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Abstract
According to David Hume, "The mind is a kind of theatre where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations." Hume's well-known account of personal identity aptly describes William Beckford--petulant heir to great wealth, a member of Parliament, connoisseur, architectural dilettante, fugitive from sexual scandal, and author of Vathek, one of the most enjoyable and intriguing of the eighteenth-century Oriental tales. Across the pages of Vathek and, indeed, of Beckford's whole life pass and mingle the successive actors of his disjointed identity.

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The Author in the Novel: Creating Beckford in *Vathek*

R.B. Gill

According to David Hume, "The mind is a kind of theatre where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations."[1] Hume's well-known account of personal identity aptly describes William Beckford—petulant heir to great wealth, a member of Parliament, connoisseur, architectural dilettante, fugitive from sexual scandal, and author of *Vathek*, one of the most enjoyable and intriguing of the eighteenth-century Oriental tales. Across the pages of *Vathek* and, indeed, of Beckford's whole life pass and mingle the successive actors of his disjointed identity.

Hume's caution to the reader is especially relevant in Beckford's case: "the comparison with theatre must not mislead us. They are the successive perceptions only, that constitute the mind; nor have we the most distant notion of the place, where these scenes are represented, or of the materials, of which it is compos'd." The spectators of Beckford's life and the readers of his tale have wished to know the materials of which his inner self was composed in order to explain his theatrics, but they have never agreed on what they found. And Beckford himself, complaining of the mask he wore, yet intent on preserving a gentlemanly image, a man unwillingly hastened by his family and his wealth from one performance to the next, seems never

1 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 253. References are to this edition.

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to have found that inner being with which he could be at peace. The result is that there are many Beckfords, some he himself created and many created by his various critics.

But these created selves are, to use Hume's terms for personal identity, "merely verbal" (p. 262). These verbal Beckfords are plots without a story, the texts he and we write in lieu of an anchoring identity. The problem in Beckford's case lies not so much in this textuality as in our desire (and his) to find the originating self of that text. The ambiguities surrounding Beckford prompt a search for biographical explanations. Yet Beckford's personae within *Vathek* and his life are clearly created ones, even though they are offered as biographical fact. In this respect, Beckford's presence in the novel is typical of other authorial personae, artistic creations that paradoxically function properly only when taken as factual biography. But when that paradox tempts critics into the impossible task of locating the true self of the author, they find only what Hume notes is a mysterious and inexplicable fiction. *Vathek* is a clear case of a novel especially in need of a biographical centre to resolve its ambiguities.[2] Not finding that centre or authorial identity, critics (and Beckford himself) have created a number of identities to satisfy their own perceptions of the needs of the novel.

A straightforward Oriental tale whose quick narrative and polished style cover no depths of complex psychological characterization, *Vathek* would not seem to offer special problems of interpretation. Yet critical views of this novel vary widely. It has been seen as both Gothic and non-Gothic, satiric and non-satiric, realistic and fantastic, neo-classic and romantic, socially conventional and anti-bourgeois, metaphysical and messageless, as well as both unified and split in its sensibility. *Vathek* has been valued for its "correctness of costume," criticized for its elaborate explanatory notes, and, notably, regarded as moral, immoral, amoral, and "anti-moral."[3]

2 Roger Lonsdale writes: the "difficulty of attaching any clear meaning or satiric purpose to *Vathek* has also tended to force its readers back on the author itself for enlightenment." See introduction, William Beckford, *Vathek* (Oxford: World's Classics, 1983), p. viii.

3 Summaries of critical reactions can be found in Lonsdale, pp. xix–xxii; Dan J. McNutt, *The Eighteenth-Century Gothic Novel: An Annotated Bibliography of Criticism and Selected Texts* (New

The diverse critical opinions arise in part from the intriguing mixture of opposites in Beckford's style. Whether we consider it Oriental or Gothic or whatever, *Vathek* is essentially the sort of fabular parable that the eighteenth-century reader enjoyed. It is thus outside the realistic mainstream that has come to represent for us the novel's most characteristic mode of addressing moral issues. And yet, on its surface at least, it is an explicitly moral parable. Consequently, there is difficulty for us, as there was for Beckford's contemporaries, in reconciling the fabular, Eastern exoticism of *Vathek* with its moral elements. Further, we cannot say of *Vathek*, as we can of *Candide* and *Rasselas*, that its imaginative centre lies in the moral message, for our interest in the perverse actions of the characters frequently jars with the conventional morals, particularly the closing moral that "the condition of man upon earth is to be—humble and ignorant."

There is an additional mixing of opposites in the self-conscious playfulness of Beckford's style. Like Sterne, Beckford watches himself write and is intrigued by the possibilities of expressing himself in guises—now moral, now perverse, now coy, now sublime. He cannot resist indulging himself momentarily in some ludicrous or incongruous aspect of his material. The storks, for instance, that join the morning prayers of Nouronihar and Gulchenrouz by the lake are a poke at the solemnity of religious greybeards, but their incongruity as members of the worshipping congregation is so striking that it distracts attention from the narrative, an indulgence we enjoy as part of a highly self-referential style. Beckford is not willing to suppress these moments of self-conscious fun; *Vathek* smiles at its sardonic incongruities from the first paragraph to its closing moralisms.

Beckford uses authorial self-consciousness in the text of *Vathek* to remove himself from his occult material and thus to preserve, or create, an aura of sophistication and control. Here is no romantic subordination or merging of author with his outré creation, as we find in the works of Poe. Rather, *Vathek* is an eighteenth-century amalgam of Pope's proud epic notes in the *Dunciad* (a similarity Beckford recognized) and Sterne's sophisticated and intensely self-aware metafiction. Beckford wants us to observe him laughing at his subject, manipulating it: a gentleman engaged with compromising material but, nevertheless, in thorough control of it and able to smile

York: Garland, 1985), pp. 265–310; and Brian Fothergill, *Beckford of Fonthill* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), pp. 128–35.

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knowingly at his own folly. In this mixture of opposites, *Vathek*, like many other neoclassical works, has a civilized sophistication that acknowledges its own role-playing.

In fact, Beckford cared greatly about the image of himself created in *Vathek*. In this respect the novel is a literary counterpart of Fonthill, the Gothic abbey on which he later lavished his efforts and money. On occasion he claimed, somewhat misleadingly, to have written the novel in several days in a fit of inspiration, and he romanticized about the "most extravagant intensity" of the Christmas celebration at Fonthill that formed part of the inspiration of the novel. Beckford's letters reveal that he was very much aware of the effect of his image on others—and that he enjoyed the thought. *Vathek* is "the only production of mine which I am not ashamed of" he wrote to Samuel Henley; and in a different letter he spoke of the "honours" with which he expected *Vathek* to be received. To another correspondent he wrote of "ma vanité" of the Caliph, and in the journal of his stay in Portugal he noted that he was "extremely impatient" to receive "the last monthly reviews in which I expect to read a critique on *Vathek*." Cyrus Redding, his first biographer, recalled, "To abuse *Vathek* he deemed a personal insult. His pride took the alarm and he could scarcely restrain his anger, so fierce when aroused, though evanescent."[4]

The references in his letters to shame, honour, and pride reveal his characteristic concern with the relationship between his work and his reputation. Biographers often note the changes that Beckford made in his papers and letters in order that they appear most advantageous. Contemporaries of Beckford such as Mrs Thrale, William Hazlitt, and Byron understood the degree to which public appearance was involved in Beckford's effects and enjoyed the scandal that attended his reputation. A continuing motif in the Portuguese journal, written shortly after publication of *Vathek*, is Beckford's awareness that others are watching his carefully contrived self-image: "I hear there is no conversation in Lisbon but of my poetry." "My reputation as a devotee spreads prodigiously." Although he notes, "I am sick of forming the chief subject of conversation at all the card tables," he also takes care to record the surprise with which "the whole herd of precentors, priests, musicians and fencing masters" listen to his playing and singing. Again, "my singing, playing and capering subdues every

4 Fothergill, p. 134. See also Lonsdale, pp. x–xiv; and *The Journal of William Beckford in Portugal and Spain 1787–1788*, ed. Boyd Alexander (New York: John Day, 1955), p. 139.

Portuguese that approaches me." In preparation for a trip to a convent, he writes, "I am furbishing up a string of highly polished saintly speeches for the occasion." And later, "for flippery in crossing myself and goosishness in poking out my head I will turn my back to no one." Beckford, then, works carefully to create a persona; he attentively watches people react to that image; and he self-consciously distances himself from his creation through self-abnegating humour with such references as "flippery," "goosishness," and "capering."[5]

It is true that he grew restive with his public self. In one entry, after worrying about a possible scrape with a "young friend," he continues with the complaint often quoted by critics, "How tired I am of keeping a mask on my countenance. How tight it sticks—it makes me sore." Significantly, he immediately follows this complaint with self-conscious observation upon it: "There's a metaphor for you. I have all the fancies and levity of a child."[6] The ingredients of Beckford's dilemma are here—the concern with image, the restiveness, and the recurrent self-consciousness that flickers over his thoughts and actions. He does not remove his mask but worries, instead, about getting into a scrape. For all the restiveness, the image of himself that Beckford contrived to project was exterior: he was concerned with his public reputation, with the appurtenances of a gentlemanly and leisured class, with his adeptness in Oriental matters, and with the skill of his style and of the "magnificence" with which *Vathek* concludes.

Yet that exterior image has never seemed sufficient or trustworthy, a circumstance that accounts for the central critical dilemma of *Vathek*. The novel's puzzling mixture of opposites invites the reader to seek an inner author, the "real" Beckford accessible through psychological examination. Behind the varying judgments of Beckford's novel lie critical assessments of his inner person. There are explanations that he was impotent, homosexual, bisexual, dominated by a Calvinist mother, grieving for his dead wife, a leisurely country gentleman, bitter, mad, vile, sadistic, a "barely socialized psychopath,"

5 Beckford, *Journal*, pp. 38, 41, 44, 76, 86, 92, and 225. For discussion of Beckford's revisions and his reputation, see Guy Chapman, *Beckford* (New York: Scribner's, 1937), p. 323; Timothy Mowl, *William Beckford: Composing for Mozart* (London: John Murray, 1998), passim; James Lees-Milne, *William Beckford* (Montclair, NJ: Allanheld, Osmun, 1979), p. 107; and McNutt, pp. 288, 301–4.

6 Beckford, *Journal*, p. 41. See also André Parreaux, *William Beckford: Auteur de "Vathek"* (Paris: Nizet, 1960), p. 76.

and so on.[7] Without question, the novel is a document in Beckford's life, as biographically relevant as, say, his construction of Fonthill. Nor is Beckford the type of artist whose work rises self-contained and impersonal above its historical contingencies. *Vathek* is a minor novel, interesting in itself certainly, but also of legitimate interest as a record of the tastes of its author and age.

Nevertheless, for all the care and intelligence expended on it, the search for the inner, unifying Beckford has not been successful. Mme de Staël, to whom Beckford had given a copy of his travelogue *Dreams, Waking Thoughts and Incidents*, wrote to him, "You dream when you have nothing to describe. Imagination, which invents or represents objects, has never been given more freedom." Likewise, André Parreaux has noted that seeing "le vrai visage" of Beckford behind his mask is a matter of great difficulty. V.S. Pritchett claimed that "everything Beckford writes is suspect, for truth and fiction are hard to separate in this incessantly revising and play-acting autobiographer."[8] And that is the dilemma. The search for the interior Beckford seems a necessary step to reconciling the opposites in his life and work, but that search cannot lead us past the contrived and public mask it was Beckford's fate to wear.

For both practical and theoretical reasons, the inner Beckford cannot be found. First, it is important to bear in mind the well-known dangers of moving back and forth between biography and art. One need not be unduly afraid of the Intentional Fallacy or of its reverse, biography based on interpretation of the artist's works, to recognize the difficulties and dangers and, therefore, the need of great caution. Is Fielding the compassionate observer of the ambiguities of mercy in *Tom Jones* or the sterner remembrancer of justice in *Amelia*? And to what extent can we move from his actual experience as magistrate of the Bow Street police court to the more sombre judicial tone of that later novel?

7 See John T. Farrell, "A Reinterpretation of the Major Literary Works of William Beckford," *Dissertation Abstracts* 45 (1984), 1758A (University of Delaware); George E. Haggerty, *Men in Love: Masculinity and Sexuality in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 136–51; and Mowl, p. 111.

8 Mme de Staël is quoted in William Beckford, *Dreams, Waking Thoughts and Incidents*, ed. Robert J. Gemmett (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1971), p. 26; Parreaux, p. 78; V.S. Pritchett, "Vile Body," *New Statesman* 63 (1962), 265–66.

But no matter how receptive we are to the intermingling of biography and art, we must allow for the great practical difficulties that interfere with our understanding of the relevant facts of Beckford's life. Beckford was born to a public family with the expectation and the means of creating and protecting an appropriate public image. There is evidence that the suppression of *Dreams, Waking Thoughts and Incidents* came as a result of family fears that its injudicious subjectivity might endanger a public career. "Neither Orlando nor Brandimart," he wrote of the matter, "were ever more tormented by Daemons and Spectres in an enchanted Castle than Wm. Bd. in his own Hall by his nearest relations."[9]

His marriage to Lady Margaret Gordon again seems the result of a family strategy, as was his short stay in Parliament. Lady Hamilton's vivid letter to Beckford in 1780 attempting to dissuade him from a scandalous liaison in Venice stresses the public image that Beckford's relations valued above all. What is the struggle against temptation for, she asks. "No less than *honor, reputation* and all that an honest and noble Soul holds most dear, while Infamy, eternal infamy (my soul freezes while I write the word), attends the giving way to the soft alluring of a criminal passion."[10] For most of his life Beckford seems to have resented and struggled against these impositions on his private self, but he did not throw them off. The private Beckford remained cloistered. Unlike Byron, Parreaux notes, Beckford would not play the role of outcast but tried to maintain the fiction of having a privileged place in the society of his time.[11] In fact, much of the pathos of Beckford's life results from the disparity between his compromised reputation and his expectations of an aristocratic, privileged position. Beckford chose an unhappy role to play, but the important point here is that he chose the public and proper role urged on him by his family.

Beckford's sexuality has been a key concern of critics looking for the inner explanation of *Vathek*'s opposites. In 1785 Beckford left England temporarily in the wake of a scandal over his relationship with the young William Courtenay. The opprobrium remaining from this incident together with continuing rumours plagued him through-

9 Chapman, p. 168.

10 Beckford, *Dreams, Waking Thoughts and Incidents*, pp. 16–17.

11 Parreaux, p. 77.

out his life. But our understanding of this matter is enormously complicated by the practical difficulties of determining the facts, by the different theoretical models used to explain the facts, by the limitations of any sort of psychological explanation, and by the divergent uses that critics make of their conclusions even when they agree on the facts. We know that Beckford was married with two daughters, that his wife maintained her faith in him, and that he grieved her death. What lies behind the protective public face must be surmised. Beckford's letters and papers contain helpful information, but, as noted, they were revised in places with the intention of portraying a desirable image; they are often oblique, and, as Boyd Alexander observes, Beckford "dramatises and exaggerates his moods and feelings." Beckford himself lamented in his *Journal*, "I have more profligacy of tongue than of character and often do my utmost to make myself appear worse than I am in reality."[12]

Further, even where the facts seem clear, there is the theoretical difficulty of knowing how to interpret them. What do we want to say—that he was homosexual, bisexual, merely self-indulgent without a strongly marked sexual orientation? Do we want to psychoanalyse him as a case of "narcissistic paederasty"? This last diagnosis is informative, a perceptive use of psychological criticism to explain the tensions in Beckford's style, but at bottom it illustrates the limitations of attempts to explain what lurks behind the scenes of the mind. Its diagnosis, "narcissistic paederasty,"[13] is not defined precisely enough for use as the key to a complex man's very difficult personality. It includes childishness as well as child-love; it is metaphorical ("a self-devouring child wishing to rape his own image"); and it is governed by the need to find a psychological unity beneath the behavioural data. Like so many explanations of sexuality, it is an imposition of a unifying concept on separate facets of behaviour. This interpretation, then, leaves us in the biographical dilemma. It is meaningful precisely because it creates a unifying matrix for separate and heterogeneous elements in Beckford's actions. As we have seen, we need interpretation imposed on the discrete items of Beckford's

12 Quoted in Boyd Alexander, *Life at Fonthill, 1807–1822* (London: Rupert Hart Davies, 1957), p. 26.

13 See Magdi Wahba, "Beckford, Portugal and 'Childish Error,'" *William Beckford of Fonthill, 1760–1844: Bicentary Essays*, ed. Fatma Moussa Mahmoud (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1960), p. 58.

life in order to understand them in relationship with each other. Yet, equally clearly, there is no justification for believing that whatever interpretation we may impose is historically verifiable truth.

What indeed does it mean to "understand" the sources of a person's acts and ideas? One's actions stem from the intricate causal network that is one's whole being; therefore, no explanation can be complete. Any attempt at explanation must be an abstraction, a grouping or a simplification of a myriad causes. It represents the critic's decision about where to draw the line between significance and insignificance. And that decision must necessarily be personal and subjective. What shall we make, for instance, of an opinion that *Vathek* may embody Beckford's complex reaction to his "possessive and autocratic mother"?[14] Again, I find the suggestion reasonable but am not certain that any array of biographical facts, no matter how extensive, would persuade another reader less convinced of the importance of parental influence than I am. What then of his equally dominating father, Alderman Beckford, twice Lord Mayor of London, robust heterosexual and extrovert, who seems to have been both amused and impatient with the whims of his wilful child? Do our own explanatory models hold that fathers are not as influential as mothers?[15] Or do we see a malign conjunction in their mutual influences? The point, of course, is that each of us will delineate the boundaries between significance and insignificance in different ways, ways owing as much to our explanatory models of child development as to objectively demonstrable facts about William Beckford.

Critics whose thinking is determined by one explanatory model will regard another as lacking in the requisite rigour of method and verifiability. Many types of explanations have only practical justification and, therefore, offer no *a priori* reasons why their results may not be duplicated by another type of explanation. Thus, psychoanalysis may in practice accomplish in contemporary society what advice from village elders or purification rituals accomplished in other ages. Because these explanatory models enable a person better to function in his or her environment and a critic to unite disparate facts under a common hypothesis, we value them highly. A model or system of beliefs with explanatory powers will come to seem self-evident, its underlying

14 Lonsdale, introduction to *Vathek*, p. viii.

15 For differing ideas of parental influence, see Lonsdale, introduction to *Vathek*, p. viii; and Mowl, p. 31.

William Beckford in Old Age, from a drawing by "HB" (John Doyle). Reproduced by permission of McMaster University Library.

assumptions justified by the results they produce. In Beckford's case, some sort of sexual hypothesis may unite his behaviour patterns with the ambivalent closing moral of *Vathek* and with what we know of human behaviour from our own experiences and studies. These are significant results. They may lead us to accept the critic's interpretation, but they leave unanswered such questions as whether we understand Beckford's behaviour patterns as they really were and whether the psychological aspects of the hypothesis (for instance, "narcissistic paederasty") are empirically verifiable concepts.

Further, even satisfying explanations leave undetermined the extent to which the critic's own interpretations are mediated by personal and social codes.[16] The subtleties of George Haggerty's account of Beckford's search for a "true heart's friend"[17] are an advance over earlier stereotypes or what he calls "essentialist" categorizations, but his views so clearly originate in a personal thesis concerning "love" that one accepts them with the same caution necessary in reading Timothy Mowl's more commonsensical portrait of Beckford as robust bisexual horseman. The openness with which we now discuss sexual behaviour allows honest explorations, but falls easy prey to the temptations of biographical creation, which it is the purpose of this paper to delineate. Sex is far too interesting a matter to approach dispassionately. Self-congratulation on exposing the equivocations of past critics, the wrinkled pleasure of rehearsing Beckford's perfervid letters, and the rivalries of competing models of Beckford's desires all increase the risks that personal zest rather than objectivity accounts for our explanations.

What in the end are the truth-value and the verification procedure of a claim that Beckford died "at the age of eighty-four—unrepentant, unreformed, and immature"?[18] I choose this remark because it comes from a respected critic of Beckford; it is both adroit and compelling. Yet its virtues are dexterity of statement (entirely a verbal virtue) and ability to bring a number of biographical strands into a single formulation (a literary and logical virtue). Neat summation is appealing in a linear, logical mode such as biography, but life itself is

16 For discussions of limitations imposed by "conceptual paradigms" and hypotheses, see David E. Swalm, "Locating Belief in Biography," *Biography* 3 (1980), 23; and Ira Bruce Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1984), pp. 10, 209.

17 Haggerty, p. 151.

18 Alexander, p. 15.

confused, contradictory, and illogical. What counts as a literary virtue may be in fact a liability in the search for truth. As we have seen, such a claim has its own sort of meaningfulness, but we who understand ourselves only with difficulty may remain sceptical of the biographer's ability to reduce another human's inner being to clear patterns.[19]

Hume's point was similar and adds to the theoretical obstacles we face in finding a "real" Beckford. Although we have a great "propension ... to imagine something unknown and mysterious, connecting the parts" of our personal identity, that mysterious something is a feigned support and centre rather than a "true" entity. We know only the perceptions of others and ourselves rather than their causes. Instead of the "nice and subtile questions concerning personal identity [which] can never possibly be decided," Hume notes that the mind "gives rise to some fiction or imaginary principle of union." Our personal identity is a "grammatical" matter, a syntax of the self created from discrete parts (pp. 254, 262–63).

Hume's scepticism springs from philosophical analysis and properly concerns the existence of personal identity rather than its characteristics, which I claim Beckford and his critics are searching for. Back of Hume's analysis, however, lies an English—and especially an eighteenth-century English—emphasis on the social bases of personality, the self as acted role. As Lord Chesterfield writes (notoriously but not atypically) to his son, "Manner is all, in everything; it is by manner only that you can please, and consequently rise."[20] And in his account of himself, Hume stresses his own manners and sociability: "I was a man of mild dispositions, of command of temper, of an open, social, and cheerful humour. ... Even my love of literary fame, my ruling passion, never soured my temper."[21] An eighteenth-century gentleman might well doubt the inner self, for the class and the age place their interests in mannerly, social roles. For Hume, Chesterfield, and Beckford, one's identity was created, a composed grammar or syntax of the self rather than a deep structure.

We can return now to Beckford with some sympathy and under-

19 See Noel Chabani Manganyi, "Psychobiography and the Truth of the Subject," *Biography* 6 (1983), 44–45, 50.

20 Earl of Chesterfield, *Letters to His Son by the Earl of Chesterfield* (Washington: M. Walter Dunne, 1901), 2:395.

21 Ernest Campbell Mossner, "My Own Life," *The Life of David Hume* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1954), p. 615.

standing for his lot, that of replacing personal identity with a public face. In *Vathek* we have a work whose mixture of opposites seems to demand an author's personality to give it unity. Yet the very prominent personality that Beckford interjects into *Vathek* stands aloof from his material, for Beckford is eager that we see him laughing and manipulating the diverse attitudes of *Vathek* without being compromised by naïve commitment to them. That public, mannered Beckford is all we have—but not all we need if we are to depart satisfied with a unified impression of *Vathek*. And so we create for Beckford an inner, unifying personality, *aware now that it is our own creation*. We do for the novel what Beckford did for it: we write an imaginatively embellished biography of the Caliph of Fonthill just as he wrote of *Vathek* Billah, ninth Caliph of the Abassides.[22]

We end up with creations—an aristocratic Beckford defying middle-class morality in *Vathek*, or an infantile, sexually insecure Beckford projecting his interests on the novel, or a "nervous, self-conscious, shoulder-shrugging" littérateur, or even the impersonal artist whose work "might not be due so much to [his] own neuroses as to certain conventions" within an artistic tradition.[23] Our Beckford may or may not be the "true" Beckford, but this construction renders the novel more meaningful. Where conflicting opposites have deconstructed author and novel, the interpretive critic has reconstructed them. Thus, we find the many different Beckfords in the critical literature. To some extent these critics are creating their own selves in the person of Beckford, shaping the work so it will pass through the network of their own adaptive and defensive strategies, as Norman Holland has put it. To some extent, no doubt, their work is a more literary attempt to supply an orderly grammar of logical relationships to their perceptions of *Vathek*.[24]

In each of these cases lies the reality, now often noted in biographical as well as critical studies, that every subject is changed by the discourse that embodies it. William Epstein has observed that "the decline of faith

22 See Kenneth W. Graham, "Implications of the Grotesque: Beckford's *Vathek* and the Boundaries of Fictional Reality," *Tennessee Studies in Literature* 23 (1978), 64.

23 James Henry Rieger, "Au Pied de la Lettre: Stylistic Uncertainty in *Vathek*," *Criticism* 4 (1962), 310; James K. Folsom, "Beckford's *Vathek* and the Tradition of Oriental Satire," *Criticism* 6 (1964), 53.

24 Norman Holland, "Unity Identity Text Self," *PMLA* 90 (1975), 816–17; Peter Nagourney, "The Basic Assumptions of Literary Biography," *Biography* 1 (1978), 93.

in the unmediated, ontological status of 'events'" must influence all but the most unexamined approaches to biography.[25] Any Beckford that we (and he) perceive is a product of the interpretive codes that govern our cognitive being. What sort of man lies behind or transcends these codes is, as Hume would put it, a "nice and subtile question" (p. 262). For, indeed, whether we take our cue from Hume or Derrida, the absolute origin of perception is inseparable from the activity that records it. Whether we look at the issue practically, theoretically, or (to use eighteenth-century terms) in the clear light of reason, the Beckford we find is a creation of cultural and interpretive codes. The insights of Enlightenment English empiricism, the twists of postmodern criticism, and the reticence of polite and experienced observers of human nature can go no further than the public Beckford.

There is no alternative to accepting the dilemma of the desirability and impossibility of biographical interpretation. A critic must put together a unified interpretation of the data, knowing all along that interpreted data is meaningful creation rather than fact independent of its expression. That is the dilemma of all biography; Beckford's case only makes it especially clear. In the end, we come to something very close to Hume's sceptical reflections on personal identity. We (and Beckford himself) know the "successive perceptions" (p. 253) of the novel and the life but lack the most distant notion of their underlying causes or, for that matter, of their basic unity. Yet we see Beckford struggling unsuccessfully to find himself and critics struggling to create narratives to bind together their perceptions. The effort in each case must be unsuccessful, but, paradoxically, it is also understandable and necessary.

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25 William Epstein, *Recognizing Biography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), p. 36.