A TASTE FOR VICE IN MATTHEW GREGORY LEWIS'S 'THE MONK'

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Abstract*: If Matthew Gregory Lewis(1775-1818) was a person famous in his age, his popularity was undoubtedly founded on the publication of The Monk(1796) - a novel that was written in ten weeks, before its author turned twenty. Three centuries after its release, the novel still preserves its capacity to challenge the readers to explore the intimate mechanisms of a territory that was tabooed in that particular historical and cultural background: Human Nature as inescapably subjected to Vice. The purpose of this paper is to re-consider The Monk from an ethical perspective and to focus in detail on the valuable manner in which the ethical combines with the artistic.*
Keywords*: human nature, vice, taboo*

In a period of industrialisation and rapid social change, Western artistic imagination responded to all external circumstances and entered a new, "sinister"[1] to some, stage: Gothic fiction. The genre as a whole owes its name to Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto (1764)* with the subtitle *A Gothic Story*, and, in spite of its displaying a most controversial and contested nature, it is still felt as deeply anchored in the cultural, historical and social realities of that day.

Due to the complexity of both the term and the literary sequence which it denotes, our endeavour must be accompanied by a focus on such acts as defining or describing the traits by means of which Gothic fiction can be identified in literary history. A new type of writing that was shaped by historical and social factors, the Gothic (comprising not only fiction, but also poetry and drama) emerged in the mid-18th century, a period when society still privileged rationality as promoted by the Age of Enlightenment. It marked the birth of a new *taste*, of a new *aesthetic* brought about by a revival of imagination that received skeptical reception from an audience educated in the spirit of cold reason. However, in a society that underwent substantial social changes, there was nothing that could prevent the rise of this new category of fiction "whose key motifs are paranoia, manipulation and injustice, and whose central project is understanding the inexplicable, the taboo, the irrational"[2].

Gothic fiction is still uniquely valuable through its incursion into the macabre nature of humanity/human nature in its quest to satisfy mankind's desire to reach the climax of terror - a means of producing aesthetic pleasure, of providing the reader with a manner of touching a new type of *sublime*. Most of the works which literary history classifies as "Gothic" describe themselves by way of a large series of devices such as the psychology of horror and/or terror; the appearance of the supernatural; a sense of mystery; a poetics of the sublime; the construction of a hero/villain; strong moral closure; decaying and menacing landscapes. It becomes easier thus to understand why Gothic fiction was thought by many as the reflection of the spiritual or irrational side of the human psyche that had been long repressed by the rationalist behaviour of the 18th century[3]; as a "rebellion of the imagination against the tyranny of reason"[4]; or as a cultural phenomenon that was encouraged by the "obscurity of morality and rationality"[5] that governed the 18th century.

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The most notorious literary product of 1790s Gothic fiction was Matthew Gregory Lewis's *The Monk*, a novel that generated the most varied of responses from both readers and critics alike. The main point of interest was the novelist's rather "barbaric imaginative freedom" [6] that revolted against the tyranny of reason and decided to emphasise deeper cultural fears of a dying rational behaviour of the human being.

There were critics that identified *The Monk* with the beginning of a new literary/cultural stage, but, on the other hand, there were others that questioned the value of the novel on account of its ethical connotations. Indeed, much controversy about *The Monk* arose on the issue of its morality. At the time when the young novelist published his work, the novel as such was still a "young, not highly respected"[7] literary genre, and its purpose was not only *to please*, but also *to instruct* the readers in the ways of Virtue rather than Vice. With its nuanced treatment of vicious human nature, Lewis's novel was a source of much worry for more serious rationalists and educationalists formed within the tradition of "Enlightened" rationalism mixed with Romantic imagination.

The Monk contains an "oedipal narrative"[8] of a family romance that ends in disaster. It opens in a Madrid Cathedral where Ambrosio (the monk from the title) was to hold his sermon in front of a crowd of auditors who had not come there out of piety, but merely to show off their economic and social positions; there is no reference to moral reform or sincere religious conviction in these opening pages of the novel. "To seek for true devotion" among the majority of them, we are told, "would be a fruitless attempt"[9], since their postures of devotion are in fact false, counterfeit. The only example of *virtue* in that audience was the monk himself, a highly pious man who had begun his education inside the community of the Capuchins as a young boy and had grown into the "idol" of a wealthy Spanish audience.

Ambrosio shows an immense capacity of manipulating people through his rhetorical skills and spiritual grandeur. There is, however, a certain point in the novel where his fall is anticipated: retreating in his cell, after having preached wonderfully and most convincingly, Ambrosio contemplates the portrait of the Virgin with the shameless gaze of an ordinary seducer: "Oh! If such a creature existed, and existed but for me! Were I permitted to twine round my fingers those golden ringlets, and press with my lips the treasures of that snowy bosom! Gracious God, should I then resist the temptation? Should I not barter for a single embrace the reward of my sufferings for thirty years? Should I not abandon- Fool that I am-! Whither do I suffer my admiration of this picture to hurry me? Away, impure ideas! Let me remember, that woman is forever lost for me! Fear not, Ambrosio! Take confidence in the strength of your virtue"[10].

The attachment to his vocation proves to be stronger than the instinct, but this supremacy will not last for long. Temptations that usually belong to the commoners begin to take control over Ambrosio, who breaks the vows of chastity and piety and allows his body to be the object of a woman's love. A devoted and melancholic young novice called Rosario reveals one night that *he* is in fact a *she*, and that she (assuming the name of Matilda) is deeply in love with Ambrosio. Matilda's revealing her true identity and thoughts has another significance that has in fact been announced from the opening pages of the novel. In Renaissance Spain, the institution of religion came to be associated with sexuality, with sexual instincts and drives [11], as can be deduced from the strong admiration of women towards Ambrosio's person. Matilda pretends at first that she wants to be bound to the priest only spiritually, through a platonic "eternal friendship", but eventually confesses that "she *lusts* for the enjoyment of his person" [12].

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Her confessions confuse Ambrosio, to the point when he leaves aside his vows of celibacy, chastity and "riots" with Matilda "in delights till then unknown to him" [13].

The relation with Matilda represents the beginning of the Monk's fall, and yet it does not show him at the height of his daemonic powers. He appears to be much more involved in the moral crimes committed against Donna Elvira and her daughter Antonia. Assuming the supposed status of Antonia's spiritual father, he still lets destructive passion to govern his behaviour. He ends in killing Donna Elvira for having understood his true nature and intentions, and raping and killing the innocent girl in the underground vaults of the Abbey. He escapes the punishment of the community that once adored him only by a summoning of Lucifer (in a scene that triggers connections with Goethe's *Faustus*), an action that, contrary to his expectations, does not bring him the salvation he desired so desperately.

Paradoxically (or perhaps most relevant of the author's satirical intention), the majority of the narrative concentrates around the sacred place of the Church of the Capuchins, of whom Ambrosio himself is the spiritual authority. It is in this supposedly protected and protective space that most sins take place; it is here that Ambrosio is seduced by the temptress Matilda; it is here, in the underground vaults of the monastery, that Ambrosio rapes and eventually kills young Antonia, who was his own sister; finally, it is here that Matilda and Ambrosio summon of Lucifer to save them from the anger of the betrayed community.

The choice of such a physical setting may lead to a series of conclusions. Traditionally, a spiritual space such as the one in question portrays a life of purity, chastity and total devotion to the word of God. The physical space as such was supposed to be isolated from the corruption of the public realm. Within its walls, the individual is separated from outer society. Continuous study gave Ambrosio, the character in question, the idea that the monastery was in fact a perfect balance between isolation and community, as the area that mediates in fact between the individual and society. Ambrosio points out that man's highest state is independence, but at the same time, he argues that "Man was born for society". In the novel, the monastery seems to reconcile these opposing principles, by "secluding its inhabitants from corruption, and yet keeping them in the possession of the benefits of society" [14]. The religious setting plays the role of the institution of family in its mediating between individual and society and, specifically, in socializing the essential stage of the individual, the child (Ambrosio had been found at the door of the abbey when a little child).

In reality, the abbey is the place where piety equals repression, repression of the flesh, body, and nature (all of whom are associated with sexuality). On the surface a very seductive spectacle, the church conceals beneath the appearance of the evils of a superstitiously religious education. We are told that Ambrosio was initially a good individual, but he was destroyed through an un-natural education. The monks in charge of his upbringing "modified" Ambrosio's inner self: "The noble frankness of his temper was exchanged for servile humility; and in order to break his natural spirit, the monks terrified his young mind, by placing before him all the horrors with which Superstition could furnish them". Normally, the education follows the nature of the individual. In this case, education is opposed to natural instincts and represents the source of a distinction between a public (the pious preacher) and a private (the man with needs and desires other than those spiritual) self, whose clash is a source of tragedy.

The first impression left upon our consciousness is that from *virtue* to *vice*, it is only a step. At least this is the idea we get from the fragment: "While the monks were busied in rooting out his (Ambrosio's) *virtues,* and narrowing his sentiments, they

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allowed every *vice* which had fallen to his share to arrive at full perfection" [15]. The main character thus enacts two different moral paradigms, a division of the self that warrants the force of the novel in the larger context of English culture. Ambrosio begins his fictitious travel in our minds as being a mortal totally subjected to the will of God, a saint and pious man who shines among the crowd of sinners. His self participates in the natural order and therefore receives benevolence from Divinity, being a mediator that negotiates the transition between the ordinary state of human soul and the eternal realm of Ideas. To achieve this status, he had been taught to renounce worldly pleasures, the temptations of degrading earthly beauty and embrace the Truth - this would be genuine Happiness, attained through the exercise of reason aided by religious doctrine.

This initial hypostasis of the monk posture should be understood in terms of adhering to the precepts of the *Theory of Virtue* - one of the oldest traditions of Western thought, having its roots in ancient Greek culture. The earliest and most systematic account of the belief that the foundation of morality is the cultivating of good character traits, or *virtues* theory appears in Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*, though opinions on this matter had been formulated previously by such names as Plato or Socrates. Aristotle is noted for taking virtue as the centre of a well-lived existence and distinguishes two types of virtues, i.e. *intellectual virtues* (practical and theoretical wisdom etc) and *ethical virtues*, or *virtues of character* (temperance, courage and so on). He describes ethical virtue as a "disposition" [16], a tendency induced by our habits, to have appropriate feelings and to achieve the highest good (happiness). The development of virtues in influenced by the development of *reason,* thus a virtuous life *would be* led by a rational behaviour. If man uses reason in an appropriate manner, he will live well as a human being; using reason represents a virtue and the premise of happiness acquired through reason.

Lewis presents his character as being at first a rational human being, governed by reason and desire for knowledge, full of virtues of character and intellect and conscious of the *vanitas* of this world (just a mere shadow of the after-life). More than that, he enjoyed an education in the spirit of faith and renunciation and possessed the craft of a supreme orator. The beginning of the novel informs us of the persuasive manner in which Ambrosio constructs his religious discourse in order to attract the admiration of the audience. We find here a replica of the ancient narrator as theorized by various men of letters of both Greek and Latin antiquity. Ambrosio possesses the craft of speaking well (as Quintillion once said), of producing discourses that can *probare, conciliare, movere* (Cicero) - persuading people of the truth contained in his sayings through a variety of rhetorical devices [17].

Surprisingly, this most pious of the monks ends his journey through the novel in a most decaying attitude. The pride he takes in his own purity and sanctity eventually proves fatal as it gives him to his ambitions and passions. Ambrosio finally surrenders to the primitive instinct and disregards all the precepts of his highly religious education. It is the moment when Ambrosio becomes the subject of a process of division of the self: an appearance of propriety and dignity hides a vicious, passion-driven, very anti-priestly conduct. Ambrosio finds himself unable to experience the most profound feeling of love and remains at the level of satisfying his sexual instinct by all means. He accepts and puts in practice the reverse of chastity, of virtue, of the publicly - accepted behaviour and releases his sexual tension in a dejecting manner, first with Matilda and then with Antonia. Nevertheless, perhaps the most revelatory scene from this point of view is the scene of his contemplating the portrait of Madonna that in terms of his education should have had other connotations than the ones attributed by the confusing

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monk. It announces the monk's abandoning of reason and dedicating himself to the gratification of his senses, even more than that, Ambrosio's being the subject of a new and perhaps Gothic-like experience of *the sublime*. *The sublime*, as it were, was theorised by Edmund Burke in "A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful"(1757). "For Burke, beautiful objects were characterised by their smallness, smoothness, delicacy and gradual variation" [18]. Lewis starts from this premises, but he lays the foundation of a new type of *sublime*, a sublime of excess that could hardly be processed by reason, by a rational behaviour. This excess arises from the confrontation of two opposing sets of moral values: virtue and vice, reason and the senses as two distinct ways of approaching reality. The result would evoke a type of sublime that produces horror and terror at the same time.

The character's new moral hypostasis shows him as assuming the moral shape of an Epicurean, i.e. an adept of Epicure's system of morality. To gain further knowledge into the matter, we should state that Epicure defined virtue as springing from the individual's power of obtaining pleasure from the activities he performs (pleasure understood as *absence of pain*) [19]. The philosopher thus identifies pleasure and pain as the two extremes of human nature, a hypothesis that encouraged the human being to strive for the experiencing of pleasure (the hedonistic approach of life) as the most appropriate means of investigating reality. As we might have expected, a relatively important area of pleasure is confined to the senses, thus to the empirical exploration of human nature. Epicure opposed this sensualist philosophical doctrine to the rational and virtuous way in which Aristotle had constructed his philosophical discourse, and it seems that the former's empirical approach gained new strength in the 18th century through the theories of John Locke, David Hume, John Stuart Mill (empiricism).

There have been voices that also discovered in Ambrosio's decline echoes of Godwinian philosophy, according to which the individual feels the need to free himself from the institutions that imprison him (it was Rousseau who also said that man was born free, but he is still in chains). Society is the true factor that awakens man, Godwin says. However, once living in society, man has to train himself to be virtuous, in which case virtue equals happiness. It is not however the happiness that is theorized by utilitarian doctrines (*utilitas*= public and common good) - at least not in *The Monk*. On a few occasions Ambrosio's words do indeed trigger connections with Godwin's ideas - in his early declaration that "Man was born for society" [20] for instance. Yet, we find from the same reliable source (the narrator - the writer's voice) that "Instead of *universal benevolence* he (Ambrosio) adopted a *selfish partiality* for his own particular establishment: he was taught to consider compassion for the errors of Others as a crime of the blackest dye: the noble frankness of his temper was exchanged for servile humility; and in order to break his natural spirit, the monks terrified his young mind, by placing before him all the horrors with which Superstition could furnish them" [21]. The term *benevolence* reminds the reader of the ethical theory proposed by Joseph Butler, who used the term to define a certain tendency in man's nature to pursue both his good and the good of the entire community. Once again, man is portrayed a social animal that needs social intercourse in order to achieve his happiness and the happiness of the others. In Lewis's novel, the part with the common happiness is intently left out; the young boy had been educated according to the monastic rules in the spirit of isolating from the corrupting society and annihilating spiritual communion with the world of depravation. Moreover, morality is not seen in this context as following human nature, but rather breaking away with it. In this situation, institution equals repression, and

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repression has devastating effects (as signalled by Sigmund Freud's famous theory of sexuality). Then how should we interpret him? As a villain or as a victim?

Lewis's Ambrosio does possess what seems to be a twofold nature. On the one hand, he is the Aristotelian virtuous man – endowed with reason, and thus with the capacity of achieving knowledge. On the other, he is the Epicurean hedonist who finds the supreme goal of life in the satisfying of primary and de-nobling needs. The contest between virtue and vice has been won by vice, since a good man (good in ethical terms) has been corrupted and irremediably destroyed. The ending of the novel wants itself to give a moral lesson –the evil destroys itself. But the threat that it brings to the integrity of the human being is best seen in the number of works that underline the disastrous effects of allowing vice to flourish in one's nature. Perhaps the origin of this "taste" for vice recorded in 18th century both ethical and literary areas should be sought in the change of mentalités brought about by various political, social and cultural events, of whom the writer remains a spectator and a recorder at the same time. Lewis perhaps guides us into reaching the conclusion that it is natural for man to have passions (a commonplace of ethical thinking). As long as man possesses passions, he will let them contribute to both his glory and fall. This duality of human nature, its oscillation between passions and reason, its being guided by virtue or by sense, will always generate the need to read *The Monk.*

Notes

[1] Watt, James, *Contesting the Gothic: Fiction, Genre and Cultural Conflict, 1764-1832*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 2
[2] *Idem*, p. 2.
[3] Idem, p. xv.
[4] Kilgour, Maggie, *The Rise of the Gothic Novel*, Routledge, London, 1995, p. 3
[5] Botting, Fred, *Gothic,* Routledge, London, 1996, p. 1
[6] Kilgour, Maggie, *op. cit.*, p. 3
[7] Lewis, Matthew, Gregory, *The Monk*, Oxford, OUP, 1995, p. VII
[8] Kilgour, Maggie, *op. cit.,* p. 142
[9] Lewis, Matthew, Gregory, *op. cit.*, p. 1
[10] Lewis, Matthew, Gregory, *op. cit.*, p. 32-33.
[11] Cf Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality,* Vintage, New York, 1980
[12] Lewis, Matthew, Gregory, *op. cit.*, p. 50
[13] Lewis, Matthew, Gregory, *op. cit.*, p.78
[14] Kilgour, Maggie, *op.cit.*, p. 144
[15] *Idem*, p. 143
[16] cf. Aristotel, *Etica Nicomahică*, Editura Iri, Bucureşti, 1998, p.53
[17] Grimal, Pierre, *Literatura Latină*, Editura Teora, Bucureşti, 1998, p. 153.
[18] Botting, Fred, *Gothic*, ed. Cit., p. 39
[19] Cazan, Gheorghe, *Filosofia antică*, Editura Actami, Bucuresti, 1996, p. 287
[20] Lewis, M.G., *The Monk*, ed. cit., p. 43
[21] *Idem*, p. 24.

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