The *Divine Comedy* in the Early Gothic Novels: A study case[1]

MARIA TERESA MARNIERI
Researcher, Bologna, Italy

A thousand visages
Then marked I, which the keen and eager cold
Had shaped into a doggish grin; whence creeps
A shivering Horror o'er me.
(Dante, Inferno: Canto XXXII, Dante Gabriel Rossetti tr.)

Deeply they plunged beneath the deadly shade
Of mental Night, that her broad wing display'd
Throu' many a dark age o'er the slumber'ng Soul
(Dante, Paradiso: Canto VII, Henry Boyd tr.)

Abstract

     The early Gothic novels contributed to original literary iconographies, which were universally acclaimed for their creativity but also frequently rejected for their exaggerations. The early Gothic is the result of the cultural crossover of literary influences from different authors and epochs. This study 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. The texts are complex and merge multiple sources and influences, creating a pastiche effect inherited from the first Gothic tale, Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764). Various critical interpretations have been provided and several sources have been identified. However, lesser attention has been dedicated to medieval inspiration and to tropes borrowed from Dante. As Diego Saglia (2006) convincingly argues "Gothic overtones were found in the most popular narratives of the Inferno". Hence, the aim of this article is to demonstrate how Dante's Comedy played a major role in the creation of Beckford's and Lewis's novels' dramatic finales. It highlights the Dantesque factor in the development of some crucial parts of horror stories and shows how influences from Italian Trecento still had a very important role in literature at the end of the Eighteenth Century.

Keywords: Eighteenth-Century Literature, English Literature, Early Gothic Novels, Dante, *Divine Comedy*, William Beckford, Matthew Lewis

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[1] This article is the development of a section, which originally belonged to a chapter in a PhD dissertation discussed in 2016 at UAB, Barcelona. It was later changed and adapted for a conference about Gothic Studies in Puebla Mexico (2017). It will be included in the book *Delightful Horrors. Early Gothic Novels 1764-1809.*

The early Gothic contributed to new forms of imagery in the novels of the period that were the result of the cultural crossover of several literary influences from different authors and epochs. Antiquity played a remarkable role and inspired many. This study looks at Beckford's and Lewis's texts as examples of works rich in cultural substrata combining multiple sources. Critical literature on 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 of determining 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. The other doubt concerns the halo of mystery surrounding the actual sources that might have had a substantial part in forming the Gothic. As far as the first problem is concerned, the dialectical contrast between the intellectual brilliance of the Enlightenment and latent forms of pervasive darkness has been investigated by a number of scholars, who have drawn attention to the co-existence of problematic shadows during the age of "light", which exalted reason, science and tolerance. These shadows included the attraction of superstition and magic. After presenting Denis Diderot's rational entry on "Magic'" in the *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire Raisonné,* meant to disabuse humanity of the dangers of superstition, Lizanne Henderson (2016) claims that during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there were not always clear-cut distinctions 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, whereas scientific techniques were employed by some in hopes of finding proof of the spirit world, or explanations of second-sight and paranormal phenomena. John Fleming's study (2013) examines even more extreme topics, as he concentrates on the dark side of the Enlightenment and on the strange personalities that populated that epoch, such as Giuseppe Balsamo, Count Alessandro di Cagliostro's pseudonym, who was involved in a series of mysterious events. His strange story and the dichotomy of his persona, never satisfactorily clarified, became legendary and attracted the interest of the masses as well as of powerful people including bishops, politicians, aristocrats and monarchs. Goethe was so intrigued with his adventurous life that he decided to personally investigate Cagliostro's story at his place of origin, Sicily, during his Grand Tour in Italy in the 1780s. Having grown up in dire poverty, Balsamo, alias Cagliostro, escaped from the monastery where his relatives had sent him. Fleming recounts that he exploited his rudiments of chemistry and pharmacy to become a healer. He was also interested in alchemy, occult science and magic rites. These rites were perfected during his numerous journeys across Europe, from Russia to Portugal, Poland and Malta, via Great Britain, Switzerland and France, where he resided for longer periods of time. He created freemason lodges in Europe attracting large numbers of adepts. Wealthy members of one of the

German secret societies, probably the Illuminati, were thought to bankroll him for political purposes. An adventurer, a forger and a swindler, eager to exploit his wife's good looks in exchange for economic and social advantages, he was accused of being involved in the *Affair of the Diamond Necklace*, which indirectly inspired Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* (1991). Later, he was condemned by the Roman Inquisition and sentenced to life imprisonment in the Castle of San Leo. The Victorian historian Thomas Carlyle could not conceive how the Count's contemporaries might have been so gullible, especially considering his unattractive appearance, lack of education and the improbability of his claims. Cagliostro was hated by some of his contemporaries. Giacomo Casanova and many of his countrymen absolutely abhorred him. Notwithstanding his suspicious activities, Cagliostro enjoyed immense popularity. Mozart created the character of Sarastro in *The Magic Flute* (1791) with Cagliostro in mind. The records of his interrogations, tortures and trial were published by Giovanni Barbieri (1791), who had access to Inquisition documents. Barbieri's records and Cagliostro's memoirs were immediately translated into English in the very same year. Before falling from grace, Cagliostro had become friends with de Louthenbourg (Beckford's master of ceremonies). He met the popular painter during his two stays in London and when he lived in Switzerland. Boyd Alexander (1962) claims that the young Beckford might have met the pseudo necromancer and taken part in some of his Masonic rites, at the invitation of de Louthenbourg. Coincidentally, traces of mysterious rituals can be identified in Beckford's works and *Vathek*. The dark ambiguities underlying 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 early Gothic literary phenomenon.

The second problem comprised within the Gothic concerns the identification of its sources. Influences of the distant past did not play a secondary role in the development of novels that were a congeries of multiple ideas. That works from past centuries and from other countries continued to be relevant at the end of the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth might be clearly supported by the ongoing publication of Classical, Medieval and Renaissance masterpieces and their translations. Stuart Gillespie and David Hopkins (2005) underline the importance of literary translations in the development of British literature. Their systematic research on translations of past authors have cast an interesting light on potential sources and literary connections that may have been overlooked. An example of the continuing interest for works of the Italian past is given by the British poet, essayist and critic Leigh Hunt, a friend of the Romantic Shelley, who published a collection of selected poetic extracts well into the mid-nineteenth century, named *Stories from the Italian Poets*, in 1846. The literary miscellany included Dante, Ariosto and Tasso, but the inclusion of both Luigi Pulci and Matteo

Maria Boiardo was less common a choice and demonstrated Britain's rich cultural level as well as an unfaltering love for Italian literature. Two decades before Hunt, in 1830, the British Museum librarian Antonio Panizzi, an Italian expat, published a series of volumes devoted to the rich analysis of the "Romantic narrative poetry of Italians", including critical commentaries and long passages of the same authors chosen by Hunt, plus commentaries on Petrarch and Boccaccio. The term "Romantic" conveyed different meanings from those connected with the same word today. Including poets from the Middle Ages, such as Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, or poets from the Renaissance, such as Pulci, Boiardo, Ariosto, and Tasso, under a general "Romantic" category was acceptable at that time. The distinction between the periods was yet to be demarcated, as the periodization of literary currents was introduced at the end of the nineteenth century. Marilyn Butler (1981: 122) acutely observes that the clear-cut distinction between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance that we use today was not felt in past centuries, and figures such as Dante, Boccaccio, Petrarch, Shakespeare, Ariosto, Tasso and Milton were seen as an expression of the past under the global sign of Romanticism. Periodization and literary distinctions created at the end of the nineteenth century are rethought today, as the borders between literary currents are becoming blurred and less clear once more (Miriam Wallace 2009). William Galperin and Susan Wolfson (1997) provocatively labels the time span between 1750 and 1850 as the "Romantic dominion", starting with the melancholic voices of the Graveyard poets and extending into the mid-Victorian era. A considerable number of past authors, namely what we now call Medieval and Renaissance, supplied ideas for the Gothic and influenced *The Castle of Otranto*, *Vathek**, The Monk*, *The Romance of the Forest* and other Gothic novels to a greater or lesser extent.

A vast body of critical literature has been published providing interpretations and identifying possible models for early Gothic novels, but less attention has been dedicated to Medieval inspiration and Renaissance contents of crucial importance to several parts of the texts analysed here, which demonstrate that Italian *Trecento*, Humanism and the Renaissance continued to play a very important role in poetry and literature at the end of the eighteenth century. Dante, together with Boccaccio and Ariosto, are significant sources and influences for the Gothic. Despite his intrinsic difficulty and the lack of a complete translation, Dante had represented a steady influence throughout the centuries since Chaucer's translations of some fundamental passages:

It may be a matter of some surprise for those who have not had their attention called to the fact, to learn how far back the influence of Dante on English literature extends. Chaucer translated and imitated a number of passages in the *Divine Comedy*; there is frequent mention of the great Florentine by the poets of the sixteenth century; while Milton's debt to his

predecessor in the religious epic has already been pointed out. (Oscar Kuhns 1899: 176)

This revealing remark by Kuhns is only half the story. The interest in the medieval poet in the eighteenth century was promoted by the mainstream Augustan tradition as well as Pre-Romantic poets and Gothic writers (Richard Bates 2005: 395). A poet, historian, prose-writer, philosopher and politician living between the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries, Dante is reputed to be the greatest poet of Italian literature. The renowned Florentine's studies covered many important subjects: he was a linguist *ante litteram*, and his works were foundational in promoting the Italian vernacular over Latin. Dante developed *volgare,* the Medieval antecedent of the Italian language, from the Florentine speech by carrying out a philological inclusion of terms belonging to other regional speeches of the peninsula, in addition to borrowing from Latin, Greek, and other languages. His masterpiece is the *Divine Comedy,* or *Divina Commedia,* completed in 1320, an allegorical epic narrative, in *terza rima* stanzaic form, of the poet's supernatural journey in the three loci of the Christian after-world, *Hell*, *Purgatory* and *Paradise.* Some of his frightening descriptions of the netherworld were appreciated and reproduced by literati of different epochs and, as Diego Saglia (2006) has demonstrated, Dante provided an immense range of images for both the Gothic novel and Romanticism. A number of his characterizations of the infernal world were absorbed and interiorised by the early Gothic novelists, who reproduced them in their fearsome stories. Like Horace, Dante was one of the most revered 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. In a section of the *Encyclopaedia of Literary Translation*, Edoardo Crisafulli (2001: 340) traces an illuminating account of Dante's *Divine Comedy* translations:

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, *Inferno* XXXII–XXXIII), which have always aroused interest in the English literary tradition. William De Sua demonstrated there was a great number of rewritings of Dante's poem into English, perhaps more than into any other language, and Dante is, together with Horace, the most widely translated poet [...] The British Henry Boyd's (1802) 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 modernising and naturalising tradition of translating (as in 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'). Boyd's free version was based on Dante's literary borrowings in Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton, Dryden, and Pope.

Crisafulli's compendium of the multiple renderings in English confirm the high literary status enjoyed by the illustrious Florentine and, notwithstanding the lack of an Italian standard version of the poem before the early twentieth century and its intrinsic difficulty, Dante's gloomy descriptions in the *Divine Comedy* were popular throughout the centuries. Interestingly, an Italian version of the *Inferno* was published in Paris in 1787 (printed by Hubert-Martin Cazin), which demonstrates the continuous popularity of the *Comedy*'s original version and the cultural knowledge of Italian in Europe during the eighteenth century. Meanwhile, translations continued to attract many readers. Four years before Cazin's edition, Count Antoine de Rivarol had translated *The Inferno* in prose, a version which deeply inspired René de Chateaubriand's *Le Génie du Christianisme* (1802). Different schools of thought have developed contrasting hypotheses concerning the proper translation of Dante's verses in the *Comedy* that embrace the Pythagorean formula of the number three as a symbol of perfection. The three canticles are formed by cantos, each featuring thirty-tree tercets, called *terza rima*, with the exception of the first canto that contains thirty-four, so that the final number is one hundred, a further addition to the text's numerological symmetry. The difficulty in translating involves different challenges including diachronic and synchronic renderings of a literary work into a different language without losing its linguistic, cultural and epistemological value. Technically speaking, the English translations of Dante's poetic work have been divided into three categories assigned by one of the most eminent American scholars of Dante, Oliver Wendell Holmes, as Joseph Chesley Matthews (1957) indicates in his essay. Crisafulli helpfully clarifies (2001: 340):

From Oliver Wendell 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 little or 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 Lawrence 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 exoticizing policy). The choice of both poetical form and the language of translation, Crisafulli explains,

determine remarkable differences in the final output, which may or may not reflect the original version. The canonical Italian version of the *Divina Commedia* was established in 1921, and has since been replaced by Italian scholar Giulio Petrocchi's 1960 adaptation.

The gnoseological complexity of Dante's poem, the difficulty of categorising it and the existence of diversiform versions of the *Commedia* did not generally facilitate the task of translators. In particular, earlier translators of the *Comedy* were forced to work on more than one original text. In Britain, the country where the dissemination of culture through periodicals and the printing press was higher than in other European nations, literary translations were instrumental in the propagation of knowledge for all social categories (Gillespie and Hopkins 2005). Early Gothic novels by most established authors equally show the importance of Dante. Following Saglia's (2006) convincing claim that "Gothic overtones were found in the most popular narratives of the *Inferno*", the aim of this analysis is to demonstrate how Dante's *Inferno* and *The Divine Comedy* were part of early Gothic narratives. While Walpole had inserted some elements from Dante in *The Castle of Otranto*, Beckford and the other authors absorbed more influences from Italian Medieval and Renaissance models. Both *Vathek* and *The Monk* are interesting examples of how Dante's replicas permeated late eighteenth-century literature. Beckford's and Lewis's mastery of both Italian language and literature was frequently mentioned in their correspondence and memoirs. It is not a coincidence that one distinctive and very interesting element in Beckford and Lewis is the pervading presence of Dante at the grim conclusions of their stories. The two authors epitomise the most fortunate readers of Dante, as they could enjoy the Tuscan poet directly or through the elegant versions of eminent English poets, or even French translators, insomuch as they were fluent in all three languages. It is unlikely that Beckford and Lewis read Boyd's complete translation before composing their novels, as it was published after their first editions of *Vathek* and *The Monk*. Boyd's *Inferno* had, nevertheless, been available starting from 1785, and this rendering may have had some relevance. Moreover, the two novelists had probably read the Dantesque cantos in translations by Chaucer, Milton and Pope, or by Walpole's friend and graveyard poet Gray. In all probability, they also read the poem, or at least some of its most relevant parts, in Italian thanks to their proven fluency in the language. Sincere admirers of the Italian language, both Beckford and Lewis could read and understand Dante's *Comedy* in its original version, like Walpole, Gray and several British intellectuals of the time.

The novel by Beckford is difficult to encase in a single genre. Dantesque influences materialise in the last parts of his novel, conveying gloomy and infernal atmospheres. Although Beckford's reviewers have connected the text to great authors of the past, these analogies have not

received much attention. While the genre of *Vathek* cannot be determined with certainty, some scholars identify sublime and picturesque aspects in the work that, when added to the narrative's gloomy conclusion, allow them to place the text in the Gothic current. The supernatural and magical contexts adorning the novel seem to convey a further confirmation of the intrinsic Gothic nature of the story, in spite of its bizarre situations and grotesque adventures in a pseudo Oriental context. Sandro Jung (2011) convincingly inscribes *Vathek* and its architectures in the gestalt of the Gothic that was to influence novelists during the following decades before the turn of the century. A thorough analysis of the final part of the novel, where the presence of Dante is dominant, clearly reveals its Gothic essence. Three versions of the Comedy are referenced for this chapter, two in poetry and one in prose. One poetic version reflects the division of the cantos into tercets (three-line stanzas, or *terza rima*) and is a modern rendering taken from the Princeton website dedicated to Dante, including his complete works with an extensive bibliography; the second is a poetic version in six-line stanzas by Henry Boyd, who completed the *Inferno* in 1785 and translated the whole *Commedia* in English for the first time in 1802. The prose version by Charles Eliot Norton (1892) is linguistically compatible with the prose used by Lewis and Beckford in their novels, even though it belongs to a later date.

After a tourbillon of fantastic events, comic episodes, and tumultuous adventures, the pacing of *Vathek*'s narrative becomes slower and the atmosphere darker. The protagonists' parable culminates in the subterranean palace of Eblis that the caliph, his lover and his mother have incessantly been in search of, thinking that it was the supreme locus of knowledge and power. Beckford's narrative style changes completely upon their arrival at Eblis: the Eastern lustre and Lucretian hedonism are abandoned in exchange for a dark and gloomy Gothic desolation. The pages are dominated by the pervading presence of Dantesque imagery with mutable contexts borrowed from the *Inferno*. 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 creatures of stone at the entrance represent animals that have their flesh and blood counterparts in Dante's *Comedy,* wherein the poet becomes entangled in the middle of a dark forest. The forest is the allegorical symbol of strong emotional trauma and has continued to inspire literati and painters in the centuries to come. In the gloomy landscape, Dante encounters three heinous animals, which are fierce and menacing and intend to freeze the poet's attempts to save himself. The poet is trying to escape from the dangerous wood and climb a steep mountain to overcome his plight. Norton's 1892 prose translation describes the scene from the first canto as follows (hence the

quotations from Norton's prose and Boyd's poetic translations include the canto and the page, or the lines from the Princeton website):

> 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. (*Inferno*: I, 2)

After the paralysing effect of the mysterious leopard, the poet meets a menacing lion and a covetous she-wolf, all fierce, flesh and blood creatures threatening the protagonist in mysterious ways. In an agony of indecision and fear, Dante almost succumbs to horror. The symbolic animals in the first Canto are the alliterative "lonza", "leone", and "lupa", respectively translated as "leopard", "lion" and "she-wolf" in the Princeton version. The significance of the dangerous and frightening creatures is rather obscure. The beasts have been variously deciphered as potential embodiments of the emperor, the pope, or the Florentine government that exiled Dante away from Florence and Tuscany. Philosophical, religious, political and metaphorical explanations have been added without ultimately unravelling the actual message hidden behind the allegorical creatures. The intricate and symbolic complexity of animals in the *Commedia* has been thoroughly analysed by scholar Giuseppe Ledda (2019). Dante's meaning is intentionally enigmatic. Although less profound and much more limited in scope, Beckford's *Vathek* is equally ambiguous. It is, therefore, not possible to determine a single interpretation for the variety of bizarre creatures and puzzling events of the story. The novel becomes even more abstruse in the finale. Beckford intermingles the images of animals with the portal of hell to describe the entrance to Eblis and he does so by combining Dante's complex symbols in the First and Third Cantos. The mouth of the Inferno is Vathek's final destination, not the beginning as in Dante's mythical adventure. Interestingly, wild creatures are positioned at the gate of Hell in both Dante and Beckford. The stone animals that the caliph finds are at the portal, which is inscribed with carved words that constantly mutate, reiterating the linguistic obsession and recalling the strange inscriptions on the Giaour's magic sabre, forever metamorphosing. When entering hell, Dante sees "words of colour obscure […] at the top of a gate", and these words are "dire" to him (*Inferno*: I, 11, Norton). Dante has to face a hideous and gloomy place to reach his final bliss. On the contrary, Vathek starts his journey in a sublime condition only to end up in a place of fear and terror. Dante and Vathek share the same curiosity, the thirst for knowledge and the desire to enter the unknown, but their state of mind is dissimilar and their destinies incompatible.

One interesting feature in *Vathek* is the description of extreme verticality that seems to convey deeper meanings. The characters in *Vathek* move both upwards and downwards. The upward movement takes place in

the high tower belonging to Vathek's mother, Carathis, who had it built to carry out her mysterious dark magic. What is more, she performs her magical rites and bloody sacrifices upon the highest part of it. The downward movement is first found in the description of the chasm where the Giaour, the monstrous creature haunting Vathek, disappears to carry out macabre rituals. The most extraordinary example of downward movement into the abyss is, however, represented by the Hall of Eblis. The corridors are labyrinthine and dangerously "steep". All vertical movements are part of a Dantesque phenomenology, as they mirror Dante's progression along the arduous and horrid recesses of the Inferno with extreme difficulty. The entrance to Eblis creates a specular reflection of Dante entering Hell. In the very beginning, the poet finds darkness and walks on almost perpendicular paths. Later, he can observe devilish creatures, punishing sinners doomed to eternal sufferings. Dante's guide is the great Latin poet Virgil, whereas the ambiguous and obscene Giaour, Vathek's nemesis and the devil's emissary, leads the caliph and his group. Other equally disgusting creatures perambulate in the mysterious subterranean citadel of Eblis and the reiteration of an ever-descending vertical movement towards the chasm is accentuated by a number of synonyms (some repeated many times): "ascendancy", "chasm" (alternatively "black", "dreadful", and "accursed"), "gulph", "precipice", "mysterious recesses", "valleys of darkness", "the centre of the earth", and "gorges". The hypothesis here contrasts John Garrett's (1992: 25) interpretation of the novel according to "Vathek's horizontal perspective". Dante's downward movement throughout the *Inferno* is described in the first part of his story, whereas Vathek's progress takes him downwards at the very end of his strange adventure. After the momentary ascension in Carathis's majestic tower, almost touching the sky, the caliph constantly moves downwards and becomes itinerant, thinking, like Dante, that he has lost his way. When he finally finds the opaque 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). The dark subterranean region contains boundless misery instead. In a reversed state of mind, a frightened and desperate Dante cautiously moves along the circles of Hell, towards the centre of the earth and Lucifer's kingdom. Dante's senses are awakened while his wise companion, Virgil, an example of moral superiority, constantly warns the poet against the dangers lurking in the devil's hideous realm. Virgil awakens Dante's empathy. On the contrary, the Giaour definitely silences Vathek's conscience and nourishes his greed inside the dark labyrinths of Eblis.

Virgil accompanies Dante as far as Purgatory, then leaves him with the idealised love of his youth that passed away while still in her prime. The virtuous Beatrice is meant to drive the poet to the highest empyrean spheres. Vathek's first meeting with Nouronihar, the adolescent girl who

unconsciously seduces him, somehow recalls the medieval idealisation of the angel-like woman, a trend started by troubadours and adapted by Guido Guinizzelli, Guido Cavalcanti and Dante himself to their poetic school, called the *Dolce Stil Novo* or sweet new style the poetic manner of late medieval poets exalting the purifying raison d'être of the beloved woman. The first meeting between Vathek and Nouronihar is peculiar. Ros Ballaster (2005a: 367) interestingly highlights that the description of Vathek's first meeting is told in "the third person personal narration", i.e. from the protagonist's inner perspective, while Beckford generally adopts a "detached and cynical irony" to narrate the entire story. Hence, the meeting between Vathek and Nouronihar acquires special connotations that make Vathek's experience similar to a medieval encounter with an idealised woman. The perfume and the beauty of Nouronihar and her maids inebriate Vathek, who thinks that they are not creatures of this world but mythological "Peries come down from the spheres", the legendary creatures whose name means "the beautiful race of creatures which constitutes the link between angels and men" (*Vathek*: 146). Nouronihar's effect may be compared to the angelical woman's healing appearance in the poems of the *Dolce Stil Novo*. The idealised woman's ethereal beauty provokes a languid torment in the medieval poets' senses because she unites goodness and sensibility and has the power to better the man she loves. Even the hedonistic caliph seems to change because of this fatal tryst, perchance, a new phase interrupting his trajectory of debauchery and indifference. However, instead of instilling him with peace, Nouronihar becomes an agent of evil. She is spellbound by Vathek's negative influence and becomes as evil as he is, turning avid and insatiable. Unlike Dante and Beatrice, the caliph and his lover cannot find happiness. Nouronihar is diametrically opposed to Dante's Beatrice. Her negativity is reiterated at the gloomy portal of the 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), whereas Beatrice obtains the opening of paradise doors for Dante by virtue of her goodness. The epiphany of the caliph's lover's essence occurs at Eblis.

Dante's and Vathek's common attribute is their sinful state at the commencement of their strange adventures. Dante obtains his long searched-for purification. Inversely, Vathek becomes more sinful and his crimes accumulate, making his redemption impossible. Their guides are antithetical; Virgil represents moral strength and superior knowledge, whereas the Giaour has many cryptic meanings all connected with wrongdoing and misdeeds. Beautiful and ethereal women accompany Dante and Vathek during the final part of their peregrinations. However, the women's alliances with the two heroes take different directions, as Beatrice leads Dante through the heavenly kingdom towards apotheosis and forgiveness, while Nouronihar is responsible for Vathek's definitive fall and perpetual despair. Beatrice's name is symbolic

of the beatitude she concedes: she is now a celestial creature helping Dante reach the highest part of heaven and admire the elevation of all creatures divine. She also sustains the poet as he is purified of his earthly sins. On the contrary, Nouronihar's superior beauty and sweetness does not help Vathek since she is inexorably spoilt by his darkest sins and contaminated by his greed. As a result, she must share his eternal suffering and dramatic downfall, in a place that resembles Dante's *inferno*, eternally excluded from happiness. Conversely, after his tragic suffering, Dante finally finds a way out of obscurity and enjoys the vision of the firmament (here in Norton's prose rendering):

> 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*: XXXIV, 193)

Dante abandons the lower world and his movement is upward and out of the recesses of the earth. He arrives at a place where he can finally admire a marvellous starry sky: "E quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle" (Canto XXXIV, Line 139), "thence we came forth to see again the stars", is the well-known last line of the *Inferno*, blending deep joy at the conclusion of the infernal nightmare and admiration for the celestial vault's evocative beauty. The sense of relief and the image of the scintillating night are also found in *Vathek,* but the context is unlike Dante's, as the protagonists do not leave the place of doom. They are moving towards the fatal entrance, instead:

> 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 Nouronihar becomes her lover's impatient guide and she voluntarily enters the evil palace, leading the group. Vathek's entrance into the mysterious subterranean vault in the finale is in contrast to Dante's newly-found freedom after his escape from the dark abyss of horror. The poet breathes the pure air and admires the stars in a limpid sky, whereas, in a perfect specular instance, Beckford's characters abandon the marvels of the "firmament" and enclose themselves in the dark devilish place, overwhelmed by "infernal exhalations". Beckford demonstrates

he not only had the *Divine Comedy* in mind but also intended to create a reversed story, interspersed with Bakhtinian carnivalesque interludes, wherein the progress of corrupt individuals culminates in a Dantesque hell of dark despair. A further reversed echo can be found a few paragraphs later when Vathek and Nouronihar look at each other, but they can only see reciprocal hate. On the contrary, in every canto, when climbing the spheres of paradise, Dante and Beatrice look into each other' eyes filled with and surrounded by rivers of refulgent light. Another symmetrical opposition can be observed when Vathek and Nouronihar have similar feelings to Dante and Beatrice before being engulfed by the abyss of darkness: "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). The tragic illusion for Vathek and Nouronihar is the thought of having reached the superior state of heavenly creatures as they consider themselves "spiritual intelligences". Interestingly, the apparent state of ecstasy that the caliph and his companion feel when "gazing on each other" and the great luminosity ("resplendent", "effulgence") that surrounds them before they succumb to doom reproduces the trope of radiance in *Paradise*, in which Beatrice's effulgent aura and the Empyrean's utmost luminosity determine Dante's transfiguration, his change from a physical being into an intellectual entity, an aspect which has been analysed by Juan Varela-Portas Orduña (2019) and other famed scholars. It is also oddly similar to the last time Dante looks at Beatrice in the splendour of the Empyrean, in Canto XXXI in Boyd's 1802 poetic version:

> [Beatrice], crown'd with glory, sate above;
> Yet, wing'd with ev'ry glance, the shaft of Love
> Still reached my heart across the boundless Sky. (*Paradise*: XXXI, 347)

Beatrice's brilliance gives the poet sheer delight and promises a future of happiness in the afterlife. Beckford's ingemination of Dante's images progresses and the following passage in *Vathek* is an evident symmetric repetition of Dante's lines in Canto III 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).

This scene of the "immense multitude" of sinners condemned to eternal suffering is among the most impressive and best known of Dante's *Inferno* and was famously re-elaborated by T. S. Eliot, among others. The punishment inflicted on the damned is the same for everyone in *Vathek*, whereas Dante is much more articulate in his descriptions of chastisement. The sense of deep anguish and tremendous agony is vividly rendered by Beckford. It is possible to argue that Dante's words in the third Canto, corresponding to lines 24–32 and 56–61 in the original three-verse stanzas, represent a clear source for Beckford. Here follows a passage from Norton's prose 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*: III, 11–13)

Although Beckford does not seem to have adopted Dante's triadic division of the *Comedy*, nevertheless his novel *Vathek* may be ideally divided into three parts. Randall Craig (1984) identified a classical structure and a division into three phases, reproducing the scheme of *agon* (conflict), *pathos* (death-struggle) and *anagnorisis* (final discovery). The structure of a threefold classical division was originally highlighted by Northrop Frye (1963) in his critical studies of poetic mythology. Despite Craig's interesting motivations, the three-phase classical development would be more suitable to describe the narrative structure in Radcliffe' novels or in *The Monk*. In effect, Vathek's life in Samarah is a form of paradise with all its extraordinary beauties, in which Carathis's immense tower may lead to the Empyrean, a context that does not seem to be compatible with *agon,* or conflict. Vathek's difficult journey to the lake, where Nouronihar and Gulchenrouz are hidden, is symbolic of purgatory, an idea that is confirmed by the hero's first feeling of deep suffering when he is convinced he has forever lost Nouronihar. Hell is then found in the final part in the Palace of Fire belonging to the demon Eblis, further contradicting Craig's theory. The variety of echoes reminiscent of Dante in the closing pages of the story casts a different light on Beckford's chameleonic narration, resulting in an inverted and grotesque *Divine Comedy*. In the light of multiple corroborations, it is difficult to consider Beckford's novel as an Oriental tale exclusively. Rather, it is a philosophical exercise and a parade of knowledge the young author had accumulated and was eager to transmit. Vathek and his beautiful companion's tragic destiny becomes a distorted version of Dante and Beatrice's story. When the doomed couple arrive at the mysterious palace, they find an iconographic terrifying

ensemble that appears to reflect Piranesi's 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, "[t]heir 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). Intriguingly, Dante sees and hears similar words at the gate of Hell in the third Canto of the *Inferno* (Norton's version): "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*: III, 20). These fateful words become the décor of Beckford's gloomy final image, confirming the hypothesis that his novel constitutes an inverted *Comedy*, merging mediaeval Dante and classical Lucretius.

Saglia (2006: 65) 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 offers some striking examples and clarifies that Count Ugolino's atrocious sequence in Dante's *Inferno* had a strong visual and emotional impact, confirmed by the plethora of imitations it inspired. Romantic poets of the calibre of Byron and Shelley "were deeply fascinated by Dante" (66) and, as many before them, were puzzled by the story of Count Ugolino's, a medieval nobleman of the Ghibelline faction living in thirteenth-century Pisa. Accused of treason after ambiguous alliances with the Guelph side, he was imprisoned in a tower and left to starve with his sons and nephews. Legends were born from the horror of their captivity, vividly narrated in Dante's *Comedy*.

Like *Vathek*, *The Monk* subsumes a stratification of sources. Despite the connection with classical elements, Lewis's narrative exaggerations, frequently tend to cast a shadow on its cultural essence. For certain aspects

the novel followed the literary fashion of the time, but the creativity and literary technique shown in *The Monk* were by far superior to the poor stylistics of popular novels. Lewis's borrowings from Dante are not as extensive as Beckford's, but two episodes in *The Monk* are significant for their analogies with events in the *Inferno*. Agnes's subplot presents an important correlation with Dante's gruesome story of Count Ugolino. An aristocratic girl and Lorenzo's sister, she has been forced to live in a convent as a consequence of her deceased parents' decision. After the abbot Ambrosio has discovered a secret letter unveiling her pregnancy and intention to elope with her fiancé, Raymond, he orders the ruthless Abbess to imprison the girl in a dark cell with her newborn infant in the convent dungeons. Agnes is left to starve with her child in the same way as Ugolino, walled up and forced to see his offspring die. Even if Agnes is saved in the end, she is no longer the person she was before, transfigured by the deadly experience. Similarly, Dante's Ugolino's blood-soaked destiny is appalling. The count is locked in a dark tower and left starving with his heirs. His torment becomes unbearable when he has to witness the children's agony. When Agnes wakes up from an artificially induced torpor to find herself in a dark cell, 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 reaches the lower parts of Hell (*Inferno*: XXXIII), he casts a glimpse at Ugolino and sees the damned count grabbing the skull of the man - who was his enemy. The poet conveys an atrocious doubt about the image: "From that savage repast the sinner raised his mouth, wiping it with the hair of the head that he had spoiled behind" (*Inferno*: XXXIII, 181). Although Agnes's and Ugolino's ways of introducing themselves and their stories are antipodal, it is nevertheless quite interesting to highlight the horrid detail of a skull that is near the narrator of the gory event. Later, Agnes's extreme pathos in describing the unbearable pain of witnessing her beloved child's starve to death is remarkably similar to Ugolino's powerless despair rendered in 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 cheek 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)

The Dantesque mould is evident in the dramatic scene of a powerless parent losing her child, immersed in despair for the painful vision. Lewis imitated images from Dante, and like Beckford, used them especially in the concluding part of his novel with an eschatological intention. The hideous creature haunting Ambrosio in the final pages embodies the devil, who throws the sinful monk in the desert, where the wretched man finds horrid monsters similar to infernal creatures. Whereas *Vathek*'s Hell is based on dark images contrasting the previous colourful narrations of the caliph's adventures, the last two chapters of *The Monk* are marked by a crescendo of horrible visions, contrasting the original peace of his monastery. The final images of Ambrosio alone in the middle of a desert bear remarkable resemblance to scenes from Dante's *Inferno,* and are anticipatory of Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798):

> 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 scholars see the final scene as a reversal of the *Book of Genesis* considering that Ambrosio's agony lasts seven days, but a more striking resemblance with Lewis's description can be retrieved in Dante's *Divine Comedy* (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, lines 53–57)

In the scene, Dante crosses the abandoned space before Limbo and Inferno when he sees the souls of the Uncommitted, cowardly people incapable of acting. They are forever stung by horribly voracious insects for the law of *contrappasso,* a symbolic poetic justice imposing different punishments,

distributed according to various forms of sins. The pain provoked by the insects is an allegory of the sting of conscience that pusillanimous people did not follow in life. The horrible punishment for Ambrosio seems to declare his lack of moral strength in life and his sinful cowardice. 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 in the novel's opening. The great medieval poet's influence, which is evident in both Lewis and Beckford, is once more highlighted by Saglia (2006, 75), who convincingly argues that "the eighteenth century has been recognised as the beginning of a systematic re-evaluation of Dante", who early Gothic writers were eager to imitate. Saglia claims that Italian literature of the Trecento provided original imagery that was the object of "assiduous and analytical studies" in Britain between the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. An interesting argument, modifying 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 and by Dante and Boccaccio, in particular (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,* are elements that support the theory that a wider number of sources influenced *The Monk*. Lewis's novel contains rich cultural substrata, in which Medieval literary inspiration is as strong as Classical influences. The development of images from Dante is undeniable and the *Comedy* inspired Beckford's and Lewis's dramatic finales, respectively, and it will provide Mary Shelley with interesting material for her Frankenstein (1818). The Dantesque factor, together with influences from authors of Italian Trecento, were absorbed by the early Gothic, which was to become a durable genre in literary tradition.

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