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THE CONSERVATIVE, THE TRANSGRESSIVE, AND THE REACTIONARY: ANN RADCLIFFE'S *THE ITALIAN* AS A RESPONSE TO MATTHEW LEWIS' *THE MONK*

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It is widely recognized that there are two stages in the development of the Gothic. The first one established by Radcliffe, which was molded to popular favor, labeled "terror-Gothic" and/or "loyalist," considered "feminine," and drew its inspiration from French sensationalism and Elizabethan Dramatists. The second one, embodied by Lewis, was influenced by the German *Shauer-Romantik* (horror-Romantic), labeled "horror-Gothic" and subject to much controversy, for even though it was regarded as more daring, innovative, and more "masculine" (Watt 84, 87), it also acquired a reputation for being immoral and scandalous, obscene and perfidious, seditious and revolutionary (McEvoy vii-xi).

Within the specifics of the Gothic genre, Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* stands in sharp contrast to the more popular novels of Ann Radcliffe. To this effect, James Watt contends that Gothic fiction is "constituted or structured by the often antagonistic relations between different writers and works" (6). The contrast between the two writers is obvious in their approach to the Gothic, and more particularly, in the explicitness of content and in their use of certain Gothic conventions. There is also a notable difference in their perspectives regarding the contextualization of their work and its socio-political implications. T.J. Mathias describes Radcliffe as "the Shakespeare of Romance-writers" and "the first poetess of Romance fiction" (qtd. in Tompkins 248), and in extensive praise, J.M.S.Tompkins argues that the author was very conscientious about the way she crafted her novels in order that they "could be enjoyed by statesmen and head-masters without embarrassment" (249). She also belongs to that first wave of Gothic writers that Watt identifies as "loyalist" for their nostalgia for the historical heyday of England's feudal medieval past (68). In Radcliffe's novels, a strong sense of virtue and morality systematically prevailed

and to downplay the element of shock and horror, which were sure to arouse controversy, the supernatural was always given a rational explanation. Elizabeth Napier observes that she is "careful to provide rational explanations for most of her mysteries and often engages in self-conscious disclaimers about the nature of any supernatural or overly romantic events she describes" (66). Having witnessed the adverse critical reception of the genre, Radcliffe was aware that the inclusion of certain Gothic devices had drawn rebuke from the critics. "She did not contemplate violence with pleasure," Tompkins notes, "even though she was aware that [it could] … deepen and enrich a romantic setting" (253). Rather, it is the absence of the grotesque that seemed to provide Radcliffe's prose with a sense of dignity, a self-consciousness which was the result of cultural exchanges with the arbitrators of literary merit and her prospective audience; as Watt points out, "Conservative critics and reviewers generally found Radcliffe to be a highly readable author, who stood out from her contemporaries in terms of both the skill and the morality that her work displayed" (110). By carefully considering the potential reception of her work on the contemporary literary scene, Radcliffe was cautious to select material that would not come under attack from the institutions of cultural power—writers and critics—which, in turn, would ensure the reputation of her work and secure its place in the canon of popular literature. In referring to the various critics who reviewed Radcliffe's work, Watt suggests that they perceived her as a loyalist and a conservative, a "political innocent" whose romances were not considered subversive and were a form of entertainment that allowed one to transcend the anxieties of the particularly unstable socio-political context of the period: "Radcliffe's exceptional reputation in the 1790s and 1800s was at least partly dependent upon the fact that her work was seen to provide a legitimate form of diversion or recreation at a time of obvious national crisis" (128). While Radcliffe's strand of Gothic fiction pleased many reviewers and critics, the reputation of her work did not withstand the criticism of ensuing ages regarding its lack of commitment and its failure to innovate. In his biographical essay, "Life and Writings of Mrs. Radcliffe," Thomas Talfourd complains about her admiration for "every species of authority," and her conservative perception that "some established canon of romance obliged her to reject real supernatural agency" (qtd. in Watt 124). Similarly, Sir Walter Scott argued that her deliberate choices to please her audience confined her to write in a low genre, suggesting that her achievement was limited even according to her own standards (*Lives* 229). What Scott suggests is that while she strove for the sublime by using the conventions of "terror," her insistence on framing the

supernatural was a failure to appeal to the imagination.

Nevertheless, as Watt suggests in his assessment of Radcliffe as a "proto-feminist writer of the 'female Gothic'" (107), she remains an important figure in consideration of feminist approaches to literature, in particular as she illustrates the typically "restrained" female writer who only gained critical acclaim by following the prevailing ideological hierarchies of class and gender. With regard to this last point, in her book titled *In the Name of Love: Women, Masochism, and the Gothic,* Michelle A. Massé points out that for many female writers and readers, the Gothic represents the reproduction of a culturally induced trauma: "[Women's] social contract tenders their passivity and disavowal of public power in exchange for the love that will let them reign in the interpersonal domestic sphere" (18). Hence women were able to affirm their cultural identity by abiding to a set of strict socio-cultural conventions that the Gothic plot faithfully reenacted. Drawing from a variety of novels where the heroine is relentlessly persecuted, Massé argues that this identity is at times reliant upon what appears to be a masochistic drive, which could be representative of attributes that are socially valued the most in a woman: "self-sacrifice and self-abnegation" (42). Radcliffe, then, embodies the archetypical persecuted female of the late eighteenth century, whose writing further reinforced the conventions of the patriarchal social order.

In contrast to Radcliffe, Lewis is considerably more daring and strives to break established boundaries of content and form, as well as the conventions of morality and accepted political ideologies. By making unprecedented use of transgressive elements, his strategy is one of unconcealed, unadulterated shock and horror. Watt dubs Lewis an "*enfant terrible*" (5) who strove clearly to distinguish himself from other writers of the genre, arguing that "Lewis accentuated the sensationalism of his source materials, and supplied a cynical commentary of his own, thereby making *The Monk* a licentious yet also innovative work by the standards of contemporary criticism" (84). Nevertheless, twentieth-century critics were not the first ones to acknowledge the novel's innovations. At the time of *The Monk*'s publication, the Marquis de Sade praised Lewis' work, claiming that in an age when "everything seems to have been written," in order "to compose works of interest" it was necessary to "call upon the aid of hell itself" and, in that respect, Sade claimed that *The Monk* "was superior in all respects to the strange flights of Mrs. Radcliffe's brilliant imagination" (114, 109). Anna M. Wittmann shares a similar view by arguing that *The Monk* is a particularly remarkable novel in the Gothic genre:

> M.G. Lewis's *The Monk* marks a major turning point in the history of the English Gothic novel. Here for the very first time a truly nightmarish vision emerges. Demons and specters take on the form of human beings; at the same time, they are no more dangerous and destructive than the demonic within man …. Unnatural disturbances in the natural order are, in the earlier English Gothic novels, signals of human transgressions that must be righted. They not only create the characteristic thrills of Gothic horror, but also forward the eventual victory of good over evil. The network of evil is far more complex in *The Monk*, where it invades the very foundation of moral order. Concurrently, the supernatural no longer serves to warn and champion the good and to destroy the evil. (67)

It is precisely *The Monk*'s transgressions regarding the "foundation of moral order" that triggered the outpouring of outraged reviews. Like others such as Ernest Baker, Tompkins shares Wittmann's view. However, she also aligns herself with Lewis' contemporaries in describing the novel as "scandalous" (278) and by stating that the novel marks a transition from the "delicacy," "dignity," and "moral dignity" of Radcliffe's novels (245), a transition characterized by "heavy-handed grotesqueness" and the absence of a "discernible moral framework" (277). Unlike Radcliffe, Lewis does not tone down the transgressive elements of his text by providing either an explanation for the supernatural or a subtle suggestion of horror. Lewis' text is truly uncanny in the Freudian sense; Tompkins argues that the author works by "sudden shocks" (245), while Baker suggests that "the daring and frankness" that Lewis uses in his grizzly depictions make all other authors seem shy and that he leaves the accumulation of horrifying accounts to be digested by the "sensitive minds" of his readers (209). Probably the most distressing aspects for the critics and reviewers were the various horrifying accounts of gore and the explicit scenes of violence and aggression, such as the descriptions of Agnes' awakening in her cell where she was sentenced to end her days after the discovery of her pregnancy (403), the birth and death of her baby (411-3), and the gruesome killing of the Prioress of St. Clare by a mob of angry rioters during the raid on the convent:

> At length a Flint, aimed by some well-directing hand, struck her full upon the temple. She sank upon the ground bathed in blood, and in a few minutes terminated her miserable existence. Yet though she no longer felt their insults, the Rioters still exercised their impotent rage upon her lifeless body. They beat it, trod upon it, and ill-used it, till it became no more than a mass of flesh, unsightly, shapeless, and disgusting. (356)

In an extended way, these depictions echo Bakhtin's concept of the "grotesque body," especially in what he considers to be the dying body's "comic presentations—hanging tongue, expression-

less popping eyes, suffocation, death rattle" (*Rabelais* 353). Equally disturbing is the disclosure of Ambrosio's sexuality as he fantasizes about Matilda and the Virgin Mary (67) and renounces his vows of celibacy by satiating his lustful desire with Matilda:

> Ambosio was in full vigour of his Manhood. He saw before him a young and beautiful woman … He sat upon her bed; His hand rested upon her bosom; Her head reclined voluptuously upon his breast. Who then can wonder, if He yielded to the temptation? Drunk with desire, He pressed his lips to those which sought them: His kisses vied with Matilda's in warmth and passion. He clasped her rapturously in his arms; He forgot his vows, his sanctity, and his fame: He remembered nothing but the pleasure and opportunity.
>
> 'Ambrosio! Oh! my Ambrosio!' sighed Matilda. (90)

While these episodes are capable of producing shock because they can be considered as transgressions of sexuality in the religious order, they are not nearly so disconcerting as when the monk rapes Antonia:

> … the Ravisher threw himself by her side: He clasped her to his bosom almost lifeless with terror, and faint with struggling. He stifled her cries with kisses, treated her with the rudeness of an unprincipled barbarian, proceeded from freedom to freedom, and in the violence of his lustful delirium, wounded and bruised her tender limbs. Heedless of her tears, cries and entreaties, He gradually made himself Master of her person, and desisted not from his prey, till He had accomplished his crime and the dishonour of Antonia. (383-384)

While Ambrosio's rape and subsequent murder of the young girl (391) aptly displays the taboo-breaking properties of transgression by literalizing the interconnection between sex and aggression, what can be substantially more shocking is that since Antonia is later revealed to be no other than Ambrosio's sister (439), the rape is also incestuous.

On another level, the lack of a "discernible moral framework" as many critics argued, could be attributed to the fact that although Ambrosio is captured by the authorities of the Inquisition, his death is not the result of a due-process of justice carried out by the corresponding institutions, but by the Devil. While the figure is itself rather troubling, the entire episode could be considered to be subversive for it puts into question the plausibility and the efficiency of the legal system. As Watt suggests, "*The Monk* literalizes the figure of Satan … and consequently severs the connection foregrounded by *The Castle of Otranto* and the Loyalist Gothic romance between supernatural phenomena and the workings of providence or justice" (89).

Interestingly enough, Radcliffe was so horrified by *The Monk* that she wrote *The Italian* as a response to Lewis' novel. Watt notes that

“in *The Italian* … Radcliffe clearly took account of the criticism leveled at contemporaries such as Lewis, and sought to reinstate some of the more innocent properties of the romance genre" (9). Radcliffe mostly concentrated on reworking Lewis’ subplot of Raymond and Agnes, with the monk playing the role of the Baroness’ advisor. Apart from the substantial alterations to the plot, she tacitly removed some of the most scandalous aspects of the novel; as Syndy M. Conger argues in her essay “Sensibility Restored: Radcliffe’s Answer to Lewis’s *The Monk*,” it seems fairly clear that Radcliffe saw *The Monk* as transgression against her own notion of sensibility …” (114). On one level, she totally neutered *The Monk*’s obscene and immoral aspects by removing the disturbing accounts of Ambrosio’s sexuality. For instance, she substituted Lewis’ incest episode of Ambrosio’s rape and murder of Antonia by having Schedoni spare Ellena when he realizes that she might be his daughter. The contrast between the two texts can be seen in these next excerpts. The first one is taken from *The Monk*, when Ambrosio enters the chamber in which he will later assault Antonia.

> Gradually He felt the bosom which rested against his, glow with returning warmth. Her heart throbbed again; Her blood flowed swifter, and her lips moved. At length She opened her eyes, but still opprest and bewildered by the effects of the strong opiate, She closed them immediately. Ambrosio watched her narrowly, nor permitted a movement to escape him. Perceiving that She was fully restored to existence, He caught her in rapture to his bosom, and closely pressed his lips to hers. (Lewis 380)

The second excerpt is from Radcliffe’s novel: having kidnapped Ellena to prevent her marriage to the Baroness’ son, Schedoni is about to kill her in order to carry out the mischievous plan he and the Baroness had conceived:

> … vengeance nerved his arm, and drawing aside the lawn from her bosom, he once more raised it to strike; when, after gazing for an instant, some new cause of horror seemed to seize all his frame, and he for some moments, aghast and motionless like a statue … When he recovered, he stooped to examine again the minature, which had occasioned his revolution, and which had lain concealed beneath the lawn that he withdrew. The terrible certainty was almost confirmed… he called loudly ‘Awake! awake! say, what is your name? Speak! speak quickly!’ (Radcliffe 271-272)

Both scenes share a number of similarities, notably the *mise en scène* and the characters (Antonia and Ellena correspond to Ambrosio and Schedoni respectively, who are both mischievous monks). Yet while Lewis’ Ambrosio shows no sign of restraint in yielding to temptation, Radcliffe’s Schedoni is suddenly held back by the realization that Ellena might be his daughter.

In addition, Radcliffe diminishes the sensationalism of Lewis' story by eliminating all the references to Satan and other "irrational" supernatural elements. As Watt argues, "*The Italian* assumes the readability of the superficial and reasserts the transparency of good and evil" (118). Moreover, whereas *The Monk* can be read as a work of social criticism, by writing *The Italian*, Radcliffe completely diffuses the subversive threat posed by Lewis' novel:

> Radcliffe's qualified defence of the Inquisition, along with her presentation of the familial society at the Convent of Santa della Pieta, arguably constituted *The Italian*'s most overt response to the liberal, and suspiciously 'jacobin' politics of *The Monk*'s anti-Catholicism. Any hint of direct engagement with political controversy is finally dispelled, though, by the 'general gaiety' of the festive romance ending… (Watt 118-119)

Not so surprisingly, contemporary critical reception of these two texts differed considerably, and an interesting overview of their respective evaluation can be drawn from taking a look at Coleridge's reviews of the two novels. While at first Coleridge announces that *The Monk* is "the offspring of no common genius" and celebrates the originality of the tales of the Bleeding Nun and the Wandering Jew, as well as the character of Matilda, the tone of his review changes quickly when he announces that "the errors and defects are more numerous, and (we are sorry to add) of greater importance." He claims that *The Monk* conferred no pleasure and that Lewis had displayed an "ignorance of the human heart" and had committed "mistakes in judgment" and "taste." These claims were based on his view that on the one hand, the supernatural was sensationalist in the extreme, and that on the other, the text was gratuitously horrific, immoral, obscene, and blasphemous. Voicing the defects of the novel allowed Coleridge further to discredit the value of *The Monk*. He adds that

> [T]ales of enchantments and witchcraft can be 'useful': our author has made them 'pernicious,' by blending, with an irreverent negligence, all that is most awfully true in religion with all that is most ridiculously absurd in superstition.

This last statement implies that his objections are more ideological than aesthetical, a point he clearly makes in the following remark: "We have been induced to pay particular attention to this work, from the unusual success which it has experienced." Yet Coleridge's view seems to be not only situated in the concern of the literary elite to regulate cultural production and distribution, but in attempting to reaffirm the boundaries between high and low culture that appeared to be dissolving: "[N]or must it be forgotten that the author is a man of rank and fortune. Yes! The author of *The Monk* signs himself a LEGISLATOR! We stare and tremble." Indeed, what alarmed

Coleridge the most was the prospect that England's upper classes were participating in the production and distribution of works that had been perceived to be unsuitable for an educated audience and to contribute to the vulgarization of English taste. Moreover, Coleridge's review of *The Monk* pointed to its transgressive character by claiming that Lewis exceeded the "nice boundaries, beyond which terror and sympathy are deserted by the pleasurable emotions." As mentioned earlier, in writing *The Italian* as a response, Radcliffe sought to defend and reassert the role of these boundaries, and in his review, Coleridge concludes, "*The Italian* may justly be considered as an ingenious performance; and many persons will read it with great pleasure and satisfaction." Nevertheless, Coleridge's evaluation of Radcliffe's novel was not entirely positive, for he lamented her lack of originality within the larger framework that it announced the decline of her favored genre, the romance. Indeed, Coleridge's review appears at a moment in Radcliffe's career (1798) when the perception of Radcliffe as a successful writer of romances was being superseded by other more negative perspectives regarding her craft—mostly, according to Watt, because she was writing in what was considered an unimportant and minor genre and lacked originality, systematically employing identical literary devices over and over (Watt 125). On the other hand, Lewis' boldness had a more enduring quality: his "daring" originality was constantly celebrated and *The Monk* set precedence for further works of so-called "horror Gothic." As Watt points out, Lewis' text established an unparalleled standard of boldness which would later influence the likes of Scott and Maturin (92).

While Conger claims that the distinction between Radcliffe's and Lewis' approaches to the Gothic can be attributed to their different notions of "sensibility," I would argue that the conceptual differences between the two authors can be more directly and accurately considered with regard to the distinction between "terror" and "horror," and that between mere titillation and transgression respectively. This distinction has been reaffirmed by critics such as Robert Hume, but it was first formulated by Radcliffe herself in her essay "On the Supernatural in Poetry":

> Terror and Horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes and nearly annihilates them. I apprehend that neither Shakespeare nor Milton by their fictions, nor Mr. Burke by his reasoning, anywhere looked to positive horror as a source of the sublime, though they all agree that terror is a very high one; and where lies the great difference between terror and horror, but in uncertainty and obscurity, that accompany the first, respecting the dreaded evil?

By referring to figures of the great literary tradition, Radcliffe makes a case regarding the justified use of terror as a literary device by outlining its didactic purposes. For her, the "obscurity" and "uncertainty" of terror allow the reader to explore the elevating possibilities offered by Burke's theory of the "sublime." In contrast, she discards horror for its "annihilating" capacities; according to her, the reaction it provokes does not propel the reader into a shock of imaginative contemplation. Her distinction between terror and horror contains interesting correlations, for it echoes the Aristotelian belief regarding off-stage and on-stage representations of violence, an argument succinctly articulated by Percy Shelley in his Preface to *The Cenci*, in which he claimed that on-stage violence deformed the moral purpose of "the human heart" (239-240); in other words, that the rational for depicting violence could not possibly override the moral imperatives of artistic production. In addition, it is interesting to note that Radcliff resorts to the earlier figures of the "Great Tradition" to confer on her work an authoritative quality and to dissociate it from the scandalous work of Lewis and his followers. However, her argument regarding the "annihilating" properties of horror are misconstrued, partly because of her own vested interests in distinguishing her own strand of the Gothic and partly because of the same close-mindedness that characterizes moral imperatives regarding the content of works of horror in general and Lewis in particular. Radcliffe is correct in assessing that Terror and Horror differ drastically in the type of reading experience they trigger. Horror does precisely what Terror does not; it literally "shocks" the reader, it provokes a visceral response to some type of "uncanny" or "unsettling" account. Freud considered the Uncanny as a fundamental aspect of aesthetics theory dissociated from theories of the beautiful and the sublime, and he perceives some distinct merit in the disclosure of uncanny events and the emotions they trigger in the reader. Furthermore, in contrast to terror, horror does not relegate the reader's experience to some type of intellectual contemplation but rather, it directly confronts the reader with the content: it narrows the distance between the text and the reader; creating a rapprochement between reading as an intellectual activity and reading as a physical experience. It is precisely this type of rapprochement—triggered by a visceral response—to which Georges Bataille refers in his preface to *Le Bleu du ciel* [*Blue of Noon*]:

> Le récit qui révèle les possibilités de la vie n'appelle pas forcément, mais il appelle un moment de rage, sans lequel son auteur serait aveugle à ces possibilités excessives. Je le crois : seul l'épreuve suffocante, impossible donne a l'auteur le moyen d'atteindre la vision

> lointaine attendue par un lecteur las des proches limites imposées par les conventions.[1]

As I have demonstrated in a another context, for Bataille, this experience, an intrinsic property of the transgressive and what he calls "*Erotisme* [Eroticism]," is essential in reaching a state of consciousness where *jouissance* [bliss] and *savoir* [knowledge] conflate (128-135). In the case of *The Monk*, therein lies the power of horror, for it blurs the boundaries between signifier and signified, between language and experience, and becomes a focal point where both become intertwined.

Whereas Radcliffe carefully aims to gently entertain her reader by providing a moral framework, rationalizing the supernatural, and merely suggesting an idea of terror, Lewis literally "attacks" his audience's senses and sensitivity. By doing so, he relegates the burden of decision to the reader, forces him/her to question his/her own concept of civic and moral conduct and to confront himself/herself with titillating transgressions of the established norms imposed by society. The novel's depictions of sex, murder, and incest fully exploit the transgressive role of the erotic. Furthermore, by exploring the dialectical possibilities between sex and violence in both the structure and the content of the narrative, Lewis unleashes the potential of Eroticism suggested by Bataille, for these depictions not only break taboos and social guidelines, they also question the system of meaning in which they originate. In other words, the language of sexuality becomes the language of political subversion. In *The Monk*, the suppression of Ambrosio's lustful desires, as orchestrated by the mechanics of institutional power, imposes a pattern of repression that is destructive to both the repressed individual and those who surround him. Thus, *The Monk*'s perceived "failures" (its lack of moral framework, its "obscenity," the explicit combination of sex and violence, etc.) do not diminish the novel's standing as an important work of both the Gothic and transgression. Quite to the contrary, as these specific aspects become more intensely scrutinized by various generations of critics, *The Monk*'s literary qualities are constantly being reappraised. Not only is its subversive potential fully revealed—as it denounces both the mechanisms of repression imposed by various forms of institutional power and the inherent hypocrisy of the very same institutions

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[1] The text which reveals the possibilities of existence is not necessarily compelling, but it calls for a moment of rage without which the author would be blinded to the possibilities of *excess*. I believe it: only the experience which is suffocating, impossible, gives the author the means to reach the distant vision expected by a reader who is fed up with the limits imposed by convention (Translation mine).

that preach social morality—but it also explores the Bataillean push towards the "limitless possibilities of being." While Conger considers that Radcliffe's response to Lewis is "a creative reformulation of some of the Gothic's genre other possibilities," I would argue that the possibilities opened by the transgressive properties of *The Monk* are in fact far more extensive. As Antonin Artaud would put it, "I cannot remember in any other text seeing images ... that, in their aspect as images, haul after them a veritable current of promising life *comme dans les rêves*, of new existences and infinite actions" (translation mine[2]) (12).

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[2] *je ne me souviens dans aucune autre lecture vu arriver sur moi des images … qui, dans leur aspect d'images, traînent après elles un véritable courant de vie prometteur* comme dans les rêves*, de nouvelles existences et d'actions à l'infini*.

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