Infernal Imagery: Dante in William Beckford's *Vathek* and Matthew G. Lewis's *The Monk*

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Abstract:

        The early Gothic novels published in the last decades of the eighteenth century contributed to the creation of new imagery forms and a rich variety of iconographies that were both appreciated and rejected by contemporary critics and readers. Interestingly, the Gothic literary production of the period was a result of the cultural crossover of a variety of literary influences from different authors and epochs. This research looks at the controversial and ambiguous novels Vathek by William Beckford (1786) and The Monk by Matthew Gregory Lewis (1796) as examples of rich cultural substrata. Beckford and Lewis's works feature dramatic situations that are still shocking and appalling even for a modern public. The texts are complex and mingle multiple sources and influences, creating a pastiche effect inherited from Horace Walpole's Castle of Otranto (1764). A vast critical literature has been published on both authors' strange novels providing various interpretations and identifying possible models for their works. However, lesser attention has been dedicated to medieval inspiration and to examples by Dante. Following the ideas expressed by Diego Saglia (2006), who convincingly argues that "Gothic overtones were found in the most popular narratives of the Inferno", the aim of this study is to demonstrate how Dante's Inferno played a major role in the creation of both novels' gory and dramatic finales. This study intends to highlight the Dantesque factor in the development of the most crucial parts of the novels and how influences from Italian Trecento still had a very important role in poetic and literary production at the end of the Eighteenth Century.

Key words: Early Gothic literature, Eighteenth Century literature, Medieval Literature, Dante's *Comedy*, William Beckford, Matthew Lewis, comparative literatures

Critical literature about the Gothic has been haunted by two questions that have posed a series of interpretative problems. One enigma behind the genesis of the Gothic novel is the impossibility to determine how such a strange form of writing could develop at the end of a century apparently dominated by the development of science and the predominance of rationalism. A further doubt concerns the halo of mystery surrounding the actual sources that might have played a substantial role in the formation of the Gothic. As far as the first problem is concerned, the dialectical contrast between Enlightenment and darkness has been investigated by a number of scholars who have drawn attention to the co-existence of problematic shadows during the age that exalted light through reason, science and tolerance. After presenting Denis Diderot's (1713-1784) rational entry on 'Magic' in the *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire Raisonné,* meant to disabuse men of the dangers of superstition, Lizanne Henderson (2016, 23-24) claims that "during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there were not always clear-cut distinctions made between magic, the occult, demonological theory and science. The combination of astrology and medicine, for instance, continued to play a role in some medical procedures (…) Scientific techniques were being employed by some in hopes of finding proof of the spirit world, second-sight and paranormal phenomena". John Fleming's study (2013) is even more extreme as he concentrates on the dark side of Enlightenment and on the strange personalities that populated that epoch, such as Giuseppe Balsamo, Count of Cagliostro who was involved in a series of mysterious events. It is not hazardous to claim that the dark ambiguities that underlay the apparently luminous

cultural mainstream of the Eighteenth Century might be at the origin of the love for unusual and strange characters and situations that brought about the development of the Gothic literary phenomenon. Considering the second problem connected to the Gothic, it may be plausible to argue that literary sources of the past did not play a secondary role in the development of novels that were a congeries of multiple influences. That works from the past and from other countries still played a remarkable role at the end of the Eighteenth well into the Nineteenth Centuries might be clearly supported by the ongoing publication of Classical, Medieval and Renaissance masterpieces and their translations.[1] An example of the continuing interest for works of the past is given by the British author and critic Leigh Hunt, a friend of the romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, who published a collection of selected poetic extracts named *Stories from the Italian Poets* in 1846. The literary miscellany included the famous poet Dante Alighieri. Dante's masterpiece was the *Divine Comedy*, completed in in the first two decades of the thirteenth century, an allegorical poetic narrative of a supernatural journey in the three *loci* of the Christian after-world, *Hell*, *Purgatory* and *Paradise*. His gloomy descriptions were popular throughout the centuries. Intriguingly, some of his characterizations of the netherworld were absorbed by the early Gothic novels that were published during the last two decades of the century.[2]

The two novels that are being analysed here were somehow difficult to be encased in a single genre. William Beckford's *Vathek* was first published in 1786 and Matthew G. Lewis's *The Monk* came out ten years later. Beckford and Lewis were respectively dubbed the "caliph" and the "monk", connecting them with the ambiguous protagonists of their strange stories. They also shared similar literary influences that materialize in the very last parts of the two novels. William Beckford's *Vathek* introduces a series of questions, which have not been solved in spite of the large number of in-

depth studies of the work. The first problem is the novel's linguistic dualism.[3] Although Beckford's contemporary reviews tended to appreciate the story and connect it to great authors of the past such as Dante, Ariosto and Milton, the analogies were not completely highlighted. While the genre of *Vathek* could not be determined with certainty, some scholars identified sublime and picturesque aspects in the work that, added to the gloomy conclusion of the story, allowed them to include the text in the Gothic current.[4] The supernatural and magic arts in *Vathek* may seem to convey a further confirmation of the intrinsic Gothic nature of the story, in spite of bizarre situations and grotesque adventures. A thorough analysis of the final part of the novel can help us identify its real Gothic essence and determine some of its sources more clearly.[5] An unusual novel, published at the end of the eighteenth century, *The Monk* is characterized by multiple sources. A series of traits in the plots and subplots are connected with classical elements. The text includes unusual and multifaceted contents, liable to be interpreted in several ways, and by disturbing images that can still confuse and shock readers today. Born in 1775, coincidentally the same year as Jane Austen, Lewis was fifteen years younger than Beckford, and published his novel when he was only twenty years old. Lewis had already acquired a remarkable education in public schools and at Oxford University. Like Beckford, he had not only travelled extensively but had spent various months overseas, immersing himself in the local cultures, to acquire wider linguistic knowledge. Like Beckford, he became an MP but his love for literature was stronger than his taste for politics. And like Beckford once more, he was never able to replicate the success and originality of his first literary exploit. *The Monk* is an ambiguous novel whose publication created an uproar of fervent protests against its crude and shocking representation of violence, sexuality and incest. The novel's narrative exaggerations, frequently tend to cast a shadow on its real essence.[6] Under certain aspects the

novel was following the literary fashion of the time. Nevertheless, the creativity and literary technique shown in *The Monk* were by far superior to the stylistics of popular novels. The French Revolution was envisaged as a dangerous source of inspiration.[7] In particular, the insistence on lustful details, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge emphasized in his analysis of Lewis's text, offended the readers' sensibility. Coleridge's study appeared in *The Critical Review*, one year after the book had been printed for the first time. While aristocratically despising the waves of popular novels written in imitation of *Schauerromane* (Maurice Lévy 345; Maggie Kilgour 14; James Watt 92), the Romantic poet was aware of Lewis's great literary qualities and appreciated the author's vivid imagination especially in certain parts of the novel. Lewis was "no common genius" to Coleridge, but he could not forgive the young man for various reasons.[8] In "Genres for Prosecution" (1999) Michael Gamer underlines how negative criticism created a permanent mark of infamy on Lewis's literary production that was perpetuated in the next fifty years or more (1051). Moreover, criticism has had a tendency to identify the author with his negative protagonist ever since (Emma Clery 1995, 164).[9]

One distinctive and very interesting element in both Beckford and Lewis is the pervading presence of Dante at the tragic ends of their stories. Beckford and Lewis's mastery of the Italian language and literature was frequently mentioned in their correspondence, their memoirs and their works. In his article "From Gothic Italy to Italy as Gothic Archive" (2006), Diego Saglia claims that Dante provided an immense repertoire of images for the Gothic novel and Romanticism. In this study I intend to show how Beckford's *Vathek* and Lewis's *The Monk* were imbued with images taken from Dante's *Comedy* and especially from *The Inferno*. Both *Vathek* and *The Monk* are interesting examples of how Dante's replicas permeated late eighteenth-century literature. Vathek's parable ends in the subterranean majestic palace of Eblis that he has been

desperately looking for, thinking it was the supreme *locus* of
knowledge and power. Beckford's narrative style changes
completely upon arrival at Eblis: the Oriental lustre is
abandoned in exchange for a dark and gloomy Gothic
desolation. The pages are dominated by the pervading presence
of Dante's *Comedy,* and especially of the *Inferno.* Dante, like
Horace, was one of the most widely translated poets in Britain
during the long eighteenth century. Even though a complete
version of the *Divine Comedy* was not carried out until the
beginning of the nineteenth century, its complex symbolism and
allegorical constructions were part of a shared cultural
universe.[10] Britain was the country where the dissemination of
culture, through periodicals and the printing press, was higher
than in other European nations at the time. Literary
translations were instrumental in the propagation of
knowledge, as Gillespie and Hopkins clearly highlight in their
volume dedicated to cultural translation in the eighteenth
century. Once at the gates of the strange palace of Eblis, whose
architecture had never been seen before, the caliph and his
companions can observe "the colossal forms of four creatures,
composed of the leopard and the griffin, and though but of
stone, inspired emotions of terror" (*Vathek* 107). The stone
animals have their flesh and blood counterparts in the *Comedy*.
Dante had encountered heinous animals in the "dark wood"
where he was lost at the very beginning of his supernatural
journey. Charles Eliot Norton's 1892 translation in prose
describes the scene as follows: "And lo! Almost at the beginning
of the steep a she-leopard, light and very nimble, which was
covered with a spotted coat. And she did not move from before
my face, nay, rather hindered so my road that to return I
oftentimes had turned". Then the poet meets "a lion" and finally
"a she-wolf" (*Inferno* I, 3), all of them fierce creatures that
threaten and frighten him. In an agony of indecision and fear,
Dante almost succumbs to horror.[11] Beckford uses Dante's
escamotage of the wild animals to describe the entrance to the

unusual place that represents Vathek's final destination, not the beginning as in Dante's poem. Interestingly, the creatures are at the entrance to Hell in both Dante and Beckford. Beckford unites images of the first and third Cantos. The animals that Vathek finds are at the stone portal with carved words that constantly mutate, thus reiterating the linguistic obsession in the text, which can be found in previous chapters of the novel. Dante sees "words of colour obscure (...) at the top of a gate", and these words are "dire" to him (*Inferno*, I, 11). Dante has to face a hideous and gloomy place to reach beauty and bliss. On the contrary, Vathek starts his journey in a sublime context to end up in a place of fear and terror.

One interesting feature in *Vathek* is the description of extreme verticality. This vertical feature seems to convey deeper meanings. The characters' directions in *Vathek* move actually both upwards and downwards. The upwards movement can be found in the high tower that Vathek's mother, Carathis, who had it built in order to carry out her mysterious acts. What is more, she performs her magical rites and her bloody sacrifices upon the highest part of it. The downwards movement is first found in the description of the chasm where the Giaour, a monstrous creature haunting Vathek, disappears and where innocent children are later thrown by the Caliph to be sacrificed to the monster. The most extraordinary example of movement towards the abyss is represented by the Hall of Eblis, whose corridors are dangerously "steep". They echo Dante proceeding along the Inferno with extreme difficulty. The entrance to Eblis creates a specular reflection of Dante's entering Hell. In the very beginning the poet finds darkness and walks on almost perpendicular paths. Later, he can observe devilish creatures who punish sinners, doomed to eternal sufferings. Dante's guide is the illuminated Latin poet Virgil, whereas the ambiguous and obscene Giaour becomes the leader for Vathek and his group. The Giaour turns out to be the devil's emissary. Other equally disgusting creatures perambulate in

the mysterious subterranean citadel of Eblis.[12] Dante's downward movement throughout the *inferno* is described in the first part of his story. Vathek's progress takes him downwards at the very end of his strange parable. After ascending Carathis' high majestic tower that almost touches the sky, the caliph constantly moves downwards. He becomes itinerant and thinks, like Dante, that he has lost the way. When he finally finds the puzzling labyrinth of Eblis, he descends into its entrails to find "the region of wonders", wrongly convinced he will obtain "all kinds of delights" (*Vathek* 36). What he finds is a boundless misery instead. Dante moves along the circles of Hell and towards the centre of the earth where Lucifer's seat is located. His wise companion Virgil, an example of moral superiority, constantly warns him against the dangers that are lurking in the devil's hideous domain. Virgil awakens Dante's empathy while the Giaour silences Vathek's conscience and nourishes his greed.

Virgil accompanies Dante as far as Purgatory then leaves him with the love of his life, the angelical Beatrice. She is meant to drive the poet to the highest empyrean spheres. Vathek's first meeting with Nouronihar, the adolescent girl that unconsciously seduces him, somehow recalls the Italian "Sweet New Style", originally *Dolce Stil Novo,* the poetic manner of late medieval Italian poets exalting the angelical and purifying function of the beloved woman.[13] The perfume and the beauty of Nourinihar and her maids inebriate Vathek, who thinks that they are not creatures of this world but "peries come down from the spheres".[14] He rejects his eunuch's description of their juvenile insolence:

'Contrive, rather, that my eyes may be fixed upon hers that I may respire her sweet breath as she bounds panting along this delightful wilds!' on saying these words, Vathek extended his arms towards the hill, and directing his eyes, with an anxiety unknown to him before, endeavoured to keep within view the object that enthralled his soul: but her course was

difficult to follow, as the flight of one of those beautiful blue butterflies of Cachemire, which are at once so volatile and rare. (*Vathek* 63)

Nouronihar's effect may be compared to the healing appearance of the beloved woman in the poems by Guido Guinizzelli, Guido Cavalcanti, and Dante himself.[15] The angelical woman's ethereal beauty provokes a languid torment in the poets' senses especially because it is united to goodness and sensibility. The caliph seems to be changing because of this fatal meeting that could apparently be considered as a new phase in his life of debauchery and indifference. However, instead of instilling peace in his life, Nouronihar becomes an agent of evil. She is mesmerized by Vathek's negative influence and she accompanies him in his journey; but their final destination cannot be paradise. Nouronihar is diametrically opposed to an angelical woman and to Dante's Beatrice. Her negativity is confirmed at the gloomy portal of the mysterious infernal palace when the magic stone figures reveal to Vathek that "in favour of [his] companion (…) Eblis pemitteth that the portal of this palace shall be opened" (*Vathek* 108). The epiphany of her real meaning is given when the doors of Hell are opened in her honour.

What Dante and Vathek have in common is that they are both sinners at the beginning of their strange adventures. However, Dante obtains the long searched-for purification. On the contrary, Vathek becomes more sinful and his crimes accumulate, making redemption impossible. Their guides are antithetical; Virgil represents moral strength, whereas the Giaour has many cryptic meanings all connected with wrongdoing and misdeeds. Beautiful women accompany Dante and Vathek during the final part of their peregrinations. However, the women's alliances with the two heroes take different directions. Beatrice's name is symbolic because it means eternal beatitude. She is a celestial woman who can help Dante reach the highest part of Heaven to admire the

apotheosis of divine creatures. She also sustains him in the process of purification from sin. Nourinihar's superior beauty and sweetness does not help Vathek. In fact, she is progressively spoilt by Vathek's darkest sins and she is inexorably contaminated by his greed. Therefore she must share his eternal doom of suffering and his dramatic downfall, in a place that resembles Dante's *inferno*. After his tragic suffering, Dante finally finds a way out of obscurity:

> A place is there below, stretching as far from Beelzebub as his tomb extends, which not by sight is known, but by the sound of a rivulet that there descends along the hollow of a rock that it has gnawed with its course that winds and little falls. My Leader and I entered through that hidden way, to return to the bright world. And without care to have any repose, we mounted up, he first and I second, till through a round opening I saw of those beauteous things which heaven bears, and thence we came forth to see again the stars. (*Inferno,* Norton, Canto XXXIV, 127-139)

Dante abandons the Inferno: his movement is upward and out of the recesses of the earth. The sense of relief and the beauty of the nocturnal sky are also found in *Vathek,* but the context is unlike Dante's as the protagonists are not leaving the place of doom. In fact, they are moving towards the fatal entrance:

> The rock yawned, and disclosed within it a staircase of polished marble, that seemed to approach the abyss. Upon each stair were planted two large torches, like those Nouronihar had seen in her vision: the camphorated vapour of which ascended and gathered itself into a cloud under the hollow of the vault. This appearance, instead of terrifying, gave new courage to the daughter of Fakreddin. Scarcely deigning to bid adieu to the moon and the firmament; she abandoned without hesitation, the pure atmosphere, to plunge into these infernal exhalations. (*Vathek* 108)

Totally absorbed by Vathek's greed, the once pure and beautiful Nourinihar becomes her lover's impatient guide and she

voluntarily enters the evil palace, leading the group. Vathek penetrating into the mysterious subterranean vault in the *finale* is in contrast to Dante's newly-found freedom after his escape from the dark cavern of horror. The poet breathes the pure air and admires the beauty of the stars, whereas Vathek's protagonists abandon the marvels of the "firmament" and enclose themselves in the darkest devilish place. I would argue that Beckford did not only have the *Divine Comedy* perfectly in mind, but that he also intended to create a reversed story, however interspersed with Bakhtinian carnivalesque interludes, where the progress of corrupt individuals culminates in dark despair. A further echo can be found a few paragraphs later when Vathek and Nourinihar look at each other but they can only see reciprocal hate. On the contrary, Dante and Beatrice look at each other in the final Canto 33 of Paradise and they feel a form of ecstasy. Before their fall Vathek and Nouronihar had similar feelings: "As they descended, by the effulgence of the torches, they gazed on each other with mutual admiration; and both appeared so resplendent, that they already esteemed themselves spiritual intelligences" (*Vathek* 108). Further Dantesque elements can be found in Beckford's novel. The following passage in *Vathek* is an evident symmetric echo of Dante's lines in the third Canto of the *Inferno*:

> In the midst of this immense hall a vast multitude was incessantly passing; who severally kept their right hands on their hearts; without once regarding any thing around them. They had all, the livid paleness of death. Their eyes, deep sunk in their sockets, resembled those phosphoric meteors that glimmer by night, in places of interment. Some stalked slowly on; absorbed in profound reverie: some shrieking with agony, ran furiously about like tigers, wounded with poisoned arrows; whilst others, grinding their teeth in rage, foamed along more frantic than the wildest manias. They all avoided each other, and, though surrounded by a multitude that no one could number, each wandered at random, unheedful of the

rest, as if alone on a desert where no foot had trodden (*Vathek* 110).

The scene of the immense multitude of sinners condemned to eternal suffering is among the most impressive and well known of his *Inferno*. The punishment inflicted on the damned is the same for everybody in *Vathek*, whereas Dante is much more articulate in his descriptions of chastisement. The sense of deep anguish and tremendous agony is rendered by Beckford vividly. It is possible to argue that Dante's words in the already mentioned third Canto (line 24-32 and 56-61) are a clear source for Beckford. Here follows a passage from Norton's translation:

Here sighs, laments and deep wailings were resounding through the starless air; wherefore at first I wept thereat. Strange tongues, horrible cries, words of woe, accents of anger, voices high and hoarse, and sounds of hands with them, were making a tumult which whirls forever in that air dark without change, like the sand when the whirlwind breathes (..) And I, who was going, saw a banner, that whirling ran so swiftly that it seemed to me to scorn all repose, and behind it came so long a train of folk, that I could never have believed death had undone so many. (*Inferno*, Norton, III, 11-13)

Although Dante's triadic division of his work is not evident in Beckford's text, the story may be divided in three phases.[16] Vathek's life in Samarah represents paradise with all its extraordinary beauties. The infinite steps of the immense tower built by Carathis may lead to the Empyrean. The lake where Nournihar and her cousin Goulchenrouz are forced to hide is a sort of Purgatory. Vathek's difficult journey to the lake where they are hideen is a symbol of purgatory as well and the idea is confirmed by the hero's first feeling of deep suffering for the loss of Nouronihar. Hell is then found in the final part in the Palace of Fire belonging to the demon Eblis. The variety of echoes connected with Dante in the final pages of the story casts a different light on the chameleonic narration, which

becomes an inverted and grotesque divine comedy. I would argue that it is difficult to consider Beckford's novel as an Oriental tale exclusively. Rather, it is a philosophical exercise and a parade of knowledge, which the young author had accumulated and was eager to transmit. Vathek and his beautiful companion's tragic destiny seems a distorted version of Dante and Beatrice's story. When the couple arrive at the mysterious palace, they find an iconographic terrifying ensemble that seems to reflect Giovanni Battista Piranesi's fictitious and frightening architectural structures

> A death-like stillness reigned over the mountain and through the air. The moon delated on a vast platform, the shades of the lofty columns which reached from the terrace almost to the clouds. (…) on the right rose the watch-towers, range before the ruins of an immense palace, whose walls were embossed with various figures. (…) The rock yawned, and disclosed within it a staircase of polished marble, that seemed to approach the abyss (*Vathek* 108).

In the end, when fatal punishment strikes the protagonists, "Their hearts took fire and they, at once, lost the most precious gift of heaven: - HOPE. These unhappy beings recoiled with looks of the most furious distraction (…) all testified their horror" (*Vathek* 119). What Dante had seen and heard similar words at the gate of Hell in the third Canto: "Through me is the way to the woeful city; through me is the way to eternal woe; through me is the way among the lost people. (…) Leave every hope, ye who enter!" (*Inferno*, Norton, 20). These fateful words become the décor of the gloomy final image for Beckford. Diego Saglia ("From Gothic Italy" 2006, 86) claims that "the diffusion of Italian materials in late Gothic or Gothic-inflected narratives" can be amply verified, by analysing the literary and poetic production at the turn of the century and later on. He further explains that authors "turned to Dante and Boccaccio for their powerful Gothic-style combinations of pathetic plots of hopeless love and disturbing tales of persecution and agony.

Through their stereotypical situations and characters these poems provided finely tuned descriptions of somatic and psychic states, especially the deformation of sensory perception, as well as sensitive and sympathetic portrayals of profoundly distressed human beings". Saglia gives some vivid examples and clarifies that Count Ugolino's atrocious sequence in Dante's *Inferno* had a strong visual and emotional impact, which is confirmed by the plethora of imitations it inspired. Romantic poets such as Byron and Shelley "were deeply fascinated by Dante". In particular, they were puzzled by Ugolino's story.

Agnes's subplot in *The Monk* presents an important analogy with Dante's gruesome story. After the protagonist, Ambrosio, has discovered a secret letter unveiling the nun's pregnancy and her intention to elope with her fiancé, the ruthless Abbess imprisons the girl in a dark cell with her new born infant. She is left to starve with her child in the same way as Ugolino, who is walled up and forced to see his offspring die. Even if Agnes is saved in the end and the Abbess and Ambrosio are punished for their cruelty and hideous crimes, Agnes is no longer the person she was before, transfigured by the deadly experience. Dante's Ugolino is locked in a prison and left to die of hunger. His torment becomes unbearable when he has to witness his heirs' agony. When Agnes wakes up from an artificially induced torpor (provoked by the Abbess) to find herself in a dark dungeon, she moves tentatively around in the obscurity until she touches a slimy object:

> I was opprest by a noisome suffocating smell; and perceiving that the grated door was unfastened, I thought that I might possibly effect my escape: As I raised myself with this design, my hand rested upon something soft: I grasped it, and advanced it towards the light. Almighty God! What was my disgust, my consternation"! In spite of its putridity and the worms which preyed upon it, I perceived a corrupted human head (*The Monk* 403)

When Dante first casts a glimpse at Ugolino in *Inferno* XXXIII,
the damned count is grabbing the skull of the man that
betrayed him and had him locked in a tower with his children
and grandchildren: "From that savage repast the sinner raised
his mouth, wiping it with the hair of the head that he had
spoiled behind" (*Inferno,* Norton, 181). Although Agnes and
Ugolino's way of introducing themselves and their stories is at
the antipodes, it is nevertheless quite interesting to highlight
the horrid detail of a skull that is near the narrator/protagonist
of the gory event. Later on, Agnes's extreme pathos in
describing the unbearable pain of witnessing her beloved child's
death caused by hunger is remarkably similar to Ugolino's
powerless despair (Norton's translation):

> After we had come to fourth day, Gaddo threw himself
stretched out

>> At my feet, saying," My father, why dost thou not help me?"
>> here he dies: and, even as thou seest me, I saw the three fall
>> one by one between the fifth day and the sixth; then I betook
>> me, already blind, to groping over each, and two days I called
>> them after they were dead (*Inferno,* XXXIII, 184).

The passage in Lewis's novel is equally dramatic when Agnes
describes the loss of her infant child:

> I witnessed [the child's] death with agonies which beggar all
> description. But my grief was unavailing. My Infant was no
> more; nor could all my sighs impart to its little tender frame
> the breath of a moment. (…) I placed it on my Bosom, its soft
> arm folded round my neck, and its pale cold check resting
> upon mine. Thus did its lifeless limbs repose, while I covered
> it with kisses, talked to it, wept, and moaned over it without
> remission, day or night. (*The Monk* 412)

I would argue that Lewis imitated images taken from Dante,
and like Beckford, used them especially in the conclusive part
of his novel. The hideous creature haunting Ambrosio in the
final pages embodies the devil. They are mixture of horrid

infernal monsters that can be found in Dante's *Inferno*. Whereas *Vathek*'s Hell is based on dark images in contrast with the previous colourful narrations, the last two chapters in *The Monk* are marked by a *crescendo* of horrible visions. The final images of Ambrosio's dying alone in the middle of a desert bears some remarkable resemblance with scenes from Dante's *Inferno:*

> The Sun now rose above the horizon; its scorching beams darted full upon the head of the expiring Sinner. Myriads of insects were called forth by the warmth; they drank the blood which trickled from Ambrosio's wounds; He had no power to drive them from him, and they fastened upon his sores, darted their stings into his body, covered him with their multitudes, and inflicted on him tortures the most exquisite and insupportable (*The Monk* 442).

Some critics see the final scene as a reversal of *The Genesis* considering that his agony lasts seven days, but a more striking resemblance with this description can be retrieved in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, rendered in verses in the Princeton version:

> Beyond all doubt that this was the dreary guild
> Repellent both to God and His enemies-
> Hapless ones never alive, their bare skin galled
> By wasps and flies, blood trickling down the face,
> Mingling with tears for harvest underfoot
> By writhing maggots. (*Inferno*, III, 53-57)

Dante is crossing the abandoned space before Limbo and Inferno when he sees the souls of the Uncommitted - cowards that did not take a path in life. They are forever stung by horrible insects for the law of *contrappasso,* a symbolic poetic justice according to which different punishments are distributed to various forms of sins. The pain provoked by the insects is an allegory of the sting of conscience these people did not follow in life. The final horrid punishment for the monk seems to declare his lack of moral strength in life. Ambrosio's

excruciating pain and his forced silence are in contrast with the beautiful sound of his voice and the sweet rhetoric of his words, pronounced during his sermon that had inaugurated the novel.

The influence from the great medieval poet, which is evident in both Lewis and Beckford, is highlighted by Diego Saglia (2006, 75), who convincingly argues that "the eighteenth century has been recognized as the beginning of a systematic re-evaluation of Dante […]. Gothic overtones were found in the most popular narratives in the *Inferno*". Saglia claims that Italian literature of the *Trecento* provided original imagery that could be found in the masterpieces of the period, which were the object of "assiduous and analytical studies" in Britain between the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries. An interesting argument, which modifies the perspective of the traditional *clichés* about Italy, negatively judged and obscurely represented in the Gothic, is that disparaging images of the country were paradoxically provided by its own literary sources (Saglia 2006, 74). Lewis's remarkable syncretism, his classical studies and the fact that in 1792 he was already speaking of the *romance* he was writing, in the manner of *The Castle of Otranto,* form elements that support the theory of a wider number of sources for *The Monk*, where Classic and Medieval examples play a major role.

Beckford and Lewis's novels were the result of the cultural crossover of a variety of literary influences from different authors and epochs. Controversial and ambiguous, both *Vathek* and *The Monk* are examples of rich cultural substrata. The texts mingle multiple sources and influences, creating a pastiche effect inherited from Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*, the very first Gothic masterpiece. If the medieval inspiration of the two novels is strong, the development of images from Dante is undeniable. We can claim that Dante's *Comedy* played a major role in the creation of both novels' gory and dramatic finales. The Dantesque factor together with influences from Italian *Trecento* and Classical

authors still had a very important role in poetic and literary production at the end of the Eighteenth Century. Their cultural universe was unexpectedly absorbed by the Gothic *genre*, which was to become one of the most abiding *genres* in literary tradition.

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Maria Teresa Marnieri- **Infernal Imagery: Dante in William Beckford's *Vathek* and Matthew G. Lewis's *The Monk***

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[1] Stuart Gillespie and David Hopkins (2006) are among the most important scholars who have consistently reiterated the importance of literary translations in the development of British literature. Their systematic research on translations of Classical, Mediaeval and Renaissance authors have cast a new light on a myriad of potential sources and literary connections.

[2] A poet, a historian, a prose-writer, a philosopher, a linguist, and a politician living between the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries, Dante is reputed to be the greatest poet of Italian literature and one of the most important in the world. His studies covered many fundamental subjects. He was a linguist *ante litteram*. He contributed to the promotion of the Italian vernacular that he selected from the Florentine language by carrying out a careful philological study to absorb valid terms from other vernaculars of the peninsula and from other languages. Princeton University's website, dedicated to the poet, offers an extensive bibliography. Two versions of the *Comedy* are used for this articles: the poetic one is a modern rendering, taken from Princeton website dedicated to Dante; the second is a prose version by Charles Eliot Norton, dated 1892, linguistically compatible with the versions that Lewis and Beckford might have read.

[3] Beckford entrusted other people with both the translation of his work into English and the correction of his French version, and spent months, even years, revising and modifying both versions personally. Critics such as Boyd Alexander (1962), Roger Lonsdale (2008), André Parreaux (1960), Kenneth Wayne Graham (1975) found more than one explanation to the linguistic dualism (English, French) of the work that has perplexed scholars ever since its publication. *Vathek* first appeared as an English translation in 1786 by Samuel Hensley, who decided to publish it anonymously without Beckford's permission, followed by Beckford's original French version in 1787. Beckford had completed the text in 1782, when he was only twenty-two years of age. Moreover, different editions of the novel, both in English and French, appeared between the 1790s and the first decades of the following century. These later editions contained several changes and revisions that were quite evident compared to the originally published texts. Beckford rejected the help of his tutor, John Lettice, considering him inadequate for the task, and employed Henley, who also compiled a series of extensive and cultivated annotations to the text, highly appreciated by literary reviewers for their superior intellectual level. The long notes were later reduced by Beckford himself, and adapted to the reading public for the 1816 edition, (which is the one I have used for this research, published in the Oxford World Classics series, edited by R. Lonsdale). Beckford constantly monitored the translation to which he made various changes. Henley is supposed to have forced the author to accelerate the publication of the French version as a consequence of his unauthorized publication. The difficulty of determining the exact date of writing and the actual language of the first edition was increased by a series of manuscripts with variations and corrections, which could not be attributed or dated with certainty. The reason why Beckford decided to write *Vathek* in French has been thoroughly analysed by several critics. Graham's studies aim at demonstrating "the authority of the English version", which is considered prior to the French one only by a restricted number of scholars ("*Vathek* in English and French"). The question was never satisfactorily clarified. Parreaux (1960, 137) justifies Beckford's choice in relation to the high stylistic level reached by French translators (Chardin, D'Herbelot, Antoiine Galland, Pétis de la Croix, Guelette) in the domain of Oriental tales. It was easier for Beckford to imitate their style and leaving to his own translators the task of elaborating the right English version. One possible motivation is that Beckford spoke French as fluently as he did English. Alexander, Parreaux, Rictor Norton (2000) and others confirm that William Beckford was essentially bilingual after his various journeys to Switzerland and France. Adam Roberts and Eric Robertson's (1996, 199) claim is that

"[t]he textual status of *Vathek* is interestingly unsettled. It straddles English and French, and although Beckford originally wrote the work in French, which suggests that the English version (…) is a 'translation' with all the associations that word carries with it, the situation is not as simple as it might appear" In fact, they explain that the novel did not follow the traditional trajectory of a text that is published then translated. In particular, they highlight that the translation becomes a sort of "hermeneutic endeavour" involving the reader. I would claim that a motivation for not writing in English may have been dictated by his young age and lack of linguistic expertise necessary to complete an Oriental tale. Moreover, one of the most cogent problems that Beckford faced prior to publication of the text was a sexual scandal that almost ended his political career and threatened to see him stand trial for sexual intercourse with the very young William Courtenay. It may be likely that Beckford was trying to keep public attention away from his name; writing the work in French (and translating it later into English anonymously) would make the connection between the author and the book more difficult to detect.

[4] Robert Miles (1993), Fred Botting (1996), Kilgour (1995), Gamer (1999, 2000, and 2001), Elisabeth Napier (1987), and Lévy (1995), just to mention a few, have not included *Vathek* in their analyses of the Gothic novel. Diego Saglia ("William Beckford's Sparks of Orientalism" 2002) as well as Ros Ballaster (2005) and Laurent Châtel (2013) see Beckford's work as belonging to the rich phenomenon of the Oriental Renaissance in Europe in the eighteenth century. In particular, Saglia includes *Vathek* in the Romantic critical discourse whereas Châtel considers it a handicap for Beckford's text to be included in the Gothic. John Garrett (1992, 16) claims that Beckford's novel is not "a simple veneer" but a deeply specialized text, centred on themes from the East, despite the interference of a Christian perspective in the *finale*. Some critics, such as Clery (1995) and Ellis (2000), dedicate but a few lines to Beckford's work "whose acceptance was made easier by the addition of scholarly notes, written by Henley and edited by Beckford, which were universally praised for their erudition and cited at length in reviews" (Clery 90).

[5] Using Foucault's theories on sexuality in literature and society, Dale Townshend (2007, 211-12) includes the novel in his *Orders of Gothic*. In particular, he highlights psychoanalytical "parental perversion", and analyses Vathek's enjoyment of "*ars erotica*" and pleasure. Between the 1920s and 1970s Parreaux, Devendra Varma (1966), and Eino Railo (1974) described *Vathek* as a genuine example of Gothic fiction In more recent years, Frederick S. Frank (2005) included Beckford's text in his annotated Gothic bibliographies and connected the novel to the Gothic. Ian Duncan (1992) includes Beckford in his analysis of *romance* and the development of Gothic whereas Sandro Jung (2011) claims that the architectural variety in Vathek is a pre-configuration of the Gothic that will be absorbed by Gothic authors during the next decades.

[6] From Baron Wilson to David Macdonald, most biographers explain that Lewis had been sent abroad to improve his knowledge of foreign languages in view of his diplomatic career. Meanwhile, he continued his political training, even though he was often writing to his mother about his desire to be a full-time writer - a wish that she apparently encouraged (David Punter and Glennis Byron 2009, 141). However, his letters frequently show a pecuniary interest connected with the idea of publishing, which was also due to the anxiety of supporting his mother financially.

[7] The Marquis de Sade, in his essay *Idée sur les Romans* (1798), presents a hypothesis shared by Parreaux, Ronald Paulson (1981), Clery, Corinna Wagner (2012), and, very recently, Nick Groom (2016) in his introduction to the novel. Andrew L. Cooper (2001) argues that the scenes of unchained violence in *The Monk* may resonate with the

French Revolution. Lévy, Ellis and Watt agree on the fact that readers and critics had two opposing ideas about the novel following their political orientations, one revolutionary and the other loyalist/conservative. As a consequence, conservative magazines (*The British Critic, The Critical Review, and The European Magazine*) highlighted the scandalous side of the story by exposing the lurking presence of the revolutionary germ. When Lewis decided to go public, in the same way as Walpole had revealed his name at the time of the third edition of *The Castle of Otranto,* the protests became innumerable due to the presence of the title M.P. next to the author's name. This *naïveté* may seem inexplicable. Boasting his title was a form of superficiality due to his young age. However, considering his nervous reaction to Lord Byron's irony on his poetical qualities, or his obsessive desire to be in the company of aristocratic people, we may suppose that the young man was anxious for social recognition.

[8] Coleridge admired the stories of the Erring Jew and the Bleeding Nun, because they were example of a great imaginative quality, elegantly expressed: "We trust, however, that satiety will banish what good sense should have prevented; and that, wearied with fiends, incomprehensible characters, with shrieks, murders, and subterraneous dungeons, the public will learn, by the multitude of the manufacturers, with how little expense of thought or imagination this species of composition is manufactured. But, cheaply as we estimate *romances* in general, we acknowledge, in the work before us, the offspring of no common genius" (195). Coleridge was only three years older than Lewis but his pompous prose, together with the vehemence of his judgment, definitely make him seem quite older. His conclusions on the novel are peremptory: "a mormo for children, a poison for youth, and a provocative for the debauchee" (199). The poet and critic totally disapproved of the explicit scenes describing evident eroticism, the physically crude matricide and the graphic violence of rape based on incestuous desire. However, the most offensive parts were the ones connected to blasphemy, even more so than those concerning sex.

[9] It is not clear whether the identification with the negative hero was voluntary or accidental. Baron Wilson (1839, I: 185) identifies the problem in the fact that Lewis usually signed all his correspondence as M. G. Lewis, leading people to think that M. stood for Monk and not for Matthew, as very few people knew his real name. The choice to mention Elvira's censored passages in the Bible may rather be more meta-literary than blasphemous. It looks as if Lewis is echoing the future effects that his book might have on careful parents. Parents would censure the novel's dangerous passages for their children. This is considered as an intrinsic proleptic characteristic of the story, through which Lewis is anticipating the reactions to his novel and the consequent scandal. He provides an extra-textual example of a perfect valid writing (the Biblical text) which might be misunderstood by dangerous moralism, an aspect underlined by Lauren Fitzgerald (2003) in his study on prolepsis in *The Monk*. That the shocking images in his novel had created the sediment of an unfavourable opinion and that his literary *persona* was never fully accepted is confirmed by the negative obituary that was written in *The Tickler* I/1 in December 1818 (pp.2-3), a few months after his death that had taken place on the ship from the West Indies to London.

[10] In a section of the *Encyclopaedia of Literary Translation*, Edoardo Crisafulli (2001) traces the story of Dante's *Divine Comedy* translations (N.B. I use the author's spelling): "A multitude of translators and poets, from Chaucer to Seamus Heaney, have tried their hand at rendering single episodes or entire canticles of the *Comedy* (e.g. Count Ugolino, XXXII-XXXIII), which have always aroused interest in the English literary tradition. There are a great number of rewritings of Dante's poem into English perhaps more than into any other language, (cf. De Sua, 1964: Dante is, together with Horace, the most widely translated poet (...) BOYD's (1802) (British) is the first

complete translation of the *Comedy*. His version (in pentameters arranged in six-line stanzas rhyming aabccb) is clearly a part of the 18th century modernizing and naturalizing tradition of translating (cf. Dryden and Pope): Boyd takes great liberties in rewriting the original and makes no effort to reproduce Dante's tercets. However, his imagination has a Romantic vein, since he grasps the significance of the redemption of man in the *Comedy* and stresses Dante's "sublime genius" (critics in the late 18th and early 19th century found in Dante elements of a Barbaric age such as 'terror', 'pathos' and 'sublimity')" (340). Crisafulli also explains that Boyd's free version was based on Dante's literary borrowings in Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton, Dryden, and Pope. It is unlikely that Beckford read Boyd's translation as it was published after his first editions of *Vathek*, therefore that version could not have a strong impact on the text. Beckford knew Italian and had spent various months in Italy before writing his Oriental novel. He may have read some of the cantos translated by Dryden and Pope, or by Horace Walpole's friend and graveyard poet Thomas Gray. It is most likely that Beckford read the poem in the original version thanks to his fluency in the language. Interestingly, the Italian text of the *Inferno* was published in Paris in 1787, a further evidence of the popularity of the *Comedy*'s original version and the cultural knowledge of Italian in Europe during the eighteenth century. Technically speaking, the translations of Dante's poetic work have been divided into three different categories: "From Holmes comes the idea of the three main types of verse form: mimetic (*terza rima* in English), analogical (a form, such as blank verse, having the same cultural significance in the target tradition as the original had in the source tradition), the organic (a form, such as free verse, that has no relationship with the original one). From Holmes also: the distinction between different large-scale policies: (a) exoticizing (e.g. retaining a *terza rima* and source language syntax) vs. naturalizing (e.g. blank verse and target language syntax) (b) historicizing (e.g. use of archaisms) vs. modernizing (e.g. use of modern English). From Venuti the seminal notion of transparency (the dominant canon in the English tradition of translating), i.e. a policy domesticating the foreign elements and achieving easy readability and fluency, as opposed to a foreignizing policy (synonymous with Holmes's exorcizing policy)" (Crisafulli 340). The canonical edition of the *Divina Commedia* was established only in 1921, nowadays replaced by the Italian scholar Giulio Petrocchi's version in the 1960s. Therefore, earlier translators were forced to work on more than one original text.

[11] The symbolic animals in the first Canto are the alliterative "lonza", a "leone", and a "lupa" in the original Italian version, respectively translated as "leopard", "lion" and "she-wolf" in the Princeton modern version. The meaning of the dangerous and frightening creatures in Dante is rather mysterious. The beasts have been variously deciphered. Philosophical, religious, political and metaphorical explanations have been given. However, Dante's meaning is obscure on purpose. Although less profound and much more limited in scope, Beckford's *Vathek* is equally ambiguous and it is not possible to determine a single significance for the variety of bizarre creatures and strange events of the story.

[12] The reiteration of verticality is accentuated by a number of terms (repeated many times) that connote it, such as: "ascendancy", "chasm" (alternatively "black", "dreadful", and "accursed"), "gulph", "precipice", "mysterious recesses", "valleys of darkness", "the centre of the earth", and "gorges". My claim is in contrast with Garret (1992, 25) who among others interprets the novel according to "Vathek's horizontal perspective".

[13] Ballaster (2005, 367) correctly highlights that the description of this first meeting is told in "the third person personal narration", that is from Vathek's inner perspective whereas Beckford, generally adopts a "detached and cynical irony" to narrate the entire story.

[14] As explained in Henley's note, the Peries were mythical beings and their name means "the beautiful race of creatures which constitutes the link between angels and men" (*Vathek* 183, Note 1).

[15] Guido Guinizzelli (1235-1276) Guido Cavalcanti (1255-1300) were eminent poets. Guinizzelli's surname is sometimes spelled with a single "z". He was from Bologna and Dante considered him as his poetic father. Cavalcanti was a poet and a philosopher, and one of Dante's best friends.

[16] Randall Craig (1984) develops a classical structure for *Vathek* and intromentions the triadic division in the text reproducing the scheme of *agon* (conflict), *pathos* (death-struggle) and *anagnorisis* (final discovery). This division was originally highlighted by Northrop Frye in his critical studies of poetic mythology. Despite Craig's interesting motivations, I would rather argue that the three-phase classical development would be more suitable for the Radcliffean novels or for *The Monk*.