

A Portrait of the Author of *Vathek*

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William Beckford (1760-1844) has generally been reputed to be one of the most notable of the whole company of English eccentrics. In a conventional age and born to the vast wealth that observes conventionality his extravagance lay in his unconventional creed and frequently eccentric behaviour. No doubt he was often misconstrued. People spread gossip concerning misspent opportunities, great possession squandered, the lack of a sense of responsibility, and an entirely wasted life spent upon follies and hobbies. But he was indifferent to public opinion. Until the end of his long and singular career he persistently refused to conform to the pattern of his class, remaining staunchly uncompromising towards the conventional norms of Georgian society. As a consequence one serious charge after another was brought against him, probably on no stronger foundation than the undoubted fact of his deviation from the usual type of the English gentleman.

Yet this surely is not all he was. There is more to be said for Beckford even while, in part, admitting the justice of the calumnies that have been heaped upon his unpredictable personality. He was much more than an eccentric millionaire: rather a man of many accomplishments and exceptional culture. To begin with he possessed the attributes of the universal man. He was trilingual: as fluent in French and Italian as in his native English, besides speaking Spanish, German, Portuguese, Persian and Arabic. He could judge events and their causes as a true cosmopolitan. Secondly he was recognized by the younger generation as being among the greatest men of taste, a connoisseur and bibliophile. His library was one of the largest in all England ever assembled by a private individual; and the collection of pictures he steadily accumulated rivalled the finest of his day. Thirdly he was a builder of what became the most extraordinary Gothic folly in the country, Fonthill Abbey; and a skilled landscape designer of the surrounding 519 acres of flowering wilderness.

The last, and by no means least, absorbing aspect of this multi-faceted man was the distinction he earned as a man of letters. Although his studies and literary production seem to have been indulged in more for his own private gratification than for the sake of the public, his achievements can, in the disciplines and genres that interested him, lay claim to excellence. As a wealthy and cultivated man of leisure, rather than a professional man of letters, he gave to the world several outstanding works covering genres ranging from travel writing and satire to oriental romance. *Vathek*, among others, has been his chief title to celebrity. While some critics rate his travel writings (especially his

Portuguese works) as a greater achievement,¹ *Vathek* occupies a resplendent pride of place in the manuals of English literary history. Without undue exaggeration we may hold that this single work has enabled his fame and extravagance to be preserved from lasting oblivion. It is on the early career of Beckford, culminating in the composition of *Vathek*, that the present essay will concentrate. Our primary concern is with articulating the main facts of his personal history before we consider the literary worth of the tale upon which his reputation rests.

I

The early career of Beckford commenced under a fortunate star. He had the supreme advantage of being born to such a position that within the bounds of reason he could shape his life as he chose. The only legitimate son of the Right Honorable William Beckford, twice Lord Mayor of London, he was expected almost from the day of his birth to add further social prestige to what was allegedly the hugest private fortune in England, derived from West Indian plantations and trade. His mother was Maria Hamilton, granddaughter of the Earl of Abercorn, whose ancestry could boast of aristocratic connections with the royal houses of both England and Scotland. He had adequate reason to look forward to a life of luxury at the zenith of his career.

In preparation for a glittering future the child was brought up at his father's neo-classical residence at Fonthill in Wiltshire. The grand mansion, ostentatiously called Fonthill Splendens, was typical of an important gentleman's country seat, and contained an impressive collection of fine art and rare antiques, an ample library and spacious exotic salons in the oriental style. All of these features of Splendens appealed to the young child and exercised a considerable influence on his taste. Also decisive in the formation of his personality was the fact that the vast expanse of the wooded dales and hilly countryside of his family estate was destined to be the natural surroundings for a child of subtle and refined sensibilities. All through his life he continued to commune with nature as if with spirits endowed with speech, and this Wordsworthian communion was spurred by an acute talent for observation and a sincere appreciation of nature whether in the broader vistas of the landscape or in the appeal of flowers, trees and creatures of every variety. These were the blessings bestowed on him by the groves, lakes, meadows and vales of Fonthill.²

In his early education he must have had the best of everything. He was put into the hands of a private tutor, Robert Drysdale, from whom he learnt basic Greek and Latin, philosophy, history and literature. He was also given training in architecture, drawing and music from illustrious teachers such as William Chambers and Alexander Cozens. At the age of five he is said to have received lessons in musical composition from the eight-year-old master Mozart. Emotional and wilful by nature, the boy was soon found to be precociously gifted. His godfather, the great Chatham, admitted him to be more

talented than his own son, the future Prime Minister.

Had his father lived longer his life would have followed more conventional lines. He might at least have become a more distinguished contributor to society than he was. The Alderman apparently meant his son to be a pillar of society, for he not only secured the honour of having the elder Pitt as godfather to the boy but also induced his political associates, Lord Lyttleton and Lord Camden, to interest themselves in William's future. But the early death of his father in 1770 complicated matters by placing him under the authority of his imperious and dogmatic mother who was even more obsessed than her husband with the preparations for his career. She loved her son with a fierce, energetic affection which led her to allow him an almost complete freedom from restraint while, at the same time, she instilled in the young boy a Calvinistic sense of predestination. It was unfortunate for him that his autocratic mother could not bear to part with him, for he was sent neither to boarding school nor to university to mix with his peers. Beckford himself later acknowledged that a public school would have afforded him a more salutary sense of discipline. As it was he remained in solitude at home, constantly subjected to the pressures of the censorious household composed of dowager aunts and tutors instead of the congenial society of companions of his own age. Intellectually he was well trained in all that an English gentleman might be expected to know, but the atmosphere proved to have a dampening effect on the boy's sensitive character. At any rate the absence of restraints, the Calvinistic influences, the lack of companions, the natural talents which were given every encouragement and his consciousness of his exalted position as the heir to an enormous fortune — all these factors contributed to make him arrogant and conceited as well as lonely and secretive, prone to moods of melancholy and to long periods of self-contemplation.

It was in these isolated and rather stifling conditions that, outside the prescribed program of formal education, the visionary side of Beckford's nature began to assert itself. From his earliest years he was fond of books and was given to day-dreaming. The passage of his imagination into the exotic was conceivably an easy one. His discovery of a copy of the *Arabian Nights* in the Alderman's library is supposed to have been the occasion of his initiation into the world of oriental fantasy. While some of his imagination was tinged by the romantic early history of England, he became increasingly fascinated by the imaginative world of eastern fables and tales embellished by descriptions of heroes, demons, gods, castles, towers, subterranean kingdoms and mysterious travellers from distant lands. So intense was the impression the oriental tales of marvel and magic made on William that it puzzled those who were interested in his welfare, and with good cause. Attempts were made to curb this unfavourable inclination; on one occasion Chatham strongly advised another guardian tutor, the Reverend John Lettice, to confiscate all oriental material at Fonthill. The precaution turned out to be of no avail. Beckford's enthusiasm for things Eastern remained irrepressible partly because the spirit

of wonder, of mystery, of dreamy longings had enthralled the boy's whole mind; and partly because of his Russian-born and widely travelled drawing master Cozens. Cozens was something of an orientalist as well as an artist of considerable talent. Not merely did he teach Beckford to paint, but cultivated his disciple's nascent artistic disposition in many other ways. He appears to have gone so far as to have encouraged him in those sinister subjects such as the occult and satanism which his family and guardians forbade him to pursue any further. An important influence on the lad, Cozens was in full sympathy with his passionate zeal for the oriental and became the chief recipient of an unusual series of confidential letters in Beckford's adolescence and early manhood.

Beckford did not leave England until the summer of 1777, when he went to Switzerland, ostensibly to complete his education and prepare himself for a public career. He stayed with relatives in Geneva, one of the intellectual centres of Europe in those days, and during the length of his eighteen-month stay he received practical instruction in both science and philosophy and learned Spanish, Italian and Portuguese. Though he proved his merit as a youth of marked intelligence, much of his personal correspondence at this time contains expressions of a morbid loneliness and self-absorption, combined with an arrogant contempt for his elders' interest in politics and money; and with a growing rebelliousness against the dull civilities of respectable society. To Cozens, for instance, he revealed the state of his mind as being irreconcilable with what was expected of him:

To receive Visits and to return them, to be mighty civil, well-bred, quiet, prettily Dressed and smart is to to be what your old Ladies call in England a charming Gentleman and what those of the same stamp abroad know by the appellation of *un homme comme il faut*. Such an Animal how often am I doomed to be! To pay and to receive fulsome Compliments from the Learned, to talk with modesty and precision, to sport an opinion gracefully, to adore Buffon and d'Alembert, to delight in Mathematics, logick, Geometry and the rule of Right, the *mal morale* and, the *mal physique*, to despise poetry and venerable Antiquity, murder Taste, abhor imagination, detest all the charms of Eloquence unless capable of mathematical Demonstration, and more than all to be vigorously incredulous, is to gain the reputation of good sound sense. Such an Animal I am sometimes doomed to be!³

Yet despite his disrespectful assault on the prosaic routines of polite society, his stay in Geneva was none the less an important experience in the development of his artistic talents. At home he felt inhibited by the watchful eyes of his household, whereas in Geneva he was emancipated from maternal control for the first time and had the opportunity to enrich his taste and converse freely with men of a studious or artistic turn of mind. Especially the very presence of writers, philosophers, naturalists and musicians, including Jean Huber and Voltaire, created an ambience that stimulated him further to artistic activity. Meanwhile his immersion in the lore of the East was accelerated by his mastery of oriental languages and his extensive reading on the subject. Whenever time was available he read everything he could, even in Arabic and Persian, and became

enraptured by the despotism, majesty and luxury of oriental emperors. Anything related to the East, in particular to its romance, legends, religions, together with its furnishings, botany and gardens, appealed strongly to his taste.⁴

Another point which should not go unheeded is the by no means small influence that the natural surroundings of Geneva exerted upon Beckford. His love of nature, which as seen earlier had become a fundamental part of his personality, deepened further through witnessing the spectacular Alpine scenery that overawed him. A new feeling for the mystery of the gothic was also awakened by visiting some of the old castles by the lakes. While his cultivated intellect and poetic imagination led to a fastidious avoidance of the coarser gratifications of appetite, his refined sensibility was entranced by the magnificence of the mountains with their awesome peaks and the tranquility of the lakes scattered around his Genevan home. Rather than being a gentleman who was to “suffer the encroachments of Fashion and crouch beneath the influence of solemn Idleness and approved Dissipation,”⁵ he preferred to be secluded from the responsibilities of adult life and to enjoy solitude in nature, and a security of spirit from the calls of ambition. It does not follow from this that he was permanently immersed in his own world of dreams and visions. He was quite aware of the two sides of his nature: “... my Reason or my fancy is continually employed,” he declared, “when abandoned by the one I obey the other. These two powers are my Sun and Moon. The first dispels vapours and clears up the face of things, the other throws over all Nature a dim haze and may be styled the Queen of Delusions.”⁶ In Beckford’s case reason and fancy were in fact but different aspects of the same yearning on the one hand for freedom and on the other for order and stability.

The fruits of the Genevan experience were not long in assuming a literary shape. By the end of his stay in 1778 he had written *The Long Story* (published as *The Vision* in 1930) and *An Excursion to the Grande Chartreuse*, two brilliant juvenile compositions. *An Excursion*, which was nothing but an illustration of his poetic sensibility, possesses the same pictorial quality that would later characterize his landscape design both at Fonthill and in Bath. More revealing of the roots of his oriental fantasy *Vathek*, however, was *The Long Story*, depicting the marvellous adventures of a young man. It begins with a description of the youth who leaves his family and friends to make a solitary journey to one of his favourite hills on a cloudless, moonlit night. Finding himself exposed to frightening dangers on all sides he clammers up the mountain side until he perceives, at the entrance to a great cavern, two stately figures: one a Brahmin, the other the beautiful Indian princess Nouronihar. The Brahmin, the sage-like Moisasour, declares him worthy to endure the ordeals which will earn him a taste of true knowledge and admission to an earthly paradise. Under the guidance of two other spirits the hero goes through the ordeals of fire and water and is rewarded for his fortitude by being admitted to the secret, subterranean garden unknown to any other Europeans where the sensual luxuries of Edenic realms are comingled with the pious obedience to religious order. Although the

story breaks off uncompleted, this romantic prose, with its somewhat decadent manner, bears witness to the Beckfordian sense of doom and introduces the theme of voluptuous seclusion, serving as a preliminary to his more accomplished oriental fantasy to come.

II

The return from Switzerland in December 1778 marked the end of his adolescence. We obtain an almost perfect picture of the lad during the impressionable years of the passage from youth to early manhood. Not tall, but so handsome, so talented and amusing, the young millionaire already exhibited what were to be the enduring traits of his character: the endowments of a poet; a rare command of the resources of language; a love of seclusion and mystery; a propensity for introspection and self-analysis; a sensitivity to impressions of places and scenes; and a keen sense of the ridiculous. Henceforth he was to live a life ordered according to his own desires and to allow nothing to seriously interfere with the execution of his plan. Whatever hindered his purpose was simply excluded from his life. Whether his ideal was good or bad was not the question. The essential point was that he had at the age of seventeen already mapped out the course his life was to take and that he stood sincere in his calm resolve to live it in his own way, in spite of sneers and slanders. "I am determined to enjoy my Dreams my phantasies and all my singularity, however irksome and discordant to the Worldings around. In spite of them I will be happy, will employ myself in trifles, according to their estimation"⁷

The next three years after his return to England constitute the final step on the road to the composition of *Vathek*. There is every indication that his oriental interests had attained the level of serious scholarship. His knowledge of Eastern lore — history, customs, geography and literature — was more than sufficient to fuel his imagination. Devouring anything he could lay his hands on concerning Eastern life and manners, he had become an avid reader of an extensive range of Orientalia, including the important studies of B. d'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque orientale* and the *Mogul Tales* of S. Gueullette.⁸ The following letter to his half-sister Mrs. Harvey suggests the measure of his commitment to orientalism.

Don't fancy, my Dear Sister, I am enraptured with the orientals themselves. It is the country they inhabit which claims all the admiration I bestow on that quarter of the Globe. It is their woods of Spice trees, their strange animals, their vast rivers which I delight in. The East must be better known than it is to be sufficiently liked or disliked. If you would form a tolerable judgment upon it not a single relation, not one voyage or volume of travells must be neglected, whether in Portuguese, Spanish or any other language. With this intent I am learning Portuguese and find great treasures indeed, uncommon descriptions, marvellous Histories and perilous adventures.... And why read such unmeaning Stuff? What matters it whether we are conversant with India or no? Is it not better to study the histories of Europe? I answer — these I look upon as occupa-

tions, the others as amuzements. Such is my taste; it may very easily be a lamentable one.⁹

He dedicated himself to the futility of “amuzements” to the deliberate exclusion of the usefulness of “occupations”, and this stance typified his eccentric but consistent dilettantism.

It was also during the same vivid years that this opulent youth, introverted, highly sensitive, romantic, wilful and determined, first met and developed a strange wayward partiality for William Courtenay, an effeminate, aristocratic boy of eleven whom he met through family connections. What is more Beckford became involved in another amorous tangle with the unhappily married Louisa, wife of his first cousin, Peter Beckford, and their relationship flamed into passion by the spring of 1781. To this emotional disturbance was added a conflict between his own irresponsible longings and the responsibilities which accompanied his social position of influence and fortune. Before his coming of age he was under considerable pressure to pursue a political career in parliament in conformity with the presumed tradition of his family. From his point of view, however, public activities were the business of those whose mentality was quite alien to his own:

The news of the World affects me not half so much as the chirping of a sparrow, or the rustling of withered leaves.... Ambition at present lies dormant in my breast and far from envying the triumphs of others, I exult in my happy tho' inglorious leisure. I wish not to eclipse those who retail the faded flowers of parliamentary eloquence. My senate house is a wood of pines, from whence, on a misty evening, I watch the western sky streaked with portentous red, whilst awful whispers amongst the boughs above me, foretell a series of strange events and melancholy times.¹⁰

Partly due to this conflict and partly because it was considered to be an essential process for a young man of social standing, or for some other reason, the family council decided that he should make the Grand Tour of Europe and over a period of ten months see Belgium, Holland, Germany and Austria before reaching Italy where he was to stay from the end of July 1780 till January 1781. They had hoped that when he returned from his inspection of foreign courts, he would have disengaged himself from what they regarded as a highly undesirable circle and even have developed an interest in assuming the responsibilities of manhood in the political institutions of his own country.

It was not to be. True, the visit to Italy brought him into the congenial company of a woman who was to become one of his best friends and his wisest counsellor, the charming first wife of Sir William Hamilton, Minister to the courts of Naples. Yet otherwise his travels simply promoted his proclivity for the escapism of the self-induced visionary states in which he indulged increasingly during the months preceding his return to England. By early February he was in Paris on the way back where, lingering for two months, he recoiled in horror from the prospect of embarking on a purposeful political career. He finally reached England on 14 April, but immediately before he departed from Paris he confided in Lady Hamilton as follows: “I fear I shall never be... good for anything

in the world, but composing airs, building towers, forming gardens, collecting old Japan, and writing a journey to China or the moon."¹¹ This was in part a diffident and self-defensive confession, but these prophetic words, written before reaching the age of majority, offer a curiously precise outline of his future life. It was spent exactly as he says, as if he determined to fulfill the whole of that prophecy by committing himself not to a public career but to apparently futile creative activities.

It is worth noting, therefore, that Beckford's most frustrating years proved to be the most creative period of his literary career. In spite of all the turbulent struggles and, on the other hand, all the pleasures associated with the popularity he enjoyed as much for his talents for singing, playing and mimicry, as for his position as a man of means, intelligence and charm, there were nevertheless periods of deep introspection and hours of solid industry. Beckford's first published work, *Biographical Memoirs of Extraordinary Painters*, appeared in 1780. The book was a clever mixture of art criticism and parody of the Dutch and Flemish schools of painting. Not without overtones of private fantasy it is a high-spirited piece of intermittent brilliance, displaying the satiric skill which was derived from the more rational side of his personality. From a ten-month Grand Tour of Europe he brought back notebooks full of daily entries which he compiled into a romantic travel book in letter form, entitled *Dreams, Waking Thoughts and Incidents*. Once suppressed under family pressure and later reissued in a revised and slightly mutilated form as *Italy; with Spain and Portugal* (1834), the work best demonstrates his peculiar way of approaching an object "from its most picturesque side."¹² It is not so much a description of a sentimental journey as an artful record of impressions, observations, fancies and moments of cynical humour, in response to people, places and especially landscapes, which had a lasting impact on Beckford's teeming imagination.

The true marks of genius in this literary millionaire are strongest, however, in the creation of *Vathek* that he later described as "the only production of mine which I am not ashamed of, or with which I am not disgusted."¹³ We have seen that his oriental studies had already taken on the character of serious scholarship. Beckford's mind was by now so deeply orientalized that, as J. W. Oliver wrote, his next and greatest attempt at the Eastern tale was bound to come in due course.¹⁴ All Beckford needed was the proper incentive and that was provided by a party which he gave during the Christmas of 1781. The party was privately held, with the doors locked and the windows shuttered, in the extraordinary Egyptian Hall at Fonthill Splendens. The guests were mostly young women and boys: William Courtenay and Louisa Beckford with her sisters were invited, and so were Alexander Cozens and Samuel Henley, a Harrow master, who was to play an important role in the premature publication of *Vathek*. Music was performed by famous Italian singers; and the whole scene, replete with exotic aromas and veiled in clouds of incense, was suffused by the special "necromantic" lighting created by Philip de Louthembourg, who revolutionized English stage design and lighting while working under

Garrick and Sheridan at Drury Lane. Beckford retained a vivid recollection of the “voluptuous festival” for years afterwards:

...I still feel warmed and irradiated by the recollections of that strange, necromantic light which Louthembourg had thrown over what absolutely appeared a realm of Fairy, or rather, perhaps, a Demon Temple deep beneath the earth set apart for tremendous mysteries — and yet how soft, how genial was this quiet light. [...]the choir of low-toned melodious voices continued to soothe our ear, and that every sense might in turn receive its blandishment tables covered with delicious viands and fragrant flowers — glided forth, by the aid of mechanism at stated intervals, from the richly draped, and amply curtained recesses of the enchanted precincts. The glowing haze investing every object, the mystic look, the vastness, the intricacy of this vaulted labyrinth occasioned so bewildering an effect that it became impossible for any one to define — at the moment — where he stood, where he had been, or to whither he was wandering — such was the confusion — the perplexity so many illuminated storys of infinitely varied apartments gave rise to. It was, in short, the realization of romance in its most extravagant intensity. No wonder such scenery inspired the description of the Halls of Eblis.¹⁵

Of the ensuing circumstances of the tale’s origins and publication in 1786 the truth is unlikely ever to be known. According to the modern reconstruction of events, Beckford presently left Fonthill for his London residence; and some time in January of 1782 when his mind was in a whirl of excitement after the party of unexampled magnificence and mystery he composed *Vathek* in French in one sitting, or, in his own phrase, in “three days and two nights of hard labour.”¹⁶ Although there is no evidence to corroborate this statement, it implies that the draft version was conceived and written between January and mid-May of 1782.¹⁷ From that time onwards, at any event, Beckford continued to revise and elaborate the manuscript; and during the next few years when he was frequently on the Continent he was all the time reporting on his progress at intervals to Samuel Henley, who eventually received the manuscript with a commission to translate it into English. Yet in spite of strict instructions not to publish the English before the French had appeared he perversely issued the translation anonymously in 1786, claiming in the preface that the original was in Arabic. Beckford was obliged to respond by issuing a French edition at Lausanne and another in Paris in 1787, but he had been robbed of due recognition for the authorship of the work which was to be his major claim to literary fame.

III

Turning from the circumstances of composition to the work itself, *Vathek*, like his earlier tale, is also the story of a journey, this time the Arabian Caliph’s journey to an Inferno of eternal torture among the subterranean treasures of Eblis, the Oriental Satan. The story opens with a description of the dynastic power and splendour of the despotic Caliph Vathek, grandson of Haroun-al-Raschild. A man of unbounded curiosity and

megalomania, the young Caliph has no scruples in employing his wealth and authority to become the master of the universe in power, riches and pleasures as well as in knowledge. Knowledge is, however, for him only a form of mental oppression, for the Caliph, well versed in the mysteries of astrology, has a Faustian spirit. Not satisfied with seeking to gratify each of his five senses separately in the five grandiose palaces he has built, he constructs a lofty tower of fifteen hundred stairs, which is a symbol of “the insolent curiosity of penetrating the secrets of heaven” (4).¹⁸

His pride arrived at its height, when having ascended, for the first time, the fifteen hundred stairs of his tower, he cast his eyes below, and beheld men not larger than pismires; mountains, than shells; and cities, than bee-hives. The idea, which such an elevation inspired of his own grandeur, completely bewildered him: he was almost ready to adore himself; till, lifting his eyes upward, he saw the stars as high above him as they appeared when he stood on the surface of the earth. He consoled himself, however, for this intruding and unwelcome perception of his littleness, with the thought of being great in the eyes of others; and flattered himself that the light of his mind would extend beyond the reach of his sight, and extort from the stars the decrees of his destiny (4).

The great prophet, Mahomet, beholds Vathek’s presumption from his Seventh Heaven but he says to his attendants, “Let us leave him to himself... let us see to what lengths his folly and impiety will carry him: if he run into excess, we shall know how to chastise him” (4).

The story develops with the arrival of a hideous Giaour who has little trouble persuading Vathek to repudiate orthodoxy in favour of heresy. The Giaour assures him that in return he will be granted admission to the subterranean palace of Eblis beneath the ruins of Istakar, in which lie concealed the treasures of the preadamite kings and the mysterious talismans that control the world. The insatiable Caliph yields to enticement; the price required to appease the Giaour’s thirst is the blood of fifty children, whom Vathek himself selects for the sacrifice. Seduced by the prospect of infinite wealth and power he then gathers a shimmering cavalcade of wives, eunuchs and servants of every kind and sets forth from his capital, Samarah, to the ruined city of Istakar.

The journey is undertaken with an immense retinue and unparalleled grandeur. Halfway through the expedition the Caliph’s pompous cavalcade comes under serious attack from storms and wild beasts. The whole party is threatened with destruction when emissaries of a pious emir arrive to extend to the Caliph the hospitality of their good master. Though he has been warned by the Giaour not to enter any dwelling en route to his destination, he disobeys the injunction and visits the good Emir Fakreddin. This gives him a rare chance to mend his ways by terminating his expedition, yet instead he compensates for his own violation of the prohibition by seducing the Emir’s bewitching daughter Nouronihar. She has been betrothed to her cousin Gulchenrouz, “the most delicate and lovely creature in the world” (65) and the two are extremely fond of each other. Her deep attachment to him, however, fades quickly in the face of the stately

figure of the Caliph; her newly kindled passion is joined to a rising ambition when a vision reveals to her that the Caliph, “who is destined to enjoy the treasures of the pre-adamite sultans,” is totally besotted with her (71). Distressed and frightened by Vathek’s wickedness the good Emir attempts in vain to hide Nouronihar and Gulchenrouz in a distant retreat; Vathek comes across her by chance, and henceforth she becomes his mistress and accompanies him on his blasphemous expedition.

Vathek performs various acts of infamy and impiety during the remaining leg of the journey to atone for his failure in pursuing a direct course to the subterranean palace. But we can pass over these to the point at which they come within sight of the dark summits of the mountains of Istakar. Vathek and Nouronihar are given a final warning to repent and return by the Genius, emissary of Mahomet in the disguise of a shepherd at the foot of the mountains beyond which “Eblis and his accursed dives hold their infernal empire” (104). Overwhelmed with fear, Vathek is on the verge of prostrating himself at the feet of the shepherd when his pride once again prevails; he ignores the shepherd’s reprimand and thus declares with Marlovian passion:

Whoever thou art, withhold thy useless admonitions: thou wouldst either delude me, or art thyself deceived... I have traversed a sea of blood, to acquire a power, which will make thy equals tremble: deem not that I shall retire, when in view of the port; or, that I will relinquish her, who is dearer to me than either my life, or thy mercy. Let the sun appear! let him illumine my career! it matters not where it may end (105).

The tale approaches its climax as Vathek and Nouronihar enter the realm of Istakar. As the two lovers step into the ruins, a rock platform suddenly opens, disclosing a staircase of polished marble lighted on both sides by burning torches. They descend to find an ebony portal where the Giaour awaits them holding in his hand the key that will allow them to enter the palace. Henceforward to the moment when they find they have been trapped by the Giaour there is a steady crescendo of lurid gloom and awful sublimity. As Marc Chadourne observes, whatever was witty and ridiculous in the early part of the tale vanishes and “the pen one had thought Voltairian is dipped into blacker and blacker ink: it is the pen of Edgar Poe, of Baudelaire, of Lautreamont.”¹⁹

The Caliph and Nouronihar beheld each other with amazement, at finding themselves in a place, which, though roofed with a vaulted ceiling, was so spacious and lofty, that, at first, they took it for an immeasurable plain. But their eyes, at length, growing familiar to the grandeur of the surrounding objects, they extended their view to those at a distance; and discovered rows of columns and arcades, which gradually diminished, till they terminated in a point radiant as the sun, when he darts his last beams athwart the ocean....

In the midst of this immense hall, a vast multitude was incessantly passing; who severally kept their right hands on their hearts; without once regarding any thing around them. They had all, the livid paleness of death. Their eyes, deep sunk in their sockets, resembled those phosphoric meteors, that glimmer by night, in places of interment. Some stalked slowly on; absorbed in profound reverie: some shrieking with

agony, ran furiously about like tigers, wounded with poisoned arrows; whilst others, grinding their teeth in rage, foamed along more frantic than the wildest maniac. They all avoided each other; and, though surrounded by a multitude that no one could number, each wandered at random, unheedful of the rest, as if alone on a desert where no foot had trodden (109–10).

The Giaour leads the terror-stricken lovers to the presence of Eblis, “a young man, whose noble and regular features seemed to have been tarnished by malignant vapours. In his large eyes appeared both pride and despair” (111). This Miltonic fallen angel encourages them to enjoy all the treasures afforded by his dominions and to visit the hall of the tombs of the preadamite kings where they hear the history of Soliman Ben Daoud (the Biblical Solomon). As the ancient king raises his hands towards heaven, “the Caliph discerned through his bosom, which was transparent as crystal, his heart enveloped in flames” (114). This is the eternal torment of presumptuous unbelievers; Vathek now calls on Mahomet for mercy, but he learns that no mercy exists in this “abode of vengeance and despair” (114). The awful and final judgment is then pronounced: “Their hearts immediately took fire, and they, at once, lost the most precious gift of heaven:—HOPE” (119). Thus at the end of all of his “unrestrained passions and atrocious deeds” (120) the Caliph finally discovers the vanity of the riches and wonders that he sees there, and suffers the punishment for his crime in the form of eternal torture.

In its construction *Vathek* owes much to the literary traditions of Western culture. The work retells the old story of the man of power, in this case an oriental Faust, who, obsessed with gratifying all of his desires, sells his soul to the Prince of Darkness, only to learn that he has lost the capacity to enjoy his gains. The Faustian pact with the agent of the devil, the intervention of a good angel in disguise, the torments of the damned—all these were known to the European tradition. To what extent Beckford was conscious of following the tradition there is no saying, but it is highly probable that he had become acquainted with the subject through Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*.²⁰ Another significant influence on *Vathek* was Milton. Like most eighteenth-century authors Beckford had read Milton’s poetry with ardour. An Elysian mountain near Samarah to which Vathek often betakes himself, for example, appears to be a Beckfordian Arcadia modelled on the great example of the earlier poet. Similarly the poet’s representation of the Pandemonium inspired Beckford’s description of Hell no less than the Egyptian hall of Fonthill Splendens. It offered him a quarry for his imaginative experiments, and the Halls of Eblis often achieve a Miltonic sense of awe and sublimity. The personality of Milton’s Satan, Beckford’s favourite literary hero, is evidently echoed in the striking characterization of Eblis, a fallen archangel rather than a clownish demon.

Taken as a whole, however, *Vathek* holds among eighteenth-century English fictions a unique and deservedly high place. To its first reviewers Beckford’s tale seemed an admirable imitation of the oriental tales now in vogue. The peculiarly Arabian character

of the tale was a common focus of attention in the leading literary journals. *A New Review* in June and July 1786 (ix.410–12, x. 33–9), for instance, praised the moral intention, the character portrayal and the knowledge Beckford displayed of the manners and customs of the East.²¹ Yet Beckford's treatment of oriental elements went beyond the tradition in several ways. Earlier examples of English orientalism paled beside *Vathek* with its urbane and lucid descriptions of an exotic sensuality and its rich store of Eastern allusions, phrases and imagery, evoking the colours, forms, fragrances and melodies of the East.²² Needless to say Beckford's work was ahead of its time insofar as it rested on a scholarship whose authenticity was rivalled only by the academic studies of scholars such as Sir William Jones.

If there were no previous specimens of the oriental tale superior to *Vathek*, then there was also little which linked it with contemporary Gothic tendencies in the novel.²³ It is a commonplace of criticism to assume that Beckford's romance should be included under the category of the Gothic novel. The tendency has indeed been to discuss the work along with other examples of this genre; the character of the protagonist, the sense of terror and nightmare, and the dramatic machinery of self-destructive psychic energies are what chiefly connects Beckford's story with the Gothic in English fiction. But despite its share in some features of the gothic tradition Beckford's tale is, in other respects, quite distinctive. *Vathek*, with Faustian curiosity, seeks knowledge and experience at any expense, but unlike Horace Walpole's Manfred he lives undisturbed by conscience; till the moment when Hell ensnares him he persists without the slightest compunction in defying convention and the laws of Heaven, forever in the grip of his own urges and appetites. Apparently Beckford's interest does not lie with his hero's moral choices but in the extravagant reality of his pursuit of gratification. While the eternal childishness of Gulchenrouz's dubious, amoral innocence is recommended as some source of happiness in itself, the ruthless Caliph ushers him (and the reader) into another world of black magic and occult arts, of sadism and androgynous dreams, and eventually into a Hell of infinite and everlasting torment and exhaustion which Jorge Luis Borges aptly termed "the first truly atrocious Hell in literature."²⁴ Perhaps no better elucidation of the distinctive characteristics of *Vathek* should be sought than to note that it embodies in its organic whole the dualities innate in Beckford himself: the orthodox coexists with the heretical; the magnificent with the farcical; refined taste with predilection for crudity; fear of damnation with a defiant sense that the hero's quest is to a not inconsiderable extent justifiable; the dream of seclusion and prelapsarian innocence with the indulgence of a sadistic and voluptuous sweetness; and a patrician aloofness with a decadent persuasion that the surface and the peripheral have a texture, bouquet and depth of their own.²⁵

Similarly Beckford's treatment of biographical material conceals no less an ingenuity of workmanship. Enough has been said already as to the autobiographical character of the tale. The original inspiration for the story is presumed to have come to him, as we

have seen, at the beginning of 1782 when visions of the voluptuous gathering at Splendens the previous Christmas haunted his thoughts. An echo of the author's emotional entanglement with Louisa and Courtenay, experiences either unlawful or indicative of an uninhibited sensibility, may be heard, and is indeed magnified in the Eastern air of *Vathek*: Nouronihar is an orientalized Louisa, Gulchenrouz an allegorized Courtenay and the Caliph an imaginative projection of Beckford himself. Also, beneath the obtrusive comic tone and the measured flow of urbane and lucid prose there lingers the sense of doom which the author had imbibed from the Calvinistic influences of his childhood and from which he was never completely to be released. Furthermore Beckford himself was prepared to admit later that real persons from his domestic circle were portrayed in the story; and most critics have not hesitated to emphasize the autobiographical flavour of the work. Insofar as the genesis and development of the work goes, *Vathek* can be interpreted as a work grounded in the author's own situation: originating from his awareness of the dangers concomitant upon his excessive wealth and luxurious lifestyle, his poetical and rhapsodic mentality and his sexual ambivalence.

Ultimately this approach may be justified, but at the same time we do well to remember that even in the most straightforward autobiography convention and circumstance have worked a transformation upon personal experience; the act of writing is itself an experience that can function to change the author's personality. And if this holds good for the simplest attempts at self-examination, how much more applicable is it then to a well-crafted work like *Vathek*, in which we are presented with still more sophisticated transformations. The allegedly autobiographical figures in Beckford's fiction—from *Vathek*, Nouronihar, Gulchenrouz, and even to the tortured Solomon and the melancholy Eblis—ought to be read as personae: as masks through which the author mystifies, masks which often disguise more than they expose. To be sure the fact cannot be gainsaid that a series of rhapsodic visions recur from time to time, as in the earlier pieces, but through a controlled, detached tone and the use of tradition they are now handled in a more convincing and technically accomplished fashion. Instead of the emotional outpourings that often mar the works of his literary apprenticeship, there predominates a lucidity and flexibility of style that is the hallmark of fine workmanship. It is the virtuosity of this craftsmanship that enhances the tale's dramatic impact and in general underlies its "masterly architecture" and "aesthetic finesse".²⁶

Vathek is a remarkable achievement bequeathed to English literature by one of the most wealthy, cultivated and eccentric Englishmen ever to have lived. But for this single work alone Beckford's talent and extravagance would not have provoked such admiration from so colourful a series of prominent literary figures, including Byron, Poe, Mallarmé, Swinburne and Borges. After the writing of the tale the author himself lived the life which he had always intended to live, and continued to be both much approved

and much abused. He applied himself indefatigably to the collection of “old Japan”, paintings, furniture, books and works of art of every description. The towers and gardens all came true both at Fonthill and in Bath. Before he had lived half of his life a great part of his fabulous fortune had been spent, but as *The Times* newspaper of 6 July 1822 put it he was “one of the very few possessors of great wealth who have honestly tried to spend it poetically.”²⁷

In terms of the canons of English taste there is no denying that Beckford had something foreign about him; he carried the English taste to such an extreme that it went beyond the borders of Englishness and became un-English. This may explain in part his dedicated orientalism, as well as his appreciation of what remained of a world that had already become extinct elsewhere save in Spain and Portugal. Some inherent and hereditary affinity which drew him to an understanding of these two nations was later to assume a literary form in the published edition of his letters. The other approach, however, is to see Beckford as an inheritor of the old European culture, “the most soothing subject for a nostalgic mind to contemplate”²⁸; and for that matter we may feel sure Lafcadio Hearn was also right in saying that Beckford “belonged to a type of humanity that is not likely to reappear in all the future of civilization,” for the current tides of materialism, industry and commercial middle-class values are opposed to those conditions which enabled Beckford to shine out of the sumptuous yet courageous glory of solitude.²⁹ To the non-English mind Beckford, with all his opulence, extravagance and love of solitude, might appear to be one of the paragons of English romanticism. *Vathek* is now, and will remain, therefore, not only a demonstrative manifestation of a great talent too rarely exercised, but also an eloquent testimony to the undisputed dilettantism of “the most brilliant amateur in English literature.”³⁰

Notes

- 1 Sacheverell Sitwell, for example, highly esteemed Beckford’s Portuguese works. See his *Beckford and Beckfordism* (London: Duckworth, 1930), p. 21.
- 2 Brian Fothergill, *Beckford of Fonthill* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 23.
- 3 W. Beckford to A. Cozens, 3 October 1779, quoted in Lewis Melville, *The Life and Letters of William Beckford of Fonthill* (London: Heinemann, 1910), pp. 31–32.
- 4 See, for instance, Melville, pp. 42–43.
- 5 W. Beckford to unidentified correspondent, 4 December 1778, quoted in Melville, p. 65.
- 6 J. W. Oliver, *The Life of William Beckford* (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), p. 31.
- 7 Melville, pp. 65–66.
- 8 See Robert Gemmett, *William Beckford* (Boston: Halls, 1977), p. 79, and Martha Pike Conant, *The Oriental Tale in England in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Octagon Books, 1966), pp. 37–38.

- 9 Oliver, p. 23.
- 10 Melville, pp. 83-84.
- 11 W. Beckford to Lady Hamilton, 12 April 1781, quoted in Melville, p. 105.
- 12 Richard Garnett, *Dictionary of National Biography*, II, p. 84.
- 13 W. Beckford to S. Henley, 18 November 1783, quoted in Fothergill, p. 128.
- 14 Oliver, p. 100.
- 15 *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 94.
- 17 For an account of the complicated history of the text, see *William Beckford: Vathek*, ed. by Roger Lonsdale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. xii-xviii.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 3. All page references to this work hereafter are based on this edition and appear in parentheses in this essay.
- 19 Quoted by Mario Praz in his Introductory Essay for *Three Gothic Novels*, ed. by Peter Fairclough (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p. 22.
- 20 See Ernest Baker, *The History of the English Novel* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1929), p.74.
- 21 Lonsdale, p. xx.
- 22 Byron acknowledged his indebtedness to *Vathek* in a note to his Turkish tale, *The Giaour* (1813): "...for correctness of costume, beauty of description, and power of imagination, it far surpasses all European imitations.... As an Eastern tale, even Rasselas must bow before it; his 'Happy Valley' will not bear a comparison with the 'Hall of Eblis'." Quoted in Gemmett, p. 140.
- 23 See Lonsdale, pp. xxv-xxvi.
- 24 Jorge Luis Borges, *Other Inquisitions 1937-1952*, trans. by Ruth L. C. Sims (Austin: University of Texas, 1964), p. 139, quoted in Gemmett, p. 93.
- 25 See *Vathek and Other Stories: A William Beckford Reader*, ed. with an Introduction by Malcolm Jack (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), p. xxi.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. xxxii.
- 27 Quoted in James Lees-Milne, *William Beckford* (Tisbury: Compton Russell, 1976), p. 7.
- 28 Sitwell, p. 22.
- 29 Lafcadio Hearn, *Some Strange English Literary Figures of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. by R. Tanabe (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1927; repr. Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), p. 40.
- 30 Garnett, p. 84.

Résumé

By general admission William Beckford is to be counted among the most remarkable of the whole company of English eccentrics. The air of mystery that has enveloped his inscrutable and unconventional personality has tended to cause a great many tales, invariably defamatory and usually ill-founded, to be disseminated, probably on no surer grounds than gossip. He was, however, much more than a mere eccentric: rather a man of versatility. Besides being a traveller and cosmopolitan he was one of the greatest English connoisseurs and bibliophiles of his day. He was also the builder of Fonthill Abbey, one of the most splendid follies, and a landscape designer of no mean order of the 519 acres of grounds. Furthermore he was no less indisputably a man of letters of some distinction. His eminent literary accomplishments, though few in number, gave ample proof of the marked creative talent that he had been born with.

The present essay is concerned with the early career of this literary eccentric which culminates in the creation of *Vathek*. Born in 1760 the only legitimate boy of a well-known Lord Mayor of London who, through his West Indian plantations, had amassed a huge private fortune, it was intended that he should, in both the social and political spheres, add to the honour of his family tradition. Yet he would not be forced into the conventional mould; instead he was determined to enjoy his dreams, his fantasies and all his idiosyncrasy, in spite of sneers and calumnies. There is an abundance of evidence to show his unconventional zeal for the exotic and the beautiful, especially the oriental. It naturally follows that Beckford, with his oriental enthusiasm, was in due course bound to produce an authentic Eastern romance; hence, *Vathek*, his strange contribution to eighteenth century English literature. But for this single book Beckford's talent and extravagance would have been consigned to lasting oblivion. By reason of it they will remain chronicled in the manuals of English literary history. Our primary aim here is to articulate the main facts of his personal history leading to the composition of *Vathek*, before we consider the literary merit of this work which has been his chief title to renown.