

Rethinking the Gothic Sublime: Portraiture in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*

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Abstract

This paper argues that the sublime in *The Monk: A romance* (first published 1796) by Matthew Gregory Lewis results from the failure of aesthetic dichotomies, particularly in the undecidability of perception through portraiture. While the late eighteenth-century Gothic fiction has often been framed within Edmund Burke's aesthetic theory of the sublime in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* (first published 1757) and Ann Radcliffe's emphasis on terror over horror in her posthumous essay "On the supernatural in poetry" (first published 1826), Lewis's *The Monk* disrupts these critical traditions. My paper examines the aesthetic challenges that *The Monk* imposes on the Burkean/Radcliffean framework. By incorporating Vijay Mishra's *The Gothic Sublime* (first published 1994) and Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction, my analysis reinterprets the Gothic sublime as an undecidable dilemma of perception. This paper analyzes three modes of perception—the gazed portrait, the gazing portrait, and the undecidable—highlighting the third, which demonstrates how portraiture complicates the visual relationship in *The Monk*. Moreover, as a literary example of two stories in one, *The Monk* comprises a major narrative of Ambrosio's downfall and a minor one of Don Raymond's encounter with the Bleeding Nun. Notably, each story features a portrait: one of Madona and the other of the Bleeding Nun. To analyze them, I divide my analysis into two sections. In the first, I focus on the portrait of the Bleeding Nun, and in the second, I turn to the portrait of Madona.

Keywords: *The Monk*, portraiture, the sublime, the undecidable, Jacques Derrida

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Introduction

The end of the eighteenth century witnessed the first Gothic fever in England. In *The Literature of Terror* (1996), David Punter observes that “Gothic novel reached its first peak, in terms of quantity and popularity, in the mid-1790s ... chaotic years in which domestic unrest and fears of invasion from abroad shaped political and cultural life” (p. 54).¹ Besides Horace Walpole’s *The castle of Otranto* (first published 1764), novels by Ann Radcliffe and Lewis have risen to Gothic classics and have incited critical controversies until now. Critics often compare Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (first published 1794) and *The Italian* (first published 1797) to Lewis’s *The Monk*. As Punter notes, “Lewis claimed to have been largely inspired by the success of *Udolpho*, while *The Italian* was Radcliffe’s rather shocked response to the sensationalism and sexual explicitness of *The Monk*” (p. 55). My paper aims to extend the aesthetic dialogue between Radcliffe and Lewis in terms of the Gothic sublime through portraiture—of the Bleeding Nun and of Madonna—in *The Monk*.

To be sure, Lewis disregards not only Edmund Burke’s aesthetic criteria in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* but also Horace’s decorum in *Ars Poetica*.² In *Review of The Monk by Matthew Lewis* (1797), Samuel Taylor Coleridge points out this lack of Horatian decorum, decrying that “the public will learn ... with how little expense of thought or imagination this species of composition is manufactured” (p. 194). Lewis violates what Radcliffe follows: “actions which ought to be performed off stage you must not bring on stage” (Horace, p. 137). Furthermore, based upon Burke’s aesthetic theory of the sublime, Radcliffe’s essay “On the supernatural in poetry” emphasizes the importance of “obscurity” and thus draws a line between horror and terror (p. 403).³ Although Radcliffe does not explicitly contrast her novels with Lewis’s in this essay, Robert Miles, in “Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis” (2015a), criticizes that “Radcliffe’s is a Gothic of sublime terror; Lewis’s, of horror” (p. 93). This aesthetic dichotomy between horror and terror has often positioned *The Monk* as an inferior counterpart to Radcliffe’s works.

Against the Burkean/Radcliffean framework outlined above, my paper argues that, in *The Monk*, the sublime exists in the failure of dichotomy, or, more precisely, in the undecidable caused by the perception of portraiture. Predicated upon Vijay Mishra’s *The Gothic Sublime*, my essay rethinks the Gothic sublime from a Derridean perspective. In this book, Mishra emphasizes that “it is the very nature of the sublime that it cannot be contained ... The sublime, as an imaginary construct, may be troped by its descriptor, but not framed by it; it is the impossible ergon without a parergon” (p. 40).⁴ Tracing this Derridean thread in *The Gothic Sublime*, I counter that the playfulness remains either ignored or at least repressed in Mishra’s concept of the Gothic sublime. This lack of playfulness leads to an unnecessary Gothic despair, such as Mishra’s analogy between Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon and Giovanni Battista Piranesi’s etchings of labyrinth (p. 53). Mishra rightly points out the power of “the gaze” in their designs (p. 53). Nevertheless, in *Discipline and Punish* (first published 1975), Michel Foucault also warns that “[v]isibility is a trap” (p. 200). My paper, thus,

¹ The exact publication of Gothic novels from 1770 to 1800, see Robert Miles’s “The 1790s: The effulgence of gothic” (2015b).

² To be concise, hereafter I refer to Burke’s *A philosophical enquiry into the sublime and beautiful* as *Enquiry*.

³ In this essay, Radcliffe argues that “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 Shakspeare nor Milton by their fictions, nor Mr. Burke by his reasoning, anywhere looked to positive horror as a source of the sublime” (p. 403).

⁴ Discussion about ergon (work/core) and parergon (frame), see Jacques Derrida’s “Parergon” in *The truth in painting* (1978, pp. 17-147).

stresses that the Gothic sublime in *The Monk* resides not in any one-sided perception but in an undecidable dilemma of perception.

Perception entraps its beholders, as Jacques Derrida proposes, in *Of Grammatology* (first published 1967), that “danger is that of the image” (p. 164). This danger consists not in image but in a definite article—the—which frames an image. In *The Monk*, I would like to show there are three modes of perception related to portraiture: the gazed portrait, the gazing portrait, and the undecidable. Critics have sufficiently analyzed and theorized the first two modes of perception. In terms of the gazed portrait, Anne Williams, in *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic* (1995), regards Ambrosio’s worship of the portrait of Madona as a literary example of the male gaze in a male Gothic (p. 117). Kamilla Elliott, in *Portraiture and British Gothic Fiction* (2012), also describes that “[a]s carnal desire overwhelms aesthetic and spiritual desires, the portrait becomes animated [in the eyes of Ambrosio]” (p. 231).

In terms of the gazing portrait, James Elkins, in *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing* (1996), demonstrates that “[a] portrait shows how a face might look, so that I can think how I could resemble it, and even an abstract painting makes me think of patterns and harmonies in the world and how I find my place among them” (p. 85). A gazed object stares back to discipline a perceiving subject, who, like a prisoner in the Panopticon, fantasies the presence of jailers in the central tower. Like Foucault, Jacques Lacan, in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (first published 1973), criticizes that perception renders its beholders “caught, manipulated, captured, in the field of vision” (p. 92). To sum up, the first mode of perception emphasizes the power of a perceiving subject over a gazed object; the second one nullifies this power of perception by highlighting systems of thoughts behind a disciplined subject. The third mode of perception—the undecidable between the perceived and the perceiving—remains, however, less discussed by critics. Focusing on this visual dilemma, my paper argues that the Gothic sublime exists precisely in the undecidable caused by the perception of portraiture in *The Monk*.

Theoretical Framework

My paper rethinks Mishra’s concept of the Gothic sublime through a Derridean perspective. In *The gothic sublime*, the author argues that “[w]here the Romantic sublime, finally, has the triumphant subject, the Gothic sublime is a version of the Lacanian Real ... It is this basic problem of being hostage to the unrepresentable that is the concern of this book” (p. 17). Here at least three aspects deserve closer attention.

First, the Gothic sublime is a variant of the Kantian/Romantic sublime without transcendence. As Mishra explains, “the Kantian sublime is defiantly Romantic and raises important questions about how another sublime, the Gothic, which both antedates the Kantian and feeds on it may be defined” (p. 35). Second, Mishra links the Gothic sublime to the Lacanian Real, embedding it within psychoanalytic theories which bear a poststructuralist undertone. He observes, “[t]o read the Gothic is to understand the logic of the uncanny” (p. 63). The author further notes that “the theory of intellectual uncertainty is also a theory of the experience of the sublime” (p. 74). Third, Mishra rightly points out that the Gothic sublime raises a concern for being hostage, or, more precisely, for being “hostis”: a Latin word which, in Derrida’s analysis, can be translated either as guest or enemy (Derrida, 2000, p. 45). Drawing on a Derridean theory, I analyze Lewis’s *The Monk* where the Gothic sublime resides in the undecidable caused by the act of perceiving portraiture.

Before I go into my analysis of portraiture in *The Monk*, I would like to describe briefly Derrida's critique of human perception. I argue that Derrida (un)intentionally developed his theory of visuality early in his intellectual career. For example, in "Freud et la scène de l'écriture" (first published 1966), Derrida criticizes: "Mais la perception pure n'existe pas: nous ne sommes écrits qu'en écrivant, par l'instance en nous qui toujours déjà surveille la perception, qu'elle soit interne ou externe" (p. 335).⁵ Pure perception does not exist, since every perception is mediated through interpretation. He further argues: "Le sujet de l'écriture est un système de rapports" (p. 335). The subject of writing, or of perceiving, is a system of relations behind a disciplined entity.⁶

While human perception remains under surveillance, Derrida, influenced by Martin Heidegger, emphasizes its inherent mortality or corporeality.⁷ In this essay, Derrida uses the term *le/un corps* to refer to corporeality. For instance, in his discussion about the challenges of translation, the author writes:

Or un corps verbal ne se laisse pas traduire ou transporter dans une autre langue. Il est cela même que la traduction laisse tomber. Laisser tomber le corps, telle est même l'énergie essentielle de la traduction. Quand elle réinstitue un corps, elle est poésie. En ce sens, le corps du signifiant constituant l'idiome pour toute scène de rêve, le rêve est intraduisible. (1967, p. 312)

However, Alan Bass translates *le/un corps* into "materiality" in his English rendering of "Freud and the scene of writing" (2009, p. 264). I argue that by choosing materiality over corporeality, Bass sacrifices mortality in both textuality and perception. Predicated upon Heidegger's concept of being-toward-death, Derrida's notion of corporeality serves playfully as a *pharmakon* for perception.⁸ For Derrida, the inevitability of our approaching death proves a potentiality for perception to age inadvertently. Fascinatingly, this *pharmakon* "also means paint, not a natural color but an artificial tint, a chemical dye that imitates the chromatic scale given in nature" (2013, p. 132). Derrida sees the *pharmakon* as "[a]n element that is in itself, if one can still say so, undecidable" (2013, p. 139).

To summarize, Derrida's theory, with an emphasis on corporeality as an undeniable human condition, provides a framework for interpreting perception as inherently undecidable. In *The gothic* (2013), David Punter and Glennis Byron aptly regard *The Monk* as "two stories in one" (p. 194). The novel comprises a major story of Ambrosio's downfall and a minor one of Don Raymond's encounter with the Bleeding Nun. Notably, each story features a portrait: one of Madona and the other of the Bleeding Nun. To analyze the mentioned portraiture, I divide my analysis into two sections. In the first, I focus on the portrait of the Bleeding Nun, and in the second, I turn to the portrait of Madona.

⁵ The comparison between the French version and the English translation of "Freud et la scène de l'écriture," in Derrida's book *L'Écriture et la différence* (first published 1967), is revised from my term paper in the course titled Psychoanalysis: From Freud to Lacan, NCCU.

⁶ In *Copy, archive, signature: A conversation on photography* (2010), Derrida acknowledges the applicability of his theory to visual perception: "In perception there are already operations of selection, of exposure time, of filtering, of development ... Think of Freud's *Wunderblock*, the 'mystic writing pad.' What I attempted to say about this a long time ago, about writing, also concerned photography" (p. 15).

⁷ As Derrida later admits: "What one sees by way of the portrait, beyond the reproduced double, is *Dasein*" (2010, p. 28).

⁸ As Derrida explains in "Plato's pharmacy" (first published 1968), an essay later collected in *Dissemination* (first published 1972), "*pharmakon*," a Greek word, "acts as both remedy and poison" (2013, p. 75).

“Unfinished Sketches”: The Undecidable Between Agnes and the Bleeding Nun

The undecidable between Agnes and the Bleeding Nun arises from Raymond’s initial perception of portraiture by his lover in the castle of Lindenberg. As an invited guest who has “lived at Lindenberg for three whole Months,” Raymond inadvertently summons the ghost “without hearing of the Bleeding Nun” (p. 108). Lewis describes Raymond’s perception of this portrait as follows:

I observed Agnes seated at a Table. She was occupied in drawing, and several unfinished sketches were scattered round her ... I took up some of the drawings, and cast my eye over them. One of the subjects struck me from its singularity. It represented ... a Female of more than human stature, clothed in the habit of some religious order. Her face was veiled; On her arm hung a chaplet of beads; Her dress was in several places stained with the blood which trickled from a wound upon her bosom. In one hand She held a Lamp, in the other a large Knife. (pp. 107-8)

Among those unfinished sketches, it is the portrait of the Bleeding Nun that catches Raymond’s attention. In *Enquiry*, Burke prefers “unfinished sketches of drawing” to “the best finishing,” viewing such sketches as examples of agreeable infinity due to their incomplete nature (2015, p. 63).

From a Derridean approach to the Gothic sublime, I suggest, however, that the unfinished sketches by Agnes should be interpreted as instances of playful infinity— another term for the undecidable. After recounting the ghost story to Raymond, Agnes presents him with a self-portrait as a “gift,” asking: “Do you know the resemblance” (p. 111). Without noticing Raymond’s visual fixation on the other portrait, Agnes raises a question which curiously provokes an inner monologue from her suitor: “It was her own” (p. 111). But to whom does the pronoun—her—refer? This ambiguity explains why Raymond misrecognizes the real revenant as his lover during their attempted elopement. At midnight on the fifth of May, Raymond beholds “Agnes pass through the folding-gates. She was habited exactly as She had described the Spectre” (p. 121). In this context, the portrait of the Bleeding Nun, as one of the unfinished sketches by Agnes, remains unframed, and therefore, playfully infinite.

After the miscarried elopement, Raymond suffers from recurring nightmares in which “Agnes and the Bleeding Nun presented themselves by turns to my fancy, and combined to harass and torment me” (p. 125). Drained by the eternal return of the undecidable, Raymond, with the help of a Wandering Jew, learns from the Bleeding Nun that ending this nightmarish repetition requires a fulfillment of his marriage vows made during their elopement:

Know then, that my bones lie still unburied: They rot in the obscurity of Lindenberg Hole. None but this Youth has the right of consigning them to the Grave. His own lips have made over to me his body and his soul: Never will I give back his promise, never shall He know a night devoid of terror. (p. 133)

To exorcize the spectre, Raymond must both correctly identify her name as Beatrice de las Cisternas (rather than Agnes) and properly bury her remains. In doing so, he metaphorically frames the unfinished portrait of the Bleeding Nun.

“This Abbey Is Become Your Asylum”: The Undecidable Between Matilda and the Portrait of Madona

More complicated than the previous section, the undecidable between Matilda and the portrait of Madona unfolds on two levels. First, the undecidable arises from the concept of *hostis*, and second, the undecidable lies in the unsolved tension between the original and its representation.⁹ As Derrida demonstrates in *Of Hospitality*, “[t]he guest becomes the host of the host” (2000, p. 125). In this framework, Ambrosio, as the host, becomes a hostage to his invited guest: the portrait of Madona. After delivering his sermon, the abbot retreats to his cell and “fixe[s] his eyes upon a picture of the Virgin, which was suspended opposite to him: This for two years had been the Object of his increasing wonder and adoration. He paused, and gazed upon it with delight” (p. 32). By hanging the picture on the wall, Ambrosio has figuratively invited the original into his room as a “dangerous Guest” (p. 65). In the law of hospitality, the invited guest enjoys full access to the host’s space “as if [he/she] held the keys” (Derrida, 2000, p. 123).

Admittedly, Matilda—then disguised as Rosario—interrupts the monk’s fixation on the portrait merely with “three soft knocks at the door” (p. 33). Lewis portrays the guest as follows:

Rosario was a young Novice belonging to the Monastery, who in three Months intended to make his profession. A sort of mystery enveloped this Youth which rendered him at once an object of interest and curiosity ... No one knew from whence He came, and when questioned in the subject He preserved a profound silence. A Stranger. (p. 33)

When the monk discovers Rosario’s identity as the woman Matilda, he fails to expel her for two reasons. First, the host has promised to his guest that “this Abbey is become your Asylum” (p. 43). More significantly, Ambrosio, for two years, has worshipped “the presence of this seducing Object” (p. 61). In the monk’s cell, the portrait on the wall suggests an invitation for the painted subject. In this section, the first undecidable lies in the concept of *hostis* which blurs the line between the host and the guest.

The second undecidable manifests itself as an unsolvable dilemma between the original and its representation. When Ambrosio, weakened by a serpent’s bite, suddenly raises himself from his bed, he observes:

The same exquisite proportion of features, the same profusion of golden hair, the same rosy lips, heavenly eyes, and majesty of countenance adorned Matilda! Uttering an exclamation of surprise, Ambrosio sank back upon his pillow and doubted whether the object before him was mortal or divine. (pp. 63-4)

Matilda responds to the monk’s astonishment by recounting the history of the portrait of Madona, confessing: “In Matilda de Villanegas you see the original of your beloved Madona” (p. 64). Painted by Martin Galuppi, a celebrated Venetian, and later sold by a Jewish

⁹ The first level of the undecidable caused by the Derridean concept of *hostis* is revised from my term paper in the course titled *British Fiction and the Gothic Imagination 1764-1847*, NCCU. In “Hospitality and the gothic” (2012), Joanne Watkiss applies Derrida’s reading of hospitality to explain that “the persistent Gothic threat is that of the hostile guest: the invited visitor who usurps the space she/he enters” (p. 523). In my paper, I disagree with her differentiating characters as either hosts (Elvira) or guests (Ambrosio).

merchant to Ambrosio, the portrait was created at Matilda's request. According to Matilda, the painting resembles her, not the other way around. Nonetheless, at the novel's conclusion, Lucifer reveals a further twist: "I observe your blind idolatry of the Madonna's picture. I had a subordinate but crafty spirit assume a similar form" (p. 337). Contrary to the burial of the Bleeding Nun which metaphorically frames an unfinished portrait, the archdevil's revelation unframes the framed portrait of Madonna. In this way, Lewis's *The Monk*, as a literary example of the Gothic sublime, problematizes perception itself as the undecidable.

Conclusion

This conference paper exists as a theoretical experiment where I try to apply Derrida's deconstruction as a visual methodology to reread portraiture in M. Lewis's *The Monk*. In this conclusion, I would like to point out a major limitation of this method: decontextualization. The application of poststructuralist theories would certainly diversify the possibility of a text. However, by focusing particularly on a text or on phenomena of language play within a text, a disappearance of context ensues. In my future study, I aim to do research on portraiture within contexts of the history of art from the late eighteenth century to the nineteenth century.

Author's Note

This conference paper is revised from my term paper in the course titled Romanticism and the Sublime, NCCU.

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