Experience, Fantasy, and Reality in William Beckford's *Vathek*

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine William Beckford's *Vathek* (1786) in terms of the major impacts that have helped him to compose such a novel. The three main factors that influenced Beckford are: his experience during his residence at Fonthill Abbey; his interest and readings in translations of the Arabian tales, *The Arabian Nights*; and his combination of fantasy with the soberly sensual grace of Eastern imagery. Despite the fact that *Vathek* is an eccentric short novel, it is based on a realistic protagonist, Al-Wathek (A.D.815-846), the 9th Caliph of Abassid dynasty, known for his love of food, and his knowledge in music, poetry, astronomy and logic.

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British culture had fascination with the Orient. Eastern stories had drifted across Europe by Byzantium, Italy, Spain, and the Crusaders who helped the oral transmission of stories. (Billi, 2004) Some of these stories were re-elaborated into legends and tales of adventure. According to Saglia (2002): "The orientalists' dimension gradually developed for the earlier manifestations into an intersection of texts and objects __ while became increasingly pervasive, visible and accessible within British Culture" (p.76). Saglia also states that "there was a diffusion and popularization of texts, which went along with the growing 'materiality' of Oriental consumerism, even in imaginative and visionary writers such as William Beckford" (p. 76). The most influential texts were *Arabian Nights*; the first English version was published between 1704-1712, *Turkish Tale* in 1708, and *The Persians and the Turkish Tales* in 1714.

Gray (1985) has proven that Homer's *Iliad* (700 B.C.), which was considered the corner of Western literary tradition, is an Oriental work. Quijan and Mikayel (1988. pp. 37--50) believe that the romantic interest in the Gothic has no direct relation to the Orient; it is directly related to a revival of interest in Medieval church architecture which is related indirectly to Oriental architecture. Edward Said (1995), on the other hand, doubts that the interest of Beckford, Byron, Thomas More and Goethe in the Oriental matter is for its own sake; he believes it was like an outlet to their concern in "Gothic Tales, pseudo-medieval idylls, visions of barbaric splendor and cruelty . . . sensuality, promise, terror, sublimity, idyllic pleasure, intense energy: the Orient as a figure in the pre-romantic chameleon life quality called objectively" (118-119).

During the 18th and 19th centuries, the interest in the Orient developed with several translations of the most popular tales from the East. The secretary of the French Embassy at Constantinople, Jean Antoine Galland translated the *Arabian Nights* into French. His *Les Mille et une pluits* appeared in 12 volumes between 1704-1717. These volumes were translated into English as *the Arabian Nights*, which ran through 30 editions in English and French during the 19th century alone. Other oriental tales were published as those of Reverend James Ridley, *Tales of the Genni* (1764). There was immediate influence of the tales on the 18th century that is seen in the structural arrangement of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Addison's *The Papers of Sir Roge De Coveley* (1711-1712), Goldsmith's *Citizen of the World* (1760), Johnson's *Rasselas* (1759), and most particularly Beckford's *Vathek* (1786), the first Romantic work of prose fiction promoting Orientalism (Quijan and Mikayel, 2000, p. 243).

There are three major factors that influenced William Beckford to compose his *Vathek*. The most important influence is his interest and readings in the translations of *The Arabian Nights*; his combination of fantasy with soberly sensual grace of Eastern imagery. Moreover, his experience during his residence at Fonthill Abbey plays a significant role in the development of his narrative. Finally, his readings about the historical protagonist, the 9th Abassid Caliph, Al-Wathek Ibn Al-Mu'tasim (A.D. 815-846), who succeeded his father the same day he died, is known for his love of food and his knowledge in music, poetry, astronomy and logic.

Beckford's imaginative and fantastic view is based on his knowledge of the East. (Mckenzie, 1995) The most incisive influence on Beckford's life is Alexander Cozens. It is indicated that Lettice and Beckford's grandfather, the Earl of Chatham, had burnt all oriental things. (Gemmet, 1977, p. 24) The burning of the oriental objects did not make that impact on Beckford's admiration for the Orient. In fact, Beckford rejects all restrictions imposed on his free thinking and imagination.

Of course, Beckford had actual contacts with the oriental people he met during his journeys. On his visit to Spain, he made acquaintance with Ahmed Nassif Effendi, Turkish ambassador in Madrid. Describing Ahmed's setting, Chapman (1928,p. 200) said that Beckford, "never was more delighted than upon entering a stately salon, spread with the richest carpets and performed with the fragrance of wood of a loes. In a corner of the apartment sat the ambassador, wrapped up in a pelisse of the most precious sables." At Fonthill House in 1799, Beckford transformed a room into what was later called the "Turkish Room." According to publications dealing with architecture and interiors, it is

> Extremely splendid and sumptuous, with its vaulted ceiling made entirely of gold, its painted arabesque and wreaths of flowers, its satin curtains, with fringes of silk and gold, its candelabra, Japanese vases, and piles of silk cushions, which reminded the visitors of the magical recesses of the enchanted places in the *Arabian Nights*. (Billi, 2004)

Moreover, Billi (2004) confirms that the Turkish room reveals for Beckford that the actual and the imaginary orients are combined in a mixture of reality and fiction: "visual objectivity and subjective interpretation, cultural reconstruction and personal emotional response." Unfortunately Beckford's education was conducted entirely by tutors. He became well-acquainted with French, Latin, Greek, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Persian and Arabic, speaking several of these tongues with perfect fluency. (Skeet, 1860) It was Lord Chatham, who visited William at his mother's house, received him at his own seat in Somersetshire and turned the young (less than 17 years) from the pursuit of Orient literature "to which he seemed prone" that he might fit himself by other studies for public life.

According to Melville (1910, pp. 20-21), the *Arabian Nights* "had fired his [Beckford's] youthful mind and held his imagination captive that influence over him never waned all days of his life." Despite the fact that *Vathek* is one of the wildest extravagance, the most grotesque and hideous scenes that his imagination animates; its magic incantations and horrors have no parallel in the *Arabian Nights*. This whole story, according to his account, was composed by Beckford when he was 22 years old. During a conversation with Cyrus Redding in 1835, Beckford tells him that "you will hardly credit how closely I was when I was twenty two years old. I wrote it at one setting, and in French. It cost me three days and two nights of hard labor. I never took my clothes off the whole time. This sense of application made me very ill." (Skeet, 1860, p. 360) In fact, Beckford never translated it.

Beginning in 1782, *Vathek* was composed in French, translated into English by Reverend Samuel Henley, and published, without Beckford's name as *An Arabian Tale,* in 1786. An Arabian tale seems to be of its setting, characters, oriental culture but gothic in its emphasis on supernatural ghosts and spirits, trying to induce terror in the reader.

Beckford himself informed Redding that for some of the characters he made studies from personages about Fonthill, exaggerating their mental and animal defects, and he drew his description of the Hall of Eblis; one of the most striking positions of the books from the great hall in his father's house, one of the largest rooms in the kingdom, very lofty and loud echoing, while numerous doors opened from it into long, dim, and winding passages. Beckford acknowledged that his residence at Fonthill Abbey had inspired him with the descriptions in *Vathek*. Looking back on his Fonthill home when he was an old man he recalls:

> The solid Egyptian Hall looked as if hewn out of a living rock. The line of aperture to and apparently endless passages extending form it on either side were all vaulted- an interminable staircase, which when you looked up, was lost in vapor.
>
> [T]he vastness, the intricacy of the vaulted labyrinth occasioned so bewildering an effect that it became almost impossible for any one to define -at the moment- where he stood, where he had been, or to whither he was wondering ... No wonder such scenery inspired descriptions of the Hall of Eblis. (Quoted in

> *Vathek: with the Episode of Vathek*, ed. Guy Chapman, vol. I, xiii-xiv).

At the age of 36, when Beckford returned to England, his father's house at Fonthill was one of the finest of its day, but it did not satisfy him; he resolved that his new creation should have no rival. No amount of money was spared to gratify any extravagance. Hundreds of workmen were employed day and night upon the Abbey, as it was styled. When the Abbey was fitted up in monastic style, the buildings and plantations were illuminated by myriads of lamps, torches and fires.

According to Beckford's narrative, Vathek added five palaces to his father's main palace. Each was "destined for the particular glorification of his senses." (p.5) Later in his life, in 1796 when Beckford settled at Fonthill, perhaps he thought of Vathek's tower when he employed workmen day and night to build a tower for himself, with three hundred feet high, and set them to begin it again when it fell down. Describing Vathek, the narrator says:

> His pride was at its height when, having ascended for the first time the seven thousand stairs of his tower, he cast his eyes below, and beheld men not larger than pismires, mountains than shells, and cities than bee-hives. (p. 7)

Beckford stated that the Abbey alone cost him a million and a half of dollars. Its interior's decoration must have cost a lot, while millions of dollars were spent upon the plantations. The tower of his palace was three

times rebuilt, and fell at last. It is said that he was swindled enormously by builders and agents.

> Once the tower fell from the effect of a large flag hoisted on the top of it, while exerted in a high wind such leverage as to topple it over. When informed of the mishap, Beckford, merely regretted that he had not seen it fall, and gave an immediate order for the construction of another. (*Skeet*, 1860, p.370)

The tower has a significant impact on Beckford's life. Beckford's narrator presents the Caliph Vathek as a character who believes in magic: "The succeeding night, Vathek attended by his mother, ascended the tower to see if everything were ready for his journey; for he had great faith in the influence of the stairs." (p. 25) Moreover, Vathek passed most of his nights "on the summit of his tower, till he became an ardent adept in the mysteries of astrology, and imagined that the planets had disclosed to him the most marvelous adventures." (p. 7)

The Caliph Vathek, according to the narrative, a sovereign of the world, "is destined to enjoy the treasures of the pre-admite Sultans, a Prince six-foot high, and whose eyes pervade the inmost soul of a female, is inflamed with the love of her." (p. 46) During his conversation with the Emir, Vathek displays his tyrannical power in declaring that Nouronihar, Emir's daughter, will be his wife:

> ... Vathek, becoming still more impassioned, gave a loose to his frenzy,... when the Emir, suddenly

> bursting in, threw his face upon the ground at the feet of the Caliph, and said: "Commander of the Faithful, abase not yourself to the meanness of your slave."
>
> "No, Emir," replied Vathek; "I raise her to equality with myself; I declare her my wife and the glory of your race shall extend from one generation to another."
>
> "Alas! My lord," said Fakereddin, as he plucked off the honors of his beard, "cut short the days of your faithful servant, rather than force him to depart from his word" (p. 41)

Beckford himself provides notes supporting his text. Gemmet (1977) remarks that "*d'ttebelot's encyclopedia*' *Biblioteque Oriental* [was] a primary source for *Vathek*" and every single definition of *d'ttebelot's* is greatly inaccurate if not offensive to the East. Said (1990, p. 234) believes that the "Orient" was a European invention and regarded "a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences."

Kibbani (1994, pp. 115-116) focuses on the difference between the West and the East, and the European and the the Orient. In the European narration of the Orient, there was a deliberate stress on those qualities that made the East different from the West, exiled it into an irretrievable state of "otherness". Among the many themes that emerge from European narration of the other, two appear strikingly. The first is the insistent

claim that the East was a place of lascivious sensuality, and the second is that the East was a realm characterized by inherent violence.

In *Vathek*, the East is presented in the character of Vathek, a Caliph of the Abbasid dynasty, a tyrannical ruler who wants to do everything to satisfy his whims. The narrative is made up of lists that chronicle the events without emphasis on the development of the main character; it was first published unauthorized by Beckford; it claimed to be a translation of an Arabic manuscript. In his preface, Beckford stated that it was "collected in the East by a man of letters, which was communicated to the Editor." (Gemmet, 1977, p. 87) In fact, Al-Wathek (in Arabic) was born in Baghdad in A.D. 815, ascended the Caliph's position after his father's death. According to Ibn Dahiya, Al-Wathek had exaggeration in his love for women (Al-Zerkali, 1996, p. 732). His love for music was well-known; he used to play the lute. During his reign, he called a man named Mohammed bin Al-Harith to his palace. Al-Harith said, "I was very terrified and thought that someone has tricked me and told me that the Caliph had something which he would punish me for," but when I entered into his palace, Al-Wathek ordered me to sing; he enjoyed my singing and ordered to give me ten thousand dirhams. Yazeed Al-Muhalabbi reports that Al-Wathek hates imitation and likes to supervise fields of knowledge and science. (Al-Ashmawi, 1996, p. 231; my transltion) He is known as the patron of scholars and artists. His thirst for knowledge makes him invite scholars to converse with. During their discussion, if Al-Wathek fails to convince a scholar, he attempts to bribe him; if it does not work, he sends him to prison. (As-Samurra'i, 1999, p. 405) This

realistic presentation corresponds with what Bekcford's narrator notes about Vathek: he is fond of engaging in disputes with the learned; "he liked them not to push their opposition with warmth; he stopped the mouths of those with presents whose mouths could be stopped, whilst others, whom his liberality was unable to subdue, he sent to prison to cool their blood, a remedy that often succeeded." (p.6)

Undoubtedly, Vathek was addicted to the pleasures of the flesh. One of the palaces that he added to his father's is called "The Eternal or Unsatiating Banquet"; it was "the most delicious wines and the choicest cordials flowed forth from a hundred fantasies that were never exhausted." (p.6) The emphasis is on Vahtek's sensuality in which he indulged himself; therefore, Vathek lived in extremely excessive luxury.

In another event, one of the major propagandistic promoters for the Abassid dynasty called Ahmed bin Nussayr bin Malik Al-Khusa'i was asked whether the Holy Quran is a creation. He denied admitting this belief which the Caliph Al-Wathek believes. Al-Khusa'I told Al-Wathek that there is no proof in the Quran or in the Prophet's hadith about this; then, the Caliph ordered his execution. (Kan'an, 2006, pp. 143-144)

Beckford's narrator remarked that Vathek "discovered a 'predilection'" for theological controversy. Vathek also induced the zealous to oppose him, and then persecuted them, in return; for he resolved at any to have reason on his side. (p. 15)

This presentation of the protagonist is an embodiment of evil; although Vathek was not so active as his mother, he devoted his time to the sole gratification of his senses, in the palaces which were really

dedicated to them; he disgusted himself no more with the Divan or the Mosque: "One half of Samarah followed his example, whilst the other lamented the progress of corruption." (p. 24) It seemed that Beckford combined fantasy and experience in telling about Vathek's obsession with the pleasures of the senses.

Al-Wathek also had love for food, according to Al-Muhalabbi. Ibn Fahim reported that Al_Wathek had a dining container consisting of four parts; every part was carried by 20 men. All plates were made of gold as well as the silverware. When a Muslim scholar told him not to use golden plates and utensils, because according to the teaching of Islam, Muslims should not use such golden things, Al-Wathek responded by breaking the dining container and to sending it to the state's Department of Treasury. (As-Samurra'I, 1999, p.403)

Beckford's emphasis on food and eating perhaps reveals his memories of his father, an Alderman who became twice Lord Mayor of London. As Mayor, he gave very sumptuous dinners. This history of the Caliph Vathek seems as if it was planned for an Alderman's dream after a very heavy dinner at his mansion. (Price,1887)

Beckford's narrator described Vathek's exaggerated eating habit: He "seized the basket, and long before it was finished, the fruits had dissolved in his mouth; as he continued to eat his piety increased, and in the same breath which recited his prayers he called for the Koran and sugar." (p.31) In another passage exaggeration is employed using details in the description of food excesses:

> The first service consisted of fish, which drew from a river flowing over sands of gold at the foot of lofty hill; these were broiled as fast as taken, and served up with a sauce of vinegar, and smell herbs that grown on Mount Sinai for everything with the Emir was excelled and pious. (p. 36)

Al-Wathek ruled A.D. 842-847. In *Summary of the History of Ibn Katheer*, Kan'an (2006) tells of the major events that happened during Al-Wathek's reign. During his reign, a number of revolts broke out; he joined the armies to quell those revolts personally. In A.D. 843, Al-Wathek realized that some employees of the Department of Finance were dishonest and had taken money without any legal right; he punished some of them by imposing fines. He ordered that others had to be whipped, according to the Islamic law, whereas some employees were sent to jail; and a lot of money was confiscated and restored to the Department of Finance. (pp. 141-142) This is not Al-Wathek's private wealth but it is for the Islamic state, therefore, he imprisoned those who betrayed their public responsibilities in their office. It is very interesting to compare what happened to Al-Wathek to Beckford's imaginary Vathek who admired and "was surprised to see a stranger displaying to his view rarities that had never before seen and of which he had no conception." (p.8) In this humorous incident, the Caliph Vathek has seen that the stranger produces "sabers with blades emitting the dazzling radiance"; he does not demand their price, but ordered all the coined gold to be brought

from his treasury and commanded "the Merchant to take what he pleased, the stranger compiled with modesty and silence." (p. 10)

Another major event happened in the year A.D. 844. An Arab tribe called Beni Selim, and living around Al-Madina rebelled and attacked the residents and took over all the areas between Mecca and Al-Madina. Al-Wathek sent them an army that defeated and killed many of their troops and eventually they accepted to be under the rule of the Caliph Al-Wathek. (pp. 140-42) The last significant event was in A.D. 845. More than 4362 Muslim prisoners of war were released from their enemy.

As it has been mentioned earlier, the East is presented in the character of Vathek, the 9th Abbaside Caliph. Therefore, realism can be conveyed in Beckford's *Vathek* through the historical character of Al-Wathek. In fact, the whole wondrous tale was composed by Beckford, according to his own account of his twenty-third year.

The reference to the city of Samarah is also real; it is located in the north of Baghdad. Billi (2004) believes that in the first episode, "the places have corresponded to real ones, but they are also transformed into night Moorish Gothic landscapes merged with pre-romantic gloom and sublime terror." Beckford writes on March 21st, 1785: "I have gone sinking my princes to hell with perseverance"; and sixteen months later: "I would not have him [Vathek] on any account come forth without his companies." (Quoted in Graham, 1971, p. 337)

Commenting on Beckford's work, a critic writes: "Notwithstanding the genuinely Oriental setting of abundant local material in *Vathek* at Beckford's wide familiarity with the authentic works of the Orient, the

themes and spirit of Vathek are unmistakenably Western." (Kidwai, 1995, p. 12) He also emphasizes that at the heart of Vathek is the story of Faust. Vathek and Faust seek knowledge, including its forbidden variety at the price of their souls. Garrett (1992) draws a parallel between Marlowe's *Faust* and Beckford's *Vathek* and thinks that *Vathek*'s plot seems strictly in the tradition of the Western Christianity. Within this Arabian setting, Faust is reenacted but both *Faust* and *Vathek* differ in their endings. However, *Faust* has an Eastern reprint in both its overall organization and its internal parts: it is specimen of Orientalism. Beckford himself made use of the term when writing to Henley before *Vathek*'s publication: "I doubt not [this English text with Henley's annotations] will be received with the honors due to so valuable a morsel of Orientalism." (*Vathek*, p. xvi) It is Beckford's imagination that helped him produce this gothic Vathek. It is his fascination with exotism to have an elaborate depiction of the Orient. The Caliph Al-Wathek or Vathek is presented half human and half demon, including sensual appetite and adoration of the powers of evil. Legouis (1964, p. 951) makes his comment on the novel:

> [*Vathek*} interweaves picturesque descriptions with allegorical and moral allusions; but here the wealth of imagination revels in its own display, and this oriental tale, built up of the flimsy fabric of so delicate a dream, would be a lovely thing, if only its author had led to end the courage of artistic freedom.

Beckford has interwoven into this Arabian tale some gothic element. The whole tale is considered "gothic" as there are many scenes presented in detail throughout the narrative. For example, describing the Emir's daughter, Nouronihar, it is said that she found herself surrounded by darkness, "excepting that at a considerable distance faint spark glimmered by fits." When she stopped a second time, she heard "the sounds of waterfalls, mingling their murmurs, the hollow rustlings amongst the palm branches, and the funeral screams of the birds from their rifted trunks, all conspired to fill her with terror." (p. 39) She imagined "every moment that she trod on some venomous reptile; all the stories of malignant Dives and dismal Gouls thronged into her memory." She entered "a winging track leading "towards the spark." (p. 39) The characters living their passions, connected with Oriental setting, are projections of the author's personal and cultural aspirations.

It is interesting to show how Beckford's narrator concluded *Vathek*, telling about the Caliph's punishment, and how Arab historians described Al-Wathek's death. Beckford's narrator reported that Vathek was warned against Eblis, the ruler of Hell but his pride motivates him to continue his quest for power. Vathek's end was that he "plunged into the accursed multitude, there to wander in an eternity of unabating anguish"(p.64) The ending of the story is to present a kind of moral to the readers: "Thus the Caliph Vathek, who, for the sake of empty pomp and forbidden power, had sullied himself with a thousand crimes, became a prey to grief without end, and remorse without mitigation; whilst the humble and

despised Gulchenrous passed whole ages in undisturbed tranquility, and the pure happiness of childhood." (p. 64)

According to Arab historians, when Al-Wathek suffered from illness, extremely high fever, in his last days, he summoned astronomers and asked them to tell him about his fate and how long he would live. They told him that he would live for fifty years to come. Al-Wathek died after ten days. (Al-Juzari, 1978, vol.5, p.277) It was also reported by Al-Wathegy that when Al-Wathek died, he guarded his room where the body was kept before the burial. When he closed the door, he heard some noise, and then he opened the door and saw a rat eating one of Al-Wathek's eyes. (p. 277) In both narratives by Arab historians and Beckford's narrator, it seems that there is a lot of exaggeration about his character.

In conclusion, Beckford's *Vathek* combines the author's knowledge of the Orient, based on the historical character, Al-Wathek, his reference to Western culture, his experience at Fonthill Abbey, and fuses his artistic luxuriance with dramatic, gothic and ironic elements which eventually produces a work that suits his own formula.

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