror that stalks unseen: to him a corpse, or, at any rate, a skeleton, was as efficient a bogey as a ghost.

The first 'Gothic' romance in English is usually said to be Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764), although there is no reason why Smollett's *Ferdinand, Count Fathom*, published in 1753, should not have the credit. Walpole's story, at any rate, made the thing fashionable. It is, on the 'Gothic' side, a crude accumulation of terror-striking incidents; apart from this, it is a tale of love and intrigue with a complicated plot. The horrors of the story; the colossal helm, the animated statues and pictures, the nose dropping blood; show a certain fertility of invention, but of imagination not a trace. Walpole's inability to realize imaginatively any of the situations he devises deprives him of the power of giving a modern reader even the mildest thrill. It is quite absurd to watch the inmates of the haunted castle peacefully conducting their love affairs, and the mercenary baron carrying on his nefarious intrigues in the most business-like fashion, calmly oblivious of the frightful omens and apparitions besetting them at every step. The Baron of Otranto looks on the ancestral ghosts as a nuisance, and a sad detraction from the comforts of his residence; but what chiefly annoys him is their uncalled-for interference with his private affairs. There is none of the atmosphere of eeriness and indefinable terror which forms the most potent ingredient in a really effective ghost story.

Miss Clara Reeve, author of *The Old English Baron* (1777), had prudish objections to Walpole's free use of the supernatural. She resolved, accordingly, to write a tale of terror without ghosts. One mysterious incident alone would she permit herself, a horrible groan, heard on the spot where the rightful heir to the property had been foully slain. But even this moderate demand on our faith is, of course, a draft upon the supernatural. A groan may be a prodigy as unaccountable as the gigantic apparitions of her predecessor. Mrs. Radcliffe, whose five romances began with *The Castles of Athlyn and Dunblayne*, in 1789, and ended with *The Italian*, in 1797, had the same scruples; she would have no supernaturalism. Her peculiar expedient was: the postponed explanation. She excites feelings of wonder and apprehension, only to disappoint the reader by explaining everything as the result of perfectly commonplace events. It is useless to urge that our interest in the ingenuity of her explanations, and the genuineness of our feelings of awe and terror while they last, atone for this disagreeable shock. There is a most inartistic contrast between the sublimity of the imaginary incidents and

the triteness of the actuality. Nevertheless, Mrs. Radcliffe discovered one thing of unique importance, the value of atmosphere: landscapes, ruins, characters, costumes, light and shade, are subdued by delicate touches to the right key of emotion; everything lulls the reader into the state of mind most harmonious with the incidents to be enacted. Her novels were of the nature of complex symphonies, with the feelings of awe and fear among the dominant motives; and if they are too long-winded for our taste, they certainly abound in passages of real beauty, which leave an indelible impression on the mind, and have not been without their influence on later literature.

Lewis, unfortunately, when in *The Monk* he opened a new chapter in the history of the 'Gothic' romance, showed no appreciation of what was best in Mrs. Radcliffe. Atmosphere was a thing much too sensual for his blunt perceptions. Violent blows upon the reader's nerves seemed to him the most straightforward way to secure his effects; he made no attempt to rationalize his ghostly phenomena; his only idea of the wizard atmosphere was to prepare our minds with a whiff from the churchyard. He found that horror is an easy thing to produce; he never learned that terror requires more skill and subtlety. This mistake was not repeated by his direct successor, Maturin, author of *The Fatal Revenge, or, The Family of Montorio* (1807), of *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), of *Bertram, a Tragedy*, and other lurid pieces. In rejecting any scruple as to the free employment of supernaturalism, he followed Lewis, but he left him far behind in the force and skill of his attacks upon the reader's nerves. Maturin's theory of the end and aim of art would probably commend itself to few in our day; but it is impossible to deny the art and delicacy with which he calculated his thrills, and theadroitness with which he utilized the devices of reticence and suggestion. Maturin was a connoisseur of sensations, a scientific investigator of the theory of terror, who analyzed his effects with the precision of a psychologist; consequently his were the most admirably-constructed 'shockers' produced in his time.

Mrs. Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) has many passages still capable of making a profound impression on sensitive minds, and these are the passages where she has not been content merely with terrifying incident, but fully depicts the mental and emotional states of her principal actors. She was not the inventor of the scientific romance, but she was the first to adapt its methods to the peculiar purposes of the novel of terror. Lovers of this species of fiction have been spoiled now by the accurate knowledge and the powers of methodical exposition devoted thereto by Jules Verne and Mr. H. G. Wells. But if one can overlook the blemishes due merely to her lack of scientific attainments, and throw oneself into the situation of Mrs. Shelley's still less scientific public, it

must be acknowledged that she was not far from attaining the nightmare effect she aimed at. Another book that was widely read in translation about this time was Schiller's *Ghost-seer*; it received extravagant praise from many critics, who simply bear witness to the strength of the craze for graveyard romance. Schiller proceeds upon Mrs. Radcliffe's plan of piling up a succession of mysterious occurrences, seemingly the acts of infernal ministers, and then explaining all at the end as the result of natural, though not very probable, events. But his novel is of a totally different complexion from hers. A foreign prince sojourning at Venice is the object of a secret conspiracy, of which the principal agent is a mysterious Armenian, who seems possessed of superhuman attributes, disappearing and reappearing in inexplicable ways, and performing unheard-of miracles by means, apparently, of his authority in the spirit world. The plot is a complicated tissue of which it would take many pages to give the reader even a faint idea; its intricacies require a closer attention than few would care to devote; and when the end is reached, and the bewildering entanglement unravelled, it will be a very meritorious reader who can keep clear, in his own mind, all the threads of the plot; and enjoy in retrospect the final solution of his perplexities. Evidence is forthcoming that contemporary readers thought this one of the most stupendous books ever written; the figure of the Armenian gave the nervous spasms of fright; they believed the art of thrilling could go no further. But there was still a future for the tale of terror; in England masterpieces in the art were to be composed on very different lines: by such antagonistic types of intellect as George MacDonald, Stevenson, and Rudyard Kipling, not to mention the notable attempts of Bulwer Lytton, in *The Hainted and the Haunters*, *Zanoni*, and *A Strange Story*; whilst American writers were to achieve still higher things; Hawthorne with his soul-shaking embodiments of moral dread; Poe with his Defoe-like excursions into the world of preternatural wonders, and his finer realizations of the mysticism and sinister beauty that underlie the darker movements of our thought; and lastly, Mr. Henry James; many of whose short stories, subtle and recondite as they are, yet in their capacity to sway the feelings are far more potent than the raw sensations of Monk Lewis and Maturin. The author of *The Turn of the Screw* makes consummate use of his scientific insight into the hidden springs of fear. His science helps him in more ways than one, enabling him to give a sufficiently rational account of the phenomena represented, and to trick the mind into belief in their objectivity, and telling him how to thrill the reader as if by a light touch on the nerve. Mr. James is the latest American experimenter in the fiction of terror; the earliest was a contemporary of Monk Lewis, and it is interesting to observe how original, and how strikingly successful, transatlantic

authors have always been in this byway of letters. Charles Brockden Brown was the first American novelist, and like Lewis began to write under the influence of Mrs. Radcliffe. He was an intelligent imitator, and while he copied her better features, he adapted them with success to a totally new class of subject, and developed them according to his own conceptions. He, too, aimed at the effects of supernaturalism without the reality. But, instead of seeking to explain incredible incidents by means of an extraordinary concatenation of ordinary events, he based the whole structure on the durable foundation of certain strange, but not impossible circumstances; the erratic behaviour of a somnambulist, as in *Edgar Huntly* (1799-1801), a case of suspended animation and the mysterious conduct of a concealed criminal, as in *Arthur Mervyn* (1798-1800), or the utterances of a ventriloquist as in *Wieland*. Although things of this kind are in themselves exceptional and contrary to ordinary experience, Brown managed to keep them in the background so as not to offend the reader's sense of probability too much. They were inconspicuous, though essential parts of the machinery. It was in conjunction with the less abnormal circumstances that they had their full effect. One may forget the actual incidents of the novel *Edgar Huntly*; but the sense of abject and incomprehensible fear that pervades the book, the formless dread with which we accompany the adventurer into the panther-haunted caves of the Alleghanies, and flee with him through the midnight woods infested with Indian braves, will remain as an indestructible impression of the book. Brown excelled in evoking the nightmare atmosphere, in making the reader's hair stand on end for no definable reason whatever. He was also peculiarly skilful in giving, by means of a few touches, the idea of a fearful personality, of a human being more to be dreaded than a fiend from the pit. Welbeck, in *Arthur Mervyn*, the scoundrel who exercises such a deadly fascination over the hero, is a striking example of this terrible glamour; and there is another figure in the same book, who does not even appear on the scene, and is merely alluded to by the hero in his fevered cogitations, yet gives one the same mental shock as Arthur Mervyn felt when he thought he heard his menacing footsteps at his chamber-door. The secret is, of course, that Brown does not relate incidents, but records impressions, sets down the thoughts and feelings of the actors directly, and so arouses in us thoughts and feelings only a little less powerful.

These early writers are all alike in the painful insipidity of their style. The arts of language play an unusually important part in narratives of the wonderful; a careful examination of any one of Poe's incomparable stories is enough to prove this. But the ponderous emptiness of Brown's

prose is like the ponderousness of *Caliban's Guide to Letters*: nothing more stilted was ever penned, it caricatures itself. And if anybody believes that the felicities of expression hight 'journalise' are one of the latest products of evolution, let him turn to *The Monk*. There, in Lewis's glib diction, he will recognize all the graces usually considered the special property of the halfpenny paper. Here is a piece of dialogue, the culminating passage in one of the most impassioned, most delirious love-scenes in the story, the scene where the supposed novice reveals her sex and her uncontrollable affection for Ambrosio:—

"This speech gave the abbot an opportunity of recollecting himself. He was conscious that, in the present disposition of his mind, avoiding her society, was his only refuge from the power of this enchanting woman.

Your declaration has so much astonished me, said he, 'that I am at present incapable of answering you. Do not insist upon a reply. Matilda: leave me to myself, I have need to be alone.'

'I obey you; but, before I go, promise not to insist upon my quitting the abbey immediately.'

'Matilda, reflect upon your situation; reflect upon the consequences of your stay; our separation is indispensable, and we must part.'

But not to-day, father! Oh! in pity, not to-day!

You press me too hard; but I cannot resist that tone of supplication. Since you insist upon it, I yield to your prayer; I consent to your remaining here a sufficient time to prepare in some measure the brethren for your departure: stay yet two days; but on the third! (he sighed involuntarily) 'remember, that on the third we must part for ever!'

She caught his hand eagerly, and pressed it to her lips.

'On the third!' she exclaimed, with an air of wild solemnity: 'You are right, father, you are right! On the third we must part for ever!'

There was a dreadful expression in her eye as she uttered these words which penetrated the friar's soul with horror. Again she kissed his hand, and then fled with rapidity from the chamber.

Anxious to authorize the presence of his dangerous guest, yet conscious that her stay was infringing the laws of his order, Ambrosio's bosom became the theatre of a thousand contending passions."

Are these the accents of ungovernable passion? The same continued:—
"No, rather, no! I expected not to inspire you with a love like mine: I only wish for the liberty to be near you; to pass some hours of the day in your society; to obtain your compassion, your friendship, and esteem. Surely my request is not unreasonable.'

'But, reflect, lady, reflect only for a moment on the impropriety of my

harbouring a woman in the abbey, and that too a woman who confesses that she loves me. It must not be. The risk of your being discovered is too great; and I will not expose myself to so dangerous a temptation."

And this is how the abbot surrenders to her importunate blandishments:—

"He accompanied her to the door of her cell; and, when arrived there, he stopped her to declare his consent to her continuing the partner of his solitude, so long as should be agreeable to herself."

A crowd does not scatter or disperse in Lewis's prose, it becomes 'nearly dissipated.' The abbot never preaches; he either 'delivers a discourse' or 'pronounces a sermon.' Instead of taking a nap after dinner, the monks separate and disperse themselves in various parts of the garden, where the shade of trees or retirement of some grove present the most agreeable means of enjoying the siesta. A young lady tells a gentleman:

'Segnor, you delight me by this assurance! It encourages me to indulge my prepossession in his favour; and you know not with what pain I should have repressed the sentiment!'

In fact, Lewis's *Monk* scarcely wants a single one of the vicious attractions that have in all ages secured literary fame among the unliterary, and a popularity whose magnitude is always, providently, in exactly inverse ratio to its duration. But let one thing be remembered, the works of Monk Lewis and his like, which would never have flourished and multiplied as they did without the negative merits that made them so popular, were after all the raw material of the romanticism that culminated in the *Ancient Mariner*, *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, and *The Fall of the House of Usher*. That their crude romanticism is amply represented among the fiction securing widest and most lucrative circulation at the present time, in the cheap illustrated magazine, or in the decent vesture of the six-shilling novel, it is hardly necessary to mention.

E. A. B.

August, 1906.

Preface

IMITATION OF HORACE, EPODES, I., XX.

Methinks, oh, vain ill-judging book,
I see thee cast a wishful look,
Where reputations won and lost are
In famous row called *Paternoster*.
Incensed to find your precious olio
Buried in unexplored portfolio,
You scorn the prudent lock and key;
And pant, well bound and gilt, to see
Your volume in the window set
Of Stockdale, Hookham, or Debreit.
Go, then, and pass that dangerous bourn
Whence never book can back return;
And, when you find—condemned, despised,
Neglected, blamed, and criticized—
Abuse from all who read you fall,
(If haply you be read at all)
Sorely will you your folly sigh at,
And wish for me, and home, and quiet.

Assuming now a conjuror's office, I
Thus on your future fortune prophesy:
Soon as your novelty is o'er,
And you are young and new no more,

In some dark dirty corner thrown,
Mouldy with damp, with cobwebs strown,
Your leaves shall be the bookworm's prey;
Or sent to chandler-shop away,
And doomed to suffer public scandal,
Shall line the trunk or wrap the candle!

But, should you meet with approbation,
And some one find an inclination
To ask, by natural transition,
Respecting me and my condition,
That I am one, th' inquirer teach,
Nor very poor, nor very rich;
Of passions strong, of hasty nature,
Of graceless form and dwarfish stature;
By few approved, and few approving;
Extreme in hating and in loving;
Abhorring all whom I dislike,
Adoring who my fancy strike:
In forming judgments never long,
And for the most part judging wrong;
In friendship firm, but still believing
Others are treacherous and deceiving;
And thinking, in the present era,
That friendship is a pure chimera;
More passionate no creature living,
Proud, obstinate, and unforgiving,
But yet, for those who kindness show,
Ready through fire and smoke to go.

Again, should it be asked your page,
'Pray, what may be the author's age?
Your faults, no doubt will make it clear,
I scarce have seen my twentieth year,
Which passed, kind reader, on my word,
While England's throne held George the Third.

Now then your venturesome course pursue:
Go, my delight!—dear Book, adieu!

HAGUE, Oct. 28, 1794.

M. C. L.

Advertisement

THE FIRST idea of this Romance was suggested by the story of the *Santon Barissa*, related in *The Guardian*.—*The Bleeding Nun* is a tradition still credited in many parts of Germany; and I have been told that the ruins of the castle of *Lauenstein*, which she is supposed to haunt, may yet be seen upon the borders of *Thuringia*. *The Water-King*, from the third to the twelfth stanza, is the fragment of an original Danish ballad: and *Belerna and Durandarte* is translated from some stanzas to be found in a collection of old Spanish poetry which contains also the popular song of *Cayteros and Malesindra*, mentioned in *Don Quixote*.—I have now made a full avowal of all the plagiarisms of which I am aware myself, but I doubt not many more may be found of which I am at present totally unconscious.