

Genova on Châtel (2016)

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It is hardly an exaggeration to assert that William Beckford (1760–1844), the English novelist, travel writer, art collector, and undeniable eccentric, represents one of the most curious and original figures of his time, particularly given his tendencies towards extravagance, an imagination piqued by the marvelous, and a character that comes across paradoxically as simultaneously egotistical and secretive. While he has been the subject of a number of biographies, Beckford's specific interest in Eastern aesthetics is the focus of Laurent Châtel's new work, which brings to the contemporary reader an enlightening glimpse into one of Beckford's most cherished areas of reflection and fantasy, Eastern cultures.

Beckford's concentration on the art and letters of the East seems to have been first sparked by what Châtel describes as "Indic" literature and lore, but Beckford soon went on to become fascinated with Chinese, Japanese, Persian, and Arabic traditions as well. There is also little doubt that his early reading of the *Arabian Nights* helped to spur his interest even further, though evidence of his familiarity with languages from these various cultures is scarce, and he appears to have depended heavily on French and English translations of many of the works that most famously characterized these traditions.

It is in England at Fonthill Abbey (also known as "Beckford's Folly"), an impressive Gothic revival country house, where Beckford secreted himself away for his work, subsumed as he was in the evocative effects of landscape architecture and the immediacy of the image of that particular horizon, especially its very eeriness. Here, Châtel notes that his own critical perspective on the oblique figure of Beckford highlights both his elusiveness and his storytelling, literally as two sides of the same, albeit surprising, aesthetic mode. Described by Châtel as a radical move away from didacticism, Beckford's work brings an innovative nuance to the very notion of elusiveness, while it made of him a victim of his own genius given his relatively poor reception in Britain and in France. Châtel emphasizes that Beckford's self-imposed invisibility was later detrimental to the visibility of his creative work. Accentuating that Beckford, unlike Horace Walpole or Lord Byron, never positioned himself as a purely literary figure, but rather as a quasi-anonymous storyteller or fabulist, Châtel shows how Beckford wrote for an elite audience, and his aesthetic process came across more as a kind of artistic grafting than as an attempt to create original art. Yet the point here is that despite this possibly disingenuous positioning on the part of Beckford, his work merits a second look because of its ability to provoke enchantment and even puzzlement among his readership.

Considering Beckford as an "Orientalist," Châtel presents the writer as a figure of translation, transmission, and interpolation, who adopts and transforms the tales he shares. While many twentieth-century studies have examined Beckford primarily as an Orientalist, by centering on such notions as appropriation, recycling, performance, and enactment, Châtel argues that what is truly important is Beckford's skill at keeping the actual origins of the stories unknown or mysterious, thus assuring an effect that can only be described as otherworldly and oneiric. Châtel thus presents Beckford as an icon of the struggle between Orientalism per se and the effort to produce texts that communicate an engaging attraction, in a word, to "re-Orient" the writer. In the realm of Orientalism, Beckford's name is perhaps still recognizable because of his celebrated *Vathek* (a Gothic novel unpublished during his lifetime due to complications in editing and publication), which is frequently cited in reference to eighteenth-century Orientalist literature. His associations with Gothic literary art have tended to overshadow this ideological legacy even though many of these Gothic references were in fact meant to be satirical. In the second part of his study, Châtel describes the consequences of Beckford's self-imposed "invisibility," including the author's ambivalent reception in French critical literature between 1760 and 1876, and widespread neglect in the same period (especially when compared to Lord Byron or Matthew Lewis). In this way, Châtel aims to avoid what he considers as an unduly biographical bias in Beckford studies, as he hopes to re-enchant the modern reader with this unconventional figure's work.

In the end, the importance of secrecy for Beckford cannot be overstated; Châtel's analysis returns to this motif often and reviews the author's art within an eighteenth-century context, highlighting Orientalist historiography and the *Arabian Nights* as important factors in his work. Châtel's aim is to rethink what has been labelled "Gothic" in Beckford's work as instead Orientalist, and to reposition the writer with regard to Beckford's ambiguous status between that which we might call "fact" or "fiction." Châtel hopes that concentrating on the deliberate and not-so-deliberate "invisibility" of the author might now make it more feasible to address how he has been misread by critics. Because of Beckford's commitment to abstaining from fixity, staticity, and closure, he was able to draw attention to variations among versions and cyclical patterns in the work. Châtel argues ultimately that Beckford's preoccupation with the *Arabian Nights* led to a utopian streak in the work of many other,

future authors whom he influenced. Yet, we cannot forget, as Châtel reminds us, the image of Beckford as a slave owner, who has often been considered as a selfish and even evil villain, thus again underscoring the ambiguity of his legacy. Finally, Beckford's art collection was extensive, and Châtel includes a useful appendix listing the works therein; he also includes a second appendix with a poignant excerpt by Beckford, leaving us finally with food, albeit bittersweet, for digestion.

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