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**"ORECCHIE ROSE E LABBRA MOZZE"
AND OTHER BODILY SUFFERING IN ALFONSO VARANO.
DANTEAN REMINISCENCES IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY
SEPULCHRAL POETRY**

SIMONA DI MARTINO, University of Warwick

This paper attempts a reading of Alfonso Varano's most famous work, *Visioni sacre e morali*, posthumously published in 1789, as one original response to the eighteenth-century reinstatement of Dante's *oeuvre*. Notably, the goal of this contribution is to examine the semantics of bodily suffering in Varano's *Visioni*. Such examination should highlight new elements on the way in which Varano directly employs Dantean references to construct his religious and sepulchral imagery. Indeed, drawing from the Dantean raw images, and particularly the infernal ones, which became popular in eighteenth-century Christianity due to their still relevant cautionary message, Varano builds an effective lyrical lexicon of bodily pain reminiscent of the *Commedia*. Such language lays the foundation for a fertile deathly repertoire that develops during Varano's time being appreciated by his contemporaries and inherited decades later. Varano's legacy is evident even in Giacomo Leopardi's *Appressamento della morte*, dated 1816. Specifically, this analysis includes excerpts from *Visione V* entitled "Per la peste messinese coll'apparizione della beata Battista Varano" by Alfonso Varano and *Infèrno* 28 and 29.

Keywords: Dante, Alfonso Varano, Body Studies, Sepulchral Poetry, Gothic Literature, Eighteenth-Century Literature

Varano's project of a sacred poetry

The collection of poems entitled *Visioni sacre e morali* is the major and best-known work of the Ferrarese poet and playwright Alfonso Varano.¹ The work was composed between 1732 and 1766 and published posthumously in 1789. The existing scholarship on Italian Pre-Romanticism recognizes Varano's influence on later

¹ In this paper I will quote from the critical edition Alfonso Varano, *Visioni sacre e morali*, ed. Riccardo Verzini (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2003). Another recent edition is: Alfonso Varano, *Visioni sacre e morali*, ed. Stefano Strazzabosco (Parma: Fondazione Pietro Bembo / Ugo Guanda Editore, 2007).

poetry,² an influence also testified by Giacomo Leopardi who wrote about Varano in his *Zibaldone* and included some passages of *Visioni* in his *Crestomazia poetica italiana*.³ Scholarly works on Varano and his *Visioni* report Varano's poetical reuse of Dante's poetry, especially concerning the rendering of pain and horror. Nonetheless, in his analysis, Luca Serianni demonstrates that Varano's language appears more similar to the language of his contemporaries and seventeenth-century authors, rather than to Dante's.⁴ In this paper, I dwell specifically on the lexicon of body suffering that Varano employed in his *Visioni*. In this way, I maintain that Varano reinstated Dante's work in mid-eighteenth century purposely to build a religious and deathly poetical imagery by drawing on depictions of wounded human bodies, an imagery which still survived in Leopardi's early poem *Appressamento della morte* (1816). I argue, therefore, that the reception of Dante should involve both a thematic repertoire and visual renderings, which, as it will be shown, are both characterized by a general sense of excess and abjection.

Indeed, it is no coincidence that, according to Fred Botting, excess characterizes Gothic writings, as does the feeling of abjection described by Julia Kristeva.⁵ Such an excessive and deathly imagery can also be found in many Italian late eighteenth-century poems, lyrics that can be understood as an Italian strain of, so to speak,

² Walter Binni, *Preromanticismo italiano* (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche italiane, 1947); Anna Maria Mazziotti, "Per una rilettura delle 'Visioni' di Alfonso Varano," *La rassegna della letteratura italiana* 85 (1981): 114–30; Marco Cerruti, "La cultura cattolica. Alfonso Varano," in *Storia della civiltà letteraria italiana Vol. IV* (Turin: UTET, 1993), 225–35; Riccardo Verzini, "Introduzione," in *Visioni sacre e morali* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2003), 9–37; Andrea Penso, *Un libero di Pindo abitator. Stile e linguaggio poetico del giovane Vincenzo Monti* (Rome: Aracne editrice, 2018).

³ Walter Binni, "Leopardi e la poesia del secondo Settecento," in *La protesta di Leopardi* (Florence: Sansoni, 1980), 188–90. The passages chosen by Leopardi portray mainly crude episodes, related to the Lisbon earthquake and the plague happened in Messina, and include descriptions of ruins. On the topic see also: Renzo Negri, *Gusto e poesia delle rovine in Italia fra il Sette e l'Ottocento* (Milan: Ceschina, 1965). On the presence of Varano's excerpts in Leopardi's *Crestomazia* see Giuseppe Savoca, "Introduzione," in *Crestomazia italiana. La poesia*, ed. Giuseppe Savoca (Turin: Einaudi, 1968), VII–XXVII.

⁴ Mazziotti, "Per una rilettura delle 'Visioni' di Alfonso Varano"; Luca Serianni, "Sul dantismo di Alfonso Varano. Rilievi linguistici (1996)," in *Viaggiatori, musicisti, poeti. Saggi di storia della lingua italiana* (Milan: Garzanti, 2002), 183–211. Before Serianni's examination Cambini had come to similar conclusions, in: Leonardo Cambini, "Alfonso Varano poeta di visioni," in *Atti e memorie della deputazione provinciale ferrarese di storia patria* (Ferrara: Zuffi, 1904), 65–241.

⁵ See Fred Botting, "Introduction. Gothic Excess and Transgression," in *Gothic* (London/New York: Routledge, 2005), 1–4; Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

'sepulchral poetry,' where Varano's works can be included.⁶ Indeed, the literary portrayal of bodily suffering in trend in the eighteenth-century Italian poetry, understood as part of Dante's legacy, might constitute a symptom of a coeval, upcoming, and renewed taste for vivid and death-related themes, perhaps herald of Gothic developments.⁷ Such eighteenth-century poems are characterised by constellations of words semantically related to death. Deathly motifs emerge from words describing the imagery of the night, with its darkness and melancholic states; the imagery of tombs and graves, including macabre portrayals of corpses in decay; and finally, all images related to incorporeal bodies, such as "fantasmi" [ghosts], "larve" and "ombre" [shadows] and pertaining to the realm of visions and dreamlike experiences. All these elements earned such eighteenth-century poems the name "sepulchral," echoing the British school of Graveyard Poetry.⁸

Varano's poetical project was to give birth to a sacred poem founded on religious truths, but without denying the Enlightenment's achievements based on reason, aiming then at a moral poetry governed both by religion and science. In his *Visioni* Varano presents a set of noble, clerical, and ordinary characters portraying their human sufferance before death as well as their later ascent to Heaven – with a moral and didactic aim as accustomed in the late eighteenth century. Varano's *Visioni* are constituted by twelve lyrics written in *terza rima* originally conceived for specific occasions (*poesie d'occasione*), such as the death of political and religious figures, victories of wars, and the apotheosis of emperors, but also for commemorating tragic episodes such as the plague in Messina and the earthquake of Lisbon. The whole work configures the spiritual journey of the Christian soul from the imprisonment of the flesh (with the consequent metaphor of the human body as a cage) to the heavenly beatitude. Varano shaped a clear poetic scheme in his

⁶ On Italian sepulchral poetry of late eighteenth century there is much more to say, and its complexity would require a deeper analysis that cannot find enough space in this paper. Some relevant authors are: Clemente Bondi, Antonio Capra, Francesco Cassoli, Aurelio de' Giorgi Bertola, Ippolito Pindemonte, and Ambrogio Viale. A preliminary examination on their works can be found in: Simona Di Martino, "Sepulchral Poetry and Deathly Motifs. A 'Prehistory' of the Italian Gothic," in *Italian Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, eds. Marco Malvestio and Stefano Serafini (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming).

⁷ This issue is currently under examination as part of my doctoral thesis, whose thrust is the representation of death by the portrayal of human bodies before and after death in Alfonso Varano's *Visioni sacre e morali*, Salomone Fiorentino's *Elegie di S. F. in morte di Laura sua moglie*, and Giacomo Leopardi's *Appressamento della morte*.

⁸ On the rise of Graveyard Poetry, among others, see Eric Parisot, *Graveyard Poetry: Religion, Aesthetics and the Mid-Eighteenth-Century Poetic Condition* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2013).

work, for he wanted to give life to a sacred poem able to unify religious truths and modern achievements of science, where the faith would have supplied to facts that science could not explain. Furthermore, his ultimate aspiration was to create a new Christian poetic imagery, similarly to what Dante's *Commedia* had represented in the past. Varano also manifested his admiration for Dante in the preface of his *Visioni*, openly polemicizing with Voltaire and defending the value of religious poetry, in the manner of Dante. While Voltaire's position is that Christian topics do not suit the genre of poetry, which requires pagan mythology instead, Varano presents Dante as an example of a poet who speaks of religious themes without resorting to mythology: "[...] non è egli un quadro perfetto di poesia la descrizione che ci fa Dante nel suo canto dell'*Inferno* del conte Ugolino e de' suoi figli carcerati dall'arcivescovo di Pisa? Non è animata la natura a scorgervi entro il dolore e l'orrore nel loro più fiero aspetto, senza il soccorso della mitologia?"⁹ Varano insists that poetry can successfully have God and religion as subject matters and that: "[...] può col velame delli versi strani, come dice il nostro Dante, rappresentarci il vero e il sacro nobilmente e dilettevolmente indoleggiato co' suoi colori."¹⁰

Many features exist in Varano's *Visioni* that he drew from Dante. First, the overall structure stems from Dante's *Commedia*. Indeed, both the poems involve a first-person pilgrim, the poetic-self, who experiences an otherworldly journey to reach God. Second, though they are guided by different spiritual guides, both the poetic-selves are, at a certain point, guided by one of their ancestors. Specifically, this happens in *Vision V*, under examination in this work, and in *Paradiso* 15, 16 and 17. Varano chooses as spiritual guide his ancestor Battista Varano da Camerino, a Poor Clare abbess, author of *I dolori mentali di Gesù nella sua passione* (1488) and *Vita spirituale* (1491), an autobiography considered a jewel of art.¹¹ Before Varano, Dante depicts his ancestor Cacciaguida degli

⁹ [Is not Dante's description in his Canto of *Inferno* about Count Ugolino and his sons imprisoned by the archbishop of Pisa a perfect picture of poetry? Is not nature invited to see in it the pain and horror in their fiercest aspect, without the aid of mythology?]. See Alfonso Varano, "Discorso dell'autore," in *Visioni sacre e morali*, ed. Riccardo Verzini (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2003), 84.

¹⁰ [It can, with the veil of strange verses, as our Dante says, represent nobly and delightfully the true and the sacred with its colours]. Ibid.

¹¹ Alfonso Varano includes a few notes on his ancestor and her family's tragical story, in his *Visioni*, but there is an extensive bibliography on both the life and literary works of Battista, and many of her spiritual works are still studied and critically edited. Battista's father, Giulio Cesare Varano, lord of the city of Camerino, was assassinated along with his three sons in 1502, by order of Cesare Borgia. The story does not

Elisei to provide information about the medieval Florence, and, crucially, to forecast his own exile in canto 17. Finally, the two authors share an interest for bodily suffering. This is exemplified by hellish punishments in Dante's *Inferno* responding to the *contrapasso*, which reflects the bad deeds committed on earth in the afterlife. In Varano's poem, God implements punishments to the sinners' souls, as happens in Dante's *Inferno*, and also to the living, and such penalties are intended to represent admonitions for worshippers.

Whereas the twelve lyrics proceed through a continuous opposition between the body and the soul, this paper focuses on the body only. Varano describes the human body both to exemplify divine punishments through corporeal diseases and to show bodily pain as a source of purification. While purification is expressed by the dissolution of the earthly body, divine punishments are evident when Varano illustrates natural disasters, in *Vision V* and *VII*, respectively the plague of Messina and the earthquake of Lisbon.¹² Due to the richness of gory images involved in *Vision V*, this contribution unveils reminiscences of Dante's *Inferno* specifically in this lyric dedicated to the plague which struck the Sicilian city of Messina in 1743.

Bodily suffering: the plague of Messina and the ninth bolgia

Vision V, which is entitled "Per la peste messinese coll'apparizione della beata Battista Varano" [On the plague in Messina with the apparition of Blessed Battista Varano], begins *in medias res* with the apparition of the celestial guide Battista Varano, the author's ancestor, who invites the poetic-self to sit beside her on a fiery chariot bound for the coast of Messina. The purpose of the 219-tercets-long celestial journey is to show to Varano's poetic self, and thus to the God-fearing readers, what God's wrath is capable of unleashing on sinners, so to "destar [...] virtude / coll'immagine de' mali" [arouse virtue / with the image of evils] (*Visioni*, V, 160-1).

Given the specific moral nature of such lyric, Varano drew expressionistic and vivid images from the Dantean model of the *Commedia* and sketches hellish scenes, in order to show the ways in which "il gran Pastore eterno / vendicherà la profanata legge" [the Great Eternal Shepherd / will avenge the desecrated law]

emerge from the works of Battista, but Varano writes about the episode in verses in *Vision V*.

¹² Varano exemplifies dissolution of the body as a purification of the flesh in *Visione XI*, where the beloved Amennira is first represented in her decaying body, and then ascends to God more beautiful and luminous than when she was alive.

(*Visioni*, V, 230-1). The gory scenes start at line 334 and continue through the end of the 658-lines-long poem, and the exceptional suffering circumstances are soon announced by the hyperbolic vision of "morte di mille umane spoglie" [the death of a thousand human bodies] (*Visioni*, V, 338). The author describes the entrance of his poetic-self in the city of Messina from the harbor, by walking through a long path, "via d'orror carica e di periglio" [a path full of horror and danger] (*Visioni*, V, 337), a path that promises to have hellish overtones. The following verses, indeed, herald a cycle of encounters with the souls of sinners that recall those Dante the pilgrim has during his descent into hell.

Fuor dell'abbandonate immonde soglie giacean gli avanzi della plebe abbietta su vili paglie, e infracidite foglie:	342
altri con gola orrendamente infetta di gangrenose bolle; altri avvampati il petto da fatal febbre negletta;	345
altri da lunga fame ormai spossati, non pel velen, ma pel languore infermi, fra l'altrui membra putride sdrajati;	348
ed altri in lor natio vigor più fermi, benché lasciati sotto i corpi estinti, sórti fra l'ossa accatastate e i vermi;	351
ma di squallor mortifero dipinti, e per orecchie róse, e labbra mozze dai volti umani in modo fier distinti.	354

The five tercets introduce a richly described gallery of victims presented in form of a list, which appears to be long and increasingly disturbing thanks to Varano's use of anaphora. Hence, the reader is invited to go through the whole list almost all at once, pressed by the hammering rhythm of the lines that repeat "altri" [others], as if the succession of characters involved is not coming to an end. The general sense of abjection and repulsion is extremely well conveyed to the reader by the employment of powerful adjectives, such as "immonde" [filthy], "vili" [loathsome], "infracidite" [dump]. Kristeva well explains that abjection is felt when "there looms, [...] one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable".¹³ Here, Varano's poetic-self finds himself in a place surrounded by waste, by human relics, by bodies suffering and broken by the pestilential disease that afflicts them, as a divine punishment. Varano's

¹³ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 1.

readers are invited to witness what the pilgrim sees so as to foresee their destiny if their life choices do not conform to those prescribed by religion. The list of vivid adjectives justifies such a crudeness of expression. Although Varano in the whole of his *Visioni* particularly insists on the strength of adjectives employed, one can notice that nouns are equally significant. Indeed, Varano avoids direct descriptions of entire human bodies, which instead he portrays by using a purposely reductive term such as "avanzi" [remains], as well as enumerating single parts of the body. I would also note that all the verbs indicating the human body are past participles, such as "infetta" [infected], "avvampati" [burning with fever], "spossati" [exhausted], "infermi" [sick], "sdraiati" [lying down], "estinti" [extinct], "sorti" [elevated], "dipinti" [painted], so to stress the passivity of the suffering bodies. The only active verb appears to be "giacevan" [lay], at the beginning of the list, a rhetorical device that Varano effectively employs to highlight that the only action these bodies were capable of performing was to lie down, and therefore to perform none.

Along with a pervasive sense of abjection Varano provides his readers with an imagery made of exaggeration and excess. Examples of this approach can be found in the roundup of body parts: "gola orrendamente infetta" [horrendously infected throat], "gangrenose bolle" [gangrenous blisters], "membra putride" [rotten limbs]. Once again, nouns are coupled with horrifying adjectives so as to picture appropriately exaggerated macabre details. One of the most effective scenes of the excerpt under analysis is that of the pile of cadavers, gathered one on top of the other: "Ed altri in lor natio vigor più fermi, / benché lasciati sotto i corpi estinti, / sórti fra l'ossa accatastate e i vermi," [And others in their native vigor more steadfast, / though left underneath the extinct bodies, / standing piled up amidst the bones and worms]. The same miserable picture of piled up cadavers ready to be burned by the fire returns about a dozen triplets later in the lyric:

In mezzo a valle solitaria e vasta	
stridea, scoppiando fra le vampe ingorde,	
di cento adusti ceppi ampia catasta.	390
Con picche armate in ferro adunco e lorde	
di melma tratti eran que' corpi al rogo,	
cui più vita sì dura il cor non morde (...)	393

Here the human bodies are called "catasta" [pile] rather than "avanzi" [remains] and such a pile is composed by "cento adusti ceppi" [a hundred scorched logs], recalling the initial hyperbolic

expression forecasting the vision of "mille umane spoglie" [a thousand of human remains]. The second of these tercets explains the image of the corpses' pile, for the dead bodies are gathered to form a pyre. The urgency of burning cadavers to avoid infection during the epidemic has been narrated in the poetic account of Enea Gaetano Melani who wrote *La peste di Messina accaduta nell'anno 1743*, a text that Varano knew and employed for his work.¹⁴ In the third chapter, Melani reports "Già s'ardono i cadaveri. / Pur qualche vivo abbruciasi" [Already the corpses are burning. / Even some of the livings are burning] (3-4) and testifies about the madness and all the suffering around him by defining the frenzy as "dolorosi spettacoli / non più visti, e incredibili" [painful spectacles / never happened again, and incredible] (16-7). Varano dramatizes the spectacle and together with depicting bodies no longer recognizable as humans ("dai volti umani in modo fier distinti" [were quite different from human faces]) due to hoarse ears, chopped off lips ("orecchie rose e labbra mozze"), piled up bones and consuming worms ("ossa accatastate e i vermi"), he also insists on the stench spreading through the streets of Messina. Varano describes the nauseating smell as "aere maligno" [unhealthy air] that "veste d'orror le messinese arene" [(which) dresses the coast of Messina in horror] (67, 69). The vivid expression "funereo vapor" [funereal air] reinforces the powerful image, as well as the description of the poisoned air that "fra l'infocata estate e i roghi accesi, / rende la via del respiro in forse" [between the fiery summer and the burning fires, / it's hard to breathe] (437-8). Both the rendering of the huddled and wounded bodies and the description of fires and smoke contribute to Varano's intention to portray Messina as a real hell on earth. The insalubriousness of the air also appears to be a crucial element for Dante. The two singled out expressions "aere maligno" and "funereo vapor," indeed, also recur or have close analogues in the *Commedia*. In *Inferno* 5, Francesca calls out Dante making her way through the "aere maligno" (86), a term chosen to stress the negativity of the infernal place, and a few lines later the air is defined as "aere perso" (89), indicating a nuance between black and purple. In this way, Dante strongly conveys the image of a haunted atmosphere, while Varano employed the same lexicon, nonetheless charged with infernal nuances, to emphasize the unhealthy streets

¹⁴ Full reference: Enea Gaetano Melani, *La peste di Messina accaduta nell'anno 1743 fedelmente rapportata in versi sdruccioli dall'abate di S. Giacinto Enea Gaetano Melani Sanese Protonotaro Apostolico, e Religioso, Gerosolimitano detto tra gli Arcadi Eresto Eleucanteo, che fu spettatore di sì spaventosa tragedia* (Venice: per G. Battista Recurto, 1747).

of Messina. Dante, on the other hand, insists with the characterization of the infernal air in other parts of the poem, such as in *Inferno* 9, where he condenses the muddy sludge of hell in the image of an "aere grasso" [grease air] (82). Even in *Purgatorio* 16, where the wrathful are blinded by an irritating smoke as they had been by anger in life, the air is described as "aere amaro e sozzo" [bitter and foul air] (13). The air around Dante the pilgrim is therefore always infested and thick, and Varano retrieves this element to render the image of an earthly hell in his *Visioni*. I would also underline the ways in which Varano chooses a precise bodily lexicon, evocative of images and smells, combined with the skillful use of rhetorical figures of repetition to convey a terrible and incisive imagery.

Although Melani has certainly been a source and a model for Varano, and definitely for what concerns the picture of the human pyre, *Inferno* 28 and 29 are the most suitable cantos for drawing a parallel with *Visioni* concerning the lexicon of bodily suffering. In fact, reminiscences of Dantesque lexicon and images are here particularly evident. In *Inferno* 29, Dante the pilgrim finds himself in the final *bolgia*, in the eighth circle. In this place, the falsifiers are punished. They are afflicted by various diseases, and particularly scabies, which reminds us of Varano's plague, described in *Vision V*. The sinners are heaped on the ground and crawl around, manifesting their suffering. I have singled out the three most relevant tercets of the canto to compare Varano's scenes and Dante's descriptions:

Qual dolor fora, se de li spedali,
 di Valdichiana tra 'l luglio e 'l settembre
 e di Maremma e di Sardigna i mali 48
 fossero in una fossa tutti 'nsemble,
 tal era quivi, e tal puzzo n'usciva
 qual suol venir de le marcite membre. 51

(...)
 Qual sovra 'l ventre, e qual sovra le spalle
 l'un de l'altro giacea, e qual carpone
 si trasmutava per lo tristo calle. 69

Even at first glance one can observe that Dante illustrates an overall situation which is very similar to the one portrayed by Varano. Here though, the prevailing sensation is an olfactory one. The stench, here called "puzzo" is due to the pile of diseased and malodorous bodies, which we learn are stacked on top of each other. Dante presents such a picture of piled up bodies through a simile, which compares two areas of Italy, Tuscany and Sardinia, afflicted by malaria. Indeed, hyperbolically, Dante imagines emptying out

all the malarial hospitals in the two regions and gathering all the sick bodies in the *bolgia* in which his poetic-self finds himself. It is only through this exaggeration that the author makes sure to convey to the reader the strong stench coming from the pit. Differently from Varano, Dante clearly states that the stench comes from the ill, suffering bodies, while Varano attributes the smell to the burning pyre. Despite this difference, the image of the massed bodies is similar in the two literary works and Varano's lines are indebted to the accumulation we can read in Dante's tercets. Indeed, as seen before in *Vision V*, Dante lists body parts when he describes the pile of bodies: "ventre" [belly], "spalle" [shoulders] and someone is "carponi" [crawling]. These outraged bodies are also shown in their damaged partiality: "orecchie rose e labbra mozze" [eroded ears and cut-off lips], Varano states (*Visioni*, V, 353), mirroring the expression "ombre triste smozzicate" [lost and mutilated shadows] (*Inferno* 29.6) employed by Dante, who refers to the sinners in the previous canto. As for the bodily lexicon employed, one should notice that where Dante uses the adjective "marcite" [rotten], Varano employs the word "putrido" [putrid] two terms that maintain the hardness of sound due to the letter "r". Such letter suggests, in this context, the idea of something that arouses disgust, due to its harshness and the violence required to pronounce it. Both authors are interested in conveying to the reader a sense of disgust and repugnance, which is so extreme and accurately described that it is exaggerated and almost horrifying. This horrific language, shows an excess in macabre connotations and describes monstrous figures, emphasizing the inhuman nature of the ill bodies. According to Fred Botting, one can define writings as 'Gothic' when they involve imagination and emotional effects that exceed reason, for Gothic is a writing of excess.¹⁵ It can be argued, therefore, that Varano's insistence on excessive and abject imagery constitutes a Gothic mode of writing and that such a mode can be indebted to Dante.

The last part of the analysis pivots around the gory repertoire of blood and cruel scenes of fiercely damaged bodies, and specifically examines the image of men pierced through their throat, first described by Dante, then received by Varano, and finally, inherited by the young Leopardi too. The scenes involved in the three poems concern three different situations that significantly recall one another.

In Varano's *Visioni*, the relevant description appears when the author writes about the pyre. Varano claims that people of all

¹⁵ Botting, "Introduction. Gothic Excess and Transgression," 2.

ages and social statuses have been victims of the plague. The atrocious scene begins with the enumeration of the bodies prepared for the stake.

Vivi, che ancor movean gli occhi non chiusi,
 ma palpitanti col roncio fitto
 nella gola i sospir versando, e il sangue 402
 dal collo in sì crudel foggia trafitto.

These verses include various parts of the body, just as shown before, as to bring out the mutilation of the bodies involved in the lyric and their suffering. Varano here lists "occhi" [eyes], "gola" [throat], "collo" [neck], therefore focusing on what Pozzi calls the short canon.¹⁶ The short canon provides a way of describing all those parts of the human body that concern the face only. In this scene, Varano wants to confer a major sense of drama, so to stress the suffering of the bodies and underpin the moral message to his readers, and he manages to do so by using verbs of movement, gerund, and past participles. The *incipit* of the first tercet, "vivi" [alive], meaningfully contrasts the precedent image where corpses were piled up in the street. In this scene, instead, human bodies are still moving, they have a last glimmer of life in their limbs but are so damaged and wrecked that cannot complete their actions. They are in spasm and are grasping, as suggested by the gerund "palpitando" and "versando," but at the same time they are pierced in their throats, and the past participle "trafitto" [pierced] closes the tercet, ending the effort of movement first suggested. Another key element of the scene is "sangue" [blood] gushing from the injured neck.

Even though Varano's description appears cruel and terrifying, Dante reaches more harrowing peaks in *Inferno* 28. It seems particularly significant the fact that *Inferno* 28 contains the first and only use of the term *contrapasso* explained in its juridical connotations, which well suits the didactic nature of the canto. With such a word, Dante indicates the retributive concept which states that every soul shall suffer in the afterlife according to the sins they committed on earth. As a principle of justice, the *contrapasso* derives from the biblical law of retaliation, which required that "anyone who inflicts an injury on his neighbor shall receive the same in

¹⁶ Giovanni Pozzi, "Temi, topoi, stereotipi," in *Letteratura italiana Vol. III Le forme del testo, 1. Teoria e poesia*, ed. Alberto Asor Rosa (Turin: Einaudi, 1984), 391-436.

precisely illustrated by Ronald L. Martinez with the concept of 'poetry of schism,' which is here worth mentioning.¹⁹ According to Martinez, *Inferno* 28 is "a heap of slashed body parts" and such a disarticulation of the body, mirrored in the disarticulations of linguistic entities – line 21 separates the noun "modo" and the modifier "sozzo" – , embodies the mimesis of the violence that Dante wants to achieve. Furthermore, sheer accumulation replaces the functional articulation of parts of the living, organic body, divided the same way that the culprits caused schisms in life. Finally, the bodies described in the episode are dismembered in a scheme dictated by the symmetry of the canto itself.²⁰ Martinez's annotations highlight Dante's desire to fragment the canto in order to emphasize the guilt of the sowers of schisms. Alongside such symbolic purpose, however, the dismembered bodies also highlight the poet's aim to strike the reader with visually rich images.

The gory writing, which can be called *modo sozzo* or "foul style" (*Inf.* 28.21) as Dante proclaims it and reinstated by Varano in his sepulchral poetry, seems to be welcomed by the young Giacomo Leopardi. He models his *cantica*, entitled *Appressamento della morte*, with the vividness of harsh physical damages already employed by Dante and Varano. In 1816, at only eighteen years of age, Giacomo Leopardi composed his poem *Appressamento della morte*, which remained unpublished during Leopardi's lifetime and excluded from the 1826 collection of works.²¹ More recently, the poem enjoyed two critical editions, by Lorenza Posfortunato (1983) and by Sabrina Delcò-Toschini (2002) whose version includes a rich comment by Christian Genetelli.²² First criticised and even considered a forgery, the *Appressamento della morte* has now been recognised as an experiment of the young Leopardi, who later manifested the will of working on it again.²³ Some scholars maintained that Leopardi rejected his work due to the archaic language

¹⁹ Ronald L. Martinez, "The Poetry of Schism," in *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri. Inferno*, ed. Robert M. Durling and Ronald L. Martinez, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 573-76, 573.

²⁰ Martinez, 574.

²¹ Lorenza Posfortunato, "Premessa," in Giacomo Leopardi *Appressamento della morte* (Florence: Presso l'Accademia della Crusca, 1983), 7-8.

²² Giacomo Leopardi, *Appressamento Della Morte*, eds. Christian Genetelli and Sabrina Delcò Toschini (Rome: Antenore, 2002). Both Christian Genetelli, who edited the introduction and the comment, and Sabrina Delcò-Toschini, who provided the critical version and a precise philological note, reconstruct the history of the work underpinning it with a close reading of Leopardi's epistolary exchange with his friends and the publisher Stella.

²³ Enrico Ghidetti, "Alle origini della vocazione poetica leopardiana: la cantica 'Appressamento della morte,'" in *Leopardi oggi. Incontri per il bicentenario della nascita del poeta*, ed. Bortolo Martinelli (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2000), 33.

he employed and the heavy structure of sentences, for their combination resulted in an intense and magniloquent expressiveness.²⁴ The subsequent re-elaboration of the *cantica* is evident in the work *Spento il diurno raggio*, which one can now read as fragment XXXIX in Leopardi's *Canti*, probably dated not earlier than 1831, where one can appreciate a more mature refinement and an evident downsizing of the original *Appressamento*, together with a vanishing of the religious motif.²⁵ Such an intense expressiveness and the presence of a strong Catholic sentiment in the *Appressamento*, however, appears to derive from a dramatic personal situation, which Leopardi exposes in his poem, that drove him to the foreboding of his early death. His sense of tragic unhappiness is marginally consoled by the awareness of the vanity of worldly goods and the Catholic religious vision with its promise of peace. The idea of the young Leopardi was to create a kind of poetry which was grandiose and intense, tightly linked to imagination and feelings.²⁶ To accommodate his idea, Leopardi made use of personifications of values from the Catholic tradition and sketched his poem towards a moralistic-religious direction, to satisfy his desire for a poetry of imagination like that of the ancients, albeit in a modern Italian perspective. Although traces of Dante's *Commedia* are particularly evident in Leopardi's early poem – suffice to look at the very categorisation of the text called *cantica*, divided in *canti* and written in *terza rima* – Leopardi, in his *postilla* to *Appressamento* claims to have read Dante's *Commedia* only once.²⁷

Refraining from exhaustive discussions and examinations on Leopardi's reception of Dante's *oeuvre*, my analysis focuses, cursorily, on Leopardi's choice of scenes accounting bodily suffering in his poem.²⁸ *Appressamento* is divided in five cantos organised in a

²⁴ See both Enrico Ghidetti and Walter Binni, "III. 1815-1816. traduzioni poetiche e primi tentativi di poesie originali," in *Lezioni leopardiane*, ed. Novella Bellucci (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1994), 37-52.

²⁵ Sabrina Delcò-Toschini, "Per il testo dell'*Appressamento*," in *Appressamento della morte* (Rome-Padua: Antenore, 2002), XXXIX.

²⁶ Binni, "III. 1815-1816. Traduzioni Poetiche," 51.

²⁷ See Lorenza Posfortunato, 'Appendice' in *Appressamento della morte*, 77. Leopardi declares: 'Quando scrissi non avea letto Dante che una sola volta e mi fece gran meraviglia il trovar poi nel 19. Purg. data agli avari la stessa pena di giacer colla faccia volta in giù che loro *intl.* avea dato io nel principio del 3. Canto senza saper nulla di quel luogo'.

²⁸ On the theme of human bodies and the poet as a seer of spirits I am currently devoting my PhD thesis, where I advocate that Leopardi may have received some of Dante's insights on the rendering of bodies and the phenomenon of celestial visions not only directly from Dante's work, but also from reading Alfonso Varano's *Visioni sacre e morali* and Salomone Fiorentino's *Elegie di Salomone Fiorentino in morte di*

narrational structure. *Appressamento's* canto I begins with the poetic-self alone in his room, abruptly visited by his guardian angel who announces him the approaching of his death and offers him some explanations through an "ammiranda visione" [admirable vision] (canto I, 122).²⁹ Soon in the following canto the reader is taken away through a journey into an imaginary elsewhere where the poetic-self takes on the guise of a pilgrim and encounters the personifications of various vices and the relevant sinners. The pilgrim first acknowledges the sorrow caused by Love (canto II), then he meets followers of Error, the Fame and the boastful ones, and finally realizes the atrocities of War and Tyranny (canto III). The gallery of vices and sinners, crossed in an ascending order to God, concludes with the entrance of the pilgrim to Paradise and the vision of Christ and the Virgin Mary (canto IV). The last episode, canto V, ends where the cantica started, with the poet musing in his own room, feeling that life is abandoning him.

The scene that informs this analysis takes place in canto II, in an episode indebted to Paolo and Francesca's story from *Inferno* 5. In Leopardi's work, the main protagonists are Ugo and Parisina, whose sad story, already narrated in the fifteenth-century Matteo Bandello's *Novelle* and Lord Byron's poem *Parisina* (1816), occupies 77 verses.³⁰ Ugo has an affair with Parisina, his father's wife, and for this reason his father murders him. The excerpt pictures the moment when Ugo's father enters the tower where his son was imprisoned – strongly recalling the Dantean episode of Count Ugolino – and kills him, piercing firstly his throat and then his heart with a sword.

Ma la punta a mia gola e' ficcò dreto, 160
e caddi con la bocca in su rivolta,
e 'l vital foco tutto non fu spento.
Parvemi che l'acciaro un'altra volta

Laura sua moglie. Both *Visioni* and *Elegie* would therefore have mediated Dante's reception in the young Leopardi.

²⁹ I am quoting from the previously cited critical edition by Sabrina Delcò-Toschini, 2002.

³⁰ Leopardi became aware of Byron's poem by reading its review, entitled *The Siege, ecc. L'assedio di Corinto, Poema. Parisina, Poema in 8°.* Londra, Murray, 1816, in the journal *Spettatore. Parte straniera* 62, 73-78, as explained in: Cecilia Gibellini, "Byron and Leopardi," in *Nuovi quaderni del CRIER. Byron e l'Europa, l'Europa di Byron*, ed. Francesco Piva, Angelo Righetti and Laura Colombo (Verona: Edizioni Fiorini, 2008), 215-230, 215. Christian Genetelli convincingly posits that Leopardi incorporated Ugo and Parisina's chronicle in his *Appressamento* to pursue his case against romantic poetry, and to reappropriate it in the name of the great Greek-Latin-Italian tradition, under attacked by northern authors. See Christian Genetelli, "Leopardi 'contra' Byron," *Cenobio* 44 (1995), 145-54.

throat is concerned, the verb "trafitto" used by Varano finds its counterpart in the active "ficcò," while Dante employed "forata". Leopardi, though, breaks the tradition of describing body parts according to the 'short canon' and includes instead the heart, a part of the human body that does not concern the face only, on which the other authors focus instead –namely "gola" and "collo" in Varano's lyric, and "gola," "naso," "ciglia," "orecchia" in Dante's lines. Finally, no weapons are shown either in Varano's *Visioni* and Dante's *Inferno* 28, for which one can easily provide an explanation when considering the different kinds of punishments provided to the main characters. Indeed, while both Varano and Dante accounts for divine punishments where weapons are not necessary, Leopardi reports a chronicle, a private revenge, with the aim of stressing the violence of the episode.

I would refrain from further discussions on more general analogies linking *Appressamento* to *Visioni* and the *Commedia*, which is not the focus on this article. Suffice to say, here, that in order to describe a vivid, gory scene, Leopardi's account of Ugo and Parisina's story differs from the others, where the two lovers are beheaded. Leopardi's choice of representing Ugo's father in the moment of stabbing his son may suggest Leopardi's desire to 'visually' represent a violent revenge, which makes his crudeness closer to Dante's model (e.g. *Inferno* 28) as well as to his close predecessor Varano.

Sketching Conclusions

This paper has attempted to show the ways in which and the reasons why Varano employs Dantean references to construct a new deathly imagery strictly connected to religious precepts. Such an analysis, although not conclusive or complete, ultimately attempts a partial interpretation of Varano's poem *Visioni sacre e morali* as a case study which is part of a stream of late eighteenth-century Italian poetry, here conventionally labelled as 'sepulchral'. Similarly to Varano's work, there exist a collection of lyrics rich in elements of excess and abjection forming a particularly death-related genre which can be indebted to Dante's *Inferno*, particularly in its gory traits. The sacred and moral purpose that aims at admonishing the devotees is the common ground between sepulchral poetry, represented in this analysis by Varano's *Visioni*, and Dante's model. Indeed, showing in the poems the fate of those who transgress God's laws in such a vivid and expressive manner was likely to be an effective way of persuading the devotees and leading them to the right Christian path. Nonetheless, I believe it is significant to

observe that even in the first decade of the nineteenth century an author such as Leopardi, although still young and poetically immature, considered the most sanguine and crude features of Varano's poetry worthy of citation and admiration – pictures that Varano, in turn, partly derives from Dante's *Commedia*. Although further examination is needed, nonetheless, Varano's case study shows that gory traits reminiscent of Dante's *Inferno*, and particularly *Inferno* 28 and 29, are in trend in eighteenth-century poetry concerning the portrayal of bodily suffering. In turn, bodily suffering constitutes a theme which constellates eighteenth-century Italian poetry, and results in literary depictions of bodies in decay, agonizing people, ill and mutilated bodies, as exemplified by Varano's *Vision V*. Such a deathly insistence of Italian eighteenth-century authors traces a line of continuity with the medieval Italian tradition, as Dante testifies, while, at the same time, embodies a new aesthetical taste made of excess, abjection, and marvel. I believe, and I have attempted to show, that such taste makes some eighteenth-century Italian poetry more similar to Gothic writing than has generally been noted.