Ending in Infinity: William Beckford’s Arabian Tale

William Beckford’s *Vathek* (1786), subtitled *An Arabian Tale*, displays an imagination and moral vision deeply penetrated by the perfumes of Arabia and the essence of Islam. Beckford’s enthusiasm was not merely simple-minded ecstasy in a falsely perceived “Orient” of “sensuality, promise, terror, sublimity, idyllic pleasure, intense energy,” like that which was seized upon and utilized, as Edward Said has shown, by his contemporaries.¹ Although Beckford succumbed to the temptation of projecting his fantasies onto an unknown and unknowable “other” world—a fictional Orient—his “Arabian” tale also offers evidence of a deeper intuition, in particular a sympathy with Islam (or what he took Islam to be) that lifts Beckford and his narrative beyond the bounds of the traditional English (and Christian) tale. Beckford’s East is self-evidently grotesque, without any attempt at historical or geographical veracity. Yet under its wild and extravagant surface Beckford was attempting to introduce a new way of conceiving experience which, while not authentically “Eastern,” was not conventionally “Western” either.²

*Vathek* was influenced in its characterization, its description, its philosophy, even its structure, by the practices of the East as Beckford understood them; its consequent lack of conventional guideposts and its


² The terms “East” and “West” refer, in this article, to a discrimination in Beckford’s *Welanschauung* rather than to any objectively demonstrable bifurcation.
unsettling ambience have disconcerted and annoyed critics. The *Monthly Review* (May 1787), for example, adopted a tone of paternalistic rebuke, chastising *Vathek* for its failure to keep within the perimeters of eighteenth-century fiction, remarking that the novel "preserves the peculiar character of the Arabian Tale, which is not only to overstep nature and probability, but even to pass beyond the verge of possibility, and suppose things, which cannot be for a moment conceived." A century later Wilbur Cross, though more enthusiastic about the novel, resorts to terms such as "extravagance," "sarcasm," and "love of grotesque horror" to characterize it, while thirty years after that, Edmund Wilson reduced Beckford’s deployment of irony to the need "merely to satisfy a perverse impulse." The inadequacy of these readings is the result of Beckford’s overlaying of one cultural topography (English, Christian, known) upon another (Arabic, Islamic, unknown) in order to give himself a new arena, a fresh "orientation," for the exploration of the age-old topic of a man’s relationship with his soul. This article will attempt to chart the terrain of *Vathek* from the dual perspective of East and West, which is how Beckford himself viewed it.

In the course of *Vathek*’s examination of the individual’s relation with his or her soul the shadow of the Protestant ethic falls across the novel’s pages; the final horror of *Vathek*’s and Nouronihar’s separation from God is deeper because it has been self-willed and could have been avoided: "Vathek beheld in the eyes of Nouronihar nothing but rage and vengeance; nor could she discern aught in his, but aversion and despair" (p. 119). The intrusion of Christian eschatology into the hall of Eblis—the Islamic hell—raises the question of whether Beckford intended to merge the two religions. As a proto-orientalist he seems to have subscribed to the conventional wisdom about fundamental disparities between East and West. According to Said, the division between East and West was an artificial boundary drawn by Europeans to mark off their fears of the "other" and to project all the features that their culture could

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not assimilate onto a fictional “Orient.” Having created this alien entity and assigned territorial limits to it, they then attempted, through the machinery of nineteenth-century colonialism, to penetrate and subdue it to their will.6 Said analyses the pretensions and perniciousness of this practice, showing that, under the guise of an academic discipline (orientalism), racial inferences about the superiority of one “culture” to another are often assumed. Though he was influenced by the orientalism of his day, Beckford does not privilege “West” above “East”; there are discernible differences between Islam and Christianity which Beckford took serious account of in Vathek, while also indicating that neither religion had sufficiently accommodated all the energies and aspirations kindled in the human spirit.

Beckford grounded his novel in historical fact, absorbing from Barthélemy d’Herbelot’s Bibliothèque orientale (1778) the information that “the grandson of Harun al-Raschid and the ninth Caliph of the Abbasides was Vathek Billah, offspring of Motassem and his Greek wife, Carathis.” D’Herbelot’s account of the ninth Caliph balances merits and defects; Beckford, however, suppressed most of Vathek’s virtues, leaving him an unmitigated villain. His hospitality, for example, is prompted “by motives of curiosity” (p. 5), making self-gratification the basis of his liberality. The Vathek of Vathek has no historical authenticity, nor was he intended to have any. Beckford created an autocratic character who jettisons the ballast of his traditions and his religion and thrives by the goodwill of his subjects. Into the waking nightmare of his protagonist’s wayward existence—adrift from the influences that would normally have constrained and directed a ruler’s actions—Beckford introduced elements from the Arabian Nights. The extravagance of Vathek’s “uncommonly splendid” caravan (p. 38), for example, emulates the train of “tents, camels, mules, servants, and retainers” that accompanies King Shahzaman to Samarkand;8 while indecipherable messages and consultations of the astrolabe appear in both works. Vathek also resembles its oriental model in its black humour, which frequently exploits the physically infirm—such as the “superb corps of cripples” encountered by the Caliph (p. 61)—as butts for its comic shafts. Both works, ignoring poetic justice, heap afflictions on the backs of those already afflicted.


Beckford, however, modified his inherited material, above all insisting on the moral responsibility of his characters for their deeds. In the Arabian Nights wealth falls into the lap of the hero with no deleterious side-effects, as is the case with “Ma’aruf the Cobbler,” whose ploughshare becomes snagged on a buried slabstone which opens to reveal “a square vault as large as the city baths containing four separate halls,”9 each filled with precious stones. His wealth can be enjoyed without a guilty conscience. In Vathek, however, the chamber of precious gems has more ambivalent overtones. The glistening gold may not succour the soul, but may seduce it to corruption. Thus the princess Nouronihar, entering the secret grotto, is “filled ... with fear ” and “sink[s], almost lifeless” despite the delightful appearance of the cave’s contents—“appendages of royalty, diadems and feathers of the heron, all sparkling with carbuncles” (pp. 70–71). This vision brings in its train a loss of innocence—“Nouronihar was not altogether so content” after this (p. 82)—which has no parallel in the Nights. Once an ingénue, always an ingénue, in the world of the Arabian Nights, probably because the characters are seen as puppets in the hands of fate rather than as persons who are at least partially responsible for their own development or degradation. No trace of Protestant guilt intrudes to mar their full enjoyment of their easily gotten gains.

Despite his insertion of a Protestant conscience into the matter of the Arabian Nights, Beckford was more susceptible to Islamic and Arabian influence than has been generally recognized. Most critics assume that his orientalism was a veneer. But Beckford’s Eastern interest went deeper than that of his predecessors and contemporaries, such as Addison, Steele, Johnson, and Goldsmith, all of whom made use of the oriental tale for anglocentric purposes. His understanding of the East—partly instructed, but mainly intuitive—affected the formation of his story in vital ways. Beckford availed himself, in particular, of contrasting attitudes to space and time, introducing alien concepts of boundlessness and timelessness to disconcert his European readers.

One of the claims of orientalists is that oriental structures are open-ended and means-directed whereas occidental structures are finite and end-directed.10 In the orientalist schemata the inhabitant of the East, un-

9 Nights, p. 393.
like his or her Western counterpart, is not conceptually bound to see the
purposive framework of every undertaking. It would thus be possible to
start making something without worrying about how to conclude it. The
Arabian Nights are ostensibly tallied at a thousand and one, a number
which the mind can only grasp approximately and one that will there-
fore admit the unobtrusive incorporation of new tales within the original
framework: the "one" after the "thousand" may indicate that the series
could be expanded indefinitely.

Before Vathek was published, Beckford had made provision within its
narrative structure for an extension to accommodate other stories, in the
manner of the Arabian Nights. On Vathek's arrival in the hall of Eblis
he meets "four young men, of goodly figure, and a lovely female," all
equally damned. One of them invites Vathek to "relate the adventures
that have brought you to this fatal place; and we, in return, will acquaint
you with ours" (p. 116). These additional "adventures" were originally
intended to be incorporated within the text of Vathek. "I have gone on
sinking my princes to Hell with perseverance," wrote Beckford on 21
March 1785; and sixteen months later, "I would not have him [Vathek]
on any account come forth without his companions." But Henley's
unauthorized publication of Vathek two years later effectively put paid
to Beckford's plans to include the additional tales, though he continued
to work on them sporadically.

Never published in Beckford's lifetime, the additional anecdotes, trans-
lated from Beckford's French by Sir Frank T. Marzials, finally appeared
as The Episodes of Vathek under the supervision of Lewis Melville in
1912. Their contents have been summarized by Brian Fothergill:

Each story tells how the narrator has found his way to the halls of Eblis and
the subsequent loss of his soul, and in them Beckford explores the various less
orthodox aspects of human relationships, including his own unfortunate affair
with [William] Courtenay. In [one] story on a pederastic theme propriety is
saved in the nick of time when it is discovered that the boy prince Firouz has
been a girl all the time, though after the discovery she loses no time in getting
back into male dress again.12

The ludicrousness of such events contrasts with the macabre horror of
the fate suspended over the tellers' heads. Could it be that Beckford was

11 See Kenneth W. Graham, "Beckford's Design for The Episodes: A History and a Review,"
Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America 71 (1971), 337.
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aiming at a multivalence of tone and an encyclopaedic content in the all-inclusive tradition of the Arab *adab* (belles lettres)? His wish to dilate the structure of his novel, to interpolate new narratives just prior to the anticipated climax and delay the end indefinitely, as Shahrazad defers her execution in the *Nights*, suggests plot-weaving after the design of the labyrinth, a favoured Arabic motif.

The corridors of the labyrinth—a seemingly endless intertwining of passages whose centre may never be reached—appear to be without issue; consequently they assume as much significance in themselves as does their "goal." Beckford’s design for his Fonthill Abbey residence was obviously based on his belief that oriental structures should be labyrinthine and inconclusive. Looking back on his Fonthill home when he was an old man, he recalled:

The solid Egyptian Hall looked as if hewn out of a living rock. The line of apartments and apparently endless passages extending from it on either side were all vaulted—an interminable staircase, which when you looked down it, appeared as deep as the well in the pyramid—and when you looked up—was lost in vapour ... [T]he vastness, the intricacy of this 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 wandering. ... No wonder such scenery inspired the description of the Halls of Eblis.13

An orthodox Western design, on the other hand, draws all its lines towards its end, all incidentals being commandeered to serve that purpose. There is no time to stand and stare; all energy is bent and directed to the defined aim. On this basis the vision of *Vathek* is bifocal. As much attention is lavished on the incidental, seemingly irrelevant occurrences of Vathek’s expedition as on the end-product of that journey. At certain moments—Vathek’s desecration of the sacred “besom” of Mecca (pp. 39–41), the caravan’s devastation by “wolves and tigers” (pp. 46–48), Bababalouk’s discomfiture in Nouronihar’s bath (pp. 58–59), Carathis’s ghoulish “supper” of “fresh corpses” (p. 92)—the aim of the journey is entirely lost sight of as the characters devote all their energy and gusto

to the task in hand, a task often utterly unconnected to their ultimate goal. At other times Vathek and his mother adopt an inherently teleological attitude, holding an end clearly in view as a justification for all the means used to attain it. Carathis, contemplating human sacrifice to ingratiate herself with the Giaour, affirms “No crimes should be thought too dear for such a reward” (p. 29); and Vathek slaughters with his own hand fifty of “the most beautiful sons” (p. 23) of his chief subjects in order to obtain the golden key to the Palace of Subterranean Fire and “the treasures of Soliman” (p. 46).

The tales-within-a-tale structure of the Arabian Nights indicates—as Jerrold Hogle has shown in relationship to Maturin’s Melmoth the Wanderer (1820)—the lack of a centre; an endless circular pursuit of a meaning that has long since disappeared leaving barely a trace behind. Similarly, the sought-after talismans only reveal “means to other means.” No end is in sight. “A desire spawned by crypts and pursued across crypts turns out to be a desire only for more desire.”14 Hogle’s point is that Vathek’s endeavour to decipher the hieroglyphics of the sabres is a futile attempt to unveil the past and discover a lost meaning. Frustration inevitably follows when an attempt is made to negotiate the labyrinth bearing only its “end” in mind. But in terms of Islamic architecture the very circuitousness of the route, the convolutions of its arabesque curves, may constitute its meaning, by suggesting the infinite magnitude of the unrepresentable God. It is tempting to describe Vathek as tinted by Beckford’s vision of the East and Islam in its incidentals while adhering to the West and Christianity in its structural plan. But Beckford’s interweaving of the two worlds cannot be so simply unravelled.

Beckford was sensitive to the implications of Islamic architectural design. Above the hall of Eblis are “the vast ruins of Istakhar” which include “gloomy watchtowers, whose number could not be counted ... covered by no roof” (pp. 106–7); an indication that, though Vathek’s earthly quest may now be ended, his spiritual journey, for which no end is in sight, is just beginning. Every chamber within the “immense” structure of the subterranean palace discloses itself as “without bounds or limit” (pp.

The sheer monotony of his architectural surroundings reinforces Vathek's awareness of the perpetuity of his punishment. For the Muslim, whose thoughts, directed towards Mecca, go beyond the confines of his place of worship, the horizontality of the mosque's architecture is an aid rather than an obstacle to spiritualization.¹⁵

The style of the early mosques was open-ended, in order that the edifices could be expanded or contracted in response to demographic changes: "Early Islamic architects did not conceive of the mosque as a complete and enclosed unit like the medieval cathedral; they believed that the mosque should have the potential to be made larger or smaller in the event of changes in a city's population."¹⁶ The mosque, unlike the cathedral, was not intended to be optically absorbed all at once. The vertical spaces contained within the soaring vaults of the Gothic cathedrals were meant to create a sublime effect, a meeting of the earthly and the spiritual for a limited time in a clearly defined area; the horizontal unfolding of the rows of colonnades in the early mosques suggested, on the other hand, timelessness and spaciousness. In the mosque of Cordova, as Titus Burckhardt says, "the limits of space play no role at all; the walls of the prayer-hall disappear beyond a forest of arcades. Their sheer repetition ... gives an impression of endless extension." Because of the basically open-ended design of the Cordova mosque, it was possible for it to be "steadily enlarged over three centuries without its architectural scheme being altered." Since he was not concerned with expressing a complete belief-system from beginning to end in one simultaneous sweep of apprehension, the mosque-builder was unperturbed if the gaze of the beholder of his work lost itself in "a forest of arcades." Thus "The Arab architect is not afraid of monotony; he will build pillar upon pillar and arcade upon arcade."¹⁷

For Vathek, whose life has been spent seeking advantage in this world rather than blessing in the next and who has turned his back on Mecca to complete an earthly pilgrimage in the contrary direction, the horizontal perspectives of Eblis's hall, so infinite that he at first thinks himself on "an immeasurable plain," are a constant reprimand. By his wilful disregard of the vertical axis to the Prophet in his "seventh heaven" he

¹⁵ See Titus Burckhardt, Art of Islam: Language and Meaning (London: World of Islam Publishing, 1976), "Every place on earth is directly attached to the Meccan centre" (p. 5).

¹⁶ Gittes, 243.

¹⁷ Burckhardt, pp. 127, 45.
has doomed himself to an eternity of pointless wandering, excluded from
the sight of God (pp. 109, 3–4).

Vathek’s horizontal perspective shows that he shares the Western pro-
clivity for putting bounds around everything, even the unknown. Arab
geographers were not hampered by the need to delimit and define *terra
incognita*. Al-Idrisi’s *Book of Roger* (1154) had as its full title *The Delight
of Him Who Desires to Traverse the Horizons*. Arab geography seems to
have been eclectic, not driven by a desire to present the whole picture:

The final synthesis which would have summed up all the geographical work
which had been done in Arabic [by twelfth and thirteenth-century geographers,
particularly, Al-Idrisi] was never made. ... [Their] geographical works ... are
extremely useful and meritorious, but remain compilations, made by men of
encyclopaedic knowledge indeed, but whose interests were diversified.¹⁸

That Vathek is a Western rather than an oriental geographer is evident
from the mineralogical display in his palace of the senses: “Rarities,
collected from every corner of the earth were there found in such pro-
fusion as to dazzle and confound, but for the order in which they were
arranged” (p. 2). Vathek has classified the earth and its contents and
shrank it to the dimensions of a museum exhibit. Once he begins his ex-
pedition, however, the inadequacy of such a reductive approach soon
becomes apparent:

His geographers were ordered to attend him; but, the weather proved so terrible
that these poor people exhibited a lamentable appearance: and their maps of
the different countries spoiled by the rain, were in a still worse plight than
themselves ... [E]very one was ignorant which way to turn; and Vathek, though
well versed in the course of the heavens, no longer knew his situation on earth.
(pp. 44–45)

Vathek’s carefully charted course loses its way and its momentum. He has
to fall back on the unlettered “guidance of a peasant” to take him across
the mountains (p. 45). The remainder of his journey is full of wrong
turnings and misadventures, which reveal the hubris and insufficiency
of Vathek’s approach and show how misguided he is spiritually as well
as geographically. He has to be rescued from a desert of “black sand”
and “perpendicular crags” by a search party dispatched by the Emir
Fakreddin (p. 50); and when he finally arrives at what he believes to be

the centre of the earth, Eblis's Palace of Subterranean Fire, he finds only an infertile fount, an invisible cataract. He has been following the wrong charts: terrestrial, deductive, and finite rather than celestial, inductive, and infinite. The occidental approach to geography, inculcated by his Greek mother, is exposed in all its secular shortcoming: "the principles by which Carathis perverted my youth, have been the sole cause of my perdition!" (p. 115).

Vathek, like Marlowe's Dr Faustus, has forsworn his religion for knowledge immortal: "instigated by insatiable curiosity" he "abjure[s]" the Prophet Mohammed (p. 22). Like Faustus, too, he plays practical jokes on devout men, dispatching the mullahs and imams of Schiraz seated backwards on their mules (p. 102). The parallels with Marlowe's work continue. Nouronihar first appears to Vathek like the spirit of Helen to Faustus, arousing in him the desire for illicit intercourse: "Contrive... that I may respire her sweet breath as she bounds panting along these delightful wilds!" (p. 63, cf. Faustus's "Her lips suck forth my soul"). Vathek, like Faustus, is exhorted to repent when on the brink of damnation by a figure embodying honest simplicity. The Old Man who tells Faustus to "leave this damned art" (5.1.35) becomes in Beckford a "beneficent Geni[us], assuming... the exterior of a shepherd" (p. 103) who admonishes Vathek and advises him to "abandon thy atrocious purpose" (p. 105). In neither work is the warning heeded.

Like Faustus, who aspires to "wall all Germany with brass" (1.1.87), Vathek sins by attempting to put bounds on the boundless, to inscribe a circle round the infinite, to impose Western thought-patterns on Eastern beliefs. Vathek's Hellenistic propensity for rationalization is inherited from his mother Carathis, who "had induced him, being a Greek herself, to adopt the sciences and systems of her country which all good Mussulmans hold in such thorough abhorrence" (p. 8). Through the study of "metaphysics" Faustus hopes to achieve a "dominion" that "Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man" (1.1.48-60). Vathek wishes "to know every thing; even sciences that did not exist" (p. 3). Hence his frustration when the shifting hieroglyphics on the sabres confront him with something sinuous and ungraspable: an Eastern adumbration that eludes the compartmentalizing impulse of the semi-Western mind. Faustus is similarly balked when he asks Mephostophilis to "reason of divine astrology" and receives no answer that his reductive rationalizing mind can batter on (2.2.34).

19 Christopher Marlowe, Doctor Faustus, ed. Roma Gill (London: Ernest Benn, 1965), 5.1.99. References are to this edition, which, like most modern reprints, follows the B-text of the play.
On the face of it, then, *Vathek's* plot seems strictly in the tradition of Western Christianity. Within the timeless frame of the Arabian setting a highly time-conscious drama—that of Faust—is re-enacted. Where Faustus and Vathek differ most noticeably is in their endings. There is a conclusiveness in the epilogue to Faustus's life ("Cut is the branch ... Faustus is gone") already foreshadowed earlier in the play by the hero's ironic echoing of Christ's dying words, "*Consummatum est.*" All passion spent, his "mangled limbs" are given "due burial" (2.1.74; 5.3.17). Vathek, on the contrary, ends in endlessness, passing directly to "an eternity of unabating anguish" (p. 120) without the transitional stage of death. *Dr Faustus* ends cathartically with the sense that the scholar's career has terminated, violently and definitively. *Vathek* ends with the feeling that the Caliph's lifespan has only just begun. After the interposition of the shepherd-genius, the frivolity of tone that has endured for most of the novel quickly changes into a final sombreness: a contrast that dramatizes the folly of regarding the ephemeral material world as if it possessed the permanence of the spiritual.20

It seems, therefore, that, whereas *Dr Faustus* is the typically end-orientated product of Western culture, *Vathek* refuses closure and, by ending in infinity, bears an indelibly Eastern imprint in both its overall organization and its internal parts: it is an early specimen of orientalism.21 Even without the additional episodes, *Vathek* opens out at the end, resisting the closure common to other works of Western literature. Kindred Gothic novels are no exception to the preference for climactic and finite conclusions. The prototype, Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764), winds up the skeins of its characters' existences and stows them in boxes labelled "death," "marriage," or "convent"; Ann Radcliffe's novels conclude with the mysteries all explained to the satisfaction of the enlightened heroine; the protagonist of Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) meets a Faust-like end, his body smashed beyond the possibility of reconstitution.

20 Kenneth W. Graham discusses the tonal structure of the novel and the importance of the shepherd-genius episode as a transition point ("*Vathek* in English and French," *Studies in Bibliography: Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 28 [1975], 163).

21 Beckford himself made use of the term when writing to Henley before *Vathek*'s publication: "I doubt not [the English text with Henley's annotations] will be received with the honors due to so valuable a morsel of orientalism" (*Vathek*, p. xvi).
The inmates of the hall of Eblis find no such ends. Vathek and his comrades are left with their faculties intact and an infinitude of self-conscious suffering—mental, physical, and spiritual—before them: "All severally plunged themselves into the accursed multitude, there to wander in an eternity of unabating anguish" (pp. 119–20). There is no release from tension, no respite, no finality.

Other aspects of endlessness, both spatial and temporal, are interwoven into the text of Vathek. Repetition to a degree that may appear relentless to Western eyes and ears seems much more acceptable within Islamic culture. Regular observation of the five daily calls to prayer is enjoined on all Muslims, and in the prayer-call itself "each clause is repeated at least once." Beckford shared the orientalist perception of the Islamic tolerance, even nurture, of repetition, but he makes his semi-Westernized caliph impatient of it. Vathek's chief eunuch, Bababalouk, hears the Emir Fakreddin's dwarfs "reading over the Koran" for the "nine hundred and ninety-ninth time in their lives" (p. 56), an exercise which could evidently be continued indefinitely. When they begin "to repeat the Bismillah" to Vathek in person he soon tires of their "officious" practice and, "unable any longer to refrain, exclaimed: 'For the love of Mahomet, my dear Fakreddin, have done! let us proceed to your valley, and enjoy the fruits that Heaven hath vouchsafed you'" (pp. 53–54).

Extravagance, whether in the indulgence of personal appetites or in the hospitality offered to others, is another concept where the differences of Western and Oriental values might disconcert Beckford's readers. Hyperbole suggests boundlessness, infinitude. Vathek exhibits an excessive hunger and thirst: "So insatiable was the thirst which tormented him, that his mouth, like a funnel, was always open to receive the various liquors that might be poured into it" (p. 12). He entertains the Giaour with a sitting of thirty-two meals (p. 16). This open-endedness is applicable, however, only to Vathek's physical appetite: his sensual voracity is not repeated in a hunger for anything spiritual. He aspires with his body but not with his soul, so that although the tower he has built surpasses, with exaggerated and dizzying loftiness, the height of the earth's sublimest creations, it is still aimed at horizontal rather than vertical goals:

those of this world not the next. Consequently, standing on the pinna-
cle of his edifice and looking uncharacteristically upwards for a moment, Vathek “saw the stars as high above him as they appeared when he stood on the surface of the earth” (p. 4).

Extravagance may also be found in the way that language is used. Formal greetings in *Vathek* tend to be profuse and prolonged, but one nation’s prolixity may be another’s politeness. The Arabic sentence, elastic enough to be elongated to a length that would be considered unwieldy in a Western language, is arguably expansive, not only syntactically but semantically, in its invitation to a myriad meanings. “One of the great hallmarks of Islamic culture is its rich and vastly ingenious interpretative energy. ... Few civilizations have encouraged the arts of verbal interpreta-
tion on so wide a scale as Islam.”23 In *Vathek* words refuse to be reduced to single meanings, and Beckford may have been attempting to focus on the function of words, even common ones, as “talismans” to a recasting and revaluing of experience. The unceasing alteration of the charac-
ters inscribed at the entrance to the subterranean palace—“characters ... which possessed the ... virtue of changing every moment” (p. 107)—reflects the endless “interpretative energy” with which Muslim Arabs approach their written texts: an energy which proceeds from the under-
standing that, since God contains all, mankind’s interpretations unfold in an unlimited labyrinth, and the individual will be just as far from the cen-
tre when the enterprise exhausts itself as he or she was on first setting out.

The final and perhaps most disquieting point of difference between East and West on which Beckford focuses is that of religious belief. Vathek is denied the comfort of a deity whom he can visualize and whose word he can interpret. The kaleidoscopic calligraphy of the sabres conveys a multitude of messages, none of which can be deciphered. It indicates the magnitude of God (“Allah the Mighty, the Praised One; the Sovereign of the heavens and the earth, the Witness of all things”),24 a multivalency for which there is no simple verbal equivalent. Since Vathek has renounced


the faith of which he is the guardian, it is not surprising that the point of the protean characters—visible but ineffable—escapes him. Vathek, obsessed by the Western need to rationalize, insists on a reading that the mind can apprehend. When none is forthcoming, the Caliph’s delicate occidentalized mental balance is thrown into disequilibrium, whereupon “the rage of Vathek exceeded all bounds ... His courtiers and vizirs ... all united in one vociferation—‘The Caliph is gone mad! the Caliph is out of his senses!’” (p. 7).

From the start this episode gives notice of the hopelessness of Vathek’s quest for a meaning behind existence. Life’s phenomena may offer a glimmer of light to the person who allows for the intangibility of spiritual substance, but they will remain opaque to the one of merely mundane sensibility. Once it dawns on Vathek and Nouronihar that nothing of mental or material value will be yielded to them from their sacrilegious excavations into mankind’s physical origin—the “pre-adamite kings” who “lay recumbent” in “funereal gloom” in Eblis’s palace (p. 112)—their surging advance is abruptly halted. When Soliman Ben Daoud, keeper of “the talismans that control the world” (p. 22), breaks out of his lethargy sufficiently to address Vathek and his consort, it is not in language which they are willing to hear. They are thence reduced to “wandering” in “apathy,” “faltering from this fatal hall; indifferent which way they turned their steps” (pp. 114-15).

Up to this point the Caliph has been described variously as “majestic” (p. 1), “unhappy” (p. 14), “agitaded” (p. 64), or “furious” (p. 74), but seldom referred to in disparaging terms. The ambivalence of the narrator’s viewpoint intimated by the moral neutrality of his diction is, however, ultimately counteracted by the conventional didacticism of his narrative. Until now the persistence of moral neutrality or even of ambiguity has ensured that the normative intent of the didacticism has been uncertain. Rhetoric did not synchronize with doctrine. But once Vathek nears his final goal the ambiguity of the diction vanishes and the moral purpose becomes clear. At last the narrator’s language meshes with his avowed evangelism. “Infatuated mortals! they thus indulged delusive conjecture, unable to fathom the decrees of the Most High!” (p. 103). At the same time the phrase “the Most High” elides the concepts of Allah and the Christian God into the same deity, at the point in the story where Beckford’s voice is quite unambiguous. Vathek’s contempt for conventional religion is, it now appears plain, not shared by the author’s orthodox if undemonstrative Christianity. The novel thus attacks the abuse of religion—particularly what Beckford assumes to be the
privileges of the Caliphate and the power accorded the Caliph as Mohammed's "vicegerent" (p. 103)—but not Islam itself, which is shown to encourage the same discipline and devotion as an ideal Christianity and to promote the same purity of heart. Although Beckford appears at times to blend the two religions, other developments in his story discriminate between them, and it is the Islamic viewpoint that is generally preferred, noticeably in two particulars: the transition from life to death, and the nature of the postmortem state.

Vathek goes straight to eternal torment without passing through the transitional stage of death, exemplifying the Islamic view that death is a natural event which liberates the spirit from its cadaverous prison. Thus death is not to be feared, being only a kind of journey taking the soul back to God: "Every soul shall taste death, and in the end you shall return to Us." Islam implies a continuity, a natural train of events from birth through life to death followed by eternal life or damnation: "In the life to come a woeful punishment awaits you—or the forgiveness of Allah and His pleasure." The interim between life here and life hereafter is represented by a partition separating the mortal from the immortal condition ("Behind them there shall stand a barrier till the Day of Resurrection"), an interval which in the timeless world of postmortality would be of no duration. At the moment of his translation to the underworld Vathek is confronted by "a vast portal of ebony" which "at once flew open" (pp. 108–9), enabling him to traverse the frontier without a death. Vathek displays a predilection for the image of the partition—or barzakh—that Ernest Giddey refers to as "gates or portals separating life from eternity, hope from despair and terrestrial light from the fiery darkness of the underworld." This image, with its suggestion of easy passage, is more in sympathy with the Islamic than the Christian attitude to death.

Western thought stresses death as a critical moment, an unnatural punishment for Adam's unnatural sin, interrupting the flow of the individual career ("O Death, thou comest when I had thee least in mind!").

25 The Koran, "The Spider" (29.57).
26 The Koran, "Iron" (57.20).
27 The Koran, "The Believers" (23.100).
hence to be deferred at all costs, even by “good” people who might be surer than most of their spiritual salvation. As St Augustine made clear, death is an ordeal that not even the saints can bypass: “This violent sundering of the two elements [soul and body] ... is without doubt the penalty of all who are born.”\textsuperscript{30} Christian art and architecture are gathered around the cross or crypt of death, given meaning by Christ’s resurrection from the sepulchre into eternal life. Islam, with its guiding tenet that God is in all things, can be more artistically and architecturally diffuse, since God is present not especially in one part but in all corners, however intricate the structure. The absence of the Crucifixion, with the immense symbolic weight of its climax in death, has relieved Islam of the need to focus on death as the end—in both senses—of life.

A profile of postmortal existence is outlined quite graphically in Vathek. Here Beckford is again closer to Islam than to Christianity. His vision of paradise is less ethereal and more sensuous than that of most Western eschatologists. Gulchenrouz, who crosses the frontier of death without pain, effort, or even volition, finds himself in a realm of perpetual childhood where many of the comforts are unambiguously physical: “his little friends ... were all assembled ... and vied with each other in kissing his serene forehead and beautiful eye-lids” (p. 97). This is more akin to the paradise of the Koran, whose denizens “shall be attended by boys graced with eternal youth, who to the beholder’s eyes will seem like sprinkled pearls,”\textsuperscript{31} than to the more vaguely envisioned afterworld of the Bible.

Moreover, the hell to which Vathek goes resembles the region of the damned depicted in the Koran in clearer and more vivid detail than its counterpart in the Bible. One Koranic reference to the inferno—“They shall wander between fire and water fiercely seething”\textsuperscript{32}—is an exact parallel to Vathek’s ultimate state in the halls of Eblis, where he and his companions wander between life and death, their hearts burning everlastingly in “unrelenting fire” (p. 114). Though suffering ceaseless pain and contrition, their tears are unable to flow; the perpetual “roar of a cataract visible in part through one of the grated portals” (p. 112) suggests the tantalizing prospect of relief to the doomed reprobate of the Koranic hell, who “will sip, but scarcely swallow.” Surah 70 describes


\textsuperscript{31} The Koran, “Man” (76.15).

\textsuperscript{32} The Koran, “The Merciful” (55.43).
in vivid physiognomic detail the self-torment of those who know they are damned: "they shall rush from their graves, like men rallying to a standard, with downcast eyes and countenances distorted with shame." This passage is echoed on Vathek’s first arrival in Eblis’s kingdom, when he remarks the despondency of his fellow inmates: "They all avoided each other ... [E]ach wandered at random, unheedful of the rest" (p. 110).

By his blending of Christian abstraction and Muslim concreteness, particularly in the depiction of the eternal state, Beckford created a novel perspective on the human condition that has continued to disturb his critics, disorientated by his bizarre and apparently random mixture of tones. It may be argued, however, that Vathek expands the frontiers of conventional Christian ethics by its imposition of an “oriental” vision on a typically individualistic Western quest. Beckford was not a mere eccentric dabbler in fiction but an innovator who enlarged the boundaries of the novel by “applying the perspectives of the grotesque to it.” Walter Allen remarked that this grotesque effect was produced by Beckford’s practice of placing before a noun an apparently inappropriate adjective (as in “a superb corps of cripples,” for example), thereby “disconcerting” the reader’s “view of life.” Beckford’s mixing of Western teleology with “Eastern” open-endedness creates a similar irresolvable discord. A new insight into humanity is displayed and a judgment of pitiless detachment is made upon it. Moral criteria that diverge from the norm seem to be implied, whereby the naïve self-abnegation of Vathek’s adoring subjects emerges as equally culpable with the Caliph’s insatiable appetite for self-aggrandizement. The myopic floundering of all characters, good and bad, diminishes them to the stature of dwarfs, as far beneath the stars as Vathek remains after the completion of his skyscraping tower. Beckford thus promulgates a vision of the immense distance between God and his creatures that is Islamic rather than Christian.

Vathek, through the voice of its sardonic narrator, establishes a sense of the futility of all of the Caliph’s egregious rebellions against an impersonal and inexorable divine order. The novel expands outwards towards

33 The Koran, “Abraham” (14.17); “The Ladders” (70.43–44).
an interminable conclusion: Vathek "became a prey to grief without end," while Gulchenrouz "passed whole ages in undisturbed tranquillity" (p. 120). It has moved effortlessly from a temporal to an eternal sphere of action in a manner both un-Western and un-Christian. By its answering of occidental expectations with "oriental" realizations, Vathek succeeds in destabilizing the mental edifices of its readers. Its open-endedness illuminates the limitations of Christian moral constructs, presenting a derisive and desentimentalized vision of human beings—the good are gullible, the wicked monstrous—in the voice of its ironic observer: a tone which echoes that of the Koran in its devaluation of all enterprise that deems itself autonomous ("We moulded man into a most noble image and in the end We shall reduce him to the lowest of the low: except the believers who do good works, for theirs shall be a boundless recompense").

Vathek's journey could be seen not only as an anti-Pilgrim's Progress but also, given the pervasiveness of the East and Islam in the novel, an anti-hegira. The modern Muslim philosopher Ali Shariati has "universalised Mohammed's migration (hegira) from Mecca to Medina into the idea of man as 'a choice, a struggle, a constant becoming. He is an infinite migration, a migration within himself, from clay to God; he is a migrant within his own soul.'" Vathek's pilgrimage is in a direction contrary to the true hadj. Descending from his tower to the subterranean palace of Eblis, he journeys from spirit to clay, going literally to the devil and abiding with him for eternity.

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36 The Koran, "The Fig" (95.5-6).
37 Said, Covering, p. 63.