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—
Ca' Foscari
Dorsoduro 3246
30123 Venezia

The Halls of Eblis The Uncanny in William Beckford's *Vathek*

Relatore

Ch.mo Prof. Flavio Gregori

Correlatore

Ch.ma Prof.ssa Enrica Villari

Laureando

Valerjana Hysolakož

Matricola 828941

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THE HALLS OF EBLIS

**THE UNCANNY IN WILLIAM BECKFORD'S
*VATHEK***



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INTRODUCTION



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Introduction

Vathek is one of the most interesting novels of the eighteenth century, not only for its contribution to the Gothic group of novels, but also for linking two extremely important eras of English literature: the eighteenth-century oriental tale and the romantic novel of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, in *Vathek* there is a considerable accuracy of oriental details, and the scenes of terror engross the reader to flip quickly through the pages.

This thesis means to display not only the main subjects that the novel embodies such as exoticism, uncanny, Gothic elements, dream and delusion, but also the autobiographical elements which are spread throughout the book, as much as possible.

The first chapter will open with a summary of Beckford's life. It is important to have a look at the different stages of his long life, in order to understand which were the factors that made him one of the most controversial characters of his century. He was known not only for his wealth, but especially for his ambiguous life and the homosexual scandal of 1784, which forced him to leave his beloved England for a good part of his life.

His literary creations have not been appreciated in the same way as they are nowadays. This has probably been also one of the reasons for his poor artistic flair, however, we will argue this later on. Beckford's evaluation as a writer came only when Lord Byron expressed his admiration for *Vathek*.



In order to understand Beckford and his work, it is necessary to consider society in the eighteenth century and the perception of one's identity. In the century of enlightenment, there have been the most important changes in human identity and in the formation of an awareness of the self. Furthermore, these are the years of French Revolution and the end of French monarchy, those of American Revolution and the beginning of the end of British colonialism, those of industrialisation and of the accentuation of abolitionist theories.

Moreover, the eighteenth century highlighted a new culture of sensibility and gender differences. Modernity reversed in European culture and changed the perception of gender, class and race, establishing the fundamentals of a new society. It influenced Beckford's life and his literary creativity much more than it could have done the previous century.

Afterwards, in the second chapter the main topic will be the genesis of *Vathek* and its inception, which Beckford said to have started during a Christmas party at Fonthill. It is seen as a kind of dream or nightmare containing supernatural elements, changing scenes and settings in some kind of blurred images, characteristics of the Gothic novel. This is why it is similar to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, although unlike it, *Vathek* is thought to have been written under the effects of drugs used on that Christmas night.

However, the author's 'way of being inspired', is similar to other poets and writers of that period like Baudelaire, De Quincey, Coleridge etc. Furthermore, the publishing story of this book is something extraordinary. For instance, the fact that Beckford wrote it in French was not something usual for an English writer.

As soon as *Vathek* was created, he entrusted the manuscript to Samuel Henley, who was supposed to publish its translation soon after the first French edition. Nevertheless, Henley did not follow Beckford's instructions and published the book as a mere translation of an Arabian manuscript, which he had presumably found and translated. Beckford was in Switzerland at the time, unable to get back



in England because of the Powderham scandal, and of course, claiming the authorship would not have been helpful for the success of his work. Therefore, he hurried up to have a first edition in French in Lausanne (soon after in Paris), which he achieved in 1787.

The reason why Beckford wrote the novel in French is to be searched in the oriental image of the book. Since the oriental tale, in that period, was far more known and florid in France than in England (where all novels with an oriental background were just translations of French editions), Beckford wanted his work to be read by a public already acquainted to the oriental tale, and French readers were perfect.

The third chapter will argue about *Vathek* as a Gothic novel, with its elements of terror and uncanny that the reader experiences while flipping through the pages. In the first part, I will try to give a general idea of the uncanny in literature and the anxiety that a horror tale causes to the reader. Furthermore, it is important to refer to psychoanalysis, especially to Freud, in order to understand the idea of uncanny and its origins.

The beginning of the tale has more of a sarcastic tone, which we can perceive because of the use of hyperbole that the author has chosen. A particular attention it is given to the perturbing elements in *Vathek*, the pact with the Devil and the descending to the underworld. Here, we find something terrifying, the most extraordinary piece that a Gothic novel has ever shown, the Halls of Eblis.

As regard to *Vathek's* underworld, it is a version of Hell where the reader is stuck in those images of terror and participates emotionally to the suffering of the punishment that those souls have to expiate. The whole novel is like a dream, a succession of images that change and alternate continuously. Therefore, the Halls of Eblis become the dominion of uncanny.

The fourth chapter will be analysing the autobiographical elements in *Vathek*, which are quite obvious in some parts of the narration and hidden more carefully



in other parts of it. This analysis will begin with the description of Vathek's mother Carathis as an absolute authority, who deals with dark arts. Afterwards, I will concentrate in the incestuous relationship between Gulchenrouz and Nouronihar, which relates to Beckford's doubtful relationship with his cousin Louisa. Furthermore, the episode of the Giaour's ransom: the 50 young boys intended to be his banquet, where we can see Beckford's tendency to homosexuality (examples of William Courtenay, Dom Pedro, Gregorio Franchi etc.).

These autobiographical elements show up also in the *Episodes of Vathek: The story of prince Alasi and the princess Firouzkah, The story of prince Barkiarokh, The story of the princess Zulkais and the prince Kalilah*. They tell the story of some characters which Vathek and Nouronihar meet in the Halls of Eblis. The representation of human vices and perversions are concentrated in one of the squared rooms of the Halls.

Vathek is considered as the last oriental tale, the one that marks the end of Eastern influence in literature. Beckford's literary creativity and his imagination have influenced his life as much as his life has influenced his works. A good example of this is his attempt to build Fonthill Abbey in some kind of mixture between the oriental and the Gothic style. Moreover, his activity as a collector of rare books and objects of art make him far more interesting as a character than many others of his time. All his life, he tried to create his own world, away from English society and all of his enemies.



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CHAPTER I



Chapter I

1.1 *Beckford's background*

William Thomas Beckford was born on 29 September 1759 at Fonthill Abbey, near Salisbury. He was the only legitimate son of the twice Lord Mayor of London, William Beckford, one of the richest men in England with a notorious influence in the political life of the country and large plantations in Jamaica. His father was also known for his liberal political ideas and for standing up to King George III.

At the death of Peter Beckford, young Beckford's grandfather, his possessions counted "[...] no less than twenty-four plantations and twelve hundred slaves of his own in the island."¹ Later on, William Beckford junior inherited this fortune. He was considered England's wealthiest son, as Alexander Boyd, one of his biographers, has called him in a book of the same title. His mother was a Hamilton, grand-daughter of the Earl of Abecorn. She was first married with a Jamaican planter from whom she had Elizabeth, Beckford's half-sister.

Coming from such an important background, William Beckford had to be educated in order to achieve a significant place in politics as his father did before him. Therefore, soon after his father's death in 1770, Beckford's mother tried to give to her son the best education by making available to him private tutors like

¹ Cyrus, Redding, *Memoirs of William Beckford of Fonthill, Author of Vathek*, London: C.J. Skeet, 1859. Vol.1, p. 7.



Alexander Cozens, who could give the essential knowledge a young man heir of a great fortune like Beckford might need. His drawing master fomented his love for the Oriental world, which had already started during his childhood, since his own father had built and furnished his estate with Oriental elements.

Cozens (1717-1786), born in Russia, son of the shipbuilder of the czar, known for having created a particular method of drawing called 'blotting' (blots of paint dropped at random on the paper), taught him Persian and Arabic. Sir William Chambers (1723-1796), a Scottish architect who knew China quite well, taught him the principles of architecture. Their tales and experiences motivated young Beckford to read and wish to learn more about Orient. Whereas, Latin and Greek lessons were given by a certain Reverend Lettice who tried, in vain though, to divert his attention from the *Arabian Nights* to Virgil and other Latin authors.

Young Beckford had a good memory, strong will, application, and facility in acquiring languages². However, taking private lessons with his tutors at home and having an apprehensive mother, who had tried to keep him under control, made him spend his former youth in complete solitude and isolation from other children of his age. His biographers have assumed that his mother's obsessive solicitousness has been decisive in orienting his desire in a homosexual direction. In order to finish his education, at the age of seventeen, his mother decided to send him to Switzerland accompanied by his tutor. By that time, Beckford had already composed his first work *Biographical Memoirs of Extraordinary Painters*, a satire on the life of some imaginary painters. He was inspired by the collection of paintings that Beckford's father had at Fonthill where young Beckford grew up. This first composition shows quite obviously the literary genius of a seventeen-year-old young man with a notorious imagination and a thorough knowledge of art and satire. The poetic descriptions of landscapes and paintings are the main

² *Memoirs of William Beckford of Fonthill, Author of "Vathek"*, The North American Review, Vol. 90, No. 187 (Apr., 1860). p. 300



theme of this book. In Geneva, where Beckford received his higher education, he came across figures like Voltaire, who appreciated his father's liberalism, Saussure and Bonnet. Since his mother was worried because of these attendances, she made him go back at Fonthill one year later.

In December 1778, Beckford travelled in England. During this English tour, he spent some time at Powderham Castle, where he got acquainted to Courtenay, the eleven-year-old boy, who would turn to be his public life ruin. He got infatuated with the young boy; yet, he was not going to be the only scandal for Beckford. Before his following tour in Europe, he met Louisa Beckford, his cousin's wife, whom he had a romantic relationship with. In spring 1780, he set out for the continent with his tutors starting his European tour. The first visit was paid to the Low Countries of which he was not very enthusiastic.

Beckford's attention was mostly on Gothic buildings that he observed with the eye of a critic and of course, his love for nature is evident in his descriptions of landscapes. The same story went on with Germany. What made the difference in his Continental tour was Italy. His Italian tour included Venice, Bologna, Sienna, Pisa, Padua, Florence, Naples and Rome. This journey inspired *Dreams, Waking Thoughts, and Incidents; in a Series of Letters from various parts of Europe*. It is a romantic travel-book, which Beckford was forced not to publish because of its compromising contents.

Everything that Beckford wrote have had autobiographical contents and as regard to this book, the public could have been recognizing the romance with his cousin Louisa. Since his family wanted him to be a politician, just as his father before him, he had to avoid everything that could be considered dangerous for his political life.

Soon after the Grand Tour, in 1781, he organized a Christmas party at Fonthill. His cousin Louisa and the thirteen-year-old William Courtenay were participating amongst other youths. In a letter published after Beckford's death, he confesses



that *Vathek* had been conceived during those two nights of partying under the effects of drugs, even though he does not expressively use the word. That is the most important moment in Beckford's life, since it was the inspiration for his masterpiece. After the second tour of Italy, in 1783, his family was concerned for his dissipated behaviour and pressed him to get married.

Therefore, in May, he got married to Lady Margaret Gordon, daughter of the Earl of Aboyne, despite his adversity towards marriage. He was not very enthusiastic about this marriage, however, his wife succeeded in gaining his affection and respect. His reputation grew and in 1784 and he was elected Member of Parliament for Wells. Yet, his ambition went higher and helped by his former guardian Lord Thurlow, he pointed to a barony.

The young couple left for Switzerland for their honeymoon and returned only in March. Before leaving, Beckford entrusted the manuscript of *Vathek* to Samuel Henley, so that he could translate it from the original French into English.

Nevertheless, while they were in Switzerland, Henley betrayed him and published the manuscript without naming Beckford as its author by claiming the text to be just a mere translation from an Arabian existing one. While in his honeymoon, he finds out about Henley's treachery and hastens to publish *Vathek* in French in Lausanne, as 'The author of *Vathek*' and later on in Paris.

While his best work was being stolen from him, Beckford was powerless to claim his rights and the press campaign launched against him in November 1784, made his dream of a baronial title come to nothing. He was accused of adultery with young Courtenay. Despite his wife's support, English society condemned him and his reputation was gone forever.

They retired at Fonthill, however, bored of complete isolation, the young couple went back to Switzerland and stayed there until Margaret's death after giving birth to their second daughter Susan, in May 1786. That was another opportunity for Beckford's enemies to attack him by suggesting that he was responsible for



her death, which made Beckford angrier towards society and this became “his most marked characteristic”.³

Soon after his wife's death, in order to distract himself from his grief, Beckford made a tour of Switzerland. When he returned to Fonthill, his family tried to send him at his plantations in Jamaica, which would have helped his reputation to recover by staying away from English society for a while.

However, Beckford never reached the West Indies, he stopped in Lisbon instead. Portugal became his home for a few months. With his wife dead, Beckford was an easy prey of his desires, so when he met the young heir of the Marialvas, he could not keep himself from noting about his (apparently innocent) meetings with Pedro Marialva.

While in Portugal, he tried to get introduced to the Portuguese queen, so that he could start his campaign for his return to England. It was unsuccessful. After this bitter taste of failure, Beckford went to Spain where he stayed until 1788. He also wrote a journal during his stay in south Europe: *The journal of William Beckford in Portugal and Spain*, which was to be published later.

In 1788, he spent some time in Paris becoming a testimony of the fall of the Bastille, however, he left for Switzerland again, for his safety. Yet, he kept in touch with some of his friends staying in France, in order to be informed about the revolution. France was his shelter from Englishmen and he could not stay away too long, so he returned to Paris in 1791 and stayed there until 1793.

Fonthill was his home but he did not stay long there. After only six months in England, he sailed to Portugal for his second stay, which lasted two years. This second visit gave birth to another journal, *Recollections of an Excursion to the Monasteries of Alcobaça and Batalha*, which he began to write many years later, in 1834.

³ Alexander, Boyd, Introduction and editing of, *The journal of William Beckford in Portugal and Spain 1787-1788*. London: Rupert Hart Davis, 1954. p. 13.



This was also his most literary productive period. He published two anonymous novels *Modern Novel Writing* and *Azemia*, which are a bit of ironic towards Beckford's contemporary writers. However, what was more important in these years is his effort to mediate peace between France and England. In 1798-1799, he sailed for the third time to Portugal, even though, there is not enough information about this visit, and then back in Paris again while the war was still going on.

However, during this further stay in France, he met Napoleon who granted him the title of 'First Council for Life'. His enemies in London were not very enthusiastic, yet, they could not do much about it. He finally went back to Fonthill in 1803 and took care of the project of his estate's enlargement to make it look as gothic and as oriental as possible.

After having married off his daughters, his extravagances and his expenses made him sell his magnificent estate in 1822, and built what he himself called 'the little Baghdad' when he moved to Bath. During the years spent at Fonthill Abbey, he wrote another journal entitled *Life at Fonthill*.

His last years were not very productive from a literary point of view. It is not very clear why Beckford had stopped his literary creativity after such a prolific youth. He retired almost completely from London society and lived his last years in isolation. No more travelling either. In his journals, it is quite evident that, indirectly, he blames Courtenay for his disgrace. However, he remains an ambiguous figure; condemned by his contemporaries and banished from English society, he preferred to spend his days in his estate enjoying the company of youths like Gregorio Franchi and that of his dwarf rather than exponents of English society. This isolation might have been an obstacle for his literary creativity.

Beckford died in 1844 in Bath aged 84, remembered today only for his gothic-oriental novel *Vathek* and for his travel journals. In spite of his geniality, his



creativity has been too poor to be as acclaimed of an author as Oscar Wilde is.

1.2 *Identity in the eighteenth century*

Different cultures in different historical moments have perceived their identity in different ways. The self, intended as the moment when one becomes aware of who one is, of one's own interiority, characterizes the whole eighteenth century. This interiority is considered as the expression of one's own identity. Furthermore, the self is considered as a cognitive universe, a dynamic centre of consciousness, judgment and action, organized in a well-defined 'whole' put among others of these 'wholes', which is quite peculiar seen in the contest of worldwide culture.

The questions we must ask, in order to understand the different kinds of identity are two: 'who am I?' understood as one's unique identity, and 'who am I?' understood as a common denominator of identity that puts the individual in a group. In the first case, the unicity of our identity is what distinguishes us from the others, what guarantees our self-recognition in relation to others. In the second case, identity is what identifies us within a group of people, what allows us to ignore certain differences and separates us from other groups.

In the eighteenth century, we come across these two types of identity, which we can distinguish according to social class, gender, race, but also a further distinction between humans and animals. Joseph Warder and other pre-modernists used to see the eighteenth-century society built as a beehive, where the queen bee was put in the centre of it. This was a perfect allegory for human society.

Moreover, associating the queen bee and the beehive to the Amazon queen and her warlike society, it is highlighted this contradictory construction of the first



decades of the eighteenth century. On the contrary, in the last decades, the idea of the queen bee became more like a queen-mother who takes care of her children. These children of hers, they do not have any gender, they are asexual. Consequently, the queen is not an Amazon warrior any more, she is peaceful, a queen mother to whom loyalty is obviously automatic because of the bond mother-progeny; this bond is what seems to be keeping the beehive functional. Therefore, in the first part of the eighteenth century, we come across the idea of the Amazon queen, yet, in the second part of this century, giving all that power to female sex was not acceptable any longer; that is why, the idea of the queen as a mother, one of her kind, seemed much more adequate. Although, Maxwell accused Warder of having identified the queen bee as an Amazon only to pay a compliment to Queen Anne.

In the eighties and nineties, the word Amazon as positive symbol of warrior changed into completely negative. It all started after the publishing of an article about Lesbos and Amazonic society, describing it as unnatural. Every law of nature and each part of human nature is distorted and violated in this female society. By doing so, the gothic encouraging of the Amazonic spirit was being banished.

Mary Wollstonecraft was an exponent of the Amazonic female idea of the eighteenth century. She was quite appreciated for this particularity. However, at a certain point, she found herself somehow "attacked" even from her own husband. Therefore, in the last decades, we come across a disdain of the strong woman and the Amazonic image of her.

This contempt was not only socio-political, but also within literary circles. Walpole, for example, was one of those who criticised this Amazonic spirit. He used often the word Amazon to portray those women who supported political radicalism. The word Amazon went from a way to admire female heroism to a complaint of female transgression.



Consequently, we can say that changing the Amazonic queen into a queen mother, was a cultural event. Even theatrical plays made the same change in the eighteenth century. The Amazonic woman started to be represented as something unnatural, and the dialogues were changed.

In late eighteenth century, in Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, the character of queen Margaret, who first encouraged men to war, had parts of dialogues deleted, in order to avoid this masculine part of hers by highlighting instead her femininity. The same thing was done with Queen Elizabeth.

In conclusion, "These female Knights or warriors were all now proving that gender boundaries were indeed impassable, that gender identities could not be shed at will, and that gender categories were absolute."⁴ Therefore, the warrior transgressive woman was losing ground, instead, the gentle wife and mother was being applauded by the politics of that second half of the century.

Nevertheless, there was another type of woman showing herself up at the time, the politician one. Even if she kept wanting to assume a masculine role, it is not a physical role that she tried to have, but a mental one.

There was the same attitude towards men holding women typical characteristics, like 'The man of feeling'. For the first decades they were being assumed with feelings as tears, soul weakness or refusal of violence, which are considered typical women peculiarities. Yet, when things started to change for the Amazonic woman, it happened the same to this feminine man. He had to emphasize his masculinity, even if he was playing a man wearing women's clothes, maybe trying to follow his beloved, once he got off his role, he had to act like a real man with manly characteristics. The first decades of the century, the Amazonic woman and the 'Man of Feeling' era, are identified with the *Ancien Régime*.

The outfit has also played an important role to define gender. If in the first part of

⁴ Dror, Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England*. New Haven: Yale U.P., 2004. p. 27.



the century, the so called *dandy* was seen as something fashionable and positive, with his colourful clothes and feminine attitude, on the contrary, in the second part of the century, prevails the man in uniform, which helped to accentuate his masculinity. It worked the same way for women, because they were not allowed to wear men clothes or play men roles any more, not even in theatrical plays. It had to be highlighted their femininity; there had to be a clear distinction between men and women.

Another crucial point was the distinction between races. The idea of race in the eighteenth century was very different from what it is understood nowadays. During the first part of the century, scholars like Mark Harrison used to think that differences between human beings lie on the climate they are born, meaning external effects of the surroundings. As we can understand, the initial optimism was the consequence of the theory that human diversity is the result of the effects that climate has on us. Therefore, geographical location was thought to be the reason that forged human temper, other marker of identity.

In the eighteenth century, many English scholars thought that white people were a superior race compared to black people and that it was not just a matter of climate. Hume was one of those who supported this idea. However, they were a minority and it did not represent the general idea of that time.

For the first three quarters of the century, it was thought that black people were different because of their culture, since differences depended on Christianity, civilisation, language and manners, which were not only abstract ideas anymore, but real differences between races. In some novels of the time, we meet get characters, who get undressed temporarily of their culture and religion to disguise in another completely different culture or religion, in order to accomplish their mission.

We can see here the similarity with gender transformations, which I have mentioned earlier. For example, in order to avoid dangerous situations, a white



woman, traveling to India, disguises herself as a black man, a slave. During her disguise, she is capable of interpreting her role as a slave in a thorough way, such as no one can recognize her as something different. Once she reaches her destination, she gets herself washed and everything goes back as it was, as it should be.

Religion seems to be the crucial difference. It was thought that if black people convert to Christianity, there would not be any difference between them and white people. Not even culture or civilisation were important enough, like religion was the real key to racial differences. Such important, that Jews were considered as a completely different race, absolutely hopeless to recover, much worse than negroes.

On the other hand, for what was the idea of race in the eighteenth century, American Indians are the most peculiar population. They were differentiated because of their traditions and cultural practices, as they used greasy ad various colours to cover their bodies since they were children; this was thought to be the reason why they were not white.

The same principle was applied to South Africans and New Zealanders. Consequently, for some populations, differences were thought to be relying on their culture and practices, which was thought to alter their skin colour in such way that it highlighted their non-European origin.

Therefore, for the first part of the century, education, custom and religion were the main causes to these differences between human beings, an idea that changes at the end of the century and at the end of the *Ancien Régime*. Skin colour was not a change due to customs anymore, however something "donated from their creator". An example to support this theory were taken Jews, spread all over the world but still their look and their nature did not change, even climate could not change their skin colour.

This change and reinforcement of the idea of differences between humans,



especially the stress upon inferiority of black people seen as 'stupid' and 'savages', came as a consequence of the abolitionist theories becoming stronger at that time. The moment of the advancing of these theories can be seen as the moment when European racist ideas started to become stronger. Defining races determined also European identity, the only 'civilized' one.

The formation of industrialized modern society finds its fundamentals in the mutation of these ideas of race and gender, although, above all of classes and social categories. Therefore, the idea of classes in eighteenth-century Britain took another meaning after French Revolution. If for the *Ancien Régime* aristocracy was the only one to have rights to get engaged in political life, in modernity this concept was changing radically.

French Enlightenment, which opposed absolute monarchy, contributed to reduce the sacredness of Royal figure. The King was actually losing his suggestive power over his subjects and the throne he professed to be his by divine will did not seem to be the general idea any longer. Accordingly, the perception of world's normal order changed, just like the masquerade balls organized for Royals' entertainment did.

Speaking of Masquerades seen as an example of changing society, we find them flourishing in the 1720s, which marked a continuous confusion of identities, an inversion of natural order. It was not just a mixing genders matter, but also mixing other identities, like race mixing for example; British disguising as Indians or Africans etc.

Afterwards, by the end of the century, these kind of events lost their splendour. With the beginning of the American Revolution, masquerades were the kind of activities which belonged to the old regime. Modernity had no interest for this kind of theatricality.

During the *Ancien Régime*, there existed an exploration of one's identity and the idea that 'we could have been anything that we wanted to be'. The inversion of



roles, being someone else quite easily, brought as a result the absence of a comprehension and an awareness of the self as it is understood nowadays. One's original identity was not so well delineated and 'dress was taken to make identity'. On the contrary, modernity tried to forbid it, since we can be only what our social position, race or gender allows us to be, by establishing well-defined borders between gender identities, race and culture.

Another important point on changing perception about identity in the eighteenth century, was the American Revolution. This historical event had been a turning point to the recreation of an identity, which deferred from the *Ancien Régime* one. As a matter of fact, in its beginnings, the American Revolution was considered a 'civil war' since the enemy was just another American with different political ideas from one's own.

This came as a consequence of the idea that Americans and English had the same traditions, the same religion, same habits, consequently, they were considered equal. These reflections over their understandings of identity, started to change at a certain point. Differences started to be highlighted and the distinction between 'us' and 'them' became stronger.

Another fundamental point is the fact that rebels were actually different, since Americans were originally of different nationalities, different skin colour, consequently with different traditions; yet, they were Americans, while loyalists were white, English and generally well-heeled people. As a result, the distinction became clear by the end of the century, because English people were not much alike Americans, either for their religion or for their traditions and habits.

In Beckford's novel, we cannot see a clear image of its characters' identity. There are of course some emphasized and highlighted traits of their personality, which change from a character to another, however, we find a continuous confusion between feminine and masculine (Goulchenrouz and Nouronihar). For this reason, the perception is that, it is not only borderlines between oneiric world



and reality that fall, but also borderlines between gender identities.

Furthermore, this continuous fusion and confusion is partly a reflection of Beckford himself. His real nature and his homosexual instincts had to remain well hidden because of what society had imposed at the time. Since he could not have full control of his inclinations, there was an incessant inner conflict, which often made the boundaries fall.

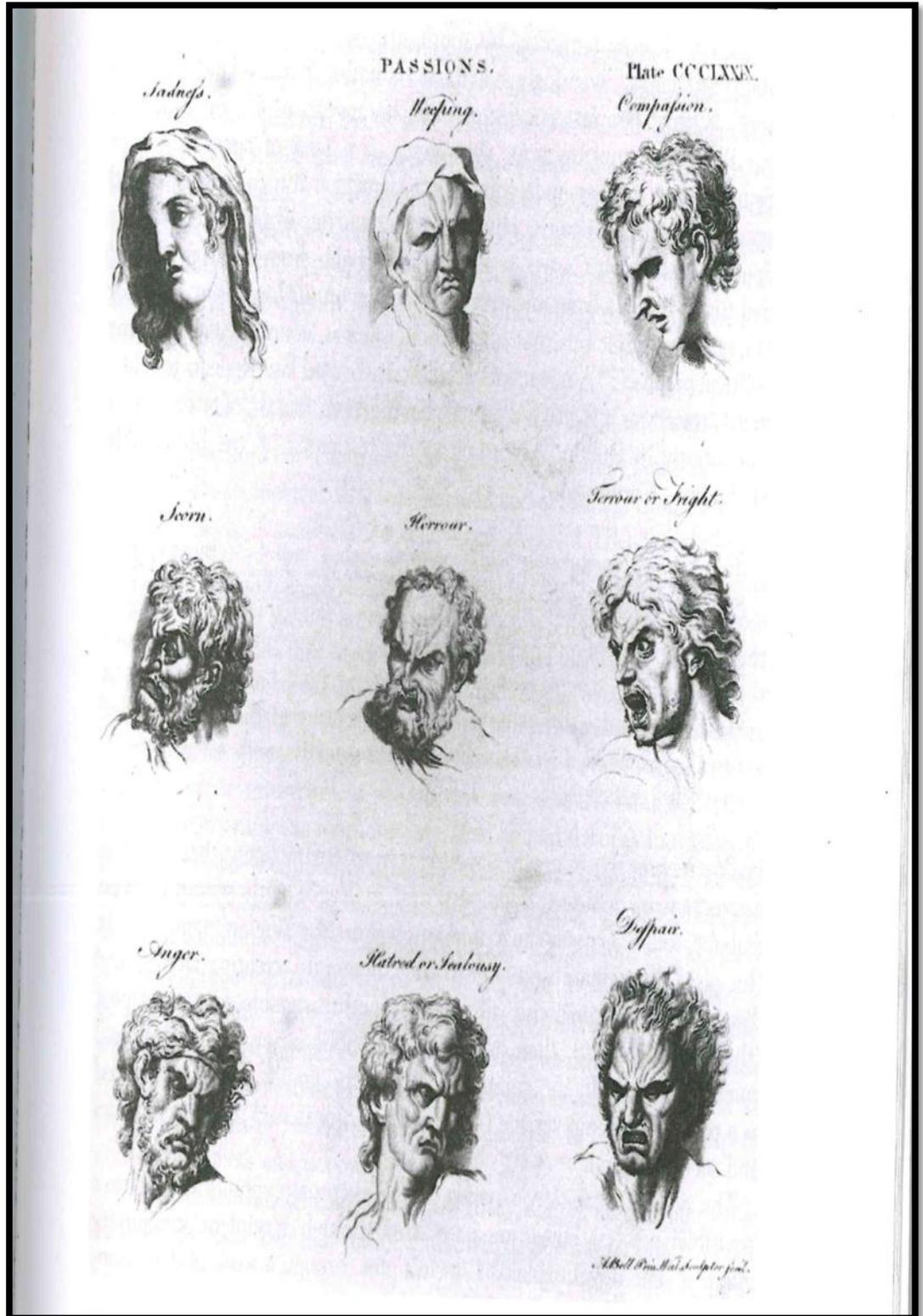
1.3 Accent on sensibility

The eighteenth century and the rise of the novel have been the basis for inner feelings enquiry, the birth of inner selfhood. The novel as a literary genre, contributed to the development of interiority both of the characters and the reader. Its narrative form allowed the reader to identify himself with the characters even if he did not have a direct acquaintance with them in real life.

Therefore, a new psychology was born. It affirmed that all people are similar to one another inside, for what concerns the psychic process and the reader sympathized with what he was reading. An inquiry on senses was evolving, and a new sensibility, which did not exist before the birth of the novel, was making space through people.

Different philosophers of that time argued about this topic. For some of them, this kind of sensibility is not within us, on the contrary it is caused by everything that happens around us. Only after collecting from the outside, the inner self elaborates the information producing those emotions, which were not highlighted before.

According to Locke, we were born with no innate ideas; a child's mind is like a blank page where it can be written anything. Therefore, all differences between human beings depend on education and human beings are malleable by the



Pic. 1. Illustration of Passions.



surroundings. This new sensitive and emotive self, was therefore the result of the society by which it was surrounded and of course, it was fundamental for the sensitivity of society itself.

Hume put sympathy as the first one of all passions, which was at the basis of human soul and then came the others like pride, lust, avarice etc. Since human beings are similar to one another, sympathy becomes some kind of spontaneous substitution too, that is to say putting oneself at someone else's place. Consequently, humans formulate desires, which are strongly influenced by society; to make this happen, it is needed resemblance.

The same thing can be applied to the novel, which was born at that moment. Its success came as a consequence of this identification of the reader with the characters of the book. Moreover, in this situation it is caused a doubling of one's self and the reader is not just the one that identifies with the characters but he is also a judge to them, an 'impartial' judge. As a result, he becomes also a judge to himself.

As regard to a person's identity and his existence guaranteed in time, Locke and Hume among others, were the ones whose contribution was the most important. The former put consciousness before everything, which remains unaltered with time passing, while the latter on the contrary, says that the identity assigned to our mind is nothing but fiction and that perceptions are what a human being is made of.

Clearly, this brings one to the conclusion that personal identity is not just remaining the same for a particular human being beside the others, but mostly because of the relations he has with others. That is why identity can be seen as a mask that one can change, just like in a masquerade ball.

This kind of argument was not only something concerning existence and human immortality, but also human's moral responsibility. Locke used to put the accent on the difference between 'man' and 'person'. Man can be part of a certain kind,



gender or race because of his physical characteristics, while a person is something else. A person is the whole of every part of the consciousness, which are thoughts, feelings and moral responsibility.

The literature of sensibility was women's dominion, which brought to an identification of sensibility in literature as a feminine writing causing the gendering of sensibility. In the first part of the century, there is an increasing desire in women to have a better education.

On the contrary, by the end of the century, with the highlighting of sexual innate differences, women were not considered able of having enough intellectual capacity to do some kind of things, like talk about politics for example, for which men were considered as far more appropriate. Moreover, "not only were women's nerves interpreted as more delicate and more susceptible than men's, but women's ability to operate their nerves by act of will was seriously questioned."⁵

We can consider this moment of literary debate between men and women writers, as the moment when women became aware of being victims of discrimination and oppression of men and as the moment which led to feminism. The novel allowed a much more detailed investigation of feelings, which was not possible with other literary genres. Another important point of the novel is the kind of public it had, which was the English middle class, especially women.

The first English novel has been *Robinson Crusoe* written by Daniel Defoe, which anticipated the industrial revolution and the new capitalistic society. Furthermore, Robinson Crusoe with his 'diligence', represented the perfect English middle class capitalist. The sentimental narration instead showed up with Richardson, who gave to his characters a new sensibility and inquiry of feelings that did not exist before, at least not in that shape.

⁵ G.J., Barker-Benfield. *The culture of sensibility. Sex and Society in Eighteenth Century Britain*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. p. xiii.



We have to say that in pre-industrial time, Britain became a society where consumerism increased in an exponential way. It increased especially for imported goods like tea, silk etc., arriving directly from China or India. That is the reason why men had to develop a kind of sensibility and politeness, which could help in their commercial relations with different cultures and different sensibilities. One's character can be complete only if both feelings and intellect are cultivated.

By the end of the century, with the changing of the perception of gender, there was an effort to orient feminine consumerism, which was becoming larger with this new culture of sensibility. It was believed that a woman who stayed home and took care of her husband and her family would have been able of keeping her man away from pubs and brothels.

However, that kind of education was not only domestic, but also cultural and intellectual, since everything was done depending on their husbands' necessities. From this new sensibility and gendering, there originated another problem, that of women as 'virtue in danger', which had to be saved and preserved, completely depending on men protection. By doing so, there was a further sexualisation of sensibility.

During the eighteenth century, women started to promote their conscious segregation identifying it as an absolute quality of an English middle class good wife. However, some women, especially writers like J. Austen and M. Wollstonecraft, had a "literary battle" with intellectuals (men) of that time. The latter claimed that women should take care of other things, women things, instead of talking about politics, which they were not able of understanding.

Therefore, men were assumed superior to women not only from a physical point of view, but also from an intellectual one. Women were fragile and sentimental and their nervous system itself was built in a way that it could not allow to them the use of reason without being influenced by their innate sensibility.



In *Vathek*, women are represented as easily tempted from the Devil, yet, with a great power over men. Vathek's mother, Carathis, is portrayed as the main culpable for Vathek's contact with the underworld and the obscure arts. His eager desire for power is actually fed by her. However, differently from women at the end of the eighteenth century in England, Carathis is not a fragile figure.

She is a woman with a great power and with a great influence over her son. It is with the appearance of Nouronihar that things change, Carathis is put aside. This other feminine figure is described as fragile and weak at the beginning, yet, she becomes another subject that tempts Vathek and pushes him towards the obscure. Actually, it is her fault if Vathek breaks the Islamic laws of hospitality and it is her fault if they end up in the depths of Eblis and lose their soul in the end.

However, in *Vathek*, there is a continuous confusion between women power and men power. The characteristics assigned to the formers are later assigned to the latters. When Vathek meets Nouronihar, he is prey of his passions, of lust, so if it had not been for her who incited him to continue his journey to Eblis, Vathek would have stayed there forever or at least, until his desire would have extinguished.

Here, the 'terrible' Vathek becomes sensitive and prey of his passions without having the ability to fight his desires with the power of reason, just as men at the end of the eighteenth century claimed to be able of. On the other hand, Nouronihar seems to be the one that appeals to Vathek's reason, the one that uses the intellect in this case, that pushes him to look for the supreme power.



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CHAPTER II



Chapter II

2.1 *Vathek, Conte Arabe or Gothic fiction?*

Gothic novel develops in England in the second half of the eighteenth century, with its first exponent Horace Walpole and his most popular work *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). Typical elements composing this new literary genre are: prophecies, pacts with the Devil, death etc. The emotions produced by this kind of literature, something between pain and pleasure, horror and curiosity, fear and desire, are what we come across while reading a gothic novel.

There lie continuous contradictory feelings within this literary genre, which is why it cannot be considered as simple horror fiction, but rather as interested in exploiting emotions, both of the reader and the characters which compose it. What gothic novels should impart to the reader is the desire to revisit dreams and obsessions, a kind of pleasure in experiencing feelings of horror, terror and amazement.

This kind of literature is just as the process of reading should be: an adventure, which accompanies the journey of a 'genre' in the fantastic universe using the magic of words. One can build a gothic story not only by using the right castle or the right ghosts, but by using the ambiguity of words in an artificial surroundings, which helps the two opposing feelings: perturbing and reassuring. It is narrating



by using one's fantasy that makes the difference.

The structure is the same one of the classical novel: the hero has to rescue the heroine from the villain, having a long and difficult journey, a main story which often crosses other minor stories and a conclusion where generally good triumphs over bad. The differences lie instead in the clarity of various situations that we find in the classical novel, which in gothic novel there is not. Gothic shows that rationality and irrationality can be confused.

Furthermore, gothic novel has as central point the evil and the sin, bringing into surface the complex of guilt, the dark side which you have to run away from in order to obtain a happy ending. This is usually identified with the Devil, the ghost or the doppelganger, which suggests that evil is within us.

Challenge and demoniac pact are signs of a rebellion of the author not to reality but to fiction, whose rules he is discussing and doubting. The story is usually presented as a dream or nightmare and just like dreams, they are perfectly built. Moreover, the elaboration of an ambiguity and confusion between reality and dreams allows the author to create the feeling of uncertainty produced by gothic novels; they make their tales somehow real to the reader.

Reading about terrible things is not the same as experiencing them personally, since in the first case, it leads to a principle of pleasure originated from terror, while in the second case, it is pure fear. Furthermore, the reader experiences the vicissitudes of the characters, however, he is not in danger himself. Behind the pages we are safe, we know nothing will happen to us, and that is where pleasure comes from: we feel what the characters feel, their terror, their panic, their fear, but we know, we will not feel pain since we are just spectators.

That is exactly what the purpose of gothic literature is. If the writer is not able of causing this kind of feeling to the reader, then he is not good on writing horror stories. Edmund Burke in his inquiry of the sublime argued that:

"When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight,



and are simply terrible; but at a certain distance, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we everyday experience.”⁶

Everything is helped by supernatural elements, which are fundamental to the genre, since this dimension holds every possibility for everything to happen, which is why scenes of terror should be as far as possible from reality, in order for the reader to be amazed and wish for more, yet, avoiding the feeling of danger. Together with pleasure, we find also the pain for characters' suffering.

What is a gothic novel then? Scholars have argued that the terms themselves are contradictory to one another; gothic means something historical, something old, while novel means something new, a novelty. The first term appeared related to horror prose fiction, like Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic story* and “It is clear that to eighteen-century readers, the term 'gothic' identified a complicated and slippery topic connoting a number of related but distinct judgments about medieval culture, national history, civic virtue and the enlightenment.”⁷

The term 'gothic' derives from the Goths, the German barbarians who lived at the borders of the Roman Empire and that invaded Rome in 376 AD. But later on, Saxons and Angles were also called Goths. That is the reason why it began to be identified with medieval culture. So, it was historical and 'dark', full of mystery and supernatural events.

In the eighteenth century, the term gothic was revised and transformed from a term connoting the unfavourable, unhappy and ruined to a more positive and confident understanding. The rise of gothic fiction represents the passage to the idealisation of an older chivalric past. Accordingly, gothic was not any longer an error of taste or a corrupting influence, but a positive feature.

We have here the re-valuation of the past to be represented even better than the

⁶ Edmund, Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Edited with an introduction by Adam Phillips. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990. p. 46.

⁷ Ellis, Markman, *The History of Gothic Fiction*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2000. p. 17.



present through a nostalgic process. There were different fields where the medieval gothic culture was very much alive to eighteenth-century people, like architecture, religion, literature and popular customs. Beckford tried to recreate in his life a gothic atmosphere, not only in his literary creative activity, but also in building Fonthill Abbey with a mixture of gothic and oriental.

Therefore, by re-discovering the gothic dimension, the eighteenth century was giving value to those chivalric characteristics like gallantry, loyalty, heroism and chivalry. The same traits were being used in literature, which celebrated the love for the marvellous, the deeper sensibility, the higher reverence for humans, sentiments and courtesy. That is why gothic is not perceived as the destroyer of the civilised values of classical Rome, but rather it is seen as the source of some unique and essential values of English culture.

Gothic fiction holds two different versions of history. On the one hand, the aura of ark irrationality and pleasurable terror offers a critique of the enlightenment view of history. The scenes of terror and pleasurable fear entertained by gothic fiction indulge a kind of perverse connection between the deep past and contemporary life. On the other hand, the novelising strategies of gothic fiction propose a scepticism towards supernatural experiences, superstitious believes and all naïve forms of credulity.

We must say, nevertheless, that history of criticism of gothic fiction is quite recent. The first criticisms have been published in 1920s. It helped collocate the different literary periods and for the first time we heard of gothic as a literary genre, even if that kind of criticism was much more bibliographical than real literary criticism. Although gothic was emarginated by critics, writers continued to find the gothic mode a rich field of creative potential.

I will argue in the third chapter about psychoanalysis in this genre. Of course I will be concentrated on *Vathek's* psychoanalytical elements, though I would like to highlight the importance of this kind of inquiry in gothic literature as it is the key



to understand society and human nature. Gothic fiction could be seen as the revelation of private life of either the individual or his culture that had been hidden by the conscious will. Therefore, gothic and psychoanalysis are related not only for their similarity in inquiring human nature but also because they both started to take shape in the eighteenth century.

The marvellous and the supernatural, the beauty of horrid and the evocation of past, the charm of antique ruins and the contemplation of nature, the attraction for death and for irrational things have always seduced humans and have been represented perfectly from eighteenth century artists. The continuous inversion of the classic order helped gothic novel to emerge and have a great success in the century of enlightenment.

The term 'novel' was introduced later on, after an agreement between the writer and the editor, since the old way to call this kind of tale, i.e. romances, memoirs, histories etc., was not considered any longer the right way to refer to a prose fiction of the eighteenth century. The union of these two words generated the Gothic novels of that century. The surrealistic cruelty, in dreams and folly, represent the extreme expression of intuition of the *roman noir*.

There have been different interpretations and evaluations of gothic novels since its appearance, but only recently it has been considered a proper literary genre. As a matter of fact, the terminology used to give a definition of gothic novel has been various and it is often used to highlight a specific aspect or thematic. Some critics prefer the supernatural effects, some others the nightmare or the demoniac elements. They may underline terror and fear or furthermore, they may use the variation of particularities, which explore the writing on evil.

Among all critics, Hume makes a difference between Terror Gothic and Horror Gothic. The former highlights suspense making the reader waiting for some possible terrible events coming soon, which will end up with a satisfactory solution or will not happen at all. Horror Gothic, on the other hand, highlights the



horrible events which are taking place in the book, like tortures, demoniac appearances etc.

A further distinction has been introduced later on from Steeves, between Oriental Romance and Gothic Romance collocating *Vathek* in-between. Beckford literary activity began when this kind of literary genre was flourishing, that is why he could not stay away from adding the gothic element to his masterpiece. All these elements are current in *Vathek*, which make it partially belonging to this literary genre.

Yet, differently from other gothic novels, which carry also Catholic/Anglican elements within, *Vathek* introduces to the public another religion, that of Islam, the oriental world, but under an English gothic point of view. Even if, descriptions of Eblis, as we will see later on, are much likely to Dante's inferno and his Christian representation of it.

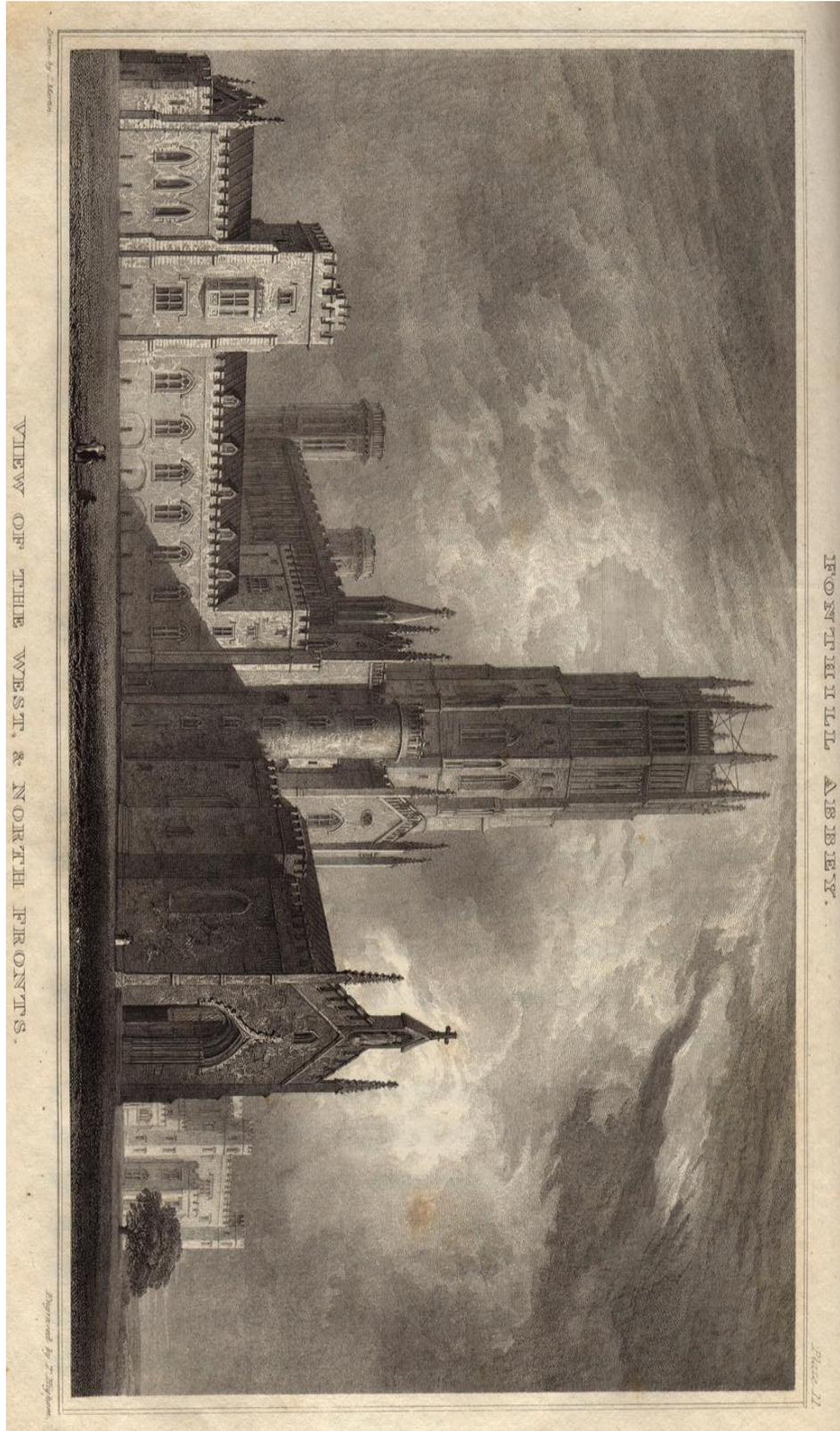
The Oriental theme in Beckford's work rests in his childhood and his interest on Arabic and Persian language. He used to spend his days at Splendens in its library reading about faraway places, of heroes and strange people with strange traditions. It looks somehow that with *Vathek*, he tried to go back to his childhood dreamland and Haven.

In France, in the first part of the XVIII century, *The Arabian Nights* has been the book that fascinated the whole public. Princess Shahrazad trying to save her own life by telling infinite stories every night won over the readers. This way of welcoming the oriental tale encouraged European writers, especially French ones, both to translate and write oriental topics.

There are too many examples of French imitators of oriental tales, though, some of them were not just imitation of this kind of exotic. I am referring to Montesquieu's *Lettres Persannes*. The main theme may concern the representation of oriental culture for a hungry public, however, this book is mostly a way for the author to express his political ideas and to criticise indirectly



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Pic. 2. Fonthill Abbey.



French form of government. There will be different imitations of *The Arabian Nights*, each one with the same structure: a tale within the tale. In England, it was a moralizing kind of tale, while in France, it was critical to the politics of the country.

The oriental tale flourished in France in this period of and soon after, English writers got on with it and published their translations and imitations in order to give their contribution to their public. Nevertheless, *Vathek* shew up in a moment when the oriental tale had lost its charms, the enthusiasm was fading away.

Beckford brings something different to the public. *Vathek* has nothing to do with politics or moral, on the contrary, it is about humans' emotions, about hidden desires, temptations and perversions. It was first introduced as the translation of a manuscript with a preface by the editor telling the great difficulties in translating it from Arabic into English. Furthermore, French notes were justified with the fact that French could express better Arabic language.

In *Vathek*, we find a mixture of elements from *The Arabian Nights* and *Persian Tales*. *Vathek* is the descendent of Harun el-Rashid, the Caliph of the former book, while Carathis' love for the obscure is taken from the latter. Moreover, the topics used by Beckford are typical of oriental literature: love, adventures and a hidden treasure.

Yet, in *Vathek*, there is something, which was out of the oriental tales' frame: the horror and the cruelty of its final part, the representation of Hell and its punishment. Furthermore: "The character of Eblis recalled Milton's Satan rather than the mischievous perverse character of the fallen angel depicted in the Koran to which Moslem imagination of the Devil strictly conforms."⁸

The surroundings and the clothes that characters wear are as important as the subject and they are very well shown compared to what simple imitations used

⁸ Fatma Moussa, Mahmoud, ed., *William Beckford of Fonthill, 1760-1844: Bicentenary Essays*. Cairo: Cairo Studies in English, 1960. p. 72.



to bring to the reader. Logically, we must say that English public was not familiar with certain traditions of Orient or details of its culture. That is why English readers were not able of recognizing the western elements, which Beckford intentionally or accidentally could have included in his story.

Another essential component of the oriental storyline is the choice of the characters' names. Most of them were taken from *The Arabian Nights* and *Persian Tales*, but also from real historical figures. Vathek himself had been an existing person: Al-Vathek Billah, son of Motassem; the city of Samarah near Bagdad had really been the city of the Abassides.

All of the surroundings had to be as realistic as possible in order to distinguish *Vathek* from other imitations of the oriental tale. Therefore, the setting and Vathek's itinerary is studied in details by Beckford. He needed to give credit to his tale, despite the fantastic elements composing it.

This plaiting of reality and fantastic is represented in such way to put the reader in the presence of familiar sceneries, which they have come across in previous oriental tales or oriental travel writers. Still, Beckford adds some perturbing components like the Giaour, which the reader expects to appear at any time or by multiplying the most terrifying elements that compose the tale.

The notes to the text, which followed *Vathek's* first edition contributed on making the story as if it was real. These kind of notes had not appeared in any other oriental tale before *Vathek*. They displayed erudition, therefore, a far more detailed knowledge of oriental culture of what any other author of imitations of *The Arabian Nights* could have done before.

Although, for someone acquainted to Orient, would have been easy to recognize the French origin of some of the elements. In addition, Soliman, who had been a great historic ruler of the Islamic world, is represented here as punished for horrible crimes he had done during his life.

The oriental tale of the first part of the nineteenth century is different from that



of the Victorian Age. When the oriental tale was flourishing in Europe, novels were full of orientalism and they were trying to imitate the *Arabian Nights* without bringing anything new. Just imitations. Furthermore, oriental tales had a moralizing theme within them, while in the nineteenth century, orientalism had a very personal interpretation, quite more romanticised.

Vathek can be seen as a bridge between the two eras of the oriental novel, since it has nothing moral through its pages, but it is not as romantic as Byron's oriental tales. Orient was used as a place where one could escape far from any familiarity with one's own land and life. Furthermore, Orient has always been fascinating to westerners. It was not born with the Arabian Nights, but much earlier, in Crusades time, with heroic Templars fighting barbarian infidels.

Therefore, Orient was the place where everything was possible, the land of miracles and wonders just as fairy tales in childhood. That was exactly where readers wanted to hide, in their childhood remembrances and innocence. Then, what we expect is for our hero or heroine to succeed. Well, many oriental novels, modern novels end like this, but it is not *Vathek's* fate. He ends up punished and in Hell because *Vathek* is not a romantic hero, he is the villain and the hero at the same time.

That is why *Vathek* is not a romantic oriental novel, but: "*It is, nevertheless, the last, the culminating rococo prose tale of the pseudo-Orient*".⁹ It carries the cruelty, the supernatural, the lust and the adventures of every oriental tale, but it does not moralize, on the contrary, it is immoral and egoistic. In addition, the interest for sadism and macabre was common among Beckford's contemporaries; everything that delineated an inquiry on human emotions and the psychological part of it, were the characteristics of the time.

⁹ F.M., Mahmoud, *Bicentenary Essays*. cit. p. 149.



2.2 *Origins of Vathek*

Apart from his literary genre origins, which I have already argued about previously, I also have to go through what actually caused the inception of *Vathek*. When Beckford was very young, he used to read oriental books in Alderman's library at Splendens. He was fascinated by them, so he started to create his own fantastic world full of demons and heroes. Therefore, at the age of seventeen, he wrote his first oriental tale called *L'Esplendente* of which it has survived only a fragment.

It may appear strange that a masterpiece of French literature was written from an Englishman, profoundly bound to his original country for its culture and social position. However, what today may seem an eccentricity, at the time it was not that much of an oddity. Since nationalism was not born yet, the ruling class possessed an international culture, it was even necessary. This internationality was at the time equal to France, in language and in culture used in literary circles. On the other hand, France was the cradle of that oriental passion invading the century of enlightenment.

Vathek's oriental origins are based on young Beckford's passion for eastern culture and literature. His masters introduced him to the oriental world through Chinese literature and Russian architectural drawings. At the age of seventeen, Beckford wrote *The Vision or The Long Story*, an oriental tale very similar to his masterpiece *Vathek*. He sent it to his drawing master asking him to keep it secret. This secrecy was necessary, since his political career that his family wanted for him, might get damaged by this romantic writing.

The differences between these two literary creations are quite evident. In the first place, *The Vision* has an immature writing dictated by a very young age. It is some kind of exercise for Beckford to the creation of a story. Here it dominates the Faustian pact, just like it does in *Vathek*. Even descending the underworld is



similar in both tales, a dreamlike structure.

However, in *The Vision*, the underworld is represented more like Dante's Inferno rather than *Vathek's* Halls of Eblis. Here, the one that tells the story is the main character, who after a long journey full of vicissitudes gets his reward. In *Vathek* there is an omniscient narrator who often is a judge to the characters. Nouronihar in the earlier creation is represented as sweet and good, characteristics which in *Vathek* are typical of Goulchenrouz, while Nouronihar is a spoiled and greedy young woman, a temptation to Vathek. Together with Carathis, they push him to commit many of his worst crimes.

In *The Vision*, the procedure is that of a teenager conquering the secrets of nature through the labyrinth of phenomenal variety. It is a process of initiation, in which fit the esoteric suggestions of his master, Alexander Cozens. This juvenile creation is quite an optimistic work, almost utopian, which puts apart rationality and invents a world with magnificent visions.

Furthermore, the Halls of Eblis here are identified with the "Palace of Central Fire" where the utopian view comes to an end, after the main character goes through visions of human degradation instead of absolute knowledge he was promised in the beginning. It ends with the initiated and his companion that find themselves in an artificial Eden leaving the story interrupted. Beckford never ended it, instead he projected almost everything in a new creation less optimistic and much more transgressive and perturbing.

In *Vathek*, it is not perturbing only the story itself, but also the genesis of those pages, which leads back to Beckford's use of hallucinogens testified from Beckford himself in his letters. Therefore, the atrocity that characterizes the book may not be only visionary or oneiric, but especially hallucinating. They make this story apparently uncontrollable and erratic, which sort the exceptional experiences that the characters live. All these experiences make this story, one of the mainstays of fictional literature.



In a letter, published in 1844, after his death, Beckford writes that the original idea of *Vathek* dated back to three days and two nights of turbulent sexual and visionary experiences. In order to celebrate his twenty-first birthday, a party was held at Splendens. Everything had been composed in a mixture of oriental and Italian style, exaggerated, yet, worthy to celebrate the richest heir in England. The atmosphere was built following Beckford's imagination and instructions becoming the hint for *Vathek*.

Although, the incitement to write his most famous book came at a Christmas party held at Fonthill, where there were guests like his cousin Louisa, Courtenay etc. The scenario had been developed by a master of theatrical lights like Louthembourg and looked like a dreamlike labyrinth.

"As evening drew on, a thousand lamps glimmered in the trees of the Park and the surroundings groves; they were reflected in the waters of the River Nadder and the lake in front of Splendens. Skiffs sped along its surface in every direction, recalling a Venetian regatta. The portico of the house and its sweeping colonnades were illumined by wax torches, which cast a wavering light on the groups lounging on the broad flight of steps below. Opposite the portico was erected an illuminated triumphal arch, so that a great piazza was formed in front of the house, reminiscent of St. Peter's. In the background three bonfires glowed on the Downs, reminding Beckford of Troy and Hector's funeral. At intervals fireworks exploded and Catherine-wheels burst in clusters of stars, which shed a bluish light upon all below; this was greeted with shouts by the tenantry, who were swilling beer in three great tents, each with its own band. By contrast, in the intervals wind instruments sounded, concealed in thickets. Then silence reigned whilst the greatest castrato in Europe, Pacchierotti,



sang in a terzetto so seductive that Beckford nearly swooned.”¹⁰

This is how Boyd Alexander, one of Beckford's greatest scholars, described the evening of Beckford's coming of age, based on his correspondence. As we can see, the atmosphere recalled of Orient, Greece and Italy, a mixture of elements that helped the alienation from the present. After this celebration, at Christmas of the same year, there was held another party where there was also Beckford's cousin Louisa, her sister Harriet, a few boys and their tutor Samuel Henley, Alexander Cozens and Courtenay.

It is thought that Black Magic was practiced at this party and Louisa Beckford's letters suggest also a sexual relationship between herself and her cousin. Later on, Beckford wrote to Cozens: "That night in particular haunts my imagination, when we arrived from Salisbury and seemed transported to a warm illuminated palace *raised by spells* in some lonely wilderness." This may be a reference to Black Magic but it may also be an effect of Louthembourg's lights, as this was the way Beckford wrote and talked all his life.

Beckford had an innate passion for theatrical lights fomented by the legend of a Chinese emperor, who buried himself together with his empress, in a subterranean palace illuminated by an artificial sun. He dreamed of closing himself up in a luxurious tower and live there away from everyone else. This was partly, what Beckford tried to reproduce during his life by building Fonthill Abbey, and we can possibly see it as one of the reasons he retired at Fonthill Abbey for a significant part of his life.

Beckford was determined to give concrete expression to his dreams and he was rich enough to afford any expense necessary for his entertainment. In one of the above-mentioned letters, there were not any explicit words about the use of hallucinogens or drugs, but there is an implicit and clear reference to visionary

¹⁰ Alexander, Boyd, *England's Wealthiest Son: A study of William Beckford*. London: Centaur Press, 1962. p. 80.



effects of drugs. Beckford talks about visions of oriental theme. It is important to highlight the fact that in the eighteenth century it was developing a use of opium among English aristocracy and middle class. The hallucinogens were first used for a therapeutic purpose, even for children, but slowly it turned into an exciting experience which helped the artistic flair.

The connection between drugs and artistic creations has always been tight. It actually dates back to Renaissance, but it was a strong protagonist of Romanticism. Though, the maximum extension has been during the second half of the eighteenth century, and we must say that it still is a practice quite common to our contemporaries.

The first one to write something about this kind of 'stimulating' quality of drugs has been Thomas De Quincey in his *Confessions of an Opium Eater* in 1821. That kind of reality presented by De Quincey was the demonstration of a normal reality among English people and especially among artists. He argued about the affinity of drugs and the artistic creativity of a chemically solicited visionary mind of the artist. Drugs provoke most of all plastic effects in visions, those which seem easily transferable in artistic manifestations.

Moreover, drugs induce artificial visions in an artificially stimulated mind in order to create the hallucinated surroundings. In *Vathek*, the visionary effects are the main part that constitute the uncanny dimension. The kind of atmosphere built as a dream helps the author to create that kind of feeling to the reader of being part of the vision.

The description of the surroundings, which leads to the Halls of Eblis, seems to hold those typical ways of a hallucinating experience like those described in De Quincey's *Confessions*; immensity of sceneries, gigantism of objects, contrasts between lights and shadows and most of all the enlargement of space-time. The most significant part of descriptions in both De Quincey and Beckford is the unnatural expansion of surfaces.



In this vastness of space, that unbearable splendour described in the underworld, those sudden and exaggerated lights, which tears darkness apart becomes indescribable in terms of human language and far too terrifying for human mind. There is here an evident similarity with De Quincey, since he remembers the architectural visions that were formed in his mind stimulated from opium, which were immense in both dimension and extension.

Furthermore, this vastness was populated by indescribable monstrous figures and gigantic objects. Beckford uses the same kind of expressions when *Vathek* and *Nouronihar* get lost before the entrance of the city of *Eblis*. Correlated to these hallucinatory experiences seem to be also *Vathek* and *Nouronihar*'s sensations when they start descending the stairs which lead to *Eblis*, where are preserved the secrets of absolute power and pleasure.

It is about a very accelerated descending, quite abnormal, extra-terrestrial, humanly uncontrollable, some kind of free-falling into the abyss. There is a similar experience described by De Quincey in his book, where he talks about a literally descending in a hole or abyss, deeper and deeper, until it seemed impossible to come out from.

Another important contribution to the genesis of the oriental tale *Vathek* is *Splendens*, the house where Beckford grew up. Full of those oriental elements that he brought back to *Fonthill Abbey*, which he built using materials extracted from *Splendens* demolition, in a kind of theatrical atmosphere, a kind of labyrinth and the famous tower, which fell a couple of times even after he sold the building before moving to *Bath* during his last living years.

Beckford was also interested in *Mulai Ismail*, Emperor of Morocco (1672-1727), described as a sadist. He used to kill and beat his people without any particular reason as he pretended to be the direct descendent of the Prophet. After having hurt someone, he used to send money to apologize for what he had done. Beckford used to do the same to his employees, after beating them, in a fit of



remorse he sent them money. He read about the Emperor in a copy of Lobineau's *Histoire de Bretagne*.

Furthermore, there is another element of Beckford's early life which inspired the author of *Vathek* in his literary activity, his father. I will argue about this autobiographical element, which recurs in the episodes, in my last chapter, but the terrible eye that was a particularity of *Vathek* came from Beckford's father glance when he was angry. Young Beckford was impressed from this peculiarity and he wrote: "My God!... if my father had been Lord Mayor, in place of the stupid animal that then presided over the destiny of the city, he would have stopped this riot in a moment, aye almost with one of his own ferocious glances, under which the King himself had learned how to tremble". Beckford's love for towers was also inherited from his father.

2.3 *Vathek's Publishing Story*

There have been many editions of *Vathek* while Beckford was still alive and many others after his death. Nevertheless, the novel did not have that much of an influence back at the time. Its success came almost 25 years later and that was a new beginning for the oriental tale, which in the 19th century was seen differently. Actually, the one who gave credit to this novel has been Byron, who first promoted it. Everything became much more scrupulous, including details.

In his correspondence with Henley, Beckford gives instructions where to find all references to *Vathek's* notes, which is not normal for that time. It shows that: "Beckford was as scrupulous concerning 'correctness of costume', as the nineteenth century contributors to the oriental tale."¹¹ Although, as I have argued previously, *Vathek* was not part of the oriental tale of the Romantic

¹¹ F.M., Mahmoud, *Bicentenary Essays*. cit. p. 89.



period in the nineteenth century.

After having written his masterpiece, in only a few days as he said, Beckford gave his manuscript to Samuel Henley, in order to have it translated from French, which was the language he had chosen to write it. The choice of French was not only a strategic publishing choice, since the oriental theme was quite popular in France at the time, but also a question of habit. It was the language he used when he translated *The Arabian Nights* and the language of aristocracy in the eighteenth century.

The very first time that *Vathek* appeared to the public was in 1786, as a translation from an Arabian manuscript under the authorship of Samuel Henley. Beckford entrusted the manuscript to Henley, who was supposed to publish its translation soon after the first French edition. Nevertheless, Henley did not follow Beckford's instructions and published the book as a mere translation of an Arabian manuscript, which he had presumably found and translated. Beckford was in Switzerland at the time, unable to get back in England because of the Powderham scandal and of course claiming the authorship would not have been helpful to the success of his creation.

Therefore, the only thing left to do was to try *Vathek's* publishing in French as soon as possible. While in Lausanne, Beckford hurried up to publish his masterpiece in Switzerland. This first French edition comes in 1787. Beckford was disappointed, frustrated and felt powerless, despite his wife's support, in facing all this political, press and in the end the literary campaign lanced against him.

The public he wanted for his best work was not the one he got after Henley's treachery. But he was unable of changing things at the time. Yet, he wanted to go on with his original plan and publish *Vathek* in Paris. So he did. In 1787, soon after the Lausanne edition, it came the French edition. After some time, Henley admitted his treachery and Beckford had his authorship recognized.

Together with *Vathek*, there were to be published three episodes added to



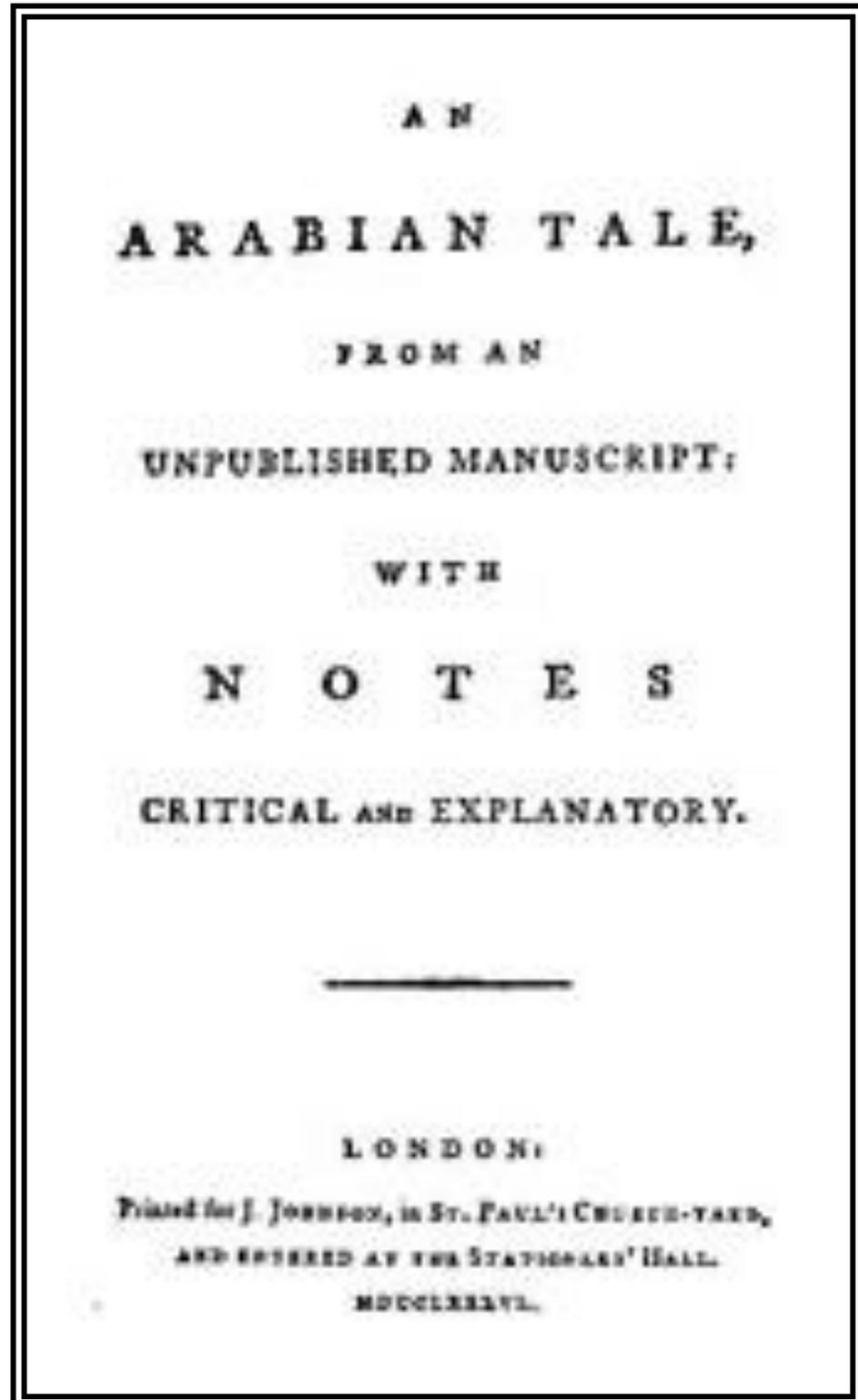
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complete the story of *Vathek* and Nouronihar's voyage in the Halls of Eblis. There were three of them, which Beckford was about to write while he was in Switzerland. However, they never got published while Beckford was alive, since the last episode seems to be unaccomplished. They probably are quite autobiographical and it would not have helped Beckford's situation for sure.

There have been many other editions of *Vathek* while Beckford was alive, but the very success of it came with Lord Byron's acclamation in nineteenth century. It had also been the moment when the oriental tale was being re-elaborated in England, and by quoting *Vathek*, Lord Byron forced the public to get acquainted also with this Gothic Oriental novel.



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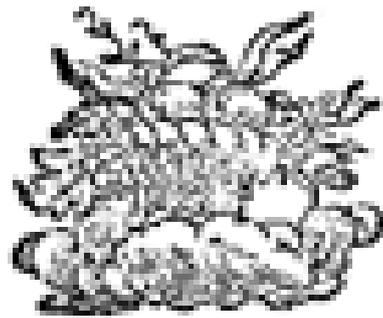


Pic. 3. Henley's translation.



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V A T H E K ,
C O N T E
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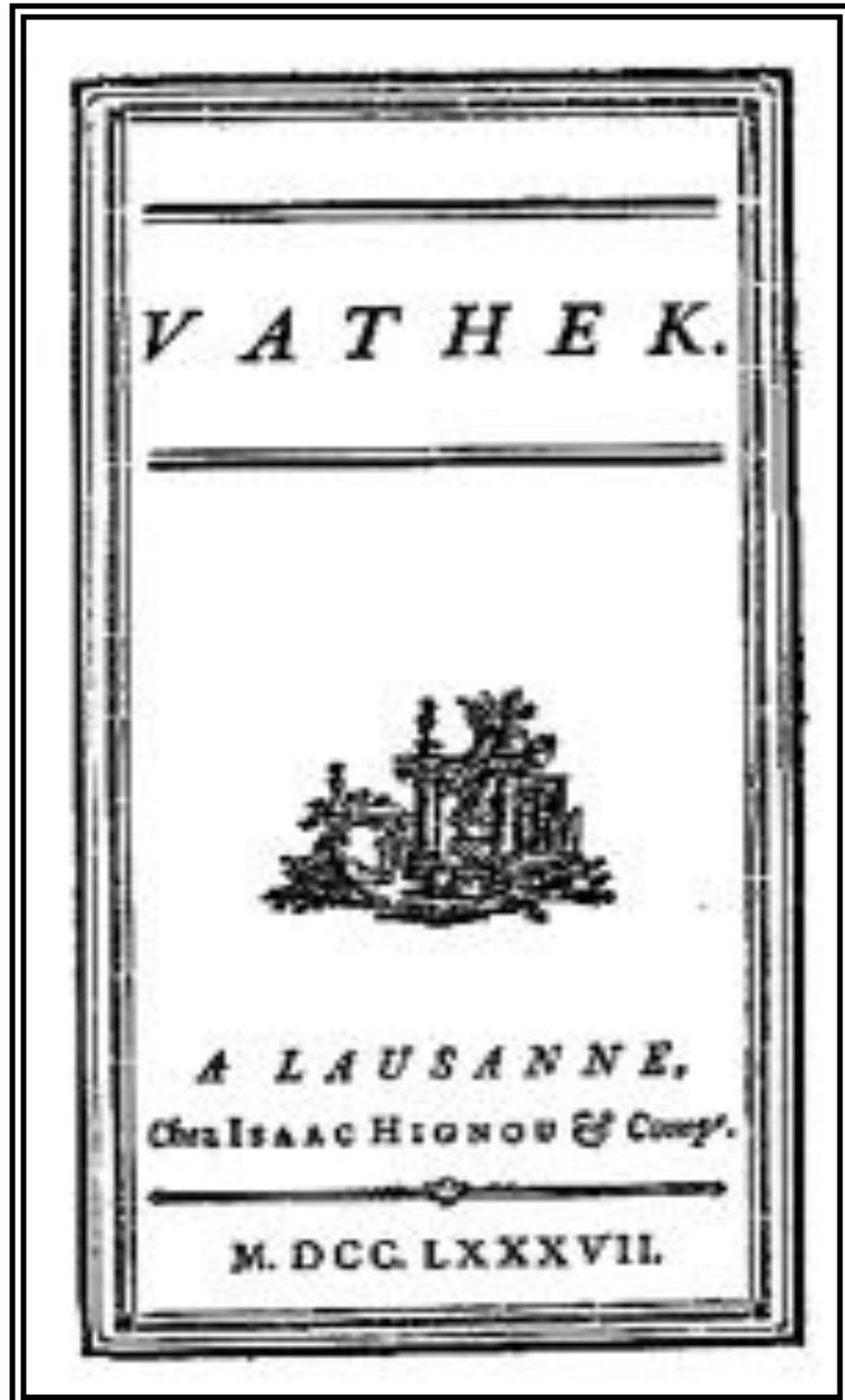
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près Saint-Germain, N^o. 111.

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Pic. 4. French edition.



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Pic. 5. Swiss edition.



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CHAPTER III



Chapter III

3.1 *The Uncanny in psychoanalysis*

The idea of psychoanalysis as the key to read the gothic novel is quite recent. It became successful when Freud introduced his analysis of the effects that horror literature could cause to the reader. However, it had not been seen as something innovative until 1970, when it started to circulate in literary circles becoming the crucial point for the creation of the marvellous dimension in art and literature.

This kind of literature introduces transgressive elements to the narration, elements which suspend the reader's certainties and it indicates an insurmountable limit of human experience. Darkness becomes a symptom of the unconsciousness; the abyss is deepened in our psyche and in dreams we experience the sublime and the uncanny. So, it began to grow an interest for Freud's *Das Unheimliche* producing a series of investigations in other fields like history, art, philosophy etc.

In psychoanalysis, Lacan goes back to the uncanny that Freud had already argued, connecting it with anxiety. For Lacan, the uncanny is the first stage of anxiety which is related to the presence of the Other, of whom the subject does not have any knowledge. The phenomenon of the uncanny becomes distressing as it disturbs the peaceful quality of symbolic identification.

Furthermore, Heidegger considers anxiety as central to his theory, from an existential point of view. He conceives the idea of disorientation, related to the



experience of *Unheimlich*, as fundamental to the comprehension of our life conditions. Therefore, the uncanny became an identifying label to modernity for some, and to post-modernity for others.

In pre-modernity, the uncanny was associated with the sacred, while in modernity it assumes a certain conceptual relevance. There was a proliferation of perturbing situations in European literature at the end of the eighteenth century, which determined the paradox of Enlightenment that was taking distance from the marvellous and was putting the accent on doubts and hesitation.

The unconsciousness is not seen as a presence, but as a difference, or maybe as the doppelganger of consciousness, just like soul was probably seen as the doppelganger of body. In the same measure, the uncanny opposes to metaphysical presence; it is not the origin but a repetition, it is not the countable but the unequal, it is not the comfortable space of our consciousness but the atopy. Furthermore, it is the particular and unpredictable introducing of an event which cracks our supposed coherence.

There exists a dimension where there is no boundary between reality and dreams, where rationality cannot prevail. It is a place where the combination of real existing elements is quite improbable, where we find ourselves suspended between the conscious and the unconscious. In that very moment, the feeling that becomes predominating is that of disorientation. Normally, this happens when we are asleep and the unconscious, which has been hidden and ignored by the Ego, comes to surface dominating the surroundings.

Therefore, our dreams are populated by irrational figures, which our Ego is not familiar with, and we find ourselves lost in a messed-up world full of contradictions that goes beyond our logical comprehension. This kind of disorienting feeling, which we find usually in our oneiric activity, is what Freud called *Unheimlich*, or in English 'the uncanny'.

The word *Unheimlich* itself has had some difficulties in finding the right



translation in other languages, since in German it contains two contradicting meanings. As Freud explains: "The German word *unheimlich* is obviously the opposite of *heimlich*, *heimisch*, meaning "familiar", "native", "belonging to the home"; and we are tempted to conclude that what is "uncanny" is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar."¹² However, as he clarifies afterwards, *unheimlich* is 'the intellectual uncertainty', what we cannot understand or explain rationally so that it becomes unfamiliar to us. In any case, the outline is not that simple.

In the analysis of the uncanny that Freud does, he claims that "the uncanny is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar."¹³ Therefore, the uncanny, becomes that part of our inner world, which we do not know or we have removed because it is uncomfortable to our Ego hidden in the inmost recesses of our soul, the unconscious.

It is when something, which we have tried so hard to keep away from our logical reality and comes to surface showing itself, that we get lost, confused, disoriented. Here it is formed a new world where everything rational and irrational is mixed-up, a world which is surreal. Consequently, the uncanny is whatever disturbs the known familiar order, the natural order of things.

The unconscious does not have words when it shows itself, but it speaks using symbols because it is something ancient and ancestral, which we have forgotten and now we are unable to translate. It is the oneiric version of what happens in real life, since we do not understand it, during its incursions in our everyday life, our reality becomes confusing and perturbing to us.

According to Freud, an emotional affect which "is transformed by repression into morbid anxiety"¹⁴ and lies hidden in our unconscious, but recurs in our everyday life, causes this kind of disorientation. This effect is the uncanny, which is "in

¹² Freud, Sigmund, *The Uncanny*. London: The Hogarth Press Limited, 1955. p. 220.

¹³ Ibid. p. 220.

¹⁴ Ibid. p.241.



reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression.”¹⁵

Freud considers dreams as the realisation of hidden desires or manifestations of inner fears. It seems to him that the ambivalence of some words like *unheimlich* actually lies in the necessity of spoken language to find the right way to express what the unconscious manifests in its incursions. These words delineate the relationship between the two opposite meanings, which relies within them; to be defined, they need their contrary.

Unheimlich is not only perturbing and unpleasant but sometimes, in common language, it refers also to something great, enormous or beautiful. That is why the uncanny is tightly connected with the concept of the sublime. In addition, quoting Burke: “whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime”¹⁶.

Therefore, the uncanny has been bound to the horrid part of the sublime, whatever it has to do with ghosts, demons, Satan etc. Unlike the sublime, the uncanny questions the nature and origins of evil related to the characteristics of human nature that takes pleasure from it. It is something that re-emerges rather than something to run away from. What perturbs us is more a presence rather than an absence, which manifests itself from where it should have been hiding.

Furthermore, the uncanny is connected to two kind of feelings very similar to one another: alienation and disorientation. They become similar in the dimension of the *unheimlich*, since they are both related to a perturbing presence, which we cannot push away from ourselves, from our home, but we cannot either welcome easily as it is already there, within us.

¹⁵ Freud, Sigmund, *Uncanny*. cit. p.241.

¹⁶ Edmund, Burke, *Origins of Sublime*. cit. p. 45.



Accordingly, this condition makes us become perturbing ourselves, so that we do not feel safe and in peace in our own house. This kind of disorientation generates anxiety as it is exactly in anxiety that we feel lost and disoriented. Therefore, the object of anxiety does not come from the outside but from the inside because it is something that belongs to us. This absence of an object makes anxiety the right feeling to avoid the sensation of being home, safe; the right feeling to express what generates the alienation, the disorientation, the uncanny.

The most interesting part of anxiety is that it cannot be controlled; we do not know when it may develop or manifest itself since it is not our decision. At this point, we get the contradiction of human existence: we have no free access to our emotions. Without an object or a direction, anxiety causes its perturbing effect.

Writing is seen as a heritage, as the trace of an absence and as a phantasmagorical structure, which is not simple to deal with, since spectres perturb our dwelling because they live in our house. Freud introduced the revolutionary idea that the unconscious does not apply the classical rules of non-contradiction, which the conscious follows. He transformed the idea of knowing oneself into something quite perturbing.

For the classical school of thought, affirmation and denial are alternate, it is impossible that something can be and cannot be something that it is not. On the contrary, Freud takes a distance from this thought realizing the abolition of traditional categories by introducing the unconscious. Concepts are not born according to a linear and progressive logic, but according to a fractal logic and a metaphoric sedimentation.

Freud comes to the conclusion that familiarity tends to invert into its opposite, in the impenetrability of a secret, of a concealment. Thus, what is the closer, the most intimate to our dwelling has to do both with what is taken out of the sight and with what is dangerously offered to it. That is how the uncanny becomes



something which is not extraneous to us and does not irrupt unexpectedly, it is instead something familiar which comes to surface while it should not.

Therefore, it is not a one-way path, from the familiar to the extraneous or the other way round, but a going back and forth which we cannot run away from as it is part of our subjectivity. Consequently, the uncanny as an artistic effect and the uncanny as a direct experience has no distinction, it becomes the loss of a familiar dimension. This kind of inquiry for Freud is made in order to study human ambivalence

There is a further experience of the uncanny, the one that alludes to something even more primordial than familiarity, something which is inside us, which has to do with our identity, with our being. The loss of homeland, of a place of our own which we have never possessed, of a sure origin, the anxiety that derives from all this brings to the experience of the uncanny.

A further important element, in order to understand the dimension of *Unheimlich*, is the creation of a confusion between the Ego and the Other. It starts during the first phases of human life, when the child, not able yet of coordinating his movement, looks at his image in the mirror. This first awareness of himself, becomes fundamental in establishing an inevitable confusion between the self and the Other, which is a kind of reproduction of this first hint of subjectivity.

Consequently, at this first stage, it is formed an imaginary character of the Ego, which is forced to live in a continuous narcissistic identification with external images. In this very moment, it begins the division of the subject, who is induced to access language symbolically, while it highlights a constructive character.

The mirror phase shows how the Ego is essentially an imaginary configuration, which should not be confused with the subject. Accordingly, the Ego is not the subject but a kind of imaginary alienation of the subject, which knows nothing about the subject's desires.



Moreover, the eyes and the sight become relevant in perceiving subjectivity. Starting from the idea that in sight there is nothing objective, we can determinate the type of sight. If we would refer to paintings for example, it can be said, as Lacan affirms, that painting does not represent reality, it hides it instead, because it shows to us that we are not actually looking at things but things are looking at us. Otherwise, we look from just one point, that of the eye, while we are exposed to a universal sight.

That is why sight can become the other side of consciousness, or, the moment when the subject realizes that the scene he is looking at is actually looking back at him. This is the point that interest psychoanalysis, since the subject that renounces to the illusion of the conscious, turns extraneous and a stranger to himself.

Psychoanalysis warns us that in the act of looking, everything is deceptive as perception overshadows structure. In other words, we do not see only what appears to the eyes as organ, but also in the dimension of the desire which our sight holds.

As regard to the voice, we know from music, philosophy and literature that it is considered as the most intimate part of subjectivity, a kind of identifying mark, unique, which does not deceive. Exactly as we know that maternal voice was the one that originally put us in connection with the rest of the world.

However, it may happen that the voice turns into something else. This may be the case of us listening to our registered voice, when we cannot identify it easily with our own voice and we convince ourselves that it may not be the sound of our voice. As an enigmatic object, the voice is a paradox perceived as both a presence and an absence.

Furthermore, by saying that voice is reassuring and perturbing at the same time, we collocate it automatically in the uncanny dimension. It is a place of ambiguous familiarity, which has to remain hidden in order to produce this kind of effect. In



the very moment that it appears, it destabilises the coordinates of subjectivity. Furthermore, the voice here is not seen as necessarily connected to language. Therefore, we can say that when voice and sight meet, cross each-other and superimpose in various ways, they produce a kind of effect which can be defined as an extraneous and perturbing familiarity.

3.2 *The uncanny in Vathek*

According to Borges, *Vathek* is the best representation of the presence of the uncanny in literature. Actually, the most interesting part is the illustration of the underworld, when Vathek and his companion Nouronihar enter the Halls of Eblis. At the beginning, the story is presented as a kind of fairy tale, similar to many other oriental tales, which Beckford must have come across while translating the *Arabian Nights*. It is a troubled and perturbing fairy tale, which unloads on the reader moral conflicts and existential questionings making him wonder about his collocation on the experience of the world.

Vathek's journey is collocated between two poles, that of dream and that of adventure. Same journey accompanies Beckford too, crossing his inner world where art and life, fiction and reality blend. The reverie becomes a vision, the most important element of the novel. The oneiric and supernatural atmosphere that pervades *Vathek* create the dimension of the marvellous in literature.

Accordingly, the journey itself carries something perturbing and beautiful at the same time. Since beauty can be cause of a disease as it carries a kind of uncanniness, which can break into pieces the coherence of our personality, the aesthetic dimension becomes fundamental to comprehend the enigmatic function of art and the beautiful.

It is because of literature and art that the boundaries between reality and



imagination fall making impossible the distinction between what exists and what does not exist. The reader and the main character must not be able of distinguishing what is real and what is not, otherwise the dimension of the uncanny is no longer possible.

In Beckford there is often the problem of defining what is real and what is not. Probably, the ideal reader is the one that accepts the narration as it is without arguing, and abandons himself to the fluidity of the story allowing to magic images interpose. Beckford himself was divided between reason and fancy.

This duplicity which pervades his literary creativity, is shown clearly in the different use of language, tones and images. We have the voltairian Beckford, the enlightened soul devoted to irony, on one hand, and the pre-romantic/pre-decadent Beckford with an inventive mind, on the other. Even the oneiric aspect is doubled at some point. Furthermore, there is dream as a break out, an evasion into a marvellous world created by imagination, a playful world terrible, but in any case reassuring because it is an invented one.

On the other hand, there is also the dream as the possibility to narrate a story by delaying the terrible moment of damnation and judgment. Sometimes, narration is so important that it is seen as a matter of life or death, just like Shahrazad fairy tales used to delay her death: narrating in order to live or acquire freedom. Beckford uses narration to get free of his demons.

The miscellaneous of images, thoughts and dreams in *Vathek*, like in all of Beckford's literary creation, makes possible a succession of scenes, which creates the oneiric-like narration. It looks like the author is making visions as his main purpose in life, and he abandons himself in these reveries in order to escape from this real and 'horrible world'.

Beckford is that kind of a narrator, which interferes with the narration by judging the characters and the various situations using qualifying adverbs like *horribly* or *shamefully*. Therefore, what is highlighted in the first part of the book, actually, is



the irony that accompanies the story made possible by a recurring hyperbole; it is needed, since irony is what makes the reader smile and feel comfortable with the odd and the horrid. The reader perceives it because of the way the narrator is presenting the events and he becomes an accomplice to this humour and smiles while jumping from a line to another.

Afterwards, exaggeration is the key for the comic, consequently, the key for the comfortability of the reader. Since everything is shown as extra-ordinary, as all but normal, we have nothing to be afraid of. This other dimension is a safe place, despite the horrible things that go on in there and we can have these exciting trips being aware that afterwards we can go back to normality just smiling.

Irony is another way for the narrator to detach from the actions of his characters, so he has no responsibility for what they may do or say. Since the novel's regular fare is castration, necrophilia, incest and sodomy, Beckford tries to keep a distance from his narrator, which often becomes a judge, and those awful actions the characters are responsible of.

Nevertheless, we come across perturbing uncanny moments in a few segments in this first part of the text, although they are quite brief. After having followed the Giaour rolling from the mountain to the valley where it disappears, Vathek and his subjects go back to the Castle "*all with looks of confusion and sadness*"¹⁷. The perturbing feeling everyone has, seems like they have been dreaming and then suddenly they wake up trying to understand what it had just happened. This *confusion* of theirs emphasizes the impotence of them to control their actions, just like a dream and as the narrator tells us:

" [...] they had been impelled by an invisible power into the extravagance, for which they reproached themselves: for it is but just that men, who so often arrogate to their own merit the good of which they are but instruments, should

¹⁷ William, Beckford, *Vathek*. London: Clarke, 1823. p. 38. (Here after quoted in the text within brackets).



also attribute to themselves absurdities which they could not prevent.” (p. 38)

Therefore, in this very moment, the narrator tries to excuse the actions of the characters since they did not have any voice in the matter because of the attraction the Giaour-ball was exercising on them. It is a kind of divesting from any responsibility the characters, as they are not to blame; Vathek is not to blame since he is destined to follow the path that Eblis, supernatural powers, has decided for him.

How can he be blamed for something he cannot control, his desire for power and knowledge? How can Beckford be blamed for his unconventional desires? Everything skirts around desire, the ones that lie hidden in the unconscious, the ones that we keep hidden from the others because we are afraid of their judgment or punishment.

However, later on, Vathek becomes the tempter, when he meets Nouronihar that in return becomes the tempted one. Here comes a second perturbing oneiric vision that she has when following a light coming from who knows where; she seems to cross along paths, stairs and halls; she listens to a conversation about the power that Vathek is destined to have. It looks more as if it announces in advance the descending of Vathek to the underworld. Then:

“The voices ceased; the torches were extinguished, the most entire darkness succeeded; and Nouronihar recovering, with a start, found herself reclined on a sofa, in the harem of her father.” (p. 135)

If she was actually dreaming as this passage may suggest, then the dimension of the uncanny would be very easily accepted, as everything impossible becomes possible in our dreams. However, if it was something that was really happening, this confusion of Nouronihar would have been pervading also the reader, which would lead to the uncanny. Therefore, it remains the doubt, which is exactly the purpose of the narrator. We can never be sure what happened to Nouronihar, because she herself does not know if she was dreaming or not.



Another important passage is the appearance of the Genius who, somehow, replaces the consciousness of Vathek. After seducing Nouronihar and breaking the rules of hospitality, the Genius put Vathek in the condition to face his crimes. He is some kind of a mirror where our hero takes a look at his darkest side and that reflection looks back at him making Vathek conscious of his crimes.

The situation causes anxiety, since it makes him suffer and cover his eyes because of the shame. The Genius is bringing to surface Vathek's unconscious, that part which is hidden and buried trying not to mix it up with the conscious. When this confrontation takes place, the borders of two separate parts fall and by doing so, we have a perturbing moment, or the uncanny.

We look usually from just one side, but we are exposed to a universal gaze. That is why this 'mirror' becomes the other side of the conscious or the moment when the subject realises that the scene he is looking at, is actually something that looks back at him. Vathek in this case is surrendering to the illusion of the conscious, which had kept him safe until now and he starts becoming extraneous to himself; his conscious part cannot recognize that dark side of his.

Normally, in Oriental tales, the appearance of a Genius is the moment when everything starts to go well for the main characters, but this does not happen here. Since Vathek refuses to stop pursuing Eblis and return to Islamic faith, his terrible destiny is preannounced.

Actually, there are two characters in Vathek who often try to avoid the victory of consciousness, one is the Giaour and the other is his mother Carathis. The Giaour represents temptation. His offers are from the beginning what made Vathek open the door to the unconscious and to the realisation of his desires by any mean. He becomes perturbing in the first moment that he shows up in Samarah. His eyes, just like Vathek's eye when he gets angry, induce people to suffering and death.

Therefore, the Giaour is Vathek's unconscious portrayal. Here is the instant of the disorientation of our hero, while the disorientation of the reader lies in the fact



that the Giaour may not be a human being. The uncertainty that we have in those pages, confuses us, perturbs us.

According to Jentsch, the ability of the writer is exactly the creation of this uncertainty in the reader 'in such a way that his attention is not directly focused upon his uncertainty, so that he may not be urged to go into the matter and clear it up immediately'. That is what creates the uncanny feeling in those who read.

In addition, Carathis represents the cause of Vathek's insatiable thirst for power and he actually blames her in the last pages of the novel when his punishment becomes real:

"Execrable woman!" answered the Caliph; "cursed be the day thou gavest me birth! Go, follow this afrit; let him conduct thee to the hall of the Prophet Soliman: there thou wilt learn to what these palaces are destined, and how much I ought to abhor the impious knowledge thou hast taught me." (p. 221)

Carathis is the projection of Beckford's mother just as Vathek is the projection of Beckford himself. André Parreaux gives an explanation of Beckford's homosexuality unacceptable to Freud theories. He assigns to him, relying on some private texts, a kind of violent erotic sentiment for his own childish image, concluding that after all, homosexuality in Beckford is nothing more than a form of narcissism.

On the other hand, Freud argues that the homosexual individual assumes young people of his own sex, as subject for his love; that love, which once his mother (a predominant figure) used to focus on him. In this way, he takes a feminine role pursuing himself eternally.

The information concerning the relationship between Beckford and his mother that we have from his biographers, are quite interesting. They show his affective addiction to an apprehensive and despotic mother, who was the one to practice the Calvinistic credo of predestination and hell, together with a strict moralism. An ideological law from which Beckford as an adult tried to distance himself



intellectually, sometimes even too disdainfully. However, we find it in the last part of his masterpiece at a depth where language gives shape to the matter, where the previous coherence of experience moulds to be then passed down in the literary communication.

Therefore, it does not matter so much that the sour-designed figure of Carathis represents the authority of a Super-Ego compared to her son; it is more important that a Super-Ego is dominating the whole text dictating those comical shapes in order to mitigate a story of damnation.

Right before the opening of the doors of Eblis this comical nuance disappears. The tones become more serious; the reader does not laugh anymore therefore starts his confusion as well as Vathek and Nouronihar's disorientation. The narrator introduces the fatal destiny of his hero.

3.3 The Halls of Eblis

The whole novel seems to be a dream and like a dream, the narrator seems to allow himself any exaggeration he may have thought as appropriate. The hyperbole in the first part of the story, leave the reader with a smile while flipping through the pages. By using adjectives as *a hundred fountains, fifteen hundred stairs of his tower, three hundred dishes that were daily placed before him* etc., Beckford tries to make the reader feel comfortable since he creates a distance between what happens in the book and the reader himself.

The movement of traveling to the underworld is a kind of challenge to knowledge, a kind of anxiety to the unknown. It is often interrupted by pauses, reassuring ones, which give the possibility to descriptions and contemplations of the surroundings, or furthermore, to the ironic tones of Carathis' macabre rites. There is a perpetual passage from a closed space to an opened one; from the



palace and pavilions to the mountains and valleys during Vathek and Nouronihar's journey.

We know that what we are reading is not something that can happen to us; therefore, we do not worry. The confusion for the reader begins later on, exactly with Vathek descending the underworld, the so-called Halls of Eblis. The tragic tone mutation in regard to the contrast between open and closed and between pause and movement, which we find in the first part of the novel, creates a perturbing effect as soon as we find ourselves inside the Palace of the Subterranean Fire.

Right from the opening of the doors, the narrator changes the adjectives. They have now become indefinite, no longer quantified as they used to be at the beginning: *a vast portal of ebony, an immeasurable plain, an infinity of censers, of this immense hall* etc. The former schemes and symmetries are destroyed. It is a closed space but the labyrinth-like rooms, which compose it, are without borders or limits.

At this final part of the journey, the movement becomes vertical, an inexorable descending to damnation. After the fatal doorway, the steps seem to be crumbling into the abyss and this descending is like a frenetic falling in a dream or nightmare.

In this closed space there is no pleasure of a break, there is instead a continuous movement all around, just like inside a nightmare. All damned souls of this story run continuously without stopping for a moment to rest. Moreover, love is transformed in hate and it is experimented solitude among others.

Furthermore, the description of the Halls becomes more like the description of a labyrinth, where there is no end for us to see, where everything can be possible. We already know this kind of feeling, since we have experienced it before, while our unconscious has manifested itself in our dreams. It uses symbols often incomprehensible to our logic, yet essential to communicate with our conscious,



since they have to know each other at least a little, in order to cohabit.

In Eblis' Kingdom there happen no longer prodigies as we were used to see in the living world, where there is still hope to recover humanity or rationality. On the contrary, here, we are amongst dead people and damned souls, where human powers can do nothing to change their own faith. In addition, these people are not exactly dead because they cannot really die, but they stay suspended in eternity waiting for their punishment to end, just like the Soliman Ben Daoud who is still half-conscious of his condition.

These scenes make the narrator and the reader, in a confused and disoriented condition, since the boundaries between death and life have fallen. We do not understand what is actually going on and when every limit is cancelled, then we have to believe that everything is possible and we have to doubt about everything.

Afterwards, this suspension of judgment that these people live, which is not acceptable for human rationality; it is a continuous, frustrating and anxious waiting. Subsequently, the word 'torments', that the narrator uses, does not define anything. These 'torments' are never qualified; it is this the inexpressibleness of the uncanny, of the monstrosity of *Vathek's* underworld.

The uncanny induces a kind of perplexity, which is due to the immeasurable surroundings, something that goes beyond human comprehension; this causes in turn an echo effect, that of the fear perceived. In the first place, this fear is perceived from the narrator and then from the reader.

"They went wondering on, from chamber to chamber; hall to hall; and gallery to gallery; all without bounds or limits; all distinguishable by the same luring gloom; all adorned from the same awful grandeur; all traversed by persons in search of repose and consolation; but, who sought them in vain for every one carried within him a heart tormented in flames." (p. 217)

The 'heart tormented in flames' produces fear becoming a perturbing element.



However, it is not the image of the heart to cause the uncanny, but the anxiety that the narrator shows while describing the scene. The atmosphere is gloomy as they walk through the halls. This wondering without knowing where the galleries will lead, is what Beckford wants us to feel: disorientation. Nothing is clear, there are no definitions, or doors, or ends, or purpose to this wondering.

Therefore, we feel lost, just as much as the main character. It looks like he ends up repeatedly, at the same exact place; only the characters keep changing. This continuous repetition both of the surroundings and of the anxiety of the narrator (an inner repetition), are elements of the uncanny. Freud called this confusion *unheimlich*, which in German means something unfamiliar, which is extraneous to us, which we do not know.

However, if we take a closer look, we will see that it is all about the subconscious and the desires and fears populating it then, suddenly, coming to surface. Therefore, the uncanny is thought as something familiar, since we are aware of what inhabits our inner world, which we try to hide and remove in order to avoid distress/perturbation.

According to Freud, “[...] the uncanny would always be that in which one does not know where one is, as it were.”¹⁸ Here, there are no more bounds of the real and the unreal, yet there is a fusion between them in order to create a new world, the surrealistic one. It becomes confusing and perturbing, since we do not know if we are dreaming or if we are awake, what is real and what is not.

This feeling of being lost generates anxiety, since we have no more the illusion of rationality (the conscious) to understand what is actually happening around us. The unconscious prevails over the conscious; there we find a place, which we do not know, though it is inside us, and at the same time, it is extraneous to us.

Consequently, the subject becomes stranger and extraneous to himself.

“They reached, at length, a hall of great extent, and covered with a lofty dome;

¹⁸ S. Freud, *Uncanny*, cit. p. 221.



around which appeared fifty portals of bronze, secured with as many fastenings of iron. A funereal gloom prevailed over the whole scene.” (p. 211)

For many people, the idea of being buried alive is the greatest fear. Here, Vathek and Nouronihar descend the underworld while being alive; in some way, they are buried alive. Both, the reader and the narrator, by following the characters’ step, feel like they are under the ground, buried with them; like there is no escaping. “Their eyes retained a melancholy motion: they regarded one another with looks of the deepest dejection; each holding his right hand, motionless, on his heart.” (p. 212)

The look in the damned ones’ eyes and the silence that Vathek encounters at this hall, represent another important point of the Uncanny; the damaging of eyes, according to psychoanalysis, symbolizes the horrible infantile fear of castration. The vacant stare of the wondering ones, together with the silence that reigns all around the hall produce anxiety to Vathek on one hand and to the reader on the other, as that vision seems unreal.

The absence of eyes expressively-looking and the absence of a voice, or sound, makes the wondering ones become mere shadows that can represent a nightmare, a projection of Vathek’s anxiety; his anxiety of ceasing to exist; that of not being recognised from the others. Since they are the ones that establish our existence by looking back and talking to us. Their voice calling our name makes us real and living. Here, the Cartesian philosophy “Cogito ergo sum” (Eng. ‘I think therefore I am’) is not applicable, since the dimension, which is represented, is not that of the conscious thinking ego, but that of the absurd unreality of the unconscious.

Therefore, we come across the fears and anxiety of our hero. He perceives this scene, on the other hand, as a mirror or a painting looking back at him. Yet, he is



tottering in front of himself becoming transparent to his self-cognition.¹⁹

Vathek is not the classic novel with a classic heroic character. It is about vice, temptation, castration, necrophilia and incest. It is about what humanity tries to restrain, the unspeakable desires and fears. There is no moral but only gratification of pleasure. That is its main purpose, even when descending the underworld. Punishment comes only at the very end as an inevitable consequence.

In his analysis of *Vathek*, J.L. Borges claims that the difference between Dante's *Inferno* and Beckford's Halls of Eblis, relies in the fact that the former is a place where people find their punishment for what they have done during their life, while the latter is a place where they find both temptation and punishment. That is what makes Beckford's underworld the most atrocious one of the whole literature²⁰.

Concluding, we can say that reading *Vathek*, even if we know that what he deserves is a punishment for his sins, we sympathize with him, we live his anxiety while thumbing through the pages, especially in descending the Halls of Eblis; we get lost with him, we get confused, just as he does. Beckford achieved his intent: the reader is involved both with his conscious and with his unconscious, because what he wishes, what we all wish, is to throw off our inhibitions and self-control just as his characters do.

¹⁹ Giorgio, Rimondi, ed., *Lo Straniero che è in Noi*. Cagliari: CUEC, 2006. p. 43

²⁰ J.L., Borges, *Altre Inquisizioni*. Milano: Adelphi, 2000. p.138.



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CHAPTER IV



CHAPTER IV

4.1 *The Episodes of Vathek as a labyrinth*

Vathek, put in an ideal frame where the narrator is a hint, at the same time, it is a frame to the Episodes following the typical structure of the tale within the tale, which we find in the *Arabian Nights*. The episodes explore the darkest side of human soul. *Vathek* and the *Episodes* compose a whole, a unity deriving from the fact that every tale has as its surrounding one of the chambers of the Palace of the Subterranean Fire waiting for the eternal damnation.

After Henley had published his translation of *Vathek*, Beckford hurried up to publish his French edition followed by the only titles of the episodes, which he was trying to write at the time. Even the second edition in Paris did not contain the episodes since he had not finished them yet, even if they were important for the typical dynamic structure of the main tale.

As a matter of fact, what can be deduced from Beckford's correspondence is that the writer was working with an extraordinary diligence on the Episodes from 1783, and that it was important for him to complete them. However, he did not reach his intent, not until 1820's. With the Episodes, Beckford intended to give to *Vathek* the same shape as *The Arabian Nights*, a tale within the tale, in order to complete the main story.



Nevertheless, the Episodes were considered too transgressive, morally and socially unacceptable to be published, even when Beckford finished writing and reviewing them. After his death, his daughter, the Duchess of Hamilton deposed the manuscript somewhere in Hamilton Palace and it stayed there for about sixty-five years. In 1909, Lewis Melville came across it, while looking for any materials necessary to write Beckford's biography.

Melville published only two of the three tales within the second episode, in 1910, and he entrusted the translation into English to Frank Marzials. Their first edition dates 1912. Just as it happened to *Vathek*, the episodes had quite a controversial publishing story, not exactly for the same reasons, of course. Yet, they are probably the most important part needed to fully understand the story of *Vathek* and of its author, since the autobiographical elements are much more evident here.

The Episodes tell the stories of four people, who *Vathek* and *Nouronihar* meet in the Halls of Eblis. At this step of their journey, they have already understood which is going to be their faith. While waiting for their condemnation, all of the new inhabitants of the Palace of the Subterranean Fire start telling their story.

The first of these episodes is *The Story of Prince Alasi and the Princess Firouzkah*. It is the story of the Prince of Kharezme, Alasi, who after his father's death, at the age of twenty years-old had to take his place in order to rule over his country. He confesses not to be interested in ruling or marriage, nevertheless, he is promised to Rondabah, Princess of Ghilan, and for political reasons, as a king to his country, he has to fulfil his duty. While, Alasi is having one of his usual walks in the woods, he meets Firouz, who claims to be the Prince of Shirvan running from the 'rebellious subjects' of his Kingdom.

Firouz until the end of the tale is perceived as a boy. However, considering the Powderham scandal, Beckford did not wish to acquire more attention of this kind over himself, therefore, he decided to change his Firouz in Firouz-kah, a young



woman instead of a young man. This would have made acceptable the publishing of the *Episodes* without taking any risks.

In order to save his life, Alasi accepts to help his new friend to hide in his Palace presenting him as the son of a shepherd. At first, Firouz seems to be lovely and innocent, although, as soon as he finds out about Rondabah, he accuses Alasi that his affection will be all for his future wife and he will not want Firouz' friendship any longer. So, trying to preserve his friendship, which has become vital now for our Prince, he reassures his guest that his affection for his future fiancé has nothing to do with the affection he holds for the young boy.

Firouz starts a campaign against Islamic religion and becomes guilty of many crimes, starting from the killing of the shepherd, his pretended father. With Alasi's wedding coming closer, he tries by any means to convince his host that Rondabah is not worthy of his love. Alasi is weak and believes every word that Firouz says. They come to a point where they invade the Kingdom of Ghilan and try to burn Rondabah, but all they can achieve is to kill the King and the Prince of the city. Having survived the fire, Rondabah ascends the throne.

During the assault, Firouz is blessed deadly. The intervention of a healer saves his life but, while Alasi undresses him in order to allow the old man cure the wound, he is surprised on discovering that his lovely friend is actually a young girl called Firouzkah. Here, the relationship takes another shape, but still full of the worst crimes. Firouzkah confesses to have been raised by a Mage and takes Alasi to his cavern.

The way to the Palace of the Subterranean Fire is about to start. Alasi and Firouzkah take the road to Istakhar and walking through the Halls of Eblis, just as Vathek and Nouronihar, they realize their faith. Desperate and hopeless, they tell their story announcing repentance for their crimes, yet too late to avoid their fatal destiny.

The second episode is called *The Story of Prince Barkiarokh*. This is probably the



most atrocious one, even more than *Vathek*. Barkiaroukh is the heir of the Kingdom of Daghestan, which royal family has been taken the throne and now is hidden in the city of Berdouka working as fishermen. Ormossouf has three sons, that he commands to find a wife until the end of the day under the promise that they would be given the key of a precious box, which they think it carries a great treasure.

The three of them start their searching. Barkiarokh leaves the city hopping to find a girl that can please his father, in order to possess the key. After having looked desperately everywhere, he sits down discouraged. At that very moment, Homaïouna appears and after accepting Barkiarokh's proposal, they both go back to the city of Berdouka. Both his brothers have found a wife each, so Ormossouf asks his sons to go fishing and the one to have fished the rarest fish would have been the one worthy to have the key for the box.

Therefore, the three brothers do anything to win this competition. They get the fishes and their wives cook them. Thanks to Homaïouna, who happens to be a peri banished from Shadukan by her father, the sovereign, because she got envious of her sister, Barkiarokh gets the key pretending to have an infinite filial love. Soon after, his two brothers and his sisters-in-law are banished. Barkiarokh takes his way to regaining the throne of Daghestan, but when he gets there, he meets Gazahidé the daughter of the current King of Daghestan, whom he falls in love with.

Forgetting about his actual wife Houmaïouna, Barkiarokh gets married to his new passion, Gazahidé, trying to get the throne by telling her that he is the son of the king of the Peris. Yet, his former wife does not agree with this disappearing of her husband. She looks for him and finds him right when she is about to get the throne and makes him confess Gazahidé's father killing.

After a series of lies and efforts to hide the crime, Barkiarokh tries to have Homaïouna killed and closes his current wife in the castle, but she seems to have



killed herself leaving behind something written to show her despair. Our hero keeps committing horrible crimes secretly, but to his people he tries to look merciful and generous.

Unfortunately for him, Barkiarokh makes another great mistake by declaring as his Grand Vizier an 'impious' man, who had no religion and his people. His emirs cannot tolerate this new outrage of him and threaten him to death. Barkiarokh runs away towards the desert where he asks for forgiveness to Homaïouna. While thinking of repenting for his crimes, he listens to someone crying, a young girl who happens to be his daughter and Gazahidé's. The latter is dead and Leilah asks for help to the one she does not know to be her real father.

Together they bury Gazahidé's body and her loyal dwarf Calila, who had saved her from Barkiarokh, helped Homaïouna. Barkiarokh starts having an incestuous desire to his daughter and in order to have her, he tries to reach Istakhar, the only place where he can be safe from the Peri and do whatever he pleases with his daughter. But Homaïouna reaches the two of them right before they enter the doors of the underworld revealing the real identity of Barkiarokh to Leilah and taking her away from him.

The third episode called *The story of Princess Zulkais and the Prince Kalilah*, tells the story of two twins, who after having been brought to life are immersed in black magic water in order to survive. Their father, the Emir Abou Taher Achmed, is passionate to hieroglyphics and tries to raise his children with the same 'religion'. It is often mentioned that their education did not include the reading of the Koran, instead Islamic religion was ridiculed and despised.

The two, brother and sister, grow up with an incestuous affection. Their only desire is to spend time in each-other's arms. The Emir tries in every way he can to keep them away from one another, but his efforts are vain. Zulkais and Kalilah are helped by a cabalist called the Palm-Tree-Climber, who was supposed to keep Zulkais away from her brother, to reach Eblis, which could be the only place



where they could live their incestuous love. The story interrupts here. This last episode remains uncompleted. Beckford never finished it.

The characters of the *Episodes* are waiting for their destiny to be fulfilled and in the meanwhile, they tell their stories to Vathek. The labyrinth kind of garden in which Barkiarokh gets lost in the second story, represents the itinerary in which are embedded the various tales. Furthermore, the palace as the main building where we find infinite pavilions, the main plot of which the episodes become part, form an ensemble of intertwined tales.

The technique of assemblage, which characterizes the external and internal decorations, is the same of the way the stories are structured. In Barkiarokh's story, there are many narrative voices crossing one-another. It seems like a repetition of the elements that form the story of Vathek, though, brought here at an exasperating level. Barkiarokh himself confronts with Vathek on collocating his crimes as even more atrocious than those of Vathek.

Barkiarokh's crimes are actually the most atrocious ones considering his incestuous desire for his daughter. However, Leilah is saved by a good spirit, just as Goulchenrouz in Vathek. The two children represent the innocent youth of childhood, which is current in Beckford's works. The three stories are told using the self as a narrator, while in *Vathek* there is an omniscient narrator, though not a judging one.

As it can be understood, Vathek's damned companions waiting with him for the final judgment have walked through the same fatal path: exasperating research, fatal seduction, irreversible punishment. They have followed in a perturbing manner, the first story, that of the powerful and the most eminent of them all, the great Soliman. He confesses to Vathek the provocative interaction between the will for power, the will for knowledge and the will for pleasure, which brought him to perdition.

The magical arts and the desire to possess them in order to have the greatest



power over human and supernatural beings is the main conductor of the story of the damned. The Emir Abou Tacher Achmed in the last Episode is also one of those who search the supreme power. The narrator at some point says that "Abou Taher Achmed came to be convinced that if he could recover the arts and sciences of the ancient Egyptians, his power would be unbounded."²¹, because these unlimited power would provide him infinite treasures.

The Islamic religion and the Koran is always being described as having restrictive precepts compared to the Persian religion of Zoroatro. In the latter, the adoration of fire is contraposed to the Islamic cult of one invisible God and one prophet as his interpreter. It is just like Vathek who has as mentor his own mother, the one that initiates him to the oriental dark power.

Starting from this perpetual looking for supernatural power, we perceive a transgressive dimension through the pages of the *Episodes* even greater than that of *Vathek* itself. Everything is enclosed in the oriental tale and the canonical relationship between a woman and a man that we find in *Vathek*, here it takes other shapes, quite more transgressive and unorthodox.

4.2 Autobiographical elements

The transgressive part, which I was arguing before is connected to Beckford as a character, a sophisticated, cynical, libertine one. He has been an incestuous heterosexual lover and a homosexual paedophile one. As a matter of fact, this kind of sexual orientation and transgression of him are evident much more in the *Episodes of Vathek* than in *Vathek* itself.

First of all, there is a narration in first person here, which allows Beckford to identify with his character much easier rather than in a third person narration. He

²¹ William, Beckford, *The Episodes of Vathek*. London: Stephen Swift & Co., 1912. p. 166.



feels what the characters feel; they are part of him. The most significant passages are the description of youths, which seems to be some kind of symbolic caresses that the author reserves to the thirteen years-old Goulchenrouz, Firouz or Kalilah. They are beautiful, sensual, unpredictable, weak and passionate, just like their empirical model: Kitty Courtenay.

The clearest case of paedophilic homosexuality in his Episodes is that of Prince Alasi who falls in love with the young boy Firouz (before he comes to know that Firouz is actually a girl, which explains his extreme effeminacy). One of the most representative moments of this kind of expression may be this:

"I had, while he was speaking, opened my arms to Firouz, and Firouz had sprung into them. We held one another embraced with a tenderness that seemed to fill the stranger with satisfaction."²²

"The sound of Firouz's voice, his words, his looks, seemed to confuse my reason, and made my speech come low and haltingly."²³

We can actually argue that the whole story of Prince Alasi is articulated upon the isotopy of homosexual attraction. Even if this attraction is transformed in a heterosexual one with Firouz becoming Firouzkah, it does not have space for any doubts over its psychological origin. This kind of sexual attraction is found initially in Goulchenrouz, who is another beautiful thirteen-years-old boy.

However, Goulchenrouz is not the subject of homoerotic attraction at the eyes of other characters in the book like Firouz is for Alasi, he is the one who addresses caresses and sexual gestures towards other youths. We can refer to the scene where he meets the other children saved from the Giaour's cannibalism and abandons himself in voluptuous kisses and caresses:

"It was there that Goulchenrouz, who as yet remained undeceived with respect to his pretended death, thought himself in the mansions of eternal peace. He

²² W. Beckford, *The Episodes*, cit. p. 5.

²³ Ibid. p. 6



admitted without fear the congratulations of his little friends, who were all assembled in the nest of the venerable genius, and vied with each other in kissing his serene forehead and beautiful eye-lids." (p. 184)

Furthermore, in the scene of the presumed cannibalism, the narrator's voice shows up with his way of looking and describing the children, somehow libidinous when he focuses on their bodies' softness and grace in the undressing ritual. The act of the Giaour asking to eat fifty of the most beautiful children of the realm, is another important homosexual paedophilic evidence. Just like the proposal of Carathis to repeat the offer to the Giaour since "there is nothing so delicious, in his estimation, as the heart of a delicate boy palpitating with the first tumults of love." (p. 179)

Or just a few pages later the narrator refers to the Genius as the protector of children, who gives them the eternal childhood:

"[...] for the genius, instead of burthening his pupils with perishable riches and vain sciences, conferred upon them the boon of perpetual childhood." (p. 185)

The 'perpetual' child is quite current in Beckford's work, which André Parreaux has argued in his studies upon Beckford. His narcissistic nature, his love for beautiful youths of any sex, is the continuous search for his childish part and innocence. Quite similar to Oscar Wilde and his Dorian Grey.

Furthermore, in *Vathek* and its *Episodes*, there is something more than just homosexuality. Another dimension of sexual transgression is also Oedipus and incest. A clear Oedipus subject is the relationship between Vathek and his mother Carathis. Before meeting Nouronihar, who helps him becoming mature, an adult, he is like an exigent, irresponsible, capricious infant, depending totally from his mother.

Carathis on the other hand, is oedipally jealous of her son²⁴ and she pretends to

²⁴ Michela, Vanon Alliata, ed., *Desiderio e trasgressione nella letteratura fantastica*. Venezia: Marsilio Editori. 2002. p. 78.



have a total control over him, even over his harem. This is why she becomes hostile towards Nouronihar, who her son chose in complete autonomy, and she will try to separate the two lovers every time that she will have the possibility to intervene. Carathis is the powerful mother, the invading mother, the despotic mother, who can be read as a representation of what Beckford's mother was to him.

A similar relationship seems to bound also Alasi and his mother in the first episode. Prince Alasi, just like the Caliph Vathek, before falling in love with Firouz/Firouzkah, was very close to his mother. As a possessive and exclusive matriarchal figure, she first imposes a marriage and a wife that is not desired by her son, and later she starts hating the one she choose for him as soon as she perceives the rising of the affection of Alasi for his future wife.

Perhaps Beckford was blaming his mother for his marriage, for his misfortunes and for sure for having isolated him from other children, when he was very young, by being overprotective. He sees her as one of the factors that contributed to his unhappiness, together with British society and aristocracy. As he mentions in the beginning of the first episode talking about the responsibilities of Prince Alasi: "With this almost misanthropic repulsion from the ordinary ways of men, I had to ascend a throne, to govern a numerous people, to endure the ineptitude of the great, and the folly of the meaner folk[.]"²⁵ he may be alluding to his duties as the heir of a great fortune, like he did what he was expected to do, referring to his marriage or his political career etc.

Yet, more transgressive and terrible than the Oedipus complex, it is the incest, which we find in the second and third episode in the relationships between brother and sister (Kalilah - Zulkais) and father and daughter (Barkiarokh - Leilah). In *Vathek*, the incest concerns the two thirteen-year-old cousins, Nouronihar and Goulchenrouz, which probably can be seen as a reference to the relationship

²⁵ W. Beckford, *The Episodes*, cit. p. 3.



between Beckford and his cousin Louisa.

Even more highlighted sexual tonality paints the relationship between the main characters of the last episodes, the two brother and sister Kalilah and Zulkais. Both heterosexual twins, thirteen years old as the other youths in Beckford's works seen as a marked confirmation of the author's torment by the obsessive ghost of William Courtenay, are bound by a fatal and pathologic attraction. This unnatural attraction is presumably caused by the esoteric ablutions that their father has imposed to them since childhood. Just like Vathek's mother, he is an expert in occult sciences.

The following passage explains very clearly what I am referring to: " Let us swear—not by the Prophet, of whom we have but little knowledge, but by the elements that sustain man's existence—let us swear that, rather than consent to live the one without the other, we will take into our veins the soft distillation of the flowers of the stream, which the Sages have so often vaunted in our hearing."²⁶

The intensity of this passion which bounds the two, brother and sister, is condemned by Zulkais, while in the Palace of the Subterranean Fire she is telling the story to Vathek. She blames her father and her masters for having allowed the affection to become more than what is normal between a brother and a sister. It is quite clear the kind of pathologic symbiosis the two of them have. We can see it in their actions, in the fact that the young prince never gets rest if not in his sister's arms, or in Zulkais who does not find other happiness apart from covering her brother with caresses.

If the relationship between brothers has a particularly accentuated articulation, the one between father and daughter becomes even more marked by an uncontrollable desire. This desire or unrestrained passion that pushes Barkiarokh towards his daughter Leilah, has been partially justified since Leilah is the living

²⁶ W. Beckford, *The Episodes*, cit. p. 189.



soul of her mother. It is justified only physically but not morally.

Before being incestuous, Barkiarokh has even been necrophilous. When his wife Homaïouna falls in a deep sleep similar to death, he is pervaded by a burning desire and satisfies himself sexually several times, over the body of his dead wife. As soon as he got back to reality, he ran away from her body, full of horror, and hid in the Mosque, but soon enough he felt again the irresistible desire to go back to his wife's dead body. All these elements make the story of Barkiarokh "the most horrifying thing that Beckford ever wrote."²⁷

The desire of transgression pervades the *Episodes* as well as *Vathek*. It is the central theme of Beckford's work. The unnatural desires represented in his masterpiece, seem to refer to how Beckford may be seeing his sexual orientation, namely as something unnatural for which he would be condemned to eternal damnation once dead. Some kind of resignation to his faith. May it be this the reason why he locked himself up at Fonthill Abbey staying away from English society, from tempting youths? Maybe he just wanted to stay away from gossip and scandals which would cost him much more than his political career.

An important topic in the *Episodes*, just as it is for *Vathek*, is the hallucinating dimension. In Alasi's story, we read twice about drugs. The first time, when Firouz is accused of having given a dose of a strong stimulating substance to the mullah, in order to cause him madness, provoking his death instead: "The public did not take the Mullah's death with quite so much equanimity. It was said that Firouz, in derision of the faith of the true believers, had administered some philtre to the holy man, causing him to lose his wits."²⁸

The second time, when the chief of Eunuchs tries to avoid his master's unwanted marriage with Rondabah and he plans to make the servants of her entourage inhale a deadly hypnotic essence.

²⁷ A. Boyd, *England's Wealthiest Son*, cit. p. 96.

²⁸ W. Beckford, *The Episodes*, cit. p. 11.



Moreover, in the last Episode, that of Prince Kalilah and Princess Zulkais, the two scandalous incestuous twins, have the idea of opposing their planned separation by using a substance which imitates natural death: " Let us swear—not by the Prophet, of whom we have but little knowledge, but by the elements that sustain man's existence—let us swear that, rather than consent to live the one without the other, we will take into our veins the soft distillation of the flowers of the stream, which the Sages have so often vaunted in our hearing. That essence will lull us painlessly to sleep in each other's arms, and so bear our souls imperceptibly into the peace of another existence!"²⁹

And again, the moment when Zulkais wakes up after the separation from her brother: "Then the noise of the water gurgling round the boat began to alarm me. It filled my ears strangely, and I half fancied I had drunk of the beverage spoken of by Kalilali, and been borne beyond the confines of our planet. I lay thus, bewildered with strange imaginings, and did not dare to open my eyes, but stretched out my arms to feel for Kalilah."³⁰ It is a further confirmation of the effects of drugs signing their presence in Beckford's texts and probably in his life.

²⁹ W. Beckford, *The Episodes*, cit. p. 189.

³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 192.



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CONCLUSIONS



Conclusions

At the end of this analysis, Beckford remains still an enigma. There have been more biographical books on Beckford than on his works. Probably critics have seen him as an interesting character who did not exploit his genius properly. His literary creativity has not been very wide, however, he has given a relevant contribution to English as well as to French literature. The case of Beckford's literary importance has been made only recently. Despite being a minor literary figure, his masterpiece *Vathek* is one of the greatest gothic-oriental novels.

Beckford had lived in the century of Enlightenment, the century of the formation of one's own identity and the well-defined roles of men and women. Yet, in his most famous novel, he continuously breaks these boundaries; young boys look like girls with all feminine characteristics and women are dressed with a strong dominating character. It is an unconventional visionary book, just as it is Beckford himself.

The fashionable oriental tale spread throughout Europe in the eighteenth century with the translation of *The Arabian Nights* generating a series of imitations, of pretended translations and of translations of pretended translations. It was difficult to distinguish between authentic and false at a certain point, since every tale had its oriental ingredients, which made it plausible.

It was especially the Arabic world that gave the right mysterious and fairy tale kind of atmosphere. Furthermore, cruelty was a fundamental component of



those tales full of magical words, geniuses, hidden treasures and eroticism. Together with the affirmation of the novel as a serious narration, which treated 'real' stories of common people, there was the oriental tale, which offered to popular tale the marvellous and the improbable.

The reminiscence of his earlier readings are obvious and manifest. He tried to convince himself that he was living in a fictitious world rather than in a real one. He put between himself and others the barrier of imagination. Beckford isolated himself in some kind of narcissistic gratification, in a private world without time or space trying to build a visionary atmosphere of happiness.

The humorous register in *Vathek* amplifies instead of hiding the awful cruelty of Hell where the Caliph will end up to expiate his crimes. This tale of unmeasurable longings, of infinite metamorphoses, of satanic rites ends in that sinister Subterranean Palace made of loneliness and suffering. In reading *Vathek*, the reader is trapped in a kind of hidden sadistic desire in the cruelty of Vathek's actions and the perversion that characterizes the book. All these elements are what make this novel one of the most valuable works worldwide.

Furthermore, the dimension of hallucinations and the transgression that pervade the text constitute the uncanny dimension. The reader and characters of the tale themselves are full of doubts. No one knows with certainty if they are in a dream or if things have really happened. In these two dimensions, Vathek makes his journey, together with Beckford's journey looking for his own identity somewhere away from English society.

If Freud had analysed *Vathek* and his author, he would have had a lot to say about anxiety and the Oedipus complex, but especially about the uncanniness of Beckfordian Hell. *The Episodes of Vathek* are the perfect representation of the most horrible human perversions, what psychoanalysts like Freud tried to explore and explain.

Vathek built his Palace dedicated to the five senses and because of his eagerness



for knowledge, he erased a very high tower, which prefigures his ascending in the abyss. Beckford tried to build the same tower both at Fonthill Abbey and at his estate in Bath where he lived his last years.

Beckford put all his frustration and desires in his *Caliph*. This novel is autobiographical and particularly an inquiry in its author's inner world. In a time where homosexuality was considered a crime punished with death, Beckford could only use his poetic skills to create a veiled text transferring all of his world. He was 'England wealthiest son' and as heir of a great fortune he could not allow another scandal like that of *Powderham*, since he could lose more than his reputation.

Therefore, he closed himself up at Fonthill Abbey, which he built according to his oriental/gothic taste, trying to bring partially to life, the world where he would have liked to live in. By exploiting his invented characters, he lived indirectly his unconventional desires. If he had been poor, it might have still been a romantic writer, but he could not have built his own oriental world as he did with his estate.

However, Beckford's literary geniality is unquestionable, even though he never achieved to acquire the deserved recognition while still alive. It is not very clear why he stopped writing after such a literary prolific youth. Yet, he achieved to leave his trace in European literature of the eighteenth century.



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