

On William Beckford's *Vatbek*

Wilde attributes this joke to Carlyle: a biography of Michelangelo that would make no mention of the works of Michelangelo. So complex is reality, and so fragmentary and simplified is history, that an omniscient observer could write an indefinite, almost infinite, number of biographies of a man, each emphasizing different facts; we would have to read many of them before we realized that the protagonist was the same. Let us greatly simplify, and imagine that a life consists of 13,000 facts. One of the hypothetical biographies would record the series 11, 22, 33 . . . ; another, the series 9, 13, 17, 21 . . . ; another, the series 3, 12, 21, 30, 39. . . . A history of a man's dreams is not inconceivable; another, of the organs of his body; another, of the mistakes he made; another, of all the moments when he thought about the Pyramids; another, of his dealings with the night and with the dawn. The above may seem merely fanciful, but unfortunately it is not. No one today resigns himself to writing the literary biography of an author or the military biography of a soldier; everyone prefers the genealogical biography, the economic biography, the psychiatric biography, the surgical biography, the topographical biography. One life of Poe consists of seven hundred octavo pages; the author, fascinated by changes of residence, barely manages one parenthesis for the Maelstrom or the cosmogony of "Eureka." Another example: this curious revelation in the prologue to a biography of Bolivar: "As in the author's book on Napoleon, the battles are scarcely discussed." Carlyle's joke predicted our contemporary literature: in 1943, the paradox would be a biography of Michelangelo that allowed for some mention of the works of Michelangelo.

The examination of a recent biography of William Beckford (1760–1844) has provoked the above observations. William Beckford of Fonthill was the embodiment of a rather trivial type of millionaire: distinguished gentleman, traveler, bibliophile, builder of palaces, and libertine. Chapman,

his biographer, unravels (or tries to unravel) his labyrinthine life, but omits an analysis of *Vathek*, the novel whose final ten pages have brought William Beckford his fame.

I have compared various critical works on *Vathek*. The prologue that Mallarmé wrote for the 1876 edition abounds in felicitous observations (for example: he points out that the novel begins atop a tower from which the heavens may be read in order to end in an enchanted subterranean vault), but it is written in an etymological dialect of French that is difficult or impossible to read. Belloc (*A Conversation with an Angel*, 1928), opines on Beckford without condescending to explanations; he compares the prose to that of Voltaire and judges him to be "one of the vilest men of his time." Perhaps the most lucid evaluation is that of Saintsbury in the eleventh volume of the *Cambridge History of English Literature*.

In essence, the fable of *Vathek* is not complex. Vathek (Haroun Benal-motasim Vatiq Bila, the ninth Abbasid caliph) erects a Babylonian tower in order to decipher the planets. They foretell a succession of wonders to be brought about by a man unlike any other who will come from an unknown land. A merchant arrives at the capital of the empire; his face is so atrocious that the guards who bring him before the caliph advance with eyes closed. The merchant sells a scimitar to the caliph, then disappears. Engraved on the blade are some mysterious changing characters which pique Vathek's curiosity. A man (who then also disappears) deciphers them; one day they mean, "I am the least of the marvels in a place where everything is marvelous and worthy of the greatest Prince of the earth"; another day, "Woe to the rash mortal who aspires to know that which he is not supposed to know." The caliph surrenders to the magic arts; from the shadows, the voice of the merchant urges him to renounce the Muslim faith and worship the powers of darkness. If he will do that, the Palace of Subterranean Fire will be opened to him. Within its vaults he will be able to contemplate the treasures that the stars have promised him, the talismans that subdue the world, the diadems of the pre-Adamite sultans and of Suleiman Ben Daoud. The greedy caliph agrees; the merchant demands forty human sacrifices. Many bloody years pass; Vathek, his soul black from abominations, arrives at a deserted mountain. The earth opens; in terror and hope, Vathek descends to the bottom of the world. A pale and silent crowd of people who do not look at one another wanders through the magnificent galleries of an infinite palace. The merchant did not lie: the Palace of Subterranean Fire abounds in splendors and talismans, but it is also Hell. (In the congeneric story of Doctor Faustus, and in the many medieval legends that prefigured it, Hell is

the punishment for the sinner who makes a pact with the gods of Evil; here, it is both the punishment and the temptation.)

Saintsbury and Andrew Lang claim or suggest that the invention of the Palace of Subterranean Fire is Beckford's greatest achievement. I would maintain that it is the first truly atrocious Hell in literature.¹ I will venture this paradox: the most famous literary Avernus, the *dolente regno* of the *Divine Comedy*, is not an atrocious place; it is a place where atrocious things happen. The distinction is valid.

Stevenson ("A Chapter on Dreams") tells of being pursued in the dreams of his childhood by a certain abominable "hue" of the color brown; Chesterton (*The Man Who Was Thursday*) imagines that at the western borders of the world there is perhaps a tree that is more or less than a tree; and that at the eastern borders, there is something, perhaps a tower, whose very shape is wicked. Poe, in his "MS Found in a Bottle," speaks of a southern sea where the ship itself will grow in bulk like the living body of the seaman; Melville devotes many pages of *Moby-Dick* to an elucidation of the horror of the unbearable whiteness of the whale. . . . I have given several examples, but perhaps it is enough to observe that Dante's Hell magnifies the notion of a jail; Beckford's, the tunnels of a nightmare. The *Divine Comedy* is the most justifiable and solid book in all literature, *Vathek* is a mere curiosity, "the perfume and suppliance of a minute"; yet I believe that *Vathek* foretells, in however rudimentary a way, the satanic splendors of Thomas De Quincey and Poe, of Charles Baudelaire and Huysmans. There is an untranslatable English epithet, "uncanny," to denote supernatural horror; that epithet (*unheimlich* in German) is applicable to certain pages of *Vathek*, but not, as far as I recall, to any other book before it.

Chapman notes some of the books that influenced Beckford: the *Bibliothèque orientale* of Barthélemy d'Herbelot; Hamilton's *Quatre Facardins*; Voltaire's *La Princesse de Babylone*; the always reviled and admirable *Mille et une nuits* of Galland. To that list I would add Piranesi's *Carceri d'invenzione*: etchings, praised by Beckford, that depict mighty palaces which are also impenetrable labyrinths. Beckford, in the first chapter of *Vathek*, enumerates five palaces dedicated to the five senses; Marino, in the *Adone*, had already described five similar gardens.

William Beckford needed only three days and two nights in the winter of 1782 to write the tragic history of his caliph. He wrote it in French;

¹In literature, that is, not in mysticism: the elective Hell of Swedenborg—*De coelo et inferno*, 545, 554—is of an earlier date.

Henley translated it into English in 1785. The original is unfaithful to the translation; Saintsbury observes that eighteenth-century French is less suitable than English for communicating the "undefined horrors" (the phrase is Beckford's) of this unusual story.

Henley's English version is volume 856 of the Everyman's Library; Perrin, in Paris, has published the original text, revised and prologued by Mallarmé. It is strange that Chapman's laborious bibliography does not mention that revision and that prologue.

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