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William Beckford's Depiction of the Orient and the Oriental as Infernal in *Vathek*

William Beckford'un *Vathek* Adlı Eserinde Doğu ve Doğuluyu Şeytanlaştırması Üzerine

ABSTRACT

Vathek treats the despotic rule of caliph Al-Wathik (842-847), the ninth caliph of the Abbasid dynasty, and by extension, depicts Islamic caliphate and culture as decadent. For Beckford, though exotically absorbing, eastern paradigm has its sinister aura: under despotic, necromantic, and sly rulers, 'good' Muslims are no more than an insipid mass. And this submissive cultural character of the East is shown as the 'other' of the West. Contrary to conventional English gothicists who praise in their works the Protestant moral code against 'decadent' Catholicism, Beckford, due to his acquaintance with European languages and cultures, assumes multicultural tone and style: through a contrastive portrayal of caliph Vathek as the wrathful, proud, greedy, slothful, lustful, envious, and gluttonous ruler of the lands of Islam, he creates the *doppelgänger* of the idealized enlightenment individual. Yet, this socio-cultural and psychological schematising influenced the first and the second generations of romantic poets, who, by orientalising the Orient like Beckford, further contributed to the distorted image of Islam, Muslims, and the East.

Keywords: Gothic, Romanticism, Beckford, Orientalism, Islam.

ÖZET

Vathek, Abbasi halifelerinden Al-Wathik'in (842-847) zalim yönetimini konu edinirken, bir yandan da İslam halifeliği ve İslam kültürünü itibarsızlaştırma çabasındadır. Beckford için doğunun egzotik bir cazibesi olsa da, bu dünya aynı zamanda tehditkâr ve tehlikelidir. Eserde, sihir ve büyüyle uğraşan zorba, şeytani hükümdarların tahakkümü altındaki 'iyi' Müslümanlar kuru kalabalık olmaktan öteye gidemezler ve doğunun bu teslimiyetçi kültürel kimliği de Beckford tarafından batıyı tanımlayan 'öteki' şeklinde resmedilir. Eserlerinde Protestan ahlakını 'çürümüş' Katolik inancına karşı öven geleneksel İngiliz Gotik yazarların aksine batı dilleri ve kültürleriyle tanışık olan Beckford, çok kültürlü Avrupalı bireyden yanadır: Aydınlanma Çağı'nın idealize ettiği bu bireyin şeytani ikizini çıkarmak adına da İslam topraklarının halifesini öfkeli, kibirli, açgözlü, tembel, şehvetli, kıskanç ve obur biri olarak betimler. Beckford'un doğu ve doğulu için çizdiği bu sosyo-kültürel, psikolojik şema da, birinci ve ikinci kuşak romantik şairlerin Beckford'u örnek almaları sebebiyle doğuyu, İslam'ı ve Müslümanlar'ı Beckford gibi çarpıtılmış biçimde tasvir etmelerinin yolunu açmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Gotik, Romantizm, Beckford, Şarkiyatçılık, İslam.

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Originally published as *An Arabian Tale from an Unpublished Manuscript*, William Beckford's *Vathek* (1786) is the first example of orientalist romantic-gothic tale in English fiction; though Beckford wrote it in French, and got it later translated into English by Samuel Henley¹. Different from Samuel Johnson's oriental apologue *Rasselas* (1759), which Johnson 'suited to fulfil the Horatian demands of neo-classicism, to instruct and to delight'², the writer of *Vathek* keeps such purposes at a minor level. In fact, the work is the result of Beckford's pleasure-seeking and self-gratification, composed through his romantic aspiration for fairy tale and gothic; a fusion achieved through replicating the *Arabian Nights*³, and through borrowing from the works of Horace Walpole and Clara Reeve, Beckford's gothicist contemporaries. And with the publication of this grotesquery, Beckford, as the richest man of Britain in need of a bizarre title other than richness, fulfilled his prospect of enjoying the label 'the caliph of Fonthill'⁴, which suggested his weird indulgences and his uncanny life. True, this fantastic work brought him the notoriety he was looking for, but it is also true that his despicable portrayal of the Orient in *Vathek* contributed to the formation of the appalling image of the East for the western perception, which had already been developed about the Orient in the western culture in the eighteenth century. Yet, despite his attempts to be a queer figure, he was unable to detach himself from the climate of opinion of his age: bringing up the archetypal image of the Orient as an alien land, and depicting orientals as a carnal, sinful, wicked, and insipid mass, Beckford is one of the authors Said describes as 'very much in the history of their societies, "shaping" and "shaped" by that history and their social experience'⁵. Having lived the late eighteenth century's racist and colonialist *Weltanschauung*, and himself a colonialist, he, with his work, helped contribute to the promulgation of the then famous Eastern Question⁶, which was on the agenda of the imperialist West: he had composed his grotesquery initially to

¹ 'Formerly a professor at William and Mary College in Virginia, who had returned to a career as schoolmaster and private tutor after the American Revolution. Henley's scholarly interest in oriental literature inspired Beckford's confidence and he came to rely heavily on the older man's willingness to assist his literary enterprises.' Lonsdale, Introduction to *Vathek* by William Beckford, p. xiv.

² Barfoot, *English Romantic Poets*, p. 67-68.

³ A collection of fairy tales compiled from Arabic, Persian, Indian, Egyptian, and Mesopotamian sources in which the Caliphate Era usually constitutes the time span. '*The Arabian Nights*, which dates from about 800, was translated into French by Antonie Galland in 1704, and other Oriental tales appeared in English at about the same time . . . Most of these had been read by the scholarly William Beckford (1759-1844), the author of *Vathek* (1786), an Oriental-Gothic production of great originality.' Hennessy, *The Gothic Novel*, p. 14.

⁴ See H.A.N Brockman, *The Caliph of Fonthill*.

⁵ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. XXII.

⁶ 'The eighteenth century, despite some occasional successes, was a bad time for the Muslim powers, which, far from being able to fulfil their religious duty of expanding the frontiers of Islam, were hard pressed to retain what they already had.' Lewis, *Islam and the West*, 20. 'What was to take the place of the Ottoman Empire in the event of its disappearance from the world? This was central problem [towards the end of the eighteenth century] of the Eastern Question. Ottoman Empire extended in Iraq, Lebanon, Arab, and Syria, Palestine etc. in Asia, in Balkan Peninsula in Europe and in Egypt, Sudan, Tunisia, Algeria and Libya etc. in Africa and a Caliph of Islam, Sultan of Turkey was spiritual head of all Muslims.' Chaurasia, *History of Middle East*, p. 299.

gratify his self-indulgence, but his work has helped develop both nuisance and ironically, (imperialist) philanthropy concerning the East.

Beckford's *Vathek* treats the caliphate and arbitrary rule of Vathek, 'ninth Caliph of the race of Abassides . . . the son of Motassem, and the grandson of Haroun al Rascid.'⁷ Living in his palace Alkoremi 'which his father, Motassem, had erected'⁸, he commands the city of Samarra. Wrathful, proud, greedy, slothful, lustful, envious, and gluttonous, he is debauchery personified. Moreover, his Greek mother, Carathis who 'adopt[s] the sciences and systems of her country which all good Mussulmans hold in . . . abhorrence'⁹ is a great influence on her son: a puppet in the hands of his sly mother and susceptible to sensuality, he is a characterless lewd ruler who just runs after power and pleasure.

Having added 'five wings, or rather other palaces [to Alkoremi] which he destined for the particular gratification of each of the senses'¹⁰, Vathek is a carnal ruler addicted particularly 'to women and pleasures of the table'¹¹. As such, he desires more pleasure and authority, and for this reason, collaborates with the Giaour, the disciple of Iblis who approaches him under the guise of a merchant selling magical knives and sabres. The Giaour promises him 'the talismans [of Soliman Ben Daoud] that control the world'¹² on condition that he enter the underworld to join Iblis there. However, so as to be taken into 'the Palace of Subterranean Fire', he must first 'abjure Mohamet'¹³, and then quench the Giaour's thirst for blood who 'require[s] the blood of fifty children'¹⁴, the conditions to which Vathek consents. Having done as instructed, he now wonders when he will be rewarded with the talismans of Soliman. Asked by his mother to 'set forward . . . to Istakhar'¹⁵ to claim his reward, he meets on the way the good Muslim dwarves who take him to their Emir named Fakreddin. Upon encountering Emir's beautiful daughter Nouronihar whom Emir promised to his effeminate nephew Gulchenrouz, he decides to take her as his new sex object, saying that it would be an injustice to give 'this divine beauty to a husband more womanish than herself'¹⁶. Taking Emir's daughter by force, seducing her despite the laws of hospitality, and making Carathis enraged for wasting his time with her, he finally reaches the ruins of Istakhar where the gates of hell are opened for him. Nouronihar, having lost her initial innocence and virtue, is now a very prideful woman, and she pursues Vathek into the underworld. Yet, entering into an 'immense hall [where they see] a vast multitude [of people] passing; who severally [kept] their right hands on their hearts; without once regarding any thing around them, [and who] had all, the livid paleness of death'¹⁷, the two are frozen with astonishment 'at the

⁷ Beckford, *Vathek*, p. 1.

⁸ Beckford, *Vathek*, p. 1.

⁹ Beckford, *Vathek*, p. 8.

¹⁰ Beckford, *Vathek*, p. 1.

¹¹ Beckford, *Vathek*, p. 1.

¹² Beckford, *Vathek*, p. 22.

¹³ Beckford, *Vathek*, p. 22.

¹⁴ Beckford, *Vathek*, p. 23.

¹⁵ Beckford, *Vathek*, p. 36.

¹⁶ Beckford, *Vathek*, p. 74.

¹⁷ Beckford, *Vathek*, p. 109.

sight so baleful, [and] demand of the Giaour what these appearances might mean . . . why these ambulating spectres never withdrew their hands from their hearts'?¹⁸ But they get no response. When they see the 'formidable Eblis [who calls them the] Creatures of clay, [and asks them to] enjoy whatever [the] place affords'¹⁹, they are encouraged by his words, and ask the Giaour to 'bring [them] instantly to the place which contains [the] precious talismans'²⁰. The Giaour takes them to 'a hall of great extent' where they encounter 'the fleshless forms of the pre-adamite kings' at whose 'feet [are] inscribed the events of their several reigns, their power, their pride, and their crimes'²¹. There they eventually find Soliman, but he is groaning with pain. He gives them an account of his wicked kingdom and reign, and says that he still is hopeful for the sake 'of the piety of [his] early youth' that his 'woes shall come to an end';²² that 'this cataract shall forever cease to flow [and] till then [he is] in torments, ineffable torments! an unrelenting fire preys on [his] heart'²³. The two finally understand that the hearts of those who have passed by are burning in their bosoms. Having realized that the abode of Iblis is, in fact, a place of torture, and that they, too, will be wandering in this place with burning hearts, Vathek 'call[s] to an afrit . . . to fetch the Princes Carathis from the palace of Samarra'²⁴. Close to his eternal damnation, he understands that the cause of his hamartia and awaiting perdition is his own mother, and now he wants her to encounter the same impending doom. Upon the arrival of Carathis, Iblis sets fire on their hearts, 'and they, at once, [lose] the most precious gift of heaven:--HOPE'²⁵, and in the fatal hall of Iblis, with burning hearts, they 'wander in an eternity of unabating anguish'²⁶.

This orientalist *tour de force* does not draw upon, like the works of Horace Walpole and Clara Reeve (the originators of gothic genre and Beckford's contemporaries), the European faux-medieval past and the *soi-disant* villains of Catholic origin, but constructs a faux-oriental land upon the ancient city of Sāmarrā²⁷, the capital of Abbasid caliphate²⁸, and pseudo-oriental villains who represent the real personages from the Abbasid reign (758-1258 AD): Al-Wathik (or Harun el-Vasik Billah), the ninth caliph of the dynasty (842-847 AD), and Qaratis (or Karati), his Byzantine concubine mother are given the names Vathek and Carathis, and are depicted as the wicked figures ruling the lands of Islam with the help of their blindly devoted vizier Morakanabad, and their sly eunuch Babalouk. To depict the East as the 'irrational' and 'immoral' *doppelgänger* of the 'rational' and 'moral' West, Beckford lays the interest of the work on the sorcery and blasphemy the mother and son practice for more power and authority, and to make the two more abhorred for his audience, he puts emphasis on Carathis's Byzantinism (or on

¹⁸ Beckford, *Vathek*, p. 120.

¹⁹ Beckford, *Vathek*, p. 111.

²⁰ Beckford, *Vathek*, p. 111.

²¹ Beckford, *Vathek*, p. 112.

²² Beckford, *Vathek*, p. 114.

²³ Beckford, *Vathek*, p. 114.

²⁴ Beckford, *Vathek*, p. 115.

²⁵ Beckford, *Vathek*, p. 119.

²⁶ Beckford, *Vathek*, p. 120.

²⁷ An ancient city in Iraq near Baghdat located on the east bank of the Tigris River.

²⁸ The dynastic name given to the caliphs of Baghdad.

her culturally inherited cunning nature), and on Vathek's cruelty and carnality.

In fact, the eerie pictures of Beckford helped establish the paradoxical mood of attraction and revulsion for the Orient. Using the wicked eastern fairy-tale figures (the Iblis²⁹, the jinn³⁰, the Giaour³¹), a semi-Arab villain (Caliph Vathek with his 'evil eye'³²) under the spell of his Byzantine mother (a Jezebel-like figure³³), and defamiliarized Muslim characters, Beckford defines the Muslim world as evil and offers, meanwhile, both new oriental and remoulded Christian themes and symbols to the post-Augustan culture of his time. He 'enlightens' his audience about the inner nature of the Orient, and gratifies, by this way, the lack of spirituality in the late eighteenth century *Weltanschauung*, paving also the way for the emergence of orientalism in the Romantic tradition, the movement which laid a new emphasis on sentiments like fear, terror, and awe to satisfy the hunger for the fantastic and the uncanny after many decades of Enlightenment and its numbing rationalism.

The significant works of the gothic genre such as *The Castle of Otranto*, *The Italian*, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, *The Monk*, *Melmoth the Wanderer*, etc., the works which depict, through faux medieval settings, Catholic countries like Italy, France, and Spain (which seemed to the Protestant English eyes the bastions of inquisitional power, bigotry, irrationality, and craziness) as the *doppelgänger* images of the British Empire, were not, in fact, as influential as *Vathek* in providing British culture with a thorough opposite. True, Britain had already labelled in the eighteenth century those non-Protestant Christian countries as corrupt so as to establish her 'respectable' identity by this opposition. Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis, and Charles Maturin on purpose chose, as the settings of their works, the 'alien looking' Catholic paradigm, and by harking back to the middle-ages, demonstrated a romantic reaction through *othering* the Catholic culture of Europe. They identified Britain with its *soi-disant* opposite to attract attention to the present problems in the country, for they recognized a society in transition from the 'orderly' mercantilist model with its established aristocratic class system to the 'disorderly' *laissez-faire* bourgeois epoch, and lampooned, by this way,

²⁹ The chief evil spirit in Islamic mythology that refused to bow to Adam.

³⁰ Created by God together with angels and humans, 'Jinn belong to the realm of magic and supernatural powers. They have the ability to transform themselves, usually into the shape of animals. They are often portrayed as monsters with four heads . . . but also as dragons and serpents; they can assume human appearance.' Marzolph and van Leeuwen, *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*, p. 535. The jinn in the *Qur'an* are described as having been made from smokeless fire, and they have free will. Yet Iblis abused this freedom in front of Allah.

³¹ Used by Turks and Balkan Muslims, the Giaour ('gavur' in Turkish and 'kafir' in Arabic) means 'non-Muslim' and/or 'infidel', usually describing Christians. In *Vathek*, however, Beckford bestows on this figure supernatural powers, and depicts him as a disciple of Iblis.

³² Eastern (Arabic, Hebrew, Persian, Turkish, Urdu/Hindi/Punjabi, etc.) belief that the malevolent look is able to cause injury or mishap.

³³ Described as an evil princess in the Books of Kings in the Hebrew Bible, who, in the Biblical account of the story, is the woman who made her husband Ahab abandon his belief in Yahweh, and persuaded him to worship Baal and Asherah, the two deities worshipped before Judaism. Carathis in *Vathek* is no different from Jezebel for she persuades her son to follow not God and Mohamed, but black magic and the Giaour, the disciple of Iblis.

the materialistic and selfish trends in the individuals (or bourgeois people) and the 'modern' institutions of the new paradigm. Highlighting the class conflicts in the new social strata, putting emphasis on the transformation of the individual from naiveté to sophistication by means of the change in the socioeconomic system, emphasizing the moral hypocrisy in both the individual and in the deeply rooted institution of religion (which gave rise to superstitious credulity in middle class people, and hence, to the formation of a bourgeois sort of religion), and portraying individuals with their ambitions and sexual duplicity, these gothicists, in truth, described not the vices in the other, but the corruption within. Hence, the Mediterranean Catholic world is almost always used as a metaphor for the northern (English) Protestant bourgeois ethos, and the profane images of Catholicism developed in such works describe not the other, the 'alien' paradigm, but through the othered signs of Catholicism, depict the outlandishness, and the spiritual lacuna of a presently changing society as a result of industrialization.

Beckford's aims and *Vathek's* case, however, are quite different from those of the celebrated gothicists and their works. As the spoiled child of a colonist, and having inherited thousands of slaves and large sugar plantations after his father's death³⁴, he sees the lands of Islam as his own playground, and the Muslims of Samarra as no different from the slaves he came to own. Moreover, acquainted with French and Italian languages, cultures, and Catholicism at an early age due to his aristocratic background and education³⁵, and claiming to have composed the original of *Vathek* in French 'at twenty-two years of age' and in 'two days and a night'³⁶, he was perhaps the most arrogant among the authors of his time. Yet, as a multicultural scholar and bilingual author³⁷, he differs from the gothicists of the Protestant tradition who detest and despise

³⁴ Beckford's father (also named William Beckford), was 'a [Whig] patriot . . . representing the North American and Caribbean colonial interest in Parliament.' (Simon During, 'Beckford in Hell: An Episode in the History of Secular Enchantment,' *Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. LXX, No. 2, 2007, p. 270. Often called 'Alderman Beckford,' he was 'the richest subject in the land—a reputation that his son inherited. The money came ultimately from the family's sugar plantations in Jamaica, where they were the island's most extensive landowners and slaveholders: at his death in 1770 the elder Beckford left three thousand slaves' to his son. (p. 270)

³⁵ His travel to Italy in 1782 (through the grand tour) inspired him to write *Dreams, Waking Thoughts and Incidents* (1783). Beckford composed *Vathek* after this visit and when European culture was under the influence of French culture and language.

³⁶ Lonsdale, Introduction *Vathek* by William Beckford, p. xiii.

³⁷ From the bulky notes and references Beckford gives in the work (with the help of Samuel Henley, the translator of *Vathek* into English) one may understand that Beckford had a vast knowledge of the oriental culture, and that he had read and been fascinated by Barthelemy d'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque Orientale*, and the *Arabian Nights*. Not only the two works, but also some other minor sources are referred to (either through themes and motifs or through some certain names and stories). Beckford, in the explanatory notes refers to some certain works such as John Cook's *Voyages and Travels through the Russian Empire, Tartary, and Part of the Kingdom of Persia*, Habesci's *The Present State of the Ottoman Empire*, Jean Frederick Bernard's *The Ceremonies and Religious Customs of the Various Nations of the Known World*, John Richardson's *A Dissertation on the Languages, Literature, and Manners of the Eastern Nations*, J.F. de la Croix's *Anecdotes Arabes*, John Hawkesworth's *Almorán and Hamlet*, Richard Pococke's *A Description of the East, and Some Other Countries*, Ovid's *Amores*, and George Sale's translation of the *Qur'an* as the

in their works those non-Protestant cultures. Merging his country's Protestant *Weltanschauung* with the Catholicism of Europe, Beckford adopts an unlike narrative tone: he does not assert, as opposed to conventional English gothicists, a nationalist Protestant identity, but approaches the Orient through a multicultural (or Franco-British) perspective. And by creating the other of European character in *Vathek*, he follows the examples of Voltaire and Samuel Johnson, the two orientalist of the post-Enlightenment period who, in their works, depicted Islam as evil and as spreading wickedness³⁸, and whom Beckford personally met and exchanged ideas (he met with the former in Geneva in 1778, and with the latter in London in 1780). Hence, after Voltaire's and Johnson's works, in the 'late eighteenth century [which is] a very roughly defined starting point [for] Orientalism'³⁹, Beckford's novel came as another study of the Orient, contributing, meanwhile, to the rise of Islamophobia in the West.

'Despite his often expressed loathing of Protestantism ('oh the disgust and stink of Protestantism,' he once wrote)⁴⁰, by developing for the western perception the *doppelgänger* of both the Catholic and Protestant paradigms in *Vathek*, Beckford, in fact, asserts the 'rectitude' of the commonly shared Christian ethics and politics to their eastern counterparts. Although there is no mention of Christianity or a Christian character in his story, the depiction of Vathek (Mohamed's caliph) as the Antichrist figure representing Mohamed, and the so called anti-Christian, unenlightened moral code 'Muslims' demonstrate, make *Vathek* a work that relies heavily on the juxtaposition between Islamic and Christian civilizations, or between the East and the West. Having created a poor replica of Christianity as Islam, and a multitude of 'good' Muslim people ruled by a wicked caliph, Beckford's appalling panorama is more than a fictional depiction of the Orient: from his perspective, since the orientals follow a 'fictitious' religion and a weak prophet (Mohamed) who is unable to stop injustice, the lands of Islam have neither the concept of justice and a just political system, nor the hope of redemption. And by labelling the Islamic culture as decadent and deleterious, Beckford helps generate 'the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all

works he made use of. Though compiled by Henley in the 1786 English translation of *Vathek*, the notes were 'supplied with his approval and at times under his direction (Lonsdale, Explanatory Notes to *Vathek* by William Beckford 120). Beckford also selected notes for the 1816 version, and revised the work once more, retaining Henley's original notes.

³⁸ In France, Voltaire had already started a tradition of Muslim cynicism with his play titled *Fanaticism, or Muhammad the Prophet*. Composed in 1740, the play is an attack on Islam, its prophet, and Muslim fanaticism. As a philosopher of Enlightenment who was against all sorts of extremism, Voltaire's plan was, in fact, to attack Catholicism by using Islam: for he did not want to be the target of Christian zealots, he concealed his assault on Catholicism under Islam. Yet, Voltaire's play was highly influential in propagating the negative images of Islam and Mohammad in the western world. In England, Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) published *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia* (1759), the tale about the exotic lands: the lands of Islam. For Johnson the people of the Orient (or Muslims) are cruel creatures; they are against civilization and civilized nations. Hence, they are ruled by relentless despots.

³⁹ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 3.

⁴⁰ During, 'Beckford in Hell', p. 283.

the non-European peoples and cultures'⁴¹.

Though *Vathek*'s influence on the Gothic writers was limited, its inspiration on the generations of romantics who popularized Beckford's attitude toward the East was unlimited. With his depiction of the Orient as an exotic place of diabolic lust, gluttony, pride, and dreadful perdition, Beckford is the progenitor of romantic orientalism in which debauchery of the orientals is the major theme, and the originator of the satanic school, the two trends in the post-Enlightenment literature which are usually associated with Shelley and Byron. Born ten years before William Wordsworth and living as long as the father of the Romantic Movement (Beckford died in 1844, and Wordsworth in 1850), he was perhaps as influential as Wordsworth on the poets and writers of the period, for his oriental archetypes, themes, motifs, and his own perception of the Orient penetrated into their works. To illustrate, under the influence of Beckford, Byron composed his famous poem 'The Giaour,' whose title comes from the name of the disciple of Iblis in *Vathek*. In 'The Bride of Abydos,' Byron uses a Turkish setting and re-introduces *harem* (after Beckford). In 'The Corsair,' a melodramatic verse-tale in which Conrad, the Byronic hero rescues Gulnare, the erogenous sex slave like Nouronihar in *Vathek*, from the harem of a Turkish Pasha. Moreover, Percy Shelley's orientalist narrator in 'Ozymandias' describes the demise of a Vathek-like figure (Ramses II) and his 'great' achievements. In 'Alastor,' the story of a wandering poet (or the poet's personae), Shelley is in search of strange truths in the undiscovered, tranquil lands of the East. Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' describes Xanadu, and the Emperor Kublai Khan's palace, which, like Vathek's palaces for the gratification of the senses, is the dome of pleasure. The Indian maiden in Keats's 'Endymion' (the narrative poem based on the Greek myth of *Endymion*) with whom the hero falls in love, and Mary Shelley's Safie character (the daughter of a Turkish merchant in love with Felix, the son of the De Lacey family in *Frankenstein*) are the figures of romance coming from the East. These are the exotic eastern settings, characters, and themes of romantic orientalism, and legacies from Beckford. Hence, such oriental tales flourished the imagination of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century audience, paving the way, after Beckford, for moulding the previously formed archetypes about the East.

Half in love with personal fame, as a burgeoning romantic and as the youngest and the richest among the rich in England, Beckford took to composing his grotesque work immediately after his second coming of age party at Fonthill House (or Fonthill Splendens)⁴². Without doubt, the eastern grandeur of the house was the initial incentive for Beckford to compose *Vathek*. His youthful ecstasy, combined with the inspiration evoked by the splendour of the Greek (and Roman) temple style architecture of Fonthill in which

The solid Egyptian Hall looked as if hewn out of a living rock . . . the interminable stair case, which . . . appeared as deep as the well in the pyramid . . . [and the] necromantic

⁴¹ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 7.

⁴² A large Palladian style house which Beckford's father (Alderman Beckford) had it constructed upon the burned down house (Fonthill Redivivus) he had purchased in 1744, and where the family gave parties to their guests.

light [in the house which made the interior] appear a land of Fairy, or rather, perhaps, a Demon Temple deep beneath the earth⁴³

provided him with the exotic spiritual aura necessary to generate an extraordinary tale about the mystery of the oriental lands. Years after his second coming of age party, Beckford recalls the event in a note dated 9 December 1838:

It was, in short, the realization of romance in its most extravagant intensity. No wonder such scenery inspired the description of the Halls of Eblis. I composed *Vathek* immediately upon my return to town thoroughly imbued with all that passed at Fonthill during this voluptuous festival.⁴⁴

A sensational rich scholar and an author trying to acquire a terrific oriental title through his work, what Beckford does in *Vathek* is to amplify, by way of his youthful experiences at Fonthill, the already existing negative prejudices of European culture about the Orient, and thereby create a new language redefining the Old World for the West. In fact, his work has become another articulation of the Orient itself in the negative way, and ‘this articulation is the prerogative, not of a puppet master, but of a genuine creator, whose life-giving power represents, animates, constitutes the otherwise silent and dangerous space beyond familiar boundaries’.⁴⁵ By giving life with his irreverent discourse to the mutely ‘dangerous space’, Beckford creates (or recreates) an Occidentalised Orient in *Vathek*.

In Edward Said’s analysis, the East is not a new discovery, yet the western language about the East is a new one developed out of the experiences of westerners in the East:

There were the Bible and the rise of Christianity; there were travellers like Marco Polo who charted the trade routes and patterned a regulated system of commercial exchange, and after him Lodovico di Varthema and Pietro della Valle; there were fabulists like Mandeville; there were the redoubtable conquering Eastern movements, principally Islam, of course; there were the militant pilgrims, chiefly the Crusaders . . . Out of this comes a restricted number of typical encapsulations: the journey, the history, the fable, the stereotype, the polemical confrontation . . . [Hence] one tends to stop judging things either as completely novel or as completely well known; a new median category emerges, a category that allows one to see new things, things seen for the first time, as versions of a previously known thing.⁴⁶

Beckford makes use of these experiences to develop in his work the language of ‘the median category’ Said talks about, and thereby contributes to the western articulation of the Orient. This new language, however, is a profane one, fashioned through the remoulding of eastern and western symbols. The final product is, in fact, an amalgam furnished as horrible in order to attract the audience of a rationalistic culture whose symbols were fast fading.⁴⁷ He also forms a vantage point, an ideology about the ‘alien

⁴³ Beckford in Lonsdale, Introduction *Vathek* by William Beckford, p. xi.

⁴⁴ Beckford in Daring, ‘Beckford in Hell’, p. 276.

⁴⁵ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 57.

⁴⁶ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 59.

⁴⁷ Carl Jung asserts that ‘it is not surprising if the religious need, the believing mind, and the philosophical speculations of the educated European are attracted by the symbols of the East. . . There are many Europeans who began by surrendering completely to the influence of the Christian

looking' eastern world, and as Said argues, 'William Beckford, Byron, Goethe, and Hugo restructured the Orient by their art and made its colours, lights, and people visible through their images, rhythms, and motifs'.⁴⁸ Well received by a reading public that saw the novel as 'the production of what purports to be an authentic account of the actual experiences of individuals',⁴⁹ Beckford's pseudo-historical work answered the demands of the eighteenth century audience for the thrilling 'true history' of a 'strange' paradigm: it provided a new source for the uncanny (oriental) archetypes, and the necessary moral justification for exploiting the *othered* peoples and their lands.⁵⁰

In fact, 'Gothic narratives never escaped the concerns of their own times, despite the heavy historical trappings . . . [and] Gothic becomes a fiction of unconscious desire, a release of repressed energies and antisocial fantasies'.⁵¹ And if *Vathek* is classified as but a different type of gothic, then it would not be far-fetched to say that Beckford, in his work, highlighted the concerns of the late eighteenth century. In accordance with the intellectual (and imperialist) climate of opinion in his age, and yearning for a different fame other than richness, he depicts, *mutatis mutandis*, the eastern culture as corrupt in accordance with the western perception of the Orient as an exotically wicked land, forming, meanwhile, another but once more a false portrayal of the East. 'Actually, Beckford's techniques of the grotesque, his sinister humour, his satire, do not detach him from eighteenth-century literary conventions . . . he cleverly employs the century's typical conventions to strengthen the negative image of the East, its people and its culture'.⁵² Hence, this grotesquery has somehow worked to frame in the western culture the identity codes of the East, reducing Islam and the Orient to irrationality, alchemy, sorcery, misuse of political power, social and individual disintegration, usurpation of heavenly order and blasphemy, and collaboration with Iblis.

Apart from Beckford's 'antisocial fantasies' made concrete in the work, his depiction of Islam and Mohamed is quite awkward, and therefore questionable. He describes the prophet as a mock figure; a weak apparition, and a poor replica of Jesus Christ residing 'in the seventh heaven',⁵³ who acts like the spearhead of the 'Genii, who are always

symbol . . . only to fall victims in their turn to the magic and novelty of Eastern symbols. This surrender is not necessarily a defeat; rather it proves the receptiveness and vitality of the religious sense.' (*The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, 8.) Jung's perspective about the symbols of the East and their impact on the western individual refers to the spiritual lacunae and the need for the religious sublime in the twentieth century. Yet, it will not be anachronistic to claim that the eighteenth century individuals, in this respect, felt no different from the twentieth century people.

⁴⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 57.

⁴⁹ Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, p. 27.

⁵⁰ '...during the [eighteenth] century Britain became an imperial power: Canada (1763), large tracks of what would later become the United States (1763-83), and Madras (1748) were established as British colonies. The 1713 Treaty of Utrecht granted Britain more than land: it won the contract to import slaves to the Spanish Indies, making the eighteenth century the golden age for the slave trade and Great Britain one of its largest beneficiaries.' (Mursell, *English Spirituality*, 3).

⁵¹ Botting, *Gothic*, p. 3-19.

⁵² Al-Alwan, 'The Orient Made Oriental', p. 50.

⁵³ Beckford, *Vathek*, p. 3-4.

ready to receive [his] commands'.⁵⁴ Yet, the prophet is unwilling to interfere into the transgressions of Muslims, especially the Muslim rulers. On the contrary, he lets the ones plunged into sin go further: for Vathek's tower the prophet says, "Let us leave him to himself . . . let us see to what lengths his folly and impiety will carry him. Assist him, therefore, to complete the tower, which, in imitation of Nimrod, he hath begun".⁵⁵ Though the prophet decries the tower, saying that this endeavour of Vathek is no different from Nimrod's attempt to erect the Tower of Babel⁵⁶, his position in the story is analogous to that of a fallen angel who is willing to inflict harm upon man. Moreover, in Islamic jurisprudence (in the *Qur'an*, in hadiths and hadith qudsis⁵⁷) there is, in fact, no mention of Nimrod. Hence, in Islamic culture, this figure is of little or no importance. Beckford's making Mohamed utter the name of Nimrod, and the likeness he draws between Nimrod and Vathek is no coincidence: the likeness is suggested with the words of Mohamed, and for Beckford the caliph of Islam is no different from Nimrod. Depicting Islam and Mohamed as speaking with the words of the *Tanakh* and the *Bible*, Beckford's portrayal of Islam as a fake form of both Judaism and Christianity becomes more manifest.

Additionally, Beckford surreptitiously matches Jesus Christ with Mohamed: when he refers to Mohamed's existence on Earth as the leader of the genii, and as a ghost that just watches the piling up of the sins of Muslims, he is, in fact, comparing and contrasting the two prophets. Though details of Christ's return to the Earth vary among the Christian sects, Christianity, in general, agrees on Christ's return to the Earth as a saviour, claiming that all human tribes 'shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other'.⁵⁸ Hence, Jesus will save his 'elect' from among the sinful mass of people. With Mohamed, however, being reduced to a passive ghostly existence on Earth observing the evil deeds of Vathek and Carathis (and of their entourage) with his jinn, the power of Jesus Christ is covertly emphasized, for 'The religion of Islam and its prophet Mahomet are helpless to save the "good Mussulmans" from humiliation, suffering, or death. Nor can they correct the corruption of evil. Vathek and his Giaour (the emissary of Eblis) reign supreme'.⁵⁹ Beckford does not seem to know the fact that in Islamic creed, the prophet is only a human being whom God communicated to send His message to mankind. Unlike Jesus Christ, he is not a saviour, and has no ability to come back 'with glory. . . [and] with all the holy angels with him'.⁶⁰ Beckford, however, for the sake of

⁵⁴ Beckford, Vathek, p. 4.

⁵⁵ Beckford, Vathek, p. 4.

⁵⁶ Nimrod is depicted in both the *Tanakh* and the *Bible* as the great-grandson of Noah, and as a man of power. In extra-biblical traditions, he is also mentioned as the king of Babylon, the builder of the Tower of Babel, and as a figure defying, by his tower, the omniscient authority of God.

⁵⁷ The sayings of Prophet Mohamed. Muslims regard hadith qudsis as the words of God (Allah) uttered through the mouth of Mohamed.

⁵⁸ Matthew 24: 30, 31. See also Mark 13: 26

⁵⁹ Al-Alwan, 'The Orient Made Oriental', p. 44.

⁶⁰ Matthew 25: 31.

making the prophet of Islam an uncanny figure for his audience, describes him as the defamiliarized version of Jesus Christ.⁶¹

Having recognized the work's blurred Islamic colours together with its anti-Islamic theme, Roger Lonsdale, a scholar of eighteenth century fiction and poetry, claims in the 'Introduction' to *Vathek* that

an influence of a different sort may be attributed to [Beckford's] possessive and autocratic mother, with her Calvinistic learning: *Vathek* itself, both in its defiant, over-insistent, sometimes childish *ridicule of all religion* (emphasis mine), and in the unexpected power of conviction with which the Caliph's final damnation is represented, may embody a complex reaction to her.⁶²

This confusing conjecture of Lonsdale tries to find an excuse for the profane language Beckford uses against Islam and the Orient: he emphasizes the role of his possessive Calvinistic mother on Beckford's psychology, and takes *Vathek* as a psychological and childish reaction to her. Having thus found the excuse, Lonsdale euphemizes the anti-Islamic tone of the work by stating that *Vathek* is the 'childish ridicule of *all religion*'. Beckford, however, is not against '*all religion*': his work is a childish ridicule of Islam.

Described as a gruesome wonderland with many horrible rarities, Beckford's Islamic orient is a parade of grotesquery where the Giaour 'collect[s] himself into a ball, and roll[s] on all sides'⁶³ to be kicked by the people of Samarra, where 'the chasm close[s]'⁶⁴ over fifty children sacrificed by Vathek to the Giaour, 'where, under the guard of fifty female negroes mute and blind of the right eye . . . [is] preserved the oil of the most venomous serpents'⁶⁵ for evil machinations, where Muslim dwarves 'each a cubit high'⁶⁶ are depicted as the only true believers, and where Caliph Vathek ascends 'the fifteen hundred stairs of his tower',⁶⁷ the monument of his hubris. Overindulgence in sex and food, and frantic desire for power are made the personality traits of the Abbasid caliph, and all his 'unrestrained passions . . . blind curiosity [and] restless ambition, which, aiming at discoveries reserved for beings of a supernatural order'⁶⁸ end up, through a Faustian closure, in hell. Hence, Beckford merges up all the oriental

⁶¹ J.E. Spilvis claims in 'Orientalism, Fantasy, and Vathek' that '[Beckford] also repeats an ancient slur on Mohammed (that he is a pretender to Christ's role rather than the prophet of a different religion) by which he asserts an occidental view of the Orient as a degenerate and parodic version of itself' (Graham Ed. *Vathek and the Escape from Time: Bicentenary Revolutions*, 56). However, Beckford's style cannot be seen as that sinister for he was away, as a romantic author, from Christian dogma. Yet, he tries to enrich his tale by the familiar eastern motifs (including Islam and Mohamed) which appear, in accordance with his aim to create the *doppelgänger* image of his own culture, as the defamiliarized depiction of Christianity, Jesus Christ, and by extension, the western ethos.

⁶² Lonsdale, Introduction to *Vathek* by William Beckford, p. viii.

⁶³ Beckford, *Vathek*, p. 18.

⁶⁴ Beckford, *Vathek*, p. 27.

⁶⁵ Beckford, *Vathek*, p. 31.

⁶⁶ Beckford, *Vathek*, p. 51.

⁶⁷ Beckford, *Vathek*, p. 4.

⁶⁸ Beckford, *Vathek*, p. 120.

iconography with the Christian doctrine of atrocious perdition which is, in fact, within the 'European tradition [concealed] beneath the shimmering Arabian surface'.⁶⁹

By defining the East, *mutatis mutandis*, as the 'other' of the eighteenth century western paradigm, Beckford bestows on the reader a strange sort of sweet-terror, creating, meanwhile, the uncanny effect as he makes the religiously defined 'familiar' East (familiar also because of the trade made through the Silk Road, through the Crusaders' invasions and plundering of the eastern lands, and through the western intellectual, philosophical, and artistic interactions with the Arab, Seljuk, and the Ottoman Empires) 'unfamiliar', and does so via eccentrically taking refuge, as a romantic-gothic writer, in a fairy-tale world similar to the world depicted in the *Arabian Nights*. Hence, Beckford's depiction of the Occident as the opposite of the Orient through the histrionic transmutation of *The Nights*' themes and motifs into a gothic novel, and the pseudo-oriental *Weltanschauung* *Vathek* inspires demonstrate Beckford's ardent desire for creating and promulgating the *doppelgänger* image of the sentimental western paradigm through its 'opposite', the East. Although 'the world he draws is full of historically exact costumes and decorations . . . its psychology belongs rather to the socio-historical situation of Beckford himself'.⁷⁰ Decorative and picturesque elements occupying the foreground in the work, Beckford's alien stance against the inner nature of the Orient forms some specific symbols about the East. Though he borrowed largely from Barthelemy d'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque Orientale*, and from *The Arabian Nights*, his romantic thriller helped form a mood which eventually shaped a specific phantasmagoria about the East. After all, *Vathek* has become a further contribution to the creation of the distorted image of the East and the Muslims, an image through which the West has come to assert its opposing identity as 'good', and paved the way to 'morally' rationalize 'the right' to manipulate the world of Islam.

As *Vathek* concentrates more on the negative depiction of the Orient, and less on criticizing the defects of the new industrial Britain and its emerging bourgeoisie, it came to serve as a tool for British imperialism to suffuse the whiggishly inclined priggish bourgeois character of the empire over the eastern, Islamic culture, for *Vathek* depicts the Muslims as corrupt; as sensual, insipid opportunists hungry for sex, violence, and authority. Hence, the work creates the impression that with despotic rulers and ambitious irrationality in power, the East *per se* is a land in need of 'civilization', and the easterners (the 'good' but characterless Muslims) in need of 'character' and a more moral commandment. True, the work has been a milestone in providing British and European cultures and literatures with new symbols and archetypes, but it is also true that with fresh but grotesque representations of the East and with a devious (or surreptitious) strategy concerning the then famous 'eastern question' in the West, Beckford depicts the East as but a hopeless civilization, which needs to be altered to a 'civilized' land.

As the son of a colonizer and himself a colonist, Beckford expresses in *Vathek* his colonial mind-set and standpoint. Although his bizarre life has generated the notion that

⁶⁹ Keymer, Introduction to *Vathek* by William Beckford, p. 10.

⁷⁰ Serghini, 'William Beckford's Symbolic Appropriation', p. 43.

through composing *Vathek* Beckford sought to be the *eccentric* of his age, his work, however, demonstrates that apart from eccentricity, his product is a socio-cultural schematizing (or demonizing) of the Orient as a decadent culture for the western rationalist and moral perception which was then on the verge of positivism. Depicting Mohamed as a powerless prophet and portraying Muslim people as a licentious and characterless mass, he creates a certain *schadenfreude* in his work, and bestows his sanctimonious complacency, which is the result of his European multicultural colonialist perspective, on his reader. For him and for his audience those non-Christian unenlightened cultures, especially the Islamic culture, have had no contact with the 'humanistic' norms and ethics of the western enlightenment. Not targeting the European Catholic past, but attacking the Orient as the other of Europe, Beckford diverts from the mainstream gothic tradition founded by Horace Walpole. Yet this 'eccentric' author affected both the gothic and romantic writers of his time, and helped contribute to the development of the orientalist perspective in the West through his own articulation of the East.

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