THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

WILLIAM BECKFORD
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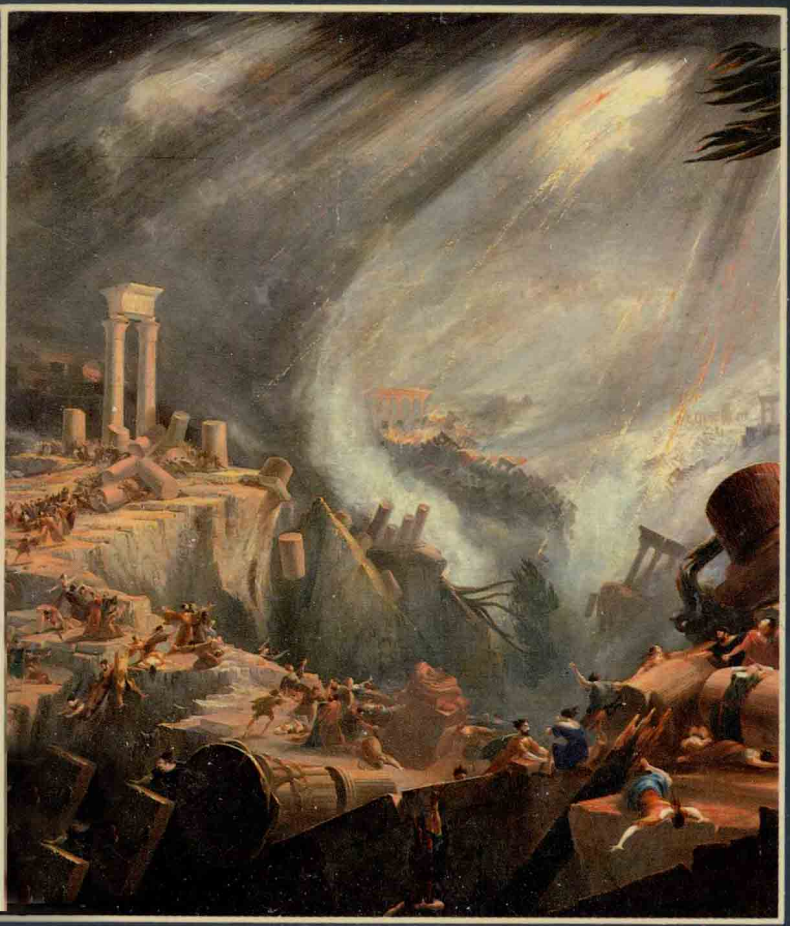

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INTRODUCTION

I

THE long and extravagant career of the author of *Vathek* would surely have impressed Samuel Johnson as a notable and sustained illustration of what his Imlac had called (in his own very different 'oriental' tale) 'that hunger of imagination which preys incessantly upon life'. The son of a famous radical Member of Parliament for the City of London (and twice its Lord Mayor), inheriting at the age of nine his father's huge income from his West Indian plantations, 'England's wealthiest son' (as Byron called him) was to be driven from England in his early twenties after a scandal over an adolescent boy, to wander restlessly round Europe for a number of years, to return to virtual ostracism by respectable society, to become a celebrated and fastidious collector of books and paintings, to publish some brilliant travel books, and to build at prodigious expense the most famous if least substantial of his monuments, the huge Gothic edifice known as Fonthill Abbey, which was to collapse three years after Beckford sold it in 1822 for £300,000. Beckford himself survived until 1844.

Inevitably *Vathek*, written in French in 1782 when Beckford was twenty-one, has often been considered as merely one more manifestation of a brilliant but baffling personality. The story of its origins and publication is a bizarre episode almost as strange as the tale itself; and the

difficulty of attaching any clear meaning or satiric purpose to *Vathek* has also tended to force its readers back on the author himself for enlightenment. What is known about the boy after the early death of his father can easily come to seem a preparation for *Vathek*. There is plenty of evidence of the rapid growth of his escapist longings for the exotic and beautiful, especially the oriental. John Lettice, his tutor, had to force him at the age of thirteen to burn a 'splendid heap of oriental drawings etc.', but Beckford's appetite for such reading matter as the *Arabian Nights* and its imitators, for the more substantial imaginative literature which he read voraciously, as well as for any works concerned with the sadistic exploits of famous despots of all ages, remained irrepressible. An important influence on the boy was Alexander Cozens, his Russian-born and widely travelled drawing-master, who encouraged Beckford's exotic interests and who became the recipient of a remarkable series of rhapsodic letters in his pupil's adolescence and early manhood. An influence of a different sort may be attributed to his possessive and autocratic mother, with her Calvinistic leanings: *Vathek* itself, both in its defiant, over-insistent, sometimes childish ridicule of all religion, and in the unexpected power and conviction with which the Caliph's final damnation is represented, may embody a complex reaction to her.

Beckford soon became an author. In Switzerland in 1777 he wrote *The Long Story* (published in 1930 as *The Vision*), an extraordinary if somewhat indigestible achievement for a seventeen-year-old boy, compounded of spectacular Alpine scenery, Beckford's apparent interest in some local occultist philosophers, and his own unusually powerful and fertile imagination. Other tales, still largely unpublished,

followed his return to England in 1778, and between 1780 and 1783 he worked spasmodically on translations from the Arabic manuscripts which had belonged to Edward Wortley Montagu (now in the Bodleian Library). His own additions to these tales (discussed at length by Professor Parreaux)[1] reveal the characteristic alternation in Beckford of moods of longing for secluded, prelapsarian innocence and the indulgence of sexual and sadistic fantasy.

The young Beckford was always claiming for himself an amoral, childish innocence: 'I am like one of those plants which bloom in a sequestered crevice of the rocks, and which but few are destined to discover', he wrote at the age of twenty.[2] In April 1781 he wrote to Lady Hamilton: 'I fear I shall never be . . . good for anything in this world, but composing airs, building towers, forming gardens, collecting old Japan, and writing a journey to China or the moon.'[3] In October 1781 he pleaded with the Countess Rosenberg: 'Don't call me *illustre ami* and *homme unique*. I'm still in my cradle! Spare the delicacy of my infantile ears. Leave me to scamper on verdant banks—all too ready, alas, to crumble, but rainbow-tinted and flower-strewn.'[4] Inevitably the escapist was in constant danger of collision with the real world. His hostess in Naples during his Grand Tour in 1780–1, Lady Hamilton, horrified to learn of a homosexual entanglement in Venice, pursued him with well-intentioned advice: 'infamy, *eternal infamy* (my Soul freezes when I write the word) attends the giving way to the soft alluring of a criminal passion.'[5] Back in England,

[1] See Bibliography, p. xxxix.
[2] Lewis Melville, *William Beckford*, p. 92.
[3] Ibid., p. 105.
[4] Boyd Alexander, *England's Wealthiest Son*, p. 14.
[5] Chapman, *Beckford*, p. 78.

Beckford found his family and friends concerned about his conduct and planning an illustrious political career for him. Ignoring such expectations and the conventions of English society for as long as possible, Beckford was before long involved in two complex relationships. By the summer of 1781 Louisa Beckford, the wife of his cousin Peter, was in love with him and, by the following autumn, Beckford himself was passionately attracted to William Courtenay, the thirteen-year-old son of Lord Courtenay.

The later months of 1781 were therefore a curiously intense period in Beckford's life, marked by emotional entanglements and a confrontation between his own irresponsible longings and the responsibilities carried by his wealth and social position. Mid-September 1781 brought celebrations at Fonthill of almost oriental magnificence to mark his coming of age. But the event which has always seemed most closely related to the conception of *Vathek* was the houseparty at the old Fonthill House at the following Christmas, to which Louisa Beckford and her sisters, some boys under their tutor Samuel Henley, William Courtenay, Alexander Cozens, and other guests were invited. Music was performed by famous singers, and the contribution of Philip de Loutherbourg, who had designed scenery, lighting and other theatrical effects for Garrick at Drury Lane, is also evident in Beckford's own, no doubt exaggerated, memories of this occasion, contained in a note dated 9 December 1838:

> Immured we were 'au pied de la lettre' for three days following—doors and windows so strictly closed that neither common day light nor common place visitors could get in or even peep in—care worn visages were ordered to keep aloof—no sunk-in mouths or furroughed foreheads were permitted to meet our

eye. Our société was extremely youthful and lovely to look upon. . . . The solid Egyptian Hall looked as if hewn out of a living rock—the line of apartments and apparently endless passages extending from it on either side were all vaulted—an interminable stair case, which when you looked down it—appeared as deep as the well in the pyramid—and when you looked up—was lost in vapour, led to suites of stately apartments gleaming with marble pavements—as polished as glass—and gawdy ceilings. . . . Through all these suites—through all these galleries—did we roam and wander—too often hand in hand—strains of music swelling forth at intervals. . . . Sometimes a chaunt was heard—issuing, no one could devine from whence—innocent affecting sounds—that stole into the heart with a bewitching languour and melted the most beloved the most susceptible of my fair companions into tears. Delightful indeed were these romantic wanderings—delightful the straying about this little interior world of exclusive happiness surrounded by lovely beings, in all the freshness of their early bloom, so fitted to enjoy it. Here, nothing was dull or vapid—here, nothing ressembled in the least the common forms and usages, the 'train-train' and routine of fashionable existence—all was essence—the slightest approach to sameness was here untolerated—monotony of every kind was banished. Even the uniform splendour of gilded roofs—was partially obscured by the vapour of wood aloes ascending in wreaths from cassolettes placed low on the silken carpets in porcelain salvers of the richest japan. The delirium of delight into which our young and fervid bosoms were cast by such a combination of seductive influences may be conceived but too easily. Even at this long, sad distance from these days and nights of exquisite refinements, chilled by age, still more by the coarse unpoetic tenor of the present disenchanting period—I still feel warmed and irradiated by the recollections of that strange, necromantic light which Loutherbourg had thrown over what absolutely appeared a realm of Fairy, or rather, perhaps, a Demon Temple deep beneath the earth set apart for tremendous mysteries—and yet how soft,

how genial was this quiet light. Whilst the wretched world without lay dark, and bleak, and howling, whilst the storm was raging against our massive walls and the snow drifting in clouds, the very air of summer seemed playing around us—the choir of low-toned melodious voices continued to sooth our ear, and that every sense might in turn receive its blandishment tables covered with delicious viands and fragrant flowers—glided forth, by the aid of mechanism at stated intervals, from the richly draped, and amply curtained recesses of the enchanted precincts. The glowing haze investing every object, the mystic look, the vastness, the intricacy of this vaulted labyrinth occasioned so bewildering an effect that it became impossible for any one to define—at the moment—where he stood, where he had been, or to whither he was wandering—such was the confusion—the perplexity so many illuminated storys of infinitely varied apartments gave rise to. It was, in short, the realization of romance in its most extravagant intensity. No wonder such scenery inspired the description of the Halls of Eblis.[1]

II

Beckford later stated more than once that *Vathek* was written in immediate response to the imaginative and emotional stimulation of the events at Fonthill at Christmas 1781. After the description just quoted, he added: 'I composed *Vathek* immediately upon my return to town thoroughly embued with all that passed at Fonthill during this voluptuous festival.' After a similar account, he noted again: 'I wrote V immediately upon my return to London at the close of this romantic villegiatura.'[2] Since he was back in London by January 1782, the date of composition might seem to be unambiguously established. Elsewhere

[1] Oliver, *Beckford*, pp. 89–91.
[2] Chapman, *Beckford*, p. 102.

he noted that 'The fit I laboured under when I wrote Vathek lasted two days and a night.—W.B.'[1] Slightly longer was allowed in an account recorded by Cyrus Redding, according to whom Beckford stated: 'You will hardly credit how closely I could apply myself to study when young. I wrote "Vathek" in the French, as it now stands, at twenty-two [*sic*] years of age. It cost me three days and two nights of labour.'[2]

If the first draft of *Vathek* in French was written with unusual rapidity, it seems clear that Beckford then spent some months writing a full version. His unpublished 'Histoire de Darianoc' was written in obvious haste in cryptic, fragmentary and ungrammatical French, in contrast with the fair copy of the opening pages which also survives. The possibility that *Vathek* was drafted in a similar manner seems to have been confirmed by Professor Parreaux's recent discovery of a fragmentary draft of passages which occur towards the end of the tale.[3] The first dated reference to *Vathek* is in a letter to Henley on 1 May 1782: 'The Tale of the Caliph *Vathec* goes on surprisingly.'[4] At about the same time, it may be assumed, Beckford told Henley: 'My Caliph advances in his journey to Persepolis, *alias* Istekar; but want of time, I believe, will force me to stop his immediate proceedings.' But by 15 May 1782, when he left for the Continent, *Vathek* was almost certainly complete. His friend Lady Craven had read it by 29 May and

[1] In his copy of Stanhope's *Greece in 1823–24* (1825), listed in the catalogue of the Third Portion of the sale of the Hamilton Palace Libraries, 1883, p. 155.

[2] *Fifty Years' Recollections, Literary and Personal* (1858), iii. 89.

[3] *Beckford*, pp. 529–32.

[4] Unless otherwise indicated the Beckford–Henley correspondence is quoted from *The Collection of Autograph Letters and Historical Documents formed by Alfred Morrison* (*Second Series, 1882–1893*), vol. i (1893), pp. 182–200; and Lewis Melville, *William Beckford* (1910), pp. 126–39 (mainly Henley's letters).

thought it 'very fine, horribly fine'.[1] At about the same time Beckford wrote to her: 'quel Calife—pardonnez ma vanité; j'avoue que je suis un peu fier de son voyage—je l'ai même damné avec assez de magnificence'.[2] Further revision lay ahead in the various French and English editions, but *Vathek* was basically conceived and written between January and mid-May 1782.

From this point an increasingly significant figure in the history of *Vathek* is the Revd. Samuel Henley, 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. Henley was not, however, meant at first to be the translator of *Vathek* into English. On 15 September 1782 Beckford's tutor, John Lettice, began a translation which breaks off less than half-way through, a clumsy, literal version which nevertheless usefully indicates the nature of the French text at this early stage. But Beckford turned eventually to the more accomplished Henley. Writing from Geneva on 18 November 1783, Beckford referred to Henley's agreement to translate *Vathek*, 'the only production of mine which I am not ashamed of, or with which I am not disgusted'. He also promised to 'bring you some Caliphs not unworthy to succeed your beloved *Vathec*'—a reference to his progress with the 'Episodes', the additional tales which he planned to add to *Vathek* shortly before the final catastrophe. Working on the 'Episodes' in Paris, London, and at

[1] Oliver, *Beckford*, p. 100.
[2] Chapman, *Beckford*, p. 134.

Fonthill, he inquired regularly about the translation of *Vathek*: 'I suppose by this time you are deep in the halls of damnation, hear the melancholy voice of Eblis in the dead of night, & catch moonlight glimpses of Nouronihar. I long eagerly to read your translation' (19 May 1784).

In June 1784 Henley promised a complete transcript of the translation, but it was apparently not until early 1785 that Beckford began to see it. The intervening scandal over William Courtenay had no doubt distracted him. In a letter of about 26 February 1785 he wrote to Henley: 'Your translation had all the spirit of the Caliphs & their daemons. I long for the continuation.' On 21 March he wrote even more warmly in a passage which may be quoted as some indication of his approval of the English translation:

> You make me proud of *Vathec*. The blaze just at present is so overpowering that I can see no faults; but you may depend upon my hunting diligently after them.
>
> Pray send the continuation . . . the original when first born scarce gave me so much rapture as y^{r} translation.
>
> Were I well & in spirits I should run wild among my rocks and forests, telling stones, trees & labourers how gloriously you have succeeded. My imagination is again on fire.

Beckford later made some changes to the translation and his letters with Henley discuss the handling of specific episodes in the novel and material for the annotation which it had been decided Henley should provide. Beckford's superior knowledge is always evident, as he advises the sometimes puzzled Henley about various scholarly sources for oriental material; but it was undoubtedly Henley who wrote most of the extremely elaborate notes which were to appear in 1786. Such was Henley's zeal that

in late April or early May 1785 (misdated 13 April 1786 in the *Morrison Catalogue*) Beckford had to restrain him:

> Upon my word you pay *Vathec* much more attention than he deserves, & do you not think we shall usher him too pompously into the world with a dissertation on his parts & machinery? Notes are certainly necessary, & the diss[ertation] I myself should very much approve, but fear the world might imagine I fancied myself the author, not of an Arabian tale, but an Epic poem.

Beckford also urged on Henley 'a light, easy style, that *Misses*, &c., may not be scared—for, after all, a poor Arabian story teller can only venture to say *Virginibus Puerisque canto*'. Significantly, Henley's enthusiasm was becoming proprietorial.

In July 1785 Beckford submitted to family pressure and left for Switzerland, leaving the English translation of *Vathek* with Henley. He was still working on the 'Episodes' and on 9 February 1786 wrote to Henley to stress unambiguously that *Vathek* was not to be published without them. He expected they would take about a year to complete. Henley had perhaps been pressing for the separate publication of the tale for which he had laboured so hard but Beckford was firm: 'The anticipation of so principal a tale as that of the Caliph would be tearing the proudest feather from my turban.' He planned to publish the complete French text first, to be followed by Henley's annotated English version, which Beckford assured him, 'I doubt not, will be received with the honors due to so valuable a morsel of *orientalism*.' Beckford wrote again on 1 August 1786. He was awaiting the manuscript of Henley's 'notes & illustrations' to *Vathek*, but the death of his wife had depressed him and he had not completed the

'Episodes'. There was no hope of *Vathek*'s publication during the coming winter. He again emphasized: 'I would not have him on any account come forth without his companions.'

Such instructions were already futile, as Beckford soon learned, for Henley's English translation had in fact been published in London on 7 June 1786. Whether or not we believe Henley's later claim that he had not received Beckford's letters forbidding publication, it is possible to feel some sympathy for his desire to see his labours in print. In a letter to Beckford's legal adviser, Thomas Wildman, on 23 October 1786,[1] Henley defended his action on the grounds of Beckford's enthusiasm for his translation, especially in contrast to his disapproval of Lettice's earlier attempt. Beckford 'not only supervised and corrected my manuscript, but retained the variations and additions I had made'. Even so, Henley was clearly dishonest: just how dishonest is indicated by an inscription in a copy of his translation in the Bibliothèque Nationale: 'From the Author/Revd S Henley.' Beckford's name was not mentioned in this translation, Henley's ambiguous preface implying that the work was a translation from a genuine Arabic original. Henley's proprietorial attitude was revealed again when he replied to the suggestion by the antiquary Stephen Weston (*Gentleman's Magazine*, lvii (Jan. 1787), 55) that the tale had been 'composed as a text for the purpose of giving to the publick the information contained in the notes'. Henley's reply in February 1787 (p. 120) does nothing to suggest that the work was not a translation from the Arabic or that it was not the entire concern of one man, the editor himself.

[1] Melville, pp. 137–9.

Beckford, who was in Lausanne, retaliated as best he could. Until recently an ingenious hypothesis has been accepted according to which Beckford was forced to commission a clumsy retranslation of Henley's English into French, and that this was the text printed at Lausanne in late November or early December 1786 (with 1787 on the title-page). Professor Parreaux's careful investigation finally disposed of this theory in 1960. The Lausanne text undoubtedly represents Beckford's own French text, from a manuscript which he must have had with him, in a slightly earlier state than that translated by Henley. Before publication this text was corrected by Jean David Levade, according to his own statement. None of Henley's notes appear in this edition and Beckford's authorship is established in the prefatory note. At the end of June 1787 an extensively revised version of the French text, in which sentences were made shorter and less complex and the style generally was lightened, was published at Paris (a second issue can be dated 4 September 1787). The evidence suggests that this edition was supervised by François Verdeil, Beckford's doctor who was accompanying him on his travels. The revision was no doubt basically Beckford's own but Verdeil's advice may have been important: at the same time Verdeil was probably responsible for the many errors and defects of this edition, especially in the notes, a selection from Henley's edition now being translated for the first time.

III

While the publication of *Vathek* ended in confusion and disappointment for Beckford, it is not true to say, as do Chapman, Parreaux, and other writers, that the publication

of his youthful masterpiece passed virtually unnoticed in England. Indeed, since it is central to Professor Parreaux's argument that Beckford was in revolt against the social and literary conventions of his time, which were unsympathetic to his genius, the actual reception of the tale is worth summarizing.[1]

Vathek was in fact reviewed at length, and on the whole enthusiastically, in at least five of the leading literary journals. No reviewer took seriously Henley's claim that the tale was a translation from the Arabic, but its literary affiliations were readily apparent. The *Monthly Review* in May 1787 (lxxvi. 450) stated calmly enough that *Vathek* 'preserves the peculiar character of the Arabian Tale, which is not only to overstep nature and probability, but even to pass beyond the verge of possibility, and suppose things, which cannot be for a moment conceived'. It was 'written with spirit, fancy, and humour, and will afford much entertainment to those who are fond of this kind of reading'. The notes, 'which are of a character entirely different from that of the work', contained 'many learned quotations, elegant criticisms, and judicious remarks'. The *Critical Review* in July 1786 (lxii. 37–42) had speculated, as did other reviews, about the nature of our pleasure in the supernatural. It went on to detect in *Vathek* 'the acute turns of modern composition, so easily learned in the school of Voltaire', but thought that it was told with 'elegance and spirit'. Its moral was praised as applicable to 'every climate and religion'. The only criticism of the notes was that they were 'too short'.

[1] Cf. Parreaux, *Beckford*, p. 333: 'En 1786, les conditions psychologiques nécessaires au succès de *Vathek*, que les changements historiques allaient favoriser, n'étaient pas encore prêtes. Aussi en 1786, *Vathek* passa-t-il presque inaperçu.'

The *European Magazine* in August 1786 (x. 102–4), after congratulating the author on his knowledge of eastern customs and his handling of 'the marvellous', praised *Vathek* for its superiority to genuine Arabian Tales in that it inculcated 'a moral of the greatest importance': i.e. the fate of those who pursue unlawful and immoral pleasures. The ending was acclaimed as 'picturesque description, which more than borders on the sublime'. This writer also suspected that the tale was of French origin and again praised the notes. Henry Maty's *A New Review* in June and July 1786 (ix. 410–12, x. 33–9) could not have been more enthusiastic: 'it is not often that works of real genius appear. Whenever, therefore, a literary comet visits our hemisphere, it becomes a duty in us to point it out. As a phenomenon of this sort we regard the history of Vathek.' The moral, character portrayal and impressive knowledge of the manners and customs of the East were praised and the 'sublime' was once more adduced: 'A machinery, not only new, but wild and sublime, seizes on the mind, and pervades the whole composition.' In summary, 'the author, in the diversities of writing, appears to display at pleasure the caustick quickness of Voltaire; the easy sportiveness of Ariosto; the sombrous grotesque of Dante; and the terrific greatness of Milton'. The reviewer hoped that a favourable reception would encourage the author 'to publish the whole suite of Tales to which Vathek belongs'.

The *English Review* in September 1786 (viii. 180–4) was alone in questioning Beckford's 'moral', which the other reviewers gratefully accepted at face value. This writer first praised the tale for its characters ('strongly marked, though carried beyond nature'), its suitably 'wild and improbable' incidents, its use of the supernatural ('solemn