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# William Beckford and the gothic charivari.

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The so-called gothic revival and more generally speaking the renewal of interest for anything gothic from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards are usually explained as a reaction against the

rigours of classical tastes. But to be frank, this normative and highly intellectual view is hardly convincing. Indeed, 2 centuries ago as well as today, there is no moral or aesthetic law which prevents us from passing from passion to (classical) taste or vice-versa. Many gothic enthusiasts happened and still happen to revel – at times – in classical or neo-classical art. In academic circles, everyone seems to agree on the definition of the gothic novel as a literary genre and art historians seem to take neo-gothicism for granted. Disputes and debates usually revolve upon some erudite references, attributions and influences from one building upon another, from one *recherché* ornament upon some piece of poetry or fiction but very few of them seem to challenge the neo-gothic style or notion as such, leading to such follies as ascribing the adjective “gothic” to all sorts of artists, sensibilities, periods, forms of art and whatnot. Today, in America “gothic” even seems to have become a mere synonym for anything terrifying, gory, cryptic or even fantastic. These notions in literature and in the history of architecture as both are so much interwoven should be reconsidered before discussing what kind of gothicism Beckford's less-known tales and fiction are made of.

### Dreams made of stones

Art historians' concepts can be very deceiving when applied as literary tools and as such can become a new form of intellectual snobbery and vacuum. Such terms as “post-modern strategies”, “mannerist discourse” or “baroque deconstruction”, are often a lure as usually the aesthetic perspective behind those big words are not made clear but simply assumed and we know that epistemological *dérive* can be very harmful to the appreciation of old texts. Still, in the case of the gothic novel for instance, the role of the history of architecture is so closely associated with it that it is possibly necessary to reconsider a few facts in order to understand more clearly what the gothic meant to 18<sup>th</sup> century aesthetes and artists.

The development of the neo-gothic after 1834 when the movement turned into something more academic and in a sense more *bourgeois* with the Oxford movement, the art of Pugin, the emblematic *Houses of Parliament* or what is usually called the ecclesiastical neo-gothic will be left aside in this study. We shall concentrate on what was variably known as gothik / gothick / modern gothick or gothic as understood by amateurs and individuals from the 1700 to the turn of the century. As everybody knows a great many books have come out on the

subject but despite their scholarship and subtle aesthetic digressions, two points can never be too strongly emphasized.

To start with, gothic taste is first and foremost a poetical matter and has long been established in a literary tradition : Pope's *Eloisa to Abelard* 1717, David Mallet's *Excursion* 1726, the Warton brothers, Arthur Young, and many others including Thomas Gray of course. Speaking about the Warton brothers, it is interesting to notice that Joseph Warton's *The Enthusiast or the Love of Nature* published in 1740 and so typical of pre-romanticism may lead us to think of Beckford's subtitle for his novel *Modern Novel Writing Or the Elegant Enthusiast* but this a topic which deserves further examination. All the poets mentioned above embody a *nostos*, an urge to a return which was headed towards nature, which probably is one of the most important characteristics of gothic. Indeed, Beckford was much influenced by Thomas Gray, filling *Vathek* with descriptions “pregnant with poetry and as well as many other writings such as those in *Prince Ahmed* for instance :

J'étais entouré, d'un côté, de précipices au bas desquels roulait une eau rapide qui en tombant de rocher en rocher faisait retentir l'air d'un bruit sombre et terrifiant ; d'un autre côté, des forêts se présentaient à ma vue, dont le noir et funeste ombrage répandait une fraîcheur mortelle et remplissait l'âme d'épouvante. < . . . >

Ils se trouvèrent bientôt au bord de cette sombre vallée. Une vapeur en sortait comme d'un bain d'eau bouillante et ils crurent voir rassemblées dans cet abîme toutes les ombres effrayantes de la nuit. A mesure qu'ils descendaient, il leur semblait qu'ils pénétraient dans les ténèbres du séjour d'Eblis. Chaque pas leur portait le frisson au cœur.

The pre-romantic sensibility and the surrender to all the manifestations of nature, including that of death (needless to say we are here quite far from the Wordsworthian notion of “Mother nature”), were later amplified into the picturesque, in other words a development of what can be called an architecture of suspense but also a suspended architecture, in short an architecture made of ruins. Whether one reads Kenneth Clarke or contemporary historians such as Megan Aldrich, the picturesque is characterised by a mixture or rather a blend of tastes, whether

unexpected or exotic, which first became most evident in garden landscaping, especially by William Kent as early as the 1720s. Besides it is a well-known fact that gothic enthusiasts in the 18<sup>th</sup> century adapted this aesthetic evolution to the field of mental representation at large, Horace Walpole being an obvious example. Another way to understand this evolution is the totally fanciful allegory which was thought to be reliable until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. William Warburton in his 1751 edition of Pope's *Works*, invented this theory, according to which the Goths' places of worship were bushes but when they became Christians, they added to the architecture of their new religious buildings elements copied from forests and vegetation in general. There is of course no historical truth in this but the flight of imagination involved speaks volumes for this nostalgic urge to the uncontrolled and anarchic forces of nature. In other words, the genesis of the gothic movement is not an archeologising quest. As for the relation between the architectural and the literary movements, Kenneth Clarke has not been surpassed yet in his judgments : "The gothic poets had sung a faint discordant undertone to the Augustan harmony ; the Gothic novelists screamed - screamed in complete reaction to everything stuffy and probable. Reaction was their chief impulse, and reaction is almost their only connexion with the architectural side of the Gothic Revival".

The second point which deserves a special emphasis is that the neo-gothic architecture, or rather the renewal of interest in "gothic" buildings or ornaments, are not at all pure. In his book *Gothic Europe*, Saverio Sestini corrects our vision : "The Romanesque grew imperceptibly into the Gothic probably at intimation of the pointed arches of the Fatimids or the Saracens. < . . > The mosques of Cairo and Damascus < . . . > Omit the sculpture which was forbidden to the Moslems and the kinship becomes more apparent.". In his conclusion entitled "Charivari of the Gothic", the baroque specialist that he was leads us to see that the architectural gothic owes as much to the Northern as to the Arab traditions. This is not an eccentric's isolated point of view. If we consider a few commentators of the modern period, we find the same confusion in terms of influences from the Arabs, the Moors and the would-be Barbarians of the North. This is the case in John Evelyn's *Accounts of Architects and Architecture* 1697, J.F. Sobry's *De l'architecture* 1776 or even in Fénelon's *Lettre sur les occupations de l'académie française*. The so-called Gothic Revival or should we say the gothic Survival is the offspring of

three complementary traditions, the medieval, the Arab and the Saracen ones.

### Gothic novels and the dark sensibility

The circumstances under which Beckford and a few friends started to read and translate some oriental manuscripts from the Montague collection are quite well-known. It might have started as early as 1781 but we know for sure that they were most productive and busy with these “romantic translations” during the winter of 1782/83. It started as a game probably, a *jeu de salon* certainly, but developed into something quite different. The question which is still to be answered is why Beckford chose to write in French. One possible explanation is that he, as a teenager, had read the *Arabian Nights* in French editions (Galland, d'Herbelot, etc.) and felt more comfortable in this exotic language so as to enjoy the special atmosphere of the East. Another one is that French represented the language of subversion, the language in which he could express his innermost feelings and his sensual reveries. That is why the term “romantic translation” was alluded to as Beckford did not literally translate those texts, he and his friends probably did when they worked together but Beckford's imagination flared up. As in chivalric romances (*romans de chevalerie* to be more exact), creating or story-telling was not a matter of inventing fictional elements leading to original plots but of re-organising the fixed, sometimes stereotyped, episodes or tableaux of a legendary tale. In order to understand the author's method in such a peculiar form of literary creation, we just have to dig into Beckford papers to find the clue to his arabesques :

Voici encore de l'arabesque que je fis sur des écrits dont l'original se trouve dans le même recueil où Jonathan Scott et plusieurs Orientalistes ont puisé. Savary aussi a paraphrasé ce petit conte à sa manière. J'avais commencé à le traduire littéralement. Mon maître d'arabe, un vieux musulman né natif de La Mecque, me l'avait recommandé comme exercice de langue. J'ai trouvé pourtant la narration si pompeusement ennuyeuse que je l'ai jetée de côté. Zémir voulut me brider, comme de raison, mais ayant pris le mors au dent, je me suis emporté à grand galop dans les régions de ma voyageuse imagination. Voici le résultat.

This quotation brings us back to the blend of different traditions already mentioned

when considering the genesis of the gothic taste revival in architecture. Beckford's oriental tales are not exactly oriental because of the fiery and modern imagination that is stirring in them. But can they, as literary pieces, be considered as gothic? On the one hand if we believe Professor Maurice Levy who wrote his doctoral thesis on the English gothic novel and which has now become a sort of reference book on those matters in France as well as in England, such writings share three common denominators : the overwhelming presence of the abbey (or any place of seclusion) a pervading atmosphere of terror or anguish and manifestations of the world beyond in the diegesis. Most tales – not all of them – but most of them and all of Beckford's fictional letters (*The Vision*, "The Transport of Pleasure", the Nouronihar fragments) correspond to this typology. So why does Levy reject *Vathek* for instance from the gothic literary genre? Many critics have shown that despite the erudition of the man behind the texts, the tales are not exactly Arabian tales. Some even suggested that they were rather caricatures or parodies of the gothic novel : "Seine pseudo-orientalische Erzählung *Vathek* kann als groteskes Zerrbild der *gothic novel* gelesen werden" Elke Heinemann tells us in her recently published doctoral thesis. As for Lévy, his hypotheses concerning Beckford's two novels *Modern Novel Writing* and *Azemias* are very interesting and ambiguous : he reads them as two parodies of the genre but also discerns in them passages that could be considered as gothic. Moreover we know that Beckford did not like being associated with the gothic revival in architecture : " No. I have enough sins to answer for without having that laid to my charge". Both opinions are thus intellectually acceptable, his tales and early writings can **and** cannot be considered as gothic.

So we are left with a big question mark. Let us go back to Horace Walpole and his *Castle of Otranto*, reputedly **the** first gothic novel. Horace Walpole is also the author of the *Hieroglyphic Tales* and the play *The Mysterious Mother*. Aren't there passages in these two works that are somehow gothic? Is the gothic novel always a novel? Nothing is less sure than that. Besides if we read Levy's *magnum opus* carefully, we may notice that although he rejects Mary Shelley as well as Beckford as gothic authors, he nonetheless gives counter arguments to his own judgment which tend to show how wrongly we assumed that something gothic has something to do exclusively with the medieval gothic :

Malgré les rapports qui ont pu être établis entre la superstition gothique et la superstition orientale par certains esprits avertis du 18<sup>me</sup> siècle - en particulier en raison de l'origine sarrasine

des romans de chevalerie -, nous croyons sages d'exclure de cette étude du roman "gothique" anglais, les contes orientaux, dont l'esprit nous paraît tout à fait différent, même lorsqu'ils atteignent à la qualité du *Vathek* de Beckford.

Things are gradually becoming less clear. If we re-read the essays and comments of precisely those contemporaries of the "gothic revival" that is to say John Aikin for example and his *On The Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror* 1773 or Nathan Drake in *Literary Hours* 1800 we'll find again that that the oriental, the gothic and the Saracen traditions intertwine and if we read Aikin in particular, the thing becomes even more obvious : the author does not dwell on a meaeieval archeological gothic but on the dark novel and sensibility as a whole and most of the time at a poetical or philosophical level. We may find many other examples of books or writers who are usually forgotten in the gothic pantheon such as Tobias Smollett and his *Ferdinand Count Fathom* or Charles Brockden Brown's works, among many others, who partake of the same dark sensibility. As a conclusion to this reassessment of the gothic genre, I think once again it shows how deceptive categorising can be, leading as it can to a general misunderstanding of such artistic gestures. So gothic has a very vague meaning today but maybe it is not such a big question after all since it has always been the case. Even within the group of unchallenged gothic authors, what remains is the individuality of each artist. And William Beckford is certainly one very good example of the English and French dark novelists, along with Sade, Diderot, Lewis or Sophie Lee.

In France, the rediscovery of such novels or writings is due to the insatiable curiosity of the surrealists. It might be interesting to remember that René Magritte did some illustrations for *Vathek*, still unpublished, and that the surrealists never spoke of a gothic taste or novel but rather of *romans noirs* just as Aikin or Drake did in their own times. In *Les vases communicants*, Breton dreams about a little gothic glass bookcase that one could hang on the wall with all the dark novels of the pre-romantic era. His taste for such books based on the fact that he considered them as "ultra-romanesques" and "archi-sophistiqués". Realism and identifications are not sought after, a new (shall I dare utter the word : modern?) mode of representation of mental perceptions was being born.

Beckford's special brand of gothicism.



In almost all dark novels, the focal point and the horizon are marked by a place or building which seems to represent metaphorically the darkest recesses of the human psyche. In Beckford's case, this place of subversion was first the "Dome of the Setting Sun" in his early letters, then Eblis in *Vathek* and finally Fonthill Abbey in real life. The progression is quite revealing, the dome is a place of communion, Eblis the "most atrocious Hell in literature" and Fonthill Abbey, as it is an abbey and not a cathedral, a place of expiation. Yet, in Beckford's tales, there is what Antoine Hatzenberger has called the aesthetics of the cathedral, which does not imply that there must be an actual cathedral playing a rôle in the diegesis.

First, verticality is the general movement in the progression. The thing is quite obvious in Beckford, whether in *The Transport of Pleasure*, *The Vision*, or a famous episode in "Histoire d'Elouard Felkanaman et d'Ansel Hogioud". Any time the protagonist is beset by doubt or any peripeteia is to occur, the pilgrimage is described on a vertical axis as opposed to the bucolic or picturesque descriptions which are horizontal. Secondly, as in *Histoire du prince Ahmed* the cathedral is a sort of interface between the exterior and the interior. The sublime quality of indoors *locale* stands as an ornament to the picturesque surroundings as well as a reflection of it. Architecture is also a metaphorical space in the gothic sensibility and more especially it reveals passions and eroticism. The *locus* can be either a luxurious abbey or a tomb but always a secluded place where melancholy pervades. In his *Almanach des Muses* Choderlos de Laclos wrote in 1777: "Ô! tombeau désirable! Ô! demeure tranquille! / Le malheur nous poursuit, prête-nous un asyle / A l'orage qui gronde, ô Mort!, dérobe nous." And then we are not all that far from the atmosphere Beckford conjures up in the first pages of "Histoire d'Al Raoui", in which the protagonist is shown, all alone and cutt off from the rest of the world : "Ennuyé de ma solitude, la mélancolie me gagna si terriblement que ma vie me devint insupportable et souvent je souhaitais la mort." Melancholy in Beckford's tales can also be considered as another kind of transport, a travel within oneself towards something strange and foreign. Hence, the emblematic and literal spiral pattern which is quite obvious in *Histoire du prince Ahmed* or "Histoire d'Aladdin". To use Hatzenberger's words "Ce que la rosace et le labyrinthe signifient, n'est-ce pas alors l'exigence pour l'homme hors de lui et étranger à lui-même à force d'extraversion, affairé, dispersé et perdu dans le monde, d'être transparent à soi-même, et de rentrer en soi pour trouver son propre centre?" With Beckford, this spiral movement is inscribed

within oriental settings clouded here and there by Sadian motifs, giving birth to a very peculiar delight in langorous sighs and imperious desires. The author often mentions situations in which "le cœur est condamné à des privations éternelles". What is forbidden is not exactly what could be expected, that is to say certain objects of desire but the moral question concerns the limits and essence of pleasure ; in other words how to contemplate and enjoy the object of one's temptations without possessing it. That is maybe what the Beckfordian obscenity encapsulates. In "Histoire des Fontaines de Merlin", the fountains of hatred are more important than the Fountain of love, the passionate lover in "Al Raoui" wants to be buried wrapped up in his beloved's shroud, Elouard Felkenaman and Ansel Hogioud are apparently much more in love when they are furiously searching for one another beyond the seas, which are always considered as doomed places in the Arab tradition.

Last of all, the role of architecture in Beckford's writing is to enhance a sense of infinitude which leads to a certain vertigo for the reader as the structure of the whole work is always interdependent with its meanings. In fact, the process is one of homology, everything becomes comparable to everything. In *Histoire du prince Ahmed*, the protagonist passes from his cell to the nets of a fisherman ; in *The Vision*, the perspective is not created by a few columns but three thousand of them and their floral shapes and ornaments seem to multiply and develop as the reading progresses. In his *Essai sur le goût*, Montesquieu gives an original point of view on the tantalizing visual impact of gothic architecture : "L'architecture gothique paraît très variée ; mais la confusion des ornements fatigue par leur petitesse ; ce qui fait qu'il n'y en a aucun que nous puissions distinguer d'un autre, et leur nombre fait qu'il n'y en a aucun sur lequel l'œil puisse s'arrêter < . . > Un bâtiment d'ordre gothique est une espèce d'énigme pour l'œil qui le voit ; et l'âme en est embarrassée comme quand on lui présente un poème obscur." In Beckford the enigma boils down to the fact that the decor is not one really, it fictionally develops as images abound : "A chaque pas, il trouva quelque nouvel objet qui l'enchantait. Cent fontaines de marbre jetaient des eaux transparentes et fraîches sur des parterres remplis d'une quantité de fleurs qu'il n'avait jamais vues auparavant". As a matter of fact, Beckford's neo-gothic is based on the fractal technique :

De cette salle il passa dans une infinité d'autres qui avaient toutes des meubles et une illumination semblables et qui n'étaient séparées que par des portières. Quand il croyait avoir tout vu,

c'était à recommencer. Las enfin de parcourir ce vaste palais, il se coucha par terre, pour attendre que quelqu'un se présentât à lui.

Beckford's neo-gothicism also relies heavily on a special brand of historicising. In all his early writings, he manipulates historical references and rearranges them in – precisely – a gothic manner. There is a continuity in Beckford's artistic gesture along with the pre-romantics. In 1785, Thomas Gray wrote : "The drift of my present studies is to know, wherever I am, what lies within my reach, that may be worth seeing whether it be building, ruin, park, garden, prospect, picture or monument, < . . . > and what has been the characteristic, and taste of different ages". If you take "Histoire de Yao" for instance there are numberless parallels and echoes among the Golden Age in China, the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries of the Arab world around Baghdad and ancient Greece (Yao, 46). Besides, oriental or more precisely Hindu divinities also abound in "Histoire de Visapour" although some of the events take place in Araby and one of the embedded stories of "Histoire d'Aladdin" is the story of prince Mahmed who is King of India. Many times memory and erudition turn writing into a sort of psycho-active travel in time :

Toutes sortes de pensées défilèrent dans mon esprit. Je me rappelais les événements passés. Je prévoyais le futur. Je reniais mes prophéties. Tout m'apparaissait comme dans un rêve et, l'instant d'après, tout me semblait réel.

The *Recollections to an Excursion to Alcobaga and Batalha* are not exactly recollections but rather a retrospection, in which memory is fictionalised by the imagination.. The very architecture of the monasteries is responsible for a change of mood in the traveller's account. Alcobaga is half way between the romanesque and the gothic whereas Batalha is a more massive and theatrical kind of gothic artefact. Within the excursion, the narrator who is also an art historian all of a sudden exposes the reader to visionary episodes such as that of the thoroughbred at the end of the eighth letter and that of the three pages taking part in the rites of Isis in the seventh letter. Kenneth Clarke wrote that : "Fonthill and Windsor spring from an impulse similar to that which produced Napoleonic classicism, the idealization of a past way of life." but idealisation is not maybe exactly what Beckford was after. In fact, like Prince Pückler-Muskau visiting Warwick Castle in 1826, Beckford could have written : "I fancied myself transported

back into bygone ages as I entered the giant Baronial Hall" Hence, Beckford gives free rein to what we could call his mythopea or mythography. Beckford revisits ancient if not primaeval civilisations and infuses them with a timeless dimension ; in "Histoire de Yao", the protagonist is looking for the Fien (or original spirit) then "êtres prestigieux, demi-dieux des temps anciens dont peu de nations ont encore un respectueux souvenir". In "Histoire de Darianoc", a new unheard of religion is established without "simulacres, ni idoles, ni culte établi, ni prêtre, ni temple", celle du Cœur Grand". In these tales or fictional letters, Beckford not only develops a world of his own but also accumulates past present and future visions in a modern-gothic manner.

Other characteristics of Beckford's gothicism which are more technical than thematic could be explored, such as a very strange enunciative strategy and character-types from maedieval and Arab tales. Among many others, Beckford did invent the *sabih* type (a neologism derived from *sabih*, the handsome one and *saih*, the wanderer) giving birth to characters as Ahmed, Darianoc, Chemnis, etc. What is important here is to notice is that character-types usually make the identification process extremely difficult and what really matters in the end is the lyrical and the mechanic, as the two modern forces at work in art. The story must proceed whatever the reader's expectations might be, and the lyricism of some tableaux must strike him like thunder. What must remain is not the empathy or sympathy of introspective narratives but the sublime terror and excitement of initiation novels :

Sans aucun doute, ces derniers moments passés, qui ont glissé comme la vision de la nuit, n'effacent pas le souvenir de ceux auxquels j'ai aspiré pendant mon initiation.

In other words this kind of literature works on a total disregard for the reader's expectations and that explains why dark novels are often read several times in a lifetime with totally different reactions from the same reader. The impact is nonetheless extremely romanesque as what is to be found there is something between Burkian fear and rapture, as if fiction echoed the vacuum in oneself of the impossible ideal of fusing with the universe.

As a conclusion, why not conjure up an emblem as any gothicism is a matter of ornament. Birds are overwhelmingly present in Beckford's early tales. His arabesques do not include doves or pigeons but rather Persian *simorgs*, Chinese *Phengs*, Hindu *garudas* Arab *rocs* or *ankas*. All these different versions of a huge white bird could be the most characteristic

*chimera* of Beckford's writings and this leads us to think again about the obscene, this time not as a moral notion supposed to represent anything that goes against conventions but etymologically speaking, as the offspring of the *oscene*, that bird whose song is a sort of omen, a sort of revelator of an impending doom. Behind the extravaganza and the gothic richness of Beckford's many talents, does lie an ever present inner disruption which is not the result from an ontological fall but in a more modern manner from an imagination torn apart from reality :

J'étais devenu le jouet de mon imagination et je ne discernais qu'à grand peine les zones d'ombre de celles de la réalité. Un effort violent fut nécessaire pour me tirer de mon emprisonnement momentané déchirant au passage mon habit que je quittai pour mieux continuer ma progression à travers la forêt dans une obscurité presque totale.

Definitely dark.