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Despotism and Consumption in William Beckford's *Vathek*

Written in 1786, William Beckford's *Vathek* deserves more scholarly attention than it previously received, especially when it comes to its significance in English Romanticism, or even more generally, in European Romanticism——if one takes into account the fact that Beckford first composed this work in French. Commonly known as a Gothic novel that makes profuse use of Orientalist elements, *Vathek* was curiously situated in the midst of the transition from an older Orientalism largely concerned with China and *chinoiserie*, to a later Orientalist scholarship, as shown in the learned notes provided by Beckford's collaborator Samuel Henley, which focused on Indian, Persian and other Islamic cultures. The adventure of an Oriental despot in search of material excess and unlimited power is fantastic and impressive, and it inspired and fascinated readers such as the Romantic rebel Lord Byron and the later French Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé. A couple of questions are thus worth raising: how should one make of the combination of Orientalism and Gothicism in this novel? Moreover, how should one determine the status of the novel in the development of Romanticism? This essay proposes and explores two interrelated themes, namely, despotism and consumption, which are closely associated with these problems, and seeks to delineate how Orientalism and Gothicism are mingled to create a distinct strand of Romanticism, a literary sensibility that can by no means be confined to the marvelous historical figure William Beckford but can also be attributed to his world.

Vathek is a tale about its eponymous protagonist, who, after receiving divine assistance in building a formidable tower, is visited by "a man so abominably hideous," later referred to as the Giaour, meaning, as the note suggests, infidel (Beckford 83). Disguised as a

merchant, the Giaour presents Vathek the Caliph (meaning, again according to the notes, successor to the prophet Mahomet, "imply[ing] the three characters of Prophet, Priest and King") with sumptuous merchandise, including "slippers, which, by spontaneous springs, enabled the feet to walk; knives, that cut without motion of the hand, sabres, that dealt the blow at the person they wish to strike; and the whole enriched with gems, that were hitherto unknown" (159, 83). Refusing to speak, the Giaour enrages Vathek, sends the latter into a frenzy and is thrown into prison, from which he breaks out easily, killing the guards. Vathek's search for the Giaour then goes even wilder. Among the most memorable episodes is where the Giaour reappears to Vathek, again enrages the Caliph with his "insolence" and, as he is attacked by our furious protagonist, transforms himself into a ball. An outrageous kicking spree ensues, in which the whole city of Samarah is involved, every citizen joining to kick the ball-like Giaour. The Giaour rolls and rolls, then enters the country, and "glancing from the precipice with the rapidity of lightening, was lost in the gulph below" (93). Nowhere to be seen but whose voice can be heard, the Giaour demands that Vathek, now yearning to go to "the Palace of Subterranean Fire" for "the talismans that control the world," bring and sacrifice fifty young boys from the city to him (94). Initially reluctant yet quickly succumbing, Vathek pushes the boys into the chasm, to no avail. Depressed, Vathek is compelled by his mother Carathis, a towering presence in the tale often performing occult rituals and dictating to his son what he should do next, to go to Istakhar, an ancient capital of Persia near what is now Iran. Vathek departs with his retinue and a splendid array of goods. On his way, he stops at a place where he meets a ruler and his beautiful daughter, Nouronihar, with whom he falls in love. Although Nouronihar is already engaged with her cousin and childhood companion Gulchenrouz, Vathek strives to obtain her, much to the chagrin of her father. Noting from the stars that Vathek is delayed by the love affair, Carathis again appears and urges her son to leave for "the palace of Istakar, the sabres, and the talismans" (141). This time, he does not fail her mother. He and Nouronihar successfully

reach the palace and meet the Giaour, after denouncing the genii that comes from heaven to offer the final chance for survival. The Giaour turns out to be only a servant of the Islamic Satan, Eblis, utterly indifferent to Vathek's purpose. Vathek and his lover are afforded the sight of the treasures in the palace, but they cannot possess them for long. Carathis is brought along from Samarah on the back of an afrit (a supernatural creature) to suffer. At the "irrevocable decree," "their hearts immediately took fire, and they, at once, lost the most precious gift of heaven:—Hope" (158). The story ends here, finally with a moralizing comment from the narrator.

A distinctive feature of the protagonist is his voracious appetite, which leads some critics to consider him infantile, showing "forms of regression and arrested development": "Beckford's Vathek is a big baby, absorbed in his voracious appetites" (Kilgour 33). While childhood development is perhaps relevant to the discussion, suggesting the extent to which Gothic novels are usually read through psychoanalytic lens, what is more interesting here is the fact that Vathek is not a tyrannical father in a Gothic novel, the initiator of a family romance, but very much a tyrant as such. More precisely, he is a despot whose infantile hunger drives him to indulge in "the particular gratification of each of the senses" in palaces called "The Eternal or unsatiating Banquet," "The Delight of the Eyes," "The Palace of Perfumes" and so on (Beckford 80-81). The architectural design that most fittingly demonstrates Vathek's despotism is certainly the formidable astrological tower that the great prophet Mahomet orders a genii to help construct: "Assist him, therefore, to complete the tower, which, in imitation of Nimrod, he hath begun … from the insolent curiosity of penetrating the secrets of heaven:—he will not divine the fate that awaits him" (82). Nimrod is the biblical ruler of Babylon and the builder of the Tower of Babel, and in a peculiar reversal of the biblical narrative, Vathek is allowed and even encouraged, as it were, to trespass divine boundaries and complete the construction, because, unlike the biblical

narrative, God secretly knows that Vathek will not be able to stand on an equal footing with him. (Note that Islam is monotheistic and shares the same origin with Christianity.)

Vathek's logic of despotism is fully on display in the following passage, where he ascends the tower, looks down on the city he rules and suddenly gazes into the starry heavens above him:

> His pride arrived at its height when, having ascended, for the first time, the eleven 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. The idea, which such an elevation inspired of his own grandeur, completely bewildered him: he was almost ready to adore himself; till, lifting his eyes upward, he saw the stars as high above him as they appeared when he stood on the surface of the earth. He consoled himself, however, for this transient perception of his littleness, with the thought of being great in the eyes of others; and flattered himself that the light of his mind would extend beyond the reach of his sight, and extort from the stars the decrees of his destiny. (82-83)

This is an image of an elevated tyrant standing on the vantage point, having a bird's-eye view of his realm. Indeed, the all-encompassing sight in front of Vathek lends him a sense of absolute authority, one might even say omniscience, which is only reserved for the most privileged person in the kingdom. Belittling whatever is down there subjected to his dominance, the proud ruler is knocked off his high horse when he notices the stars in the sky. The citizens and the open field he owns are no match for the vast celestial expanse over his head. Even though the tower signifies the hubris in longing to penetrate God's secrets, the effort is, in fact, futile, as the prophet Mahomet indicates. Srinivas Aravamudan has appropriately suggests that Vathek is "in search of the sublime" and that "the ascent of the tower turns the despot into a subject with seigneurial rights" (215, 216). Since the sublime is

mired in the complicity of landscape in power, Vathek attempts to harness it to his use, only to face humiliation. In defense, he seeks rather to contain this unrepresentable horror with another shift in perspective, that is, to that of his subjects', and to once again feed narcissism and thoughts of his astrological capability to his ego. The tripartite structure of pride—humiliation—pride regained is but an imperfect displacement of the sublime, a strategy of Vathek's to enforce his despotism, which the tale starts to undermine from the very beginning.

Towers were long associated in the West with Chinese garden designs, and Elizabeth Chang has argued that, for those who went to China on the Macartney Mission of 1793 and saw the Qing Imperial Gardens, "the gardens proclaim the despotism of the Chinese in both the physical scale of their alterations and the more abstract of their scenes to a single pair of eyes…. In the Chinese landscape, power rewrites nature; in the British landscape, nature affirms political right" (50). Although Beckford did not have to negotiate national or cultural differences with the Chinese like the British embassy, ideas about landscape and power are relevant to his fiction: for an English reader, Vathek specifically produces a despotic landscape, a landscape that imposes order and confers status. "Chinese modes had the … attraction of invoking imperial vistas" (Shaffer "Construction" 235). Of course, it is debatable whether the Chinese looked at their gardens this way, but even as a Western distortion, visual despotism appears and functions in Orientalist texts such as *Vathek*, promulgating while parodying a self-centered political subjectivity. In Beckford's unpublished manuscripts, there is an Oriental tale of the wise, mythic Chinese emperor Yao, a ruler who is a far cry from the Oriental despot Vathek. "The Caliph Vathek," writes Elinor S. Shaffer, "stood in stark and conscious contrast to Yao, the type of the good ruler" ("Orientalism" 406). If Beckford knew how Oriental sources can be used to propagate "a myth of utopia, or good government," then it is likely that *Vathek*, featuring an arbitrary, indulgent tyrant, should be read in an opposite way, rather, as the renunciation of an Oriental despot.

The problem with this Oriental despot is not just that he craves and desires like an infant, as some Gothic villains in any case do, but that, in so doing, his subjectivity and political authority are constantly in question. For example, he has no alternative but to rely on the Giaour to provide him with material goods as well as on the slaves around him to keep everything in order. "In succumbing to the allure of thing, Vathek binds himself to those who can get them for him" (Elfenbein 52). Through consumption, despotism is relegated to just another form of subservience, first to material objects, then by extension to the slaves that prepare them. More remarkably, he is so fixated on the Giaour that some may find something homosexual or homoerotic between them (53). Upon knowing that the Giaour is capable of gratifying him, "Vathek leaped upon the neck of the frightful Indian, and kissed his horrid mouth and hollow cheeks, as though they had been the coral lips and the lilies and roses of his most beautiful wives" (Beckford 90). In order to seek out the Giaour, he launches his journey and thereby risks sabotaging the stability of his reign. In fact, he effectively hands his city over to his mother, who makes a better, ambitious Machiavellian ruler than her son. And while the city is exposed to the danger of revolution, it is she that assumes the responsibility to restore peace: "'What!' exclaimed she; 'must I lose, then, my towers! my mutes! my negresses! my mummies! and, worse than all, the laboratory, the favourite resort of my nightly lucubrations, without knowing, at least, if my hair-brained son will complete his adventure? No! I will not be dupe!'" (144). Meanwhile, "the Caliph had nothing to offer in reply: he wishes his mother a prosperous journey, and ate on till he had finished his supper" (145). One cannot help considering Vathek an ineffectual leader and his mother a superior one.

"Architectural motifs," as Aravamudan notes, "initiate a shift from inner character to the spatialization of subjectivity in the gothic imaginary" (218). If the tower indicates a despotic subjectivity, then a large proportion of the narrative in the middle, where the love story between Vathek and Nouronihar happens on a wider, lusher plain, represents a distance

from claustrophobic Gothicism. Indeed, this landscape moves towards the romantic, as the description shows of the place to which the unconscious Nouronihar and Gulchenrouz are consigned in order to trick Vathek into believing his love should be unfulfilled: “this singular lake, those flames reflected from its glassy surface, the pale hues of its banks, the romantic cabins, the bulrushes, that sadly waved their drooping heads; the storks, whose melancholy cries blended with the shrill voices of the dwarfs” are quite suitable for the pastoral relationship of these two childhood companions, which Vathek has come to disrupt (Beckford 132). If this part of the narrative is a digression from the quest romance of the Giaour and the Palace of Subterranean Fire, it would be a huge one; rather, I would argue that this part is not so much a respite of something serious for some lighthearted love story as a contrast of the two men Vathek and Gulchenrouz.

Andrew Elfenbein observes that the strangeness of the character Gulchenrouz lies in the fact that “he has subjectivity at all” (57). One feels that he is indeed a more rounded character, endowed with reason and a proper interiority, compared with almost everyone else in the story. It is therefore predictable that Carathis would love to have him sacrificed, as he is everything that the irrational Vathek is not: “‘I design, before I depart, to regain the favour of the Giaour. There is nothing so delicious, in his estimation, as the heart of a delicate boy palpitating with the first tumults of love’” (Beckford 142). His love for the princess is more natural, at least in a Romantic sense, because it is based on the affections shared by cousins and developed in childhood. Although he narrowly escaped being captured and killed for his natural affections, his fate “mirrors exactly that of the bad characters: he becomes an item in the collection of a powerful master-collector” (Elfenbein 57). In other words, one wonders whether Gulchenrouz fares better in the end of the tale. He is saved by “a good old genius, whose fondness for the company of children, had made it his sole occupation to protect them,” who also save the fifty children from being devoured by the Giaour (Beckford 143). The moralizing ending reads:

> 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, the despised Gulchenrouz passed whole ages in undisturbed tranquility, and in the pure happiness of childhood. (158)

But "undisturbed tranquility" and "pure happiness of childhood" under the aegis of an old genii hardly seems desirable, not least because they hinder human development and disconnect further interactions with the world outside protection. Detached from society, the bliss of childhood easily goes awry. The person becomes a mere object, looked upon but neither acted upon nor acting. If on the one hand, eternal childhood seems a blessing, meanwhile on the other hand, never growing up is, in another sense, a curse in disguise.

The natural love between Nouronihar and Gulchenrouz presents another contrast to the erotic attraction of Vathek to the princess. Vathek's desire for Nouronihar is of a piece with his insatiety for material goods. The Oriental despot, as we have seen, surrounds himself with sensual delights, and in the midst of his quest for the Giaour and the treasures the latter represents, he is temporarily distracted by the beautiful lady. This beauty is herself fascinated with the infinity of luxurious materials that Vathek is after: "She only wished the amorous monarch had discovered more ardour for the carbuncle of Giamschid: but flattered herself it would gradually increase; and, therefore, yielded to his will, with the most bewitching submission" (136). However, it is a bitter twist that when they reach the palace of Eblis and suffer, they start to resent each other: "Vathek beheld in the eyes of Nouronihar nothing but rage and vengeance; nor could she discern ought in his, but aversion and despair. The two princes who were friends, and, till that moment, had preserved their attachment, shrunk back, gnashing their teeth with mutual and unchangeable hatred" (158). As Elfenbein forcefully claims, "What is boundless, original and sublime in the tale is the degree to which it reveals the utter worthlessness of the characters' desires, even as it encourages the readers' sympathy

with their ambitions. In *Vathek* all desires are empty, yet their emptiness paradoxically becomes their greatest lure" (57-58). Vathek's despotic longing for power, his infantile indulgence in material objects, as well as Nouronihar's mercurial submission to sensuality are castigated at last in the hellfire, but all remains sexy and steamy despite that final reversal. Simultaneously paradoxical and ironic, the text employs a double maneuver, both presenting the allure of Oriental materials and cancelling it out on the level of the narrative, exposing the shallowness of material consumption yet fashioning an enticing extraordinariness out of the entire process.

Therefore, it is imperative that one recognize at the same time "Beckford's simultaneous rendition of orientalist parody alongside 'serious orientalism'" (Aravamudan 388). The remarkable variety of materials was part and parcel of the Orientalist fancy which the form of the Oriental tale was rooted in, submitting the real Orient to ludicrous distortion, but *Vathek* also mocks the conventions at times——for instance, by means of its ending. But it also makes sense to regard this Oriental tale more than just as a bizarre singularity in English literary history, and, furthermore, as a kind of novel, a formal organization that mixes Gothicism with Orientalism. Some elements are easily aligned, such as the tower, in terms of garden designs and architecture, or the magical potion with which the Giaour quenches Vathek's thirst. The medieval genre of romance is relevant here because it so often concerns a quest for a material object, in this case, the Giaour and his treasures. Material objects thereby index what Fredric Jameson calls the "magical transfiguration of human relations": the ways in which "desire, combat, ritual, betrayal, adultery, obedience, collectivity, disaster, destiny, vocation are all uniquely recombined in the mode of fantasy and under the narrative category of adventure" (246). For the purpose of this current study, suffice it to say this interaction of persons and things bears on the human relations we have examined in *Vathek*, in other words, on the vicissitudes of despotism, especially its eventual downfall.

In the meantime, more emphasis should be laid on Orientalism in the present context, because *Vathek* registered the nascent influence of an Oriental literary product on English literature, namely, *The Arabian Nights*. Scholars have recently produced more updated research concerning the reception of *The Arabian Nights* in the West. William Beckford was an important but often neglected author in this regard. For Donna Landry, William Beckford's autobiographical "re-enactment" of *The Arabian Nights* at a party in his famous mansion, Fonthill Abbey, enabled him to satirize English rural culture, while for James Watt, the heterogeneity of the work makes it possible for readers to read it allegorically, as an ironic example of imperial "decadence and degeneration" (Watt 202). Yet, apart from these efforts to juxtapose and investigate the specific details of Eastern and Western texts, one may also opt to work on a generic level, to interpret how the form of *The Arabian Nights* might have informed Western texts such as *Vathek*, and how Oriental texts can contribute to something like an emergent literary movement such as Romanticism.

I take my departure from the famous frame narrative of *The Arabian Nights*, in which a woman called Scheherazade saves her life and prevents the mad king from killing virgins like her in the kingdom on a daily basis by telling him stories after stories, always unfinished by daylight. The novelist and critic A. S. Byatt offers a pertinent description of this story-telling practice, not only in *The Arabian Nights* but also in media and authors as wide-ranging as English Romantic poetry, Charles Dickens, Italo Calvino, Marcel Proust, cartoons and soap operas: "worlds in which death and endings are put off indefinitely" (xxi). World: a crucial invention. Scheherazade is not just spinning one good yarn after another; she is, in effect, projecting a world that is ever enlarging and incorporating new, heterogeneous elements. The world she creates is vital, energetic, and almost death-defying. And it is very much serendipity that such texts as *The Arabian Nights* found its way into European culture, when the latter was desperately in need of novelty, as writers, painters and political actors were all searching for breakthrough and a sense of the new. The somewhat clichéd

characterization of Romanticism as an inherently world-creating impulse can be vitalized by the recent work on world literature done by Eric Hayot in *On Literary Worlds.* Hayot understands Romanticism as a mode of modern literature, "the mode of utopias, and of science fictions, and of the cult of nature, which articulates its critique of modernity's technological substrate by proposing real or mental communions with a world untrammeled by technique" (129). The capaciousness of the concept "Romance" here may certainly be extended to the remote cousin that is *The Arabian Nights*, just as the Jameson quote cited above suggests how magical narratives reconfigures human relations, a feat that *The Arabian Nights* imaginatively achieves, too. Indeed, one may claim that the world(s) in *The Arabian Nights* allows the complex compilation of tales to be classified as utopian fantasies, science fictions, and nature writings all at a single stroke. The world-creating energy thrives in these narratives: Sindbad the Seamen tells Sindbad the Porter thrilling adventures set in foreign, exotic lands and seas, of how he saved his life. Then one can appreciate the fact that Romanticism exists globally in world literature: "By not taking the world for granted, Romance restores to world the idea of its being a work; and if the world is a work, then it has been (and can be) made" (129). The fictional world is malleable and prone to making and remaking; it thus possesses the potential to defy reality and define what reality should be like. "Romantic works thus make visible the world's *contingency*. That is why Romance is the mode of the political and the politically possible" (129-30). That Romanticism is political is no news, but works such as *The Arabian Nights* are seldom placed into a more refined picture of an evolving global literary culture.

Stories within stories within stories…. Such is the ingenious survival strategy that the arch-storyteller Scheherazade devises. But such can also be the form which a world of Romanticism may assume:

> From a material-formal perspective, we can observe that the creation of modern Romantic worlds, especially in the genres of fantasy and science

> fiction, will have a strong tendency to rely on the arrangement of fictions in series. The sense of completeness provided by the gap between novels assures the extension of the imaginary world beyond the boundaries of the fiction (just as does, *mirabile dictu*, the second volume of the *Quijote*). (130)

Even though this description is meant to explain the rise of novel series, it can be better applied to explain the concatenation of events in *The Arabian Nights*. Happenings after happenings ensure that the fictional world begets a sense of endlessness, a sense of an expanding universe.

The world-creating impulse of Romanticism comes in a variety of guises. Myths, be they Promethean, Christian, Faustian or even Blakean, are among the most popular resources. The newcomer, *The Arabian Nights*, I suggest, is another. But we haven't weighed the previous discussion against the focus of this essay, *Vathek*. And as we have touched on the complexity of this Oriental tale, the account will be complicated. Imaginations of a vast Oriental world can surely be found in the narrative. For example, the multifarious band of religious men that Vathek meets in the emir's court: "He diverted himself, however, with the multitude of calenders, santons, and derviches, who were continually coming and going; but especially with the bramins, faquirs, and other enthusiasts, who had travelled from the heart of India, and halted on their way with the emir" (Beckford 119). Those unaided by the notes may be dazzled by the catalogue; nevertheless, since the notes are designed to accompany the narrative, careful readers will discover that in this instance Beckford is confusing Islamic culture with Indian culture, a fact consistent with the identity of the Giaour as an Indian. Oriental knowledge engenders no easy cosmopolitanism or coexistence of different cultures. In truth, against the background of growing imperialist activities in South Asia, the notes are a corollary development of the penetration of Western power into the particularities of Eastern cultures. Greater knowledge leads to greater dominance; great power produces greater knowledge. As we have observed, serious Orientalism and whimsical fancy exist

cheek by jowl in *Vathek*, so one has to be alert to the concealed imperialist project that the text could hardly resist participating in, by dint of the shared cultural context. Moreover, the novel itself is a certain literary product made for consumption by certain consumers. As Saree Makdisi argues, "the avowedly anti-bourgeois self-Orientalizations of people like Byron and Beckford … continued to be enjoyed among the fashionable elite well into the nineteenth century" (14). Whatever Beckford himself, as a marginal social outcast in his times, intended his work to be, those in power could always put it to their own use, such as vicariously indulging in the material surplus in the novel.

Even so, critics like Watt and Elfenbein rightly detect irony or "demystification" in the narrative (Elfenbein 57). Elfenbein puts it well, indicating how the series of events in *Vathek* serves not to affirm an alternative universe like *The Arabian Nights* but to subvert it: "The novella wanders from episode to episode, in which every aspiration is undercut with a gesture, and every gesture subverted with a droll detail. Nothing reveals the desirability of the narcissistic world of consumer exchange more than Beckford's pains to undercut its every seduction" (58). Irony, demystification; in fact, they come close to something radical like critique, which is most likely signified by the hellfire that annihilates Vathek, Nouronihar and Carathis, who are single-mindedly intent on attaining luxury and power. The ending of the story allocates no room for the remaining world, concentrating instead on the protagonists. The final abiding image is that of the Palace of Subterranean Fire, exemplifying a certain destructive tendency in Romanticism, a kind of world-consuming, revolutionary (if not ontological) negativity. But as one is asked to be vigilant throughout this essay, luxury and power are nonetheless made attractive by the text. In this respect, *Vathek* seems partly to eschew the charge of Romantic ideology—distorting real historical problem through false or deluded literary transcendence—while partly remaining in the trap of material consumption.

The ambivalence could perhaps be attributed internally to Beckford himself. In her discussion of Beckford's artistic vision, Shaffer paints a portrait of him as a dissident counter-

cultural figure whose "alternative styles of vision … express[ed] a subterranean experience outlawed by society that could speak its name only through an inversion of the vistas and values of the conventional Grand Tour of culture." His strategy of combining "the familiar Enlightenment use of Chinese exoticism as a critique of English mores" with "then-current stylistic, architecturally-based claim that the Gothic mode had its roots in Oriental art" resonates with my argument of *Vathek* as a composition of Gothicism and Orientalism ("Construction" 235). Furthermore, if one hazards a biographical note, Beckford's own political activities may help illuminate the political significance of his novel. Notably, first written in French, *Vathek* "capitaliz[ed] … upon a prevailing taste for oriental tales that came from France" (Wright 14). Angela Wright points out that "in 1793, when war between France and England broke out again, [Beckford] offered himself as a peace negotiator" (14). Although he was not involved in imperialist undertakings, his historical circumstances were the antagonism between England and France several years prior to the French Revolution. Significantly, he attempts to maintain a world order based on non-violence. If Gothic novels were "careful, diplomatic, and veiled negotiations of the Anglo-French conflict" (14), then Beckford's actual reconciliatory efforts may be deemed to be on a par with the fictional world that he projects. That world in fiction promotes life and avoids destruction like Scheherazade's, but Beckford also saw to it that such death-defying impulse was supplemented with the deaths of those blindly in pursuit of money and power.

Beckford was by no means without money and power. As a fortunate inheritor of a large sum of money obtained in Jamaican plantations, he was well aware what a luxurious lifestyle could be like. The point is rather that he did not wish to stoop to the level of those rich people with poor taste. He enjoyed the privileges of being wealthy while being uncomfortable with his social peers. *Vathek* inspired Lord Byron, who belonged to a similar oxymoronic type of animal called the aristocratic rebel, so much so that the latter wrote an elliptical Oriental tale, *The Giaour*. In this tale, the Giaour is opposed to an Islamic ruler who

kills a woman in the harem because she is in love with him. In revenge, the Giaour ambushes the Muslim and then retires from society. Staging the tension between the two as the fight of two metaphysical beliefs or religious codes, Byron was actually drawing on Islam to criticize European Christianity. Beckford and Byron therefore manifested the similar tendency to take their own culture to task, although there were many differences. For example, Byron had firsthand experience in the East, such as in Turkey and Greece, thus knowing about the religions better than Beckford.

Beckford has an interesting cameo performance in Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where Dorian refers to an object as possibly coming from Fonthill Abbey. But Dorian narcissistically indulges in his self-image instead of luxury (Elfenbein 60). In his obsession with eternal youth, Dorian struggles to maintain an affinity to that character in *Vathek*, Gulchenrouz, even though he finally perishes like Vathek.

Let me come back to *Vathek* and try to draw some conclusions. In William Beckford's *Vathek*, material consumption ultimately undermines the political authority and subjectivity of the Oriental despot. Combining Gothicism with Orientalism, the fantastic Oriental world is organized and consumed in an ironic, demystifying narrative that offered a fictional contrast to the real world in which Beckford was situated. Nevertheless, as part of the popular literary production of European Romanticism, the novel could not extricate itself from personal and cultural ambivalence, as well as the project of imperialist expansion that the growing Oriental scholarship in Europe helped advance. The intricate relation of persons and things in the narratives, or the heterogeneity of the work in terms of organization, then, turns out simultaneously to be its critical edge and its ideological burden.

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