

Hedonism, Anxiety, and Horror: Lucretius and the Classics in William Beckford's *Vathek*

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Abstract

Considered by many as a novel imitating the Oriental style of the Arabian Nights, and by some as an emblematic example of early Gothic fiction, William Beckford's Vathek is a literary work that cannot be easily interpreted or encased in a specific narrative style for a series of puzzling aspects that make it unique. Originally written in French and later translated into English, it is characterized by a syncopated narration constantly deviating to different unexpected directions. Picturesque and ironic, romantic and adventurous, philosophical and frightful, the story contains a variety of sources that can only be partially detected. The recurrence of classical elements in the narration shows the young author's remarkable knowledge of languages, literatures, and Antiquity. This study aims at demonstrating that Vathek is imbued with classical culture apart from other influences. We intend to show how Beckford's enigmatic novel follows the Epicurean sources of the encyclopaedic Nature of Things written by the Latin poet Lucretius.

Keywords: Eighteenth-Century Literature – Comparative Literature – William Beckford – Vathek – Lucretius – The Nature of Things - Virgil – Ovid –Theocritus – Greek and Latin Literature – Early Gothic Novels

Genesis and Peculiarities of Beckford's literary experiment

The unusual novel *Vathek* by William Beckford is a puzzling narrative for its peculiar way of moving in one direction before suddenly changing and going against the reader's expectations - a technique the author repeated obsessively. One clarifying example is illustrated by the

children's pageant episode. The capricious sultan, the eponymous Vathek, has made a secret pact with a monster. The fake event that Vathek has organized in order to honour the most beautiful children in his reign ends with the shocking mass killing of the celebrating young creatures who, after being lured into a dangerous place, are thrown into an obscure chasm where Vathek's accomplice, the demonic Giaour, is awaiting to devour them. In spite of the inherent gory effect, the tone turns into the grotesque in the subsequent narration, and all pathos is lost. James K. Folsom explained that, with the exception of the solemn portrayal of the Palace of Eblis at the end of the novel, the extreme and sudden changes in plot and tone were deprecated by critics and readers alike for their "mockery, coarseness and flippancy".¹ Beckford seemed to be constantly shifting his narrative technique when most unexpected to shock his readers, as if he rejected being confined to a specific narrative *genre*. The text offers multiple interpretations, most critical analyses privileging Oriental influences, while others see it as a camouflage for a Gothic novel. The aim of this article is to extrapolate sources that belong to the classical world that Beckford knew and appreciated, and to demonstrate that the works by Latin and Greek authors significantly dominate the novel, creating a further layer of possible interpretations beyond canonical analyses.

Even though Beckford made extensive use of the grotesque in his novels, his private correspondence and diaries introduce a different mode of writing, full of sensibility and romantic imagery. Beckford's biographer Boyd Alexander mentions a suggestive passage describing the remains of the dying winter in the house garden that recalls Virgilian scenes in the *Georgics* when snow melts before the arrival of spring:

Last night (...) I stole from the Saloon and, led by a glimpse of moonshine between the arcades of the Egyptian Hall, went out at the Southern Portal. The dissolution of the snow next the pavement had left round it a narrow circle of verdure beyond which all was white. A grey mist had risen from the waters and, spreading over the lawn, seemed to enclose the peaceful Palace on every side. Thro' the medium of these vapours the moon cast a dim bluish light just sufficient to discover the surrounding woods, changed into groves of coral. I was so charmed with the novelty of the prospect that, setting the cold at

¹ James K. Folsom, "Beckford's *Vathek* and the Tradition of Oriental Satire", Vol. 6, No. 1 (Winter 1964); 53-60, p. 54.

defiance, I walked to and fro on the platform for several minutes, fancying the fictions of Romances realised, and almost imagining myself surrounded by some wondrous misty barrier.²

Beckford's power of imagination and taste for the mysterious is quite evident. A restricted space is more than enough for the adolescent writer to imagine strange stories developing behind the "grey mist" slowly surrounding the objects. A passage in *Vathek* seems to create a line of connection with descriptions of nature anticipating both Ann Radcliffe's and the Romantics' sensibility:

At the distance of a few miles from Samarah stood a high mountain, whose sides were swarded with wild thyme and basil, and its summit, overspread with so delightful a plain that it might have been taken for the Paradise destined for the faithful. Upon it grew a hundred thickets of eglantine and other fragrant shrubs, a hundred arbours of roses, entwined with jessamine and honey-suckle, as many clumps of orange-trees, cedar, and citron, whose branches, interwoven with the palm, the pomegranate, and the vine, presented every luxury that could regale the eye or the taste. The ground was strewn with violets, harebells, and pansies: in the midst of which numerous tufts of jonquils, hyacinths, and carnations perfumed the air. Four fountains, no less clear than deep, and so abundant as to slake the thirst of ten armies, seemed purposely placed here, to make the scene more resemble the Garden of Eden watered by four sacred rivers. Here the nightingale sang the birth of the rose.³

The narrative method and the themes in the passage provide ample material for discussion. The introduction of luxuriant nature in a prose description was a novelty at the time of the publication of Beckford's novel. Images of nature had been developed in the poems by the Graveyard Poets (starting in the 1740s) and in *The Seasons* (1747) by James Thomson, among others, but they were generally excluded from prose narratives. Thomson's works were inspired by the *Georgics*, and imitated Virgil's love for nature. Sandro Jung highlights the importance of Thomson's visual impact that was highly praised by his contemporaries. Jung also claims that "The poetry of Thomas Gray,

² Boyd Alexander, *England's Wealthiest Son: A Study of William Beckford* (London: Centaur Press, 1962), p.74.

³ William Beckford, *Vathek* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.13. All extracts henceforth mentioned in the article are selected from this text.

Edward Young, James Macpherson, and Robert Burns, among many others, was frequently interpreted visually, and it is the visual or painterly adaptation of these poems that frequently enhanced, sustained, and prolonged their, and their authors', reputation in the nineteenth century".⁴ It is difficult to determine whether Beckford's intention of describing landscapes in a great variety of passages was dictated by his aesthetic taste or by other motivations. In his in-depth analysis, Tim Fulford indicated the political importance of any discourse connected with landscape in the eighteenth century, including Thomson's and William Cowper's poetic works, Samuel Johnson's generalizations, Edmund Burke's text on the sublime, William Gilpin's essays on the picturesque, and Uvedale Price's comparative study of sublime and picturesque: "Johnson did not only use eighteenth-century conceptions of sublimity in language as a standard by which to criticize Shakespearian disorder. He also used the vocabulary of landscape-description as a strategy, a means of persuading his readers by emotion as well as reason of the rightness of his views when he could not triumph by logic (...) Like Johnson, the picturesque writers wished to uphold the power of the landed gentleman, like Cowper, they wished to recall him to his traditional paternalist role. For Gilpin, as for Johnson, it was in his confrontation with an older rural culture that his own rhetorical self-assertion became associated with local speech. And that speech resisted codification by the traditional rules of taste and eluded subordination to the social and political judgements of the gentlemanly classes."⁵ Fulford's hypothesis is intriguing as he provides a special justification for the growing importance of landscape and nature in various forms of art: "Through landscape-gardening, through painting, and through the descriptions of prose-writers and poets, views of the landscape owned by gentlemen became representations of the legitimacy of their power and the benefits it brought the nation. (...) Eighteenth-century writers were able to rework Virgilian epic and georgic into a panegyric on the national benefits deriving from a landscape 'naturally' productive of wealth, viewed from the commanding position of the noblemen and

⁴ Sandro Jung, "Visual Interpretations, and Illustrations of Thomson's *The Seasons* in Eighteenth-Century Life. 34, No. 2, (Spring 2010); 23-64, pp. 23-4.

⁵ Tim Fulford, *Landscape, Liberty and Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 110 and 115.

gentlemen who owned it".⁶ This could easily apply to Beckford, who was not only an elegant writer but also an affluent landowner who enjoyed describing a nature that was part of his life and that he was conscious to possess. A different case is represented by his contemporary Richard Payne-Knight, an aristocrat with a large estate known for his libertine free-thinking expressed in a scandalous publication dedicated to Priapus. Payne-Knight's ideas on the picturesque were in sharp contrast with other authors as he considered nature the ideal place where a gentleman's sensuality found inspiration.⁷ Interestingly, the most beautiful landscape scene in *Vathek* is where a sensual seduction takes place, and Beckford seems to adopt Payne-Knight's libertine viewpoint. It is not clear what Beckford's intentions might have been in showing such aesthetic attention to nature. However, two aspects can be extrapolated from his narratives of nature: they make of Beckford a precursor of Radcliffe's descriptions and of the romantic exaltation of natural settings. The second important aspect is that the passages describing nature clearly appeal to the senses, and appear to be following Lucretius's doctrine of the exaltation of the physical world. This aspect leads us to interpret Beckford's initial introduction of *Vathek*'s court as a sort of sensual Garden of Eden. Descriptions of charming landscapes, such as the following example are common in the text until the final turn of events when dark atmospheres dramatically replace the dominant beauty:

The evening was serene, the air refreshing, the sky clear, and the flowers exhaled their fragrance. The beams of the declining sun, whose mild splendour reposed on the summit of the mountain, shed a glow of ruddy light over its green declivity, and the white flocks sporting upon it. No sounds were heard.⁸

The scene offers an image of bucolic calmness ("serene" "declining sun" "green declivity"), and pastoral peace represented by the "flocks sporting" on the green hill. However, if one eye is turned towards the classical image inherited from Virgil, the other one is facing a horrible

⁶ Fulford, p. 3. The pragmatic aspect of wild nature had been found in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). Any picturesque value of the narration was completely excluded in Defoe for the sake of a utilitarian use of nature.

⁷ The "Discourse on the Worship of Priapus" was included in the *Accounts of the Remains of Priapus* (London: printed by T. Spilsbury, Snowhill, 1786) and it featured a pagan vision of nature. Thomas Payne-Knight's most influential text was *An Analytical Enquiry into the Principles of Taste*, published in 1805, which was devoted to the study of picturesque.

⁸ *Vathek*, p. 25.

lurking danger. It is the “dreadful chasm”, where innocent children are going to be sacrificed thereafter. Beckford did not seem to be involved in the contemporary discourse on the sublime and the picturesque albeit his frequent landscape descriptions. Nevertheless, his constant quest for the beautiful and his love for romantic settings ahead of its time betrayed a special sensibility, although it was frequently interrupted or preceded by an insinuating irony. The description of a terrible storm is first introduced by semi-satirical commentaries that make the situation humorous, in spite of its potential negativity. The register of the narration subsequently changes and conveys Burkean sublime ideals that draws attention to Beckford’s pre-romantic sensibility:

The females and eunuchs uttered shrill wailings at the sight of the precipices below them, and the dreary prospects that opened, in the vast gorges of the mountains. Before they could reach the ascent of the steepest rock, night overtook them, and a boisterous tempest arose, which, having rent the awnings of the palanquins and cages, exposed to the raw gusts the poor ladies within, who had never before felt so piercing a cold. The dark clouds that overcast the face of the sky deepened the horrors of this disastrous night, insomuch that nothing could be heard distinctly.⁹

Beckford and the Classics

Despite his golden seclusion, “Beckford received a brilliant education, and was widely learned in French, Latin, Greek, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, philosophy, law, literature and physics by the age of seventeen.¹⁰ His private piano teacher was Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Rictor Norton explains that the story provided a sort of positive halo for young Beckford even though it might not have been completely true.¹¹ As the adolescent Beckford had decided to teach himself Arabic, he translated a group of manuscripts of the *Arabian Nights* between 1780

⁹ *Vathek*, p. 45

¹⁰ Beckford’s strict Methodist mother decided not to send him to school or university as he was of a very weak constitution. Also, she was worried that he might not be able to cope with large groups of people. That choice may have had negative repercussions on the development of his personality and might have been the cause of his difficulties in social interaction in more mature years, as some biographies underline.

¹¹ Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart travelled all over Europe with his father and sister to give concerts between 1763 and 1766. He also went to England and may have briefly met Beckford whose ambitious father was ready to spend any sum for the education of his only legitimate son. Even though the age difference between the two boys was of only four years, Mozart was already a musician, being particularly precocious. Rictor Norton. “The Fool of Fonthill”. *Gay and Literature History*, updated 16 November 1999. <<http://www.rictornorton.co.uk/beckfor1.htm>>.

and 1783 that he intended to publish in 1787. Inexplicably, he did not persist and only decided to print a tale called *Al Raoui* in 1799, but it was published anonymously as Roger Lonsdale clarifies in his explicatory notes to *Vathek*, since the *novella* had strong homoerotic content with the potential to increase the prejudices on the author's reputation.¹² After years of immersion in an imaginary Middle Eastern world, Beckford abandoned his projects on Oriental translations and production altogether. His further endeavours resulted in the publication of four episodes for *Vathek*, which are sometimes attached to the main novel in certain editions. For a number of years he cherished his passion for Orientalism, but his interest in Eastern culture and literature turned out to be just one of many layers of knowledge in his extraordinary education, which did not replace his deeply rooted classical matrix. We may think that the passion for Oriental narratives was enhanced by Beckford's extensive reading both in English and in French. A possible hypothesis is that he felt more secure writing in French because the existing Oriental literary production in that language could offer special terminologies and correct nomenclatures, which took more effort to find in his native language. The motivation for later deserting his Oriental passion and studies in Arabic was probably due to the great philological difficulties he may have found in his carrying out translations, which created problems for experts and scholars as well.¹³

Beckford did not go on a single Grand Tour as he actually went on many journeys to the Continent. He lived in different countries for large periods of time; he resided in Switzerland, Italy, France, Spain, and Portugal. In 1778 Beckford's intransigent mother interrupted his

¹² Alexander, p. 100 and 101. Robert Mack states that Beckford "was competent in Arabic". See Robert Mack "The Arabian Nights' Entertainment and Other 'Oriental' Tales" in Stuart Gillespie, and David Hopkins (eds), *The Oxford History of Literary Translation in English. Vol. 3:1660-1790* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); 470-76, p. 474. However, Irwin is more sceptical and suggests that most of Beckford's "knowledge seems to have come via Galland". See Robert Irwin. *The Arabian Nights. A Companion* (London: Tauris Paperback, 2010), p. 252. For Beckford's censored homoerotic tale see: Roger Lonsdale "Introduction and Notes to *Vathek* by William Beckford", *Vathek* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); vii-xliii.

¹³ Interpreting Oriental texts could not be limited to Arabic exclusively. Knowing the Orient also meant having linguistic and cultural knowledge of Sanskrit, Persian, Turkish and other Eastern languages, which required steady philological research, possibly also in the countries where they were spoken. The architectural interests at home and his tours in Europe almost certainly prevented Beckford from continuing his adolescent and post-adolescent passion. It may also be argued that his lack of university studies, together with his erratic tastes, did not allow him to develop a systematic methodology of research, in spite of his formidable intelligence and extensive readings.

stay abroad as he had manifested mildly scandalous behaviours in Venice. As if following the script of some comedy of errors or a libertine eighteenth-century play, Beckford had fallen for a young man who reciprocated his affection. However, the young aristocrat's sisters had hopelessly fallen in love with the charming young Englishman and were desperate for his attention. To celebrate his adventures and his (male) object of desire, Beckford wrote a composition most likely dedicated to his crush. The text was a little masterpiece. Alexander posits that to create this fantasy Beckford imitated Theocritus's ode in honour of *Hylas*. The Greek poet's Idylls had been partially translated by John Dryden and included in Dryden's *Miscellanies* of 1684 and 1685 published by Tonson. Penelope Wilson explains that "Thomas Creech's complete translation appeared in 1684. (...) It was nearly eighty years before the next full-scale version appeared, by Francis Fawkes (1767), with another by Richard Polwhele following in 1786".¹⁴ The text by Fawkes adhered more closely to the original Theocritus and did not contain the sensual paraphrases used by Dryden. Both versions may have been known to Beckford. As several scholars claim, translations from classical authors were not only addressed to private readers, but also and mostly to tutors and learners for didactic reasons. The *Hylas* that Theocritus had portrayed was the mythical figure of a young man who served as squire to the legendary Hercules. The dramatic development of his story shows some analogies with the Ovidian tale of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis in *The Metamorphoses*. Gone to a spring to find water, Hylas is captured by the Naiads and hidden in the pond. After his disappearance, Hercules desperately looks for him but in vain. Beckford's adaption of Hylas's story shows his remarkable narrative skill when he describes the young man observing the world from underneath the water:

He perceives the features of the Naiads, flushed with desire. Fain would he fly from their importunities (...). In the midst of his afflictions, the well-known voice of Hercules descended faintly through the waters. Thrice did the lovely captive reply; and thrice did the unavailing sound rise bubbling from below. The malicious Naiads sported with his perplexity, and as he sat dejected on a mossy fragment, danced wantonly around. And now the moon, rising to illuminate that world to which he never could return, (...) darted her

¹⁴ Penelope Wilson, "Lyric, Pastoral, and Elegy" in Gillespie and Hopkins (eds); 173-190, p. 184. Polwhele's version received positive attention in the *Monthly Review* in 1788 (lxxviii, 309).

lustre on the humid realms below. Shadows without number, reflected from the impending vegetation, glanced on the playful group and chequered their lucid forms. But Cynthia, disgusted by their wantonness, soon lost herself in clouds. Hylas now mourned in darkness.¹⁵

This short passage is extremely rich for various reasons. Never published, the story probably had a very strong emotional impact for the Beckford. What is particularly interesting is that the text is a wonderful specimen of diversified narrative technique for the various points of view moving, as if in a filmic shooting, from Hylas under the water to Hercules's desperate vision of the meadow nearby, then to the indifferent gaze of the dancing Naiads. The description of the scene moves vertically to the sky where the moon ("Cynthia") seems to be observing the dramatic development from far above. Finally the point of observation suddenly descends and is again with Hylas, surrounded by darkness, forever a captive in that liquid prison. Equally striking is the young man's despair and his frustrating attempt to emit sounds that are lost in the watery element, whereas the images of Hercules he can see are clear but unattainable. The eighteen-year-old Beckford shows exquisite classical knowledge that he uses to express his anxiety for an impossible love. He uses an example from Greek Antiquity and the poet Theocritus to describe his anguish for an incurable heartbreak, a theme that Beckford inserted in *Vathek*. Beckford also shows stylistic elegance blended with an impressive descriptive ability that both reveal his extensive reading. The nocturnal vision of despair, which he creates in partial imitation of graveyard poetry, is imbued with classical imagery. Hercules, Diana, the Naiads are famous characters whereas Hylas is a relatively lesser known myth - a fact that may demonstrate the high intellectual level of the young Beckford and the impact of Greek and Latin culture in his works.

Beckford's extensive knowledge can be traced in *Vathek* as well. Beneath its exotic exaggerations, we can detect multiple elements of classical literature. Many passages betray the mould of Antiquity under the Oriental surface. When Beckford introduces the character of Nouronihar the author highlights that she "loved her cousin, more than

¹⁵ This passage is quoted in Alexander, p. 68.

her own beautiful eyes". The simile is taken from a poem by Catullus.¹⁶ The music that is constantly playing in *Vathek's Temple of Melody* recalls the atmosphere in Ovid's erotic elegies *Amores*. Eunuchs are to protect women from the poet's attempts to seduce them. Coincidentally Eunuchs are remarkably important in *Vathek* as they should protect the women of the *seraglio* and the emir's daughter, Nourinihar, but they awkwardly fail.¹⁷ A reference to Ovid, albeit caricatural, can be found in the image of tragic Philomel, transformed into a nightingale, whose melodious voice is compared to eunuch Bababalouk's shrieks, creating a grotesque effect in contrast with the classical source. Other themes in *Vathek* are taken from various authors such as Homer, Plutarch, Pliny and Lucian. In some cases, the sources are clearly mentioned by Samuel Henley and Beckford himself in the explanatory notes. In general, they provide cultivated allusions, which reinforce the idea of the author's classical polish, such as ancient rituals for the dead (Homer, Lucian), or the description natural elements and customs (Pliny). Beckford rejected the help of his tutor, John Lettice, for the translation of his novel, considering him inadequate for the task (Alexander, Lonsdale). He employed Henley instead, who also compiled a series of extensive and cultivated annotations to the text, highly appreciated by contemporary literary reviewers for their superior

¹⁶ *Vathek*, p. 65. The similitude can be traced in Poem III, line 5, taken from Catullus's collection of poetic works, dedicated to the "Death of Lesbia's Sparrow" and her despair: "Than her very eyes, oh! Dearer to her far". Catullus, *The Poems of Valerius Catullus*, James Cranston (ed.) (Edinburgh: William P. Nimmo, 1867), p. 29. Nourinihar's "languishing looks" can be found in the beautiful and attractive "negri occhi" in Ludovico Ariosto's Canto VII, stanza xii, lines 2-3 (see Lonsdale, p. 148, note 4).

¹⁷ Classical references to Ovid are numerous due to the popularity of the Latin poet. His influences can be found in many of Ann Radcliffe's and Matthew Lewis's works. The theme of the metamorphosis cannot be found in *Vathek*, unless we consider the fatal psychological change that the characters undergo when they are doomed in Hell. They are transfigured into desperate anonymous beings, one the same as the other. One remark made by Corinna Wagner may induce us to place the Ovidian matrix in the context of *Vathek* "Ovid's poem is filled with erotic, violent and even lurid stories evoked with consummate sophistication. (...) Ovid's moral sense does not direct the reader; indeed he often seems remarkably indifferent to responsibilities and judgement; didacticism is utterly alien to him. However, through his profoundly ironical fatalism, he frequently appears to be enjoying unmasking divine cruelty, caprices, and revenges, and he engages mordantly with human capacities for wickedness, for rape, incest, murder". Corinna Wagner "The Dream of a Transparent Body. Identity, Science and the Gothic Novel" in *Gothic Studies* 14/1, 2012; 74-92, p. 19. Certain Ovidian features may be equally applied to Beckford, in particular his irony in describing the "caprices" and the excesses of his characters. For Ovid's relevance in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, see: Maria Teresa Marnieri, "The Early Gothic, the Classics, and Ovidian Echoes in Matthew G. Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) in *European Academic Research*, Vol. VI Issue 10 (January 2010); 5806-31. The article is extracted from my Doctoral Dissertation presented and defended in 2016.

intellectual level. The long notes were later reduced by Beckford himself, and adapted to the reading public for the 1816 edition, recently published in the Oxford World Classics series, and edited by Lonsdale. Beckford constantly monitored the translation to which he made various changes. Henley supposedly published the work without Beckford's permission and indirectly forced the author to accelerate the publication of the French version, as a consequence.

When *Vathek's* imperial procession ravages the beautiful flowers of some holy men, "the bees (...) thinking it their duty to revenge the insult offered to their masters, the santons, assembled so zealously to do it with good effect".¹⁸ It may not be a coincidence that Beckford creates a mini-epos featuring the courageous tiny creatures. Virgil had dedicated his fourth Book of the *Georgics* to a sort of epic description of bees that he had humanized, and compared their laborious life to positive human activities. Virgil's Book IV is an exaltation of the tranquil life in the country. However, it also features more important themes. It is both a scientific and an entomological observation of the behavior of bees that produce a precious product, honey, which has medical properties. Virgil creates a sort of epos of the tiny creatures, which is also a philosophical meditation on the contrasting dimensions in the universe, micro- and macroscopic.¹⁹ While classical sources are a constant presence in *Vathek*, However, Lucretius's influence seems to have played a major role. *On the Nature of Things* is Lucretius's only remaining work. Lucretius was a mysterious figure of Latin literature, living in the first century BC. His vast, complex masterpiece would influence the most important authors of Antiquity such as Horace, Virgil, Ovid and many others, not to mention the impact he had on the Renaissance and the Enlightenment.²⁰ Eric Baker explains that "to characterize Lucretius' impact on the age of the Enlightenment is a daunting task. Virtually every major figure of the period was in some way influenced by Lucretius, and many of the engagements represent

¹⁸ *Vathek*, p. 101.

¹⁹ Virgil's text has also been interpreted as a metaphor of human activities and political organizations, in particular, it may be associated with monarchic political systems. Virgil was a relevant influence in the genesis of Ann Radcliffe's Gothic romances. See: Maria Teresa Marnieri "Gothic Terror, Virgilian Bucolic Atmospheres, and Classical Eroticism in *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) by Ann Radcliffe" in *European Academic Research*, Vol VII/ Issue 12 (March 2020).

²⁰See: Valentina Prosperi, "Lucretius in the English Renaissance" in Stuart Gillespie, Philip Hardie (eds) *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); 214-26. Lucretius is incredibly pervasive in the works of the time even though it is not easy to find his name clearly mentioned.

a complex, often polemically charged dialogue with previous interpretations". Lucretius's encyclopaedic text influenced Beckford even though he never clearly mention the Latin Poet's name.²¹

Lucretius and the satisfaction of the senses in *Vathek*

Although *Vathek* is a highly inventive tale, I would argue that it includes a variety of classical references underneath a finely constructed Eastern surface, and Lucretius seems to be prevalent as a source of inspiration. It is difficult to say whether Lucretius was a poet describing philosophical theories or whether he was a philosopher using elegant forms of poetry to convey his ideas.²² Lucretius's life was an enigma. Interesting details about him can be found in Cicero's correspondence. Some scholars claim that Cicero was also the editor of Lucretius's book, which was called *De Rerum Natura* in the original Latin version. The great Latin orator and senator may have published the masterpiece after Lucretius's untimely death, perhaps caused by suicide. However, this hypothesis seems to be antithetical to Cicero's Stoic attitude that was deeply in contrast with Lucretius's Epicurean doctrine, despite the respect he supposedly felt for the great poet and philosopher. Many contrasting stories circulated on Lucretius's life and his figure was surrounded by a halo of mystery that could never be dissipated due to the lack of information and documents. Little is known about him as he may have been the victim of *damnatio memoriae* - a peculiar Roman strategy that effected the elimination of any historical or social memory concerning a political enemy or a public figure in contrast with the institutions. The atheism that Lucretius expressed in his work might have been considered inauspicious for the Stoic Latin *intelligentsia* and the Roman political establishment. Lucretius lived in a period of turbulent political changes, at the heart

²¹ Eric Baker identifies three major currents of thought in the eighteenth century, which were a consequence of Lucretian ideas: the exaltation of science, the promotion of deism, and the faith in progress. The exaltation of science was supported by John Locke, Voltaire and The Earl of Shaftesbury, who include the idea of Providence as a complementary element of human life. Pierre Bayle, David Hume, and Denis Diderot did not actually agree with deism and tended towards more or less strong forms of naturalist atheism based on Lucretius. Burke, Rousseau, Goethe and Kant absorbed the idea of progress but also included the religious value, which was absent in Lucretius. See Baker "Lucretius in the European Enlightenment" in Gillespie and Hardie (eds); 274-88, p. 274. Like Beckford, Lewis used a variety of classical sources even though he only clearly mentions Horace in the prologue to this his novel *The Monk*. On the contrary, Virgil and other classical authors are explicitly cited in all Radcliffe's novels.

²² For the double definition (poetic/philosophical) of Lucretius's works see: Edward Ernest Sikes, *Lucretius: Poet and Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936).

of which one of the most frightful events took place - the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BC that was preceded by a series of devastating wars. In a sense, William Beckford was the victim of a forced social oblivion as well, imposed by contemporary society because of his scandalous behaviour. The mark on his reputation was never really erased during his lifetime.

Lucretius was progressively forgotten and Lucretian manuscripts were lost, maybe not coincidentally, as the atheism he professed was considered pernicious. It was the Italian humanist Poggio Bracciolini, a researcher of ancient texts, who found a manuscript of *De Rerum Natura* in 1417, translated in English as *The Nature of Things*, or *Nature*. This discovery allowed scholars to study the poet's philosophical theories directly from his source, rather than from secondary testimonies. Lucretius's axioms led to extreme cultural changes from the Renaissance on. However, the complexity of his work introduced doubts and uncertainties about its actual meaning. The intricacy of Lucretius's theories was also due to the underlying contradictions of some of his axioms. Some of them seem so ambiguous that they have led scholars to the definition of a Lucretian philosophy, based on Epicureanism, developed in parallel with a latent anti-Lucretian ideology, founded on scepticism and pessimism. An example of a contradictory statement is when Lucretius describes Gods' peaceful and eternal life in Book III, after claiming that nothing exists beyond physical matter, namely seeds, which he also calls atoms, an idea that he adapts from Anaxagoras's principles. Paul Hammond explains that it was easy "to find Lucretius taken to exemplify the ultimate threat to Christian orthodoxy, or to consider Epicureanism synonymous of libertinism". Lucretius was reputed to be the epitome of unbelief. He changed the mechanical atomistic theory by adding the notion of "swerve", the Latin *clinamen* - a soft movement which allows atoms to change their direction. Thanks to the notion of *swerve* he could therefore deny determinism and introduce the idea of free will - a positive element whose counterpart is the blind cruelty of nature that can violently hit mankind in any moment.²³ Hammond also highlights

²³ For the quotation in the previous paragraph, see Paul Hammond "Dryden, Milton and Lucretius" in *The Seventeenth Century*. Volume 16, Issue 1 (2001); 158-176, p.158. For the Lucretian influence on Humanism and Renaissance see: Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve. How the Renaissance began* (London: The Bobley Head, 2011). *The Nature of Things* is divided into six books that develop three major themes. The first theme contains observations on physics, based on atomism and Epicurus's

that Dryden was often associated with the Latin poet as he was one of the most attentive British scholars of Epicurean philosophy. Lucretius extensively explained Epicurus's doctrine in his masterpiece in order to demonstrate that it was the best philosophical way to improve human existence, and the life of all creatures on earth. However, Epicurean lines of reasoning were often misinterpreted due to the focus on the term 'pleasure' that is present in both Epicurean and Lucretian argumentations with relative frequency. Hammond claims that Dryden was interested in distinguishing the genuine Epicurean philosophy from the distorted libertine version of it, which was current in Restoration literature. Epicurus's exaltation of pleasure mostly meant the tranquillity of the mind, and the concept was reiterated in the six books of *The Nature of Things*, written around 55 BC. It is true that the Greek philosopher and the Latin poet generally stressed the predominance and the importance of sensuous gratification in human life. To Lucretius in particular, physical satisfaction has different meanings as it can represent the joy of poetry, the happiness of friendship, and the sweetness of landscape, rather than sexual acts. Peace of mind and tranquillity in the Epicurean sense are brought about by the absence of pain and fear - two feelings that unjustly dominate the lives of human beings and turn them into unhappy creatures. Epicureanism is in reality a doctrine that sets moral serenity as its aim. The peacefulness that it targets was different from the purely hedonistic philosophical thoughts of late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century libertine ideals, which were less involved with peace of mind and soul than on carnal desire and fulfilment. Despite the intrinsic differences between Epicureanism and the various currents of thoughts that originated from it, especially libertine philosophy, Epicurean and Lucretian teachings were often interpreted as an exaltation of hedonism and an invitation to indulge in the senses. A further problem was connected with Lucretius's negation of any metaphysical creative principle behind the existence of things: "Nature

teachings. The second theme features a form of anthropology with the theorization of the characteristics of mankind. Here Lucretius explains the essence of body, mind and soul. The last part is about the majestic and frightening manifestations of nature and the puzzling essence of the universe. Lucretius starts by showing categories and oppositions such as being and nothingness; matter and void; body, mind, and soul; time, space and infinity. He then proceeds with a description and explanation of all forms of physical phenomena.

was not form'd by Powers Divine".²⁴ All elements in the world are made of atoms alternating with the void. Like the body, mind and soul are made of similar parts called atoms, or seeds, what Aristotle defines as homeomery: "but say, that common Seeds of many Things in various Order join'd, are mix'd in every Thing, and lie conceal'd". Therefore the death of one's body is inevitably followed by the death of one's soul. According to Lucretius, religion is a human construction whence the constant fear of death is originated: "Indeed Mankind, in wretched Bondage held, lay grovelling on the ground, galled with the Yoke of what is called *Religion*: from the Sky this Tyrant shewed her Head, and with grim Looks hung over us poor Mortals".

Translations of Lucretius were not as common as other more popular and less immoral (and easier to understand) authors of Antiquity. Some passages of the Lucretian masterpiece were translated by the Elizabethan Edmund Spenser, and a century later by Dryden during the Restoration. Spenser used Lucretius's invocation to Venus in the *Fairie Queene* (1590). The prayer to the goddess can be found at the beginning of the original Latin text and is frequently repeated. Spenser introduced the supplication in the tenth stanza of the fourth Book of his masterpiece. Dryden used various passages that he adapted for a collection of miscellanies called *Sylvae* (1685) - a reminiscence of Statius's poetical masterpiece. Neither Spenser nor Dryden translated Lucretius integrally. John Evelyn was the first to translate the first two Books of the *Nature of Things* in the seventeenth century. The complete translation of Lucretius in heroic couplets was published anonymously by Thomas Creech in 1682, featuring the symbolic title of *Daphnis*. The choice of the title *Daphnis* was not a coincidence: the author abstained from using Lucretius's name to avoid the negative halo surrounding the Latin author. At the same time, the hint could be understood by those boasting classical knowledge. One character in Virgil's *Bucolics* bears

²⁴ Titus Carus Lucretius, *Of the Nature of Things: in six Books. Illustrated with proper and useful Notes. Adorned with copper-plates, curiously engraved by Guernier, and others.* 2 Vols. (London: printed for Daniel Browne, at the Black Swan without the Temple-Bar, 1743), Book III, line 15, Vol 1: p. 203. Henceforth: *Nature*. The third book starts with a dedication to the great Epicurus. Lucretius wonders when the Greek philosopher first realised that Nature had not been created by a divine entity. Following Epicurus's teachings, Lucretius intended to make superstition and the fear of death disappear. He dedicates his significant words to his friend Memmius and to all human beings. I chose to take all extracts from this eighteenth-century prose version as the anonymous translator mentions previous translations, and the text resonates with the language used during the second part of the century. Beckford had in all probability read the text. The subsequent quotations in the paragraph are: *Nature*, Book I, lines 893-96, Vol 1: p. 75; and *Nature*, Book I, lines 63-6, Vol. 1: p. 11.

that name. The Virgilian eclogue is about a sad event and many critics have identified the protagonist with Lucretius, a poet that Virgil wanted to honour. A second edition was issued the following year in 1683 with the right title and the translator's name. Therefore Creech's version became the most important translation in the eighteenth century and "would remain standard until the twentieth century".²⁵ In addition to Creech's poetical version, an anonymous prose translation was published in 1743, complete with the Latin text. In his study on Lucretius and Wordsworth, Willard Spiegelman claimed that a comparative analysis between two authors can either be based "on tropes or topics: the first a rhetorical and formal, the second a thematic and ideological way of establishing connections among writers".²⁶ The quest for Lucretian aspects in Beckford may be based on both the stylistic and the thematic aspects of their works, but also the on philosophical affinities or oppositions, in order to find what Spiegelman calls a meeting-place between two writers. Alexander, Norton, André Parreaux and other biographers agree that Beckford started learning the Classics when he was still very young and read extensively. He may have read either the Lucretian original or its translations. His brilliant mind and fluency in ancient languages may have helped him to understand the difficult Lucretian text and to be influenced by it.

Beckford introduces a series of allusions in his novel that refers to the complex Latin poet. Interestingly, one of the majestic palaces built for *Vathek* is meant to give joy to the eyes but does not only contain exquisite works of art. One part of the marvellous construction "exhibited in their several classes the various gifts that Heaven had

²⁵ Paul Davis, "Didactic Poetry" in Gillespie and Hopkins (eds); 191-203, pp. 191-92.

²⁶ Willard Spiegelman "Some Lucretian Elements in Wordsworth" in *Comparative Literature*. Vol. 37, No. 1 (Winter 1985); 27-49, p. 27, and p. 28. The relationship between Wordsworth and Lucretius, who influenced many of his poems, has been studied by various scholars, such as Spiegelman and Priestman among others. See Martin Priestman "Lucretius in Romantic and Victorian Britain" in Gillespie and Hardie (eds), 289-305. After the discovery of a manuscript at the end of the 1990s containing Wordsworth's translation of a Latin work, the poet's interaction with classical authors is much more complex than was usually believed: "The shadowy status of this translation in the Wordsworth corpus raises questions about the reception of both Juvenal and Wordsworth. [...] If today we call Wordsworth a 'Romantic', a member of a school we oppose to that of his 'neoclassical' predecessors, one reason is that, perhaps partly following his own lead, we have been willing to play down his links to classical Greek and Roman poets (the latter being the stronger). No effort was needed to overlook his work on Juvenal: its demotion in his lifetime and its obscurity ever since is an orientation of the record which in later life he himself wished when he asked for the manuscripts to be destroyed". See Gillespie, *English Translation and Classical Reception. Towards a new Literary History* (Malden, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p.101.

bestowed on our globe”.²⁷ Furthermore, Beckford uses the term “naturalist” to describe this section of the palace, which is meant to reproduce all aspects of nature. I would posit that he is referring to the Greek Hesiod and, most of all, to the Roman Lucretius - the two authors that described the works of nature in their amazing totality and promoted a didactic celebration of the world’s mysteries and marvels. One sentence at the very beginning of *Vathek* is particularly interesting as it shows a connection with the atheistic creed in Lucretius:

Being much addicted to women and the pleasures of the table, he sought by his affability, to produce agreeable companions; and he succeeded the better as his generosity was unbounded and his indulgence unrestrained: for he did not think (...) that it was necessary to make a hell of this world to enjoy paradise in the next.²⁸

The passage is only apparently simple. In fact, Beckford presents some ambiguous statements that Kenneth Graham found extremely ironic in tone.²⁹ They are contradictory and hermeneutically unclear, but show a connection with the Lucretian doctrine and make readers realize from the very beginning of the story that the caliph is intent on satisfying his senses hedonistically. It may be interesting to notice that Lucretius claims that the senses are the most important factors for a human being as they are the only instruments all creatures have to understand the world as they give to every individual the possibility to be in connection with reality. The senses allow mankind to perceive the truth, which is merely physical: “And what can be more sure than are our Senses to us, by which we fully know Falsehood from Truth?”³⁰ It is not a coincidence that *Vathek* orders the construction of palaces dedicated to the five senses and uses them to enjoy life and acquire unlimited knowledge.

We may argue that by showing “affability”, *Vathek* is following an Epicurean rule, which suggests harmony in relationships among human beings to improve both personal and general conditions. The figure of the caliph and his actions initially seem to be linked to positivity. However, the admirable quality conveyed by “generosity” is accompanied by the ambiguous presence of “indulgence”, which may

²⁷ *Vathek*, p. 2.

²⁸ *Vathek*, p.1

²⁹ See Kenneth W. Graham, “*Vathek* in English and French” in *Studies in Bibliography*. Vol. 28 (1975); 153-166.

³⁰ *Nature*, Book I, Lines 699-700; Vol 1: p. 59. Lucretius’s words and his rhetorical question “Quid nobis certius ispis sensibus esse potest. qui vera ac falsa notemus?” (p.58) indicate his desire to employ the senses as the real and only source of truth in the physical world. A strategy applied by *Vathek*.

mean tolerance but also selfishness. Finally, the short passage culminates with the Manichean dichotomy between “paradise” and “hell”. The two terms introduce a pessimistic feeling and a sharp contrast as they represent the only two possible alternatives in Vathek’s existence. They are also a prolepsis of the protagonist’s final destiny. It is interesting to notice that Lucretius explains that our lives are marred by the constant fear of death and the afterlife. The Latin poet claims that we should create a better world by using the means at our disposal to enjoy life to the fullest as it is the only one we have. Lucretius also posits that certain categories of men do not comply with the Epicurean suggestions of peace and tranquillity, but become violent and disruptive, desirous of ruining other people’s lives. Beckford is slightly modifying the Lucretian concept when he describes Vathek’s interest in avoiding hell in real life, therefore trying to create paradise on earth. However, the character’s ambiguity becomes immediately evident when we discover a few pages later that Vathek is in fact making a hell of this world for all the people surrounding him. He has a boundless thirst for power, therefore he represents the Lucretian negative version of a human being. What is striking in the very short passage is that it appears to reproduce *in nuce* Vathek’s future dramatic parable.

The third Book of *The Nature of Things* describes the excesses of cruel men that may be easily adapted to Vathek:

Covetousness and the blind Desire of Honours, which compel unhappy Men to exceed the Bounds of Right, and urge on the Partners and Assistants of their Crimes to strive Day and Night with the utmost Pains, to arrive at the Height of Wealth: These Plagues of Life are chiefly nourished by the Fear of Death; for Infamy, and Contempt, and sharp Want, seem far removed from a sweet and pure State of Life, and, as it were, hover about the Gates of Death; and therefore whilst Men, possessed by a false Fear, labour to avoid, and stand at the remotest distance from them, they add to their Heaps by Civil War, and, insatiable as they are, double their Riches, heaping one Murder upon another. They laugh with cruel Delight at the sad Funeral of a Brother, and hate and fear the Entertainments of their nearest Relations.³¹

³¹ *Nature*, Book III, lines 59-72; Vol. 1: p. 207.

This passage from *De Rerum Natura* is particularly important for a series of reasons. We have come across one of those gloomy pessimistic descriptions in Lucretius that are in deep contrast with the idealised image of an Epicurean state of *ataraxia*, that is supposed to be distant from every form of suffering, either physical or moral. The passage features one of the dark visualisations in Lucretius's work, which conveys his pessimism about the dark essence of human existence. Not all men are ready to follow the dictum of a serene life because they feel envy and "covetousness". While the fear of death transforms a lot of men into frightened and passive creatures, greed turns others into murderers and tormentors. These cruel men are described as "insatiable". It is important to notice that "insatiable" is the term Beckford often uses to define Vathek and his actions. Whether he feels infinite thirst, or huge hunger, excessive lust, or the desire for power or wisdom, the protagonist is "insatiable" in a way that recalls Lucretius's "unhappy Men". In the following lines Lucretius describes the latent and dangerous dissatisfaction felt by many:

And then to be always obliging an ungrateful Mind, to be ever pouring Favours upon it, and never satisfy it, which the Seasons of the Year, as they turn about, are always doing; they produce their fruits, and the whole variety of their Delights, and yet we are never filled with the Blessings of Life. ³²

The impossibility for men to reach full enjoyment is one of the limits of existence, which was also expressed by Petrarch in a famous line from one of his sonnets "Pace non trovo e non ho da far Guerra", which means that he cannot find peace, but he cannot make war either. The feeling Petrarch expresses is about unrequited love, but it can be extended to other existential contexts. This same feeling can be applied to Vathek, whose life is characterized by a constant lack of satisfaction and multiple forms of anxiety that cannot be eliminated, in spite of having unlimited riches and power. Like the cruel men described in Lucretius's poem, Vathek is convinced of his immortality. He is sure that he will be able to avoid "the gates of death". However, Vathek's anxious yearning for riches, knowledge and control leads him to the "gates of Eblis" where he has to experience excruciating pain for eternity. The philosophical pessimism expressed by Lucretius about

³² *Nature*, Book IV, lines 1016-20; Vol. 2: p. 280.

mankind is mirrored in Vathek's complex character. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Beckford follows Lucretius's dichotomy in alternating positive beginnings and negative conclusions. He conveys this oscillation between the two contrasting poles by means of a rhetorical strategy, which can be found in a great number of the sentence structures he uses. It is not only what Graham defines as "irony", and it does not exclusively represent a writing mode anticipating Radcliffe's tendency to bathos either. We may argue that Beckford's stylistic technique reflects the "ominous preliminary" of a "sink[ing] with terror" that awaits the characters at the end of the story.³³

Before his fall, the caliph starts his life surrounded by pleasant diversions in the Lucretian sense. Lucretius explains that mankind's physicality guides people to start the search for enjoyment, which is mental, emotional and physical:

Because the Spirits or Particles of Matter that maintain the Course, must be got together from all parts of the Body, and stirr'd thro' every Limb, and fitly united, that they may readily follow the eager Desire of the Mind. You see then, the Beginning of Motion rises in the Heart, proceeds then by means of the Will, and is thence diffused thro' every Limb, over the whole Body.³⁴

However, Beckford's protagonist becomes the slave of his desires. The paradise he can enjoy on earth actually turns into a hell for him and for everybody else. Vathek's striving for absolute power, boundless dissipation and unlimited knowledge, culminates in the labyrinthine Hall of the daemonic Eblis - a gloomy maze of eternal despair, where suffering never stops, resembling Dante's *Inferno*. The mysterious deities that seem to rule the magic place are indifferent to human suffering. When Eblis appears, Vathek and Nourinihar observe that "his person was that of a young man" and that he spoke "with a voice more mild than might be imagined".³⁵ Even if a "veil of melancholy" covers his eyes, the devilish divinity is calm and indifferent to Vathek and Nourinihar and to the rest of humanity. Intriguingly, Lucretius denies and at the same time does not deny the existence of Gods, but he makes it clear that they live peacefully in an unfathomable region:

³³ *Vathek*, p. 111.

³⁴ *Nature*, Book II, lines 266-71; Vol. 1: p. 121.

³⁵ *Vathek*, p. 111.

“The Deity of the Gods, their calm Abode appears, which neither Winds disturb, nor Clouds o’erflow with Showers, nor the white-falling snow, congealed by sharpest Frost, does spoil; but the unclouded Air surrounds them always, and smiles on them fully with diffused Light. Nature in every thing supplies their Wants; nothing at any Time destroys their Peace”.³⁶ A further analogy between the indifferent divinities in Lucretius and in Beckford is their distant and mysterious location based on verticality. Lucretius’s superior entities lie on a distant space above the world, far away from human beings. Eblis’s maze-like abode, equally distant and impossible to trace, is situated in a mysterious abyss. Beckford’s deities go towards an opposite direction as they hide in this immense chasm that John Garrett interprets as an infinitude of suffering.³⁷ To follow the divinity, *Vathek* and the other characters experience what Sandro Jung calls “a narrative of sublime fall”.³⁸ Even though the aesthetic of *Vathek* is superficially connected to the mode of the Oriental tale, I would assert that its deeper structures are made of classical elements borrowed from Antiquity, both Greek and Roman. From the very first lines and in spite of the pompous beginning of the novel, which recalls the context of the *Arabian Nights* and other exotic narratives, Beckford’s text introduces a situation that is connected with hedonistic ideals:

He surpassed in magnificence all his predecessors. The palace of Alkoremi, which his father, Motassem, had erected on the hill of Pied Horses, and which commanded the whole city of Samarah, was, in his idea far too scanty: he added therefore, five wings, or rather other palaces, which he destined for the particular gratifications of each of the senses.³⁹

The passage introduces *Vathek*’s hedonistic penchant for pure enjoyment to satisfy all five of his senses. He can indulge in beautiful forms, sweet perfumes, harmonious music, soft textures and luxurious meals at every moment of his life, and his contentment knows no limits amid “substantial pleasures”.⁴⁰ Interestingly, the satisfaction of all

³⁶ Book III, lines 18-24; Vol. 1: p. 203.

³⁷ Garrett’s theory interprets the vision of life in *Vathek* and posits it is based on Eastern and Muslim ideals. See Garrett, “Ending in Infinity: William Beckford’s Arabian Tale” in *Eighteenth Century Fiction*. Vol. 5, No. 1, (October 1992), 15-34.

³⁸ Jung, p. 304.

³⁹ *Vathek*, p. 1.

⁴⁰ *Vathek*, pp. 2-4, and 14.

senses is essential for Lucretius who intends to propagate respect for mankind's physical life:

So plain it is that something is continually flowing off from All Bodies, and is scattered all about; there is no Intermission; the Seeds never cease to flow, because we still continue to feel, to see, to smell, and hear. Besides, since any Figure we feel with our Hands in the Dark, we know to be the same we before saw by Day, and in the clearest Light, the Touch and Sight must need be moved by the same cause.⁴¹

Exaggerating the Lucretian creed, *Vathek's* life is dedicated to unrestrained Epicureanism and explicit eroticism from the very beginning. He seems to be a sincere adept of Lucretian teachings, which imply the satisfaction of the senses and the development of pacific behaviour in order to let Venus, the goddess of love and divine beauty, rule over his life: "Notwithstanding the sensuality in which *Vathek* indulged, he experienced no abatement in the love of his people, who thought that a sovereign giving himself up to pleasure, was able to govern, as one who declared himself an enemy to it".⁴² Here again we find the exaltation of the protagonist's sensuality, the atmosphere of an ancient fairy tale, and the importance of physical satisfaction, but the sentence ends with a flat statement which introduces irony and questions what has been previously told. Moreover, we discover that *Vathek's* subjects have changed their opinion and a feeling of resignation has replaced people's initial exaltation for the young ruler. Once again, we can see that Beckford starts his sentence introducing an optimistic context, which is inevitably turned into a pessimistic or malicious conclusion, in the same way as Lucretius exalts nature, but also describes its terrible and frightening effects.

Lucretius and Beckford share other similarities. Learning plays an important role in both their works: "The Caliph (...) had studied so much for his amusement in the life-time of his father, as to acquire a great deal of knowledge, though not a sufficiency to satisfy himself; for he wished to know every thing". In his mother's words, *Vathek* is also "certainly possessed of every important science", but he desires to acquire more knowledge, so we may gather the impression that he is interested in unlimited intellectual discoveries.⁴³ In Book III, Lucretius

⁴¹ Book IV, lines 225-34; Vol. 2: p. 25.

⁴² *Vathek*, p. 3.

⁴³ *Vathek*, p. 3 and p. 9. *Vathek's* unlimited desire for knowledge and power has also been interpreted by some critics as a Faustian characteristic. The Giaour would supposedly represent Mephistopheles

describes the “divine pleasure” he feels in the pursuits of the Epicurean philosophy and of wide learning. The poet feels what he defines as *horror* in Latin, which is translated by a word linked to amazement. It is the exalting sensation for the prodigious improvement of his knowledge. However, the ultimate wisdom that Lucretius needs is meant to improve the life of human beings whereas *Vathek* is only egoistically centred on himself and the satisfaction of his senses.

Incapable of translating the mysterious changing words on the golden sabres that the hideous Giaour has given him, *Vathek* falls into a state of despair, which has a strange physical consequence:

Agitated with so much anxiety, *Vathek* entirely lost all firmness; a fever seized him, and his appetite failed. Instead of being one of the greatest eaters, he became as distinguished for drinking. 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, and especially cold water, which calmed him more than other.⁴⁴

Vathek's insatiable appetites and anxiety

One of the most evident effects of *Vathek's* anxiety is his “insatiable thirst”. It is not only physical but it represents a reiterated metaphor of his “voraciousness”, his “insatiable curiosity”, and his frustration for not obtaining the knowledge he desires.⁴⁵ This knowledge is connected with the “power of darkness”. *Vathek* passes incessantly from one craving to the other, thus embodying the “*sitis*” that Lucretius illustrates - the “thirst” that human beings constantly feel for their

tempting a weak man in order to obtain his soul. However, the constant ironic stance and the comic situations experienced by *Vathek* make it difficult to compare the two characters. Some slight analogies might be found with Voltaire's philosophical story *Zadig* (1747) in the initial settings, but the two protagonists are in reality antithetical.

⁴⁴*Vathek*, p. 12. Adam Roberts and Eric Robertson consider the mutating and incomprehensible words on the sabre as emblematic of *Vathek's* “textual uncertainty” due to its bilingualism. See Roberts and Robertson, “The Giaour's Sabre. A Reading of Beckford's *Vathek*” in *Studies in Romanticism*. 35, No. 2, (Summer 1996); 199-211, p. 199. The hyperbolic descriptions of *Vathek's* culinary and drinking excesses recall the exaggerations that we can find in Rabelais's ironic stories *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*, both published in 1542.

⁴⁵ The perennially unsatisfied caliph and his inexhaustible desire for what he cannot obtain anticipates the French schools of symbolism and existentialism. It might be interesting to mention the French symbolist Charles Baudelaire. One of his poems in the notorious collection - *Flowers of Evil* (*Les Fleurs du Mal* 1857) - is entitled “Sed non satiata”, which is a Latin phrase meaning “unsatisfied” (literal meaning: unsatisfied thirst). *Vathek's* frustration is often compared to thirst, both physical and psychological. Parreaux is among the number of critics who claimed that Beckford played an important role in French literature thanks to the French version of his masterpiece. His evocative force was remarkable for French surrealists as well. See André Parreaux, *William Beckford. Auteur de « Vathek » (1760-1844). Etude de la création littéraire* (Paris: A.G. Nizet. 1960)

objects of desire: "The Pleasure we covet eagerly exceeds every thing we enjoyed before, as long as it is absent; but when we have it in possession, we long passionately for another, and the same Thirst of Life hangs upon us, still gaping for more".⁴⁶ A further connection uniting Beckford and Lucretius is a form of what I would define as linguistic anxiety. On more than one occasion, Lucretius claims that the theme he has absorbed from Epicurus is deep and important. However, it is difficult for him to find the correct words in Latin, in his opinion too simple a language to express his ideas: "I know it is hard to express in Latin verse the dark and mythic Notions of the Greek (for I have Things to say require new Words [*sic*] because the Tongue is poor, the Subject new" His awareness about his pioneering work on nature makes him reason on signifier and signified, and in meta-literary terms. Linguistically, Lucretius has to borrow some words from the rich and elegant Greek and insert them in his philosophical speech or to use similes, metaphors and euphemisms to convey difficult concepts. He equally shows that the differences of men and their position in the varied geographies of the world have created different sounds, words and idioms to express the same thing in different languages: "And then, what is there so very wonderful in This, that Men, to whom Nature has given a Voice and a Tongue, should, according to the various knowledge they had conceived of the great Variety of Things, distinguish each of them by a proper Name; when mute Cattle, and the several Kinds of wild Beasts, express their Passions by different Voices and Sounds, when their Fear, their Grief, or their Joys are strong upon them?".⁴⁷ At the same time, Lucretius shows a meta-literary conscience as he clearly highlights that his poetical effort can serve as a stepping stone in the development of literature and philosophy. On the other hand, Vathek's linguistic musing becomes evident when he is faced with the mysterious words carved on the precious sabre that he has been given by the Giaour. No one can decipher their hidden meaning and failure enrages the caliph. Roberts and Robertson interpret the Babel-like tower built by Vathek as the metaphor of the confusion of languages and, consequently, of meanings - an aspect that is constantly lurking and prevents the characters from fully understanding each other. I would posit that important issues are both the incapability of mutual

⁴⁶ *Nature*, Book III, lines 1093-97; Vol. 1: p. 287.

⁴⁷ The cited sentences in this section can be respectively found in *Nature* Book I, lines 136-39; Vol 1: p. 17, and Book V, lines 1055-60; Vol. 2: p. 201.

understanding and the powerlessness at deciphering the messages from superior entities. Carathis's wrong reading of the stars, Nouronihar's ephemeral communication with the "dives", the incomprehensible divinities in the grotto, Vathek's misinterpretation of the Giaour, together with the changing words of the sabres and the portal of Hell in Eblis, are a constant meta-linguistic meditation on the problems of incommunicability provoking levels of anxiety in every single character.⁴⁸ Vathek offers a reward to the person who can translate the message on the sabre, but he remains sceptical and claims that he will punish anyone who may be improvising or pretending. In fact, the caliph claims: "I have skill enough to distinguish whether one translates or invents".⁴⁹ What happens later is even more significant. When an old, wise man finally manages to unveil the inscription, Vathek realizes that the words on the sabre magically change and their significance is consequently altered. He angrily dismisses the old man: "but it was not long before Vathek discovered abundant reason to regret his precipitation; for, though he could not decipher the characters himself, yet, by constantly poring upon them, he plainly perceived that they everyday changed; and, unfortunately, no other candidate offered to explain them". In a different context later on, Vathek is again furious at not being able to obtain a special "key" that the Giaour had promised him: "No language could express his rage and despair. He execrated the perfidy of the Indian; loaded him with the most infamous invectives; and stamped with his foot, as resolving to be heard". Knowing Beckford's personal passion for languages ancient and modern, we may

⁴⁸ The protagonist's inability to decipher meanings or his strange capacity for misunderstanding messages are connected to a form of unattainable disambiguation of real significance, which has been conjectured by Professor Eco in his studies on the problematic but indispensable nature of translation. See: Umberto Eco's texts, *Experiences in Translation* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2001) and *Mouse or Rat? Translation as Negotiation* (London: Phoenix, 2004). Eco analysed the problems inevitably accompanying every form of translation either diachronic or synchronic. The difficulties (impossibility) of transposing a language into another, anxiously felt by Lucretius and, in a different way, by Vathek, can be found in both Eco's texts. It might be interesting to notice that the anonymous translator of Lucretius, whose work we are using here, wrote about the enormous difficulties in translating Lucretius in his Preface: "The Matter of this Poem must be confessed to be rugged, subtle, and stubborn; and every Composition of this Kind is like a Landscape, where craggy Mountains and broken Walls are intermixed with fair Meadows and smooth Streams. Our language [...] runs into Froth and Bubbles, is copious in Complement, and in Love Expressions, but very narrow and barren in Terms of Art, and Phrases suited to Philosophy; and those technical Words we have, more coarsely and cloudily in Verse. For these Reasons the Poetical Translation of Lucretius is often more perplexed and harsh than the Original" (*Nature*, p. V). He then mentions the difficulties found by his predecessors John Evelyn and Thomas Creech in their own words. Lucretius's metalinguistic awareness is passed on to future generations facing the mysteries of his masterpiece.

⁴⁹ *Vathek*, p. 9. The subsequent citations in this section are on pp. 12 and 27.

reasonably argue that the context is not only one of the many comic effects in the text, but it is also a meta-linguistic observation on the existence of an innumerable variety of lexicons. The mutating message on the golden sabre is a specimen of the myriad of existing languages and of the difficulty of knowing and understanding them. Also, the task of translating is an art that cannot be performed by everybody. Lucretius and Beckford share the same sensibility towards languages and the problem of sense, which has been systematically tackled by linguists, semioticians and pragmatists.

It is in Book IV, probably the most problematic section of *The Nature of Things* for its explicit contents, that Lucretius describes the *blanda voluptas*, which Dryden translated as “the genial Feat of Love”. Translators had avoided Book IV for its graphic sensuality and straightforward descriptions of sexual intercourse.⁵⁰ Lucretius illustrates the union of the bodies without using understatements or censorship, whereas lusty scenes are only hinted at in *Vathek*. Lucretius also provides a suggestion concerning the nourishment necessary to honour the acts ruled by Venus, rendered with a certain *pruderie* by the translator: “And the food we live upon is of no small importance; for the Seed increases through the limbs by some Meats, and it becomes watery and feeble by others”. I would not consider it a coincidence that one of the palaces dedicated to the five senses in the hill of Pied Horses contains “tables continually covered with the most exquisite dainties, which were supplied both by night and by day, according to their constant consumption; whilst the most delicious wines and the choicest cordials flowed forth from a hundred fountains that were never exhausted” The great variety of food creates stimuli to *Vathek*’s sensuality and lust.⁵¹

Beckford united an outstanding intellectual curiosity with a marked provocative genius. He juxtaposed latent classical tones with the Oriental emphasis on the surface. The characters that dominate the first part of the story are *Vathek* and his astute and ruthless mother,

⁵⁰ Dryden was one of the few who tried to transpose Lucretius’s passage literally. The anonymous translator of the prose version naively admits “I can translate no further. Dryden, in his *Miscellanies*, goes on in full vigour, and keeps up to the original”, and inserts Dryden’s explicit translation to complete the section in Book IV, Vol. 2: p. 105.

⁵¹ The importance of food mentioned above can be found in *Nature*, Book, IV, 1251-61; Vol. 2: p. 105. The passage about *Vathek* does not only describe the protagonist’s “sensuality” (*Vathek*, p. 3) but also shows how Beckford uses a form of poetic, and elegant prose. In this particular case the alliteration of the letter ‘f’ is a rhetorical device to underline the eternal flowing of the delicious libation. (*Vathek*, p. 2).

Carathis, the quintessence of cruelty. One significant example is when she makes preparation for Vathek's expedition: "During these preparations, Carathis, who never lost sight of her great object, which was to obtain favour with the power of darkness, made select parties of the fairest and most delicate ladies of the city: but in the midst of their gaiety, she contrived to introduce vipers amongst them, and to break pots of scorpions under the table. They all bit to wonder, and Carathis would have left her friends to die, were it not that, to fill up the time, she now and then amused herself in curing their wounds, with an excellent anodyne of her own invention: for the good Princess abhorred being indolent". The passage is an almost surreal illustration of the woman's wickedness, described in a light style interspersed with irony, tending to the grotesque.⁵² Indifferent to any form of punishment that may be carried out against her, ruthless Carathis embodies the villain of the story. The hideous sacrifices she is ready to perform, to obtain the devilish Giaour's favour, are inexorably useless: whether it is fifty innocent children, her zealous subjects, or whoever may be in her way to power, she is ready to carry out the most gruesome actions in view of her conquest of supreme magic. Her blind devotion to the dark forces proves to be delusional. She is cold-blooded and ferocious, but equally hermeneutically inadequate.

When the young caliph starts his journey in search of the mysterious Eblis, he is momentarily separated from his mother but a new feminine figure enters the scene. The celestially beautiful Nourinihar conquers the young man's heart. Although she is already promised to the equally dazzling pre-adolescent Gulchenrouz, Vathek decides to seduce her. However, the figure of Gulchenrouz stands between them. He embodies an ambivalent presence for his feminine beauty that seems to exacerbate Vathek's feelings.⁵³ Even if Gulchenrouz does not interact with the Caliph, who openly loves his betrothed cousin, his languid ingenuity creates a sexual tension that Beckford emphasizes with insistence. Interestingly, a passage in Lucretius's fourth Book is about falling in love. Here the poet makes a

⁵² *Vathek*, 38-9.

⁵³ When Beckford's authorship of *Vathek* became known, many commentaries were characterized by gossip. Lonsdale explains that Hester Lynch Piozzi made some remarks in her journal on 3 January 1791 about "Mr. Beckford's *favourite propensity*, [which] is all along visible I think; particularly in the luscious Descriptions given of Gulchenrouz" (Lonsdale, p. xxi). In spite of the passing of years and even though there is no sexual interaction whatsoever between the caliph and other male characters in the text, the prurient readers' morbid attention was always concentrated on that particular aspect, connected with the author's sexuality.

distinction between different forms of love. Cupid's arrows can create a passion for either a beautiful woman or a sweet pre-adolescent boy: "So he that is struck with the darts of *Venus* (whether some beauteous Boy, with Female Charms, the Arrow casts; or some more beauteous Maid, that shoots out Love from every Pore) tends to the Part that gave the Stroke; he is in Raptures to enjoy, to inject and to consummate; for the hot Desire to the Act foreshows the mighty Pleasure that attends it".⁵⁴ Although Beckford stresses *Vathek's* love for the beautiful girl, he insists on ambiguously underlining the boy's superior beauty. Once *Vathek* meets the two young people he is completely obsessed with lust and seems to showcase Lucretius's ideas on physical passion described in his Fourth Book.

In a moving passage, Lucretius warns against superstition and cruel rituals. He claims that the most horrendous of all is Iphigenia's sacrifice that her father Agamemnon is willing to accomplish before leaving for Troy:

But in these things I fear you will suspect you are learning impious Rudiments of Reason, and entering in a Road of Wickedness. So far from this, reflect what sad flagitious Deeds Religion has produced; by her inspired the Grecian Chiefs, the First of Men at *Aulis*, *Diana's* altar shamefully defiled with Iphigenia's Blood; her Virgin Hair a Fillet bound, which hung in equal length on either side her Face [sic]; she saw her Father, cover'd with Sorrow, stand before the Altar; for pity to his Grief the butchering Priests concealed the Knife; the City at the sight o'erflowed with tears; the Virgin, dumb with Fear, fell low upon her knees on the hard Earth; in vain the wretched Princess in Distress pleaded that the first gave the honoured Name of Father to the King's but hurried off, and dragged by wicked Hands, she trembling stood before the Altar: Alas! Not as a Virgin, the solemn Forms being duly done, is drawn with pleasing Force to Hymen's noble Rites, but a chaste Maid, just ripe for nuptial Joy, falls a sad Victim by a Father's Hand, only to beg a kind propitious gale for Grecian Ships: such scenes of Villainy Religion could inspire!⁵⁵

Lucretius's passionate harangue is rhetorically meant both to convince his audience of the rightness of his thought and to highlight the excesses dictated by irrational belief. Most victims in *Vathek* are young and even though their destruction is often narrated in an apparently

⁵⁴ *Nature*, Book IV, lines 1046-51; Vol. 2: p. 89.

⁵⁵ *Nature*, Book I, lines 80-101; Vol. 1: p. 13.

mocking and superficial tone, the innermost cruelty and injustice of the action is dramatically evident. Carathis, and Vathek as well, show a distorted form of religiosity and superstition, which is similar to the one abhorred by Lucretius and described in the passage above. We may think that Vathek's gloomy ending is the metaphor of an Epicurean teaching gone wrong. What Lucretius claims in his fifth Book is intriguing because he coincidentally anticipates in a few verses Beckford's protagonist's sad parable:

But Men strive to be renowned and powerful, that their Fortune May stand firm upon a lasting Foundation, and the Wealthy cannot fail to live at ease. All absurd! For those who labour to reach the highest Honours, make a very unhappy Journey in the End: Envy, like a Thunderbolt, strikes them from the Pinnacle of their Glory, and tumbles them down with Scorn into an Abyss of Misery.⁵⁶

The "Abyss of Misery", which is described by Lucretius in the original Latin version as the "Tartara taetra" in Book II - the gloomy Tartarus - is represented by the Hall of Eblis, where "the ruins of an immense palace" with "gloomy watch-towers (...) of an architecture unknown [that] inspired emotions of terror" will forever enclose Vathek. I would like to cite again from Lucretius because his words strongly corroborate images that can be applied to Vathek and his everlasting anguish:

One, tired at home, leaves his noble Seat, and goes often abroad but returns suddenly again; for he finds no Relief by shifting his Place. Another hurries and drives full-speed to his Country-house, as it was all o' fire, and he came to extinguish it; he no sooner sets his foot within the doors, but presently begins to yawn, or falls heavily to sleep, and strives to forget himself, or else posts as hard back, and returns to Town again. Thus he tries all ways to fly himself, but that Self it is, as it must be, out of his power to escape; he sticks close to him against his will, and sorely torments him. The restless Fool does not know the Cause of his Disease, if he thoroughly did, Every one would give up all other Pursuits, and apply chiefly to search into the Nature of Things.⁵⁷

The only way out for individuals is the will to study the physical world surrounding them and slowly discover the real essence of existence - an impossible task for Vathek who is prey to his unrelenting proclivity. Lucretius's rich narrations provide more topics that can be detected in

⁵⁶ *Nature*, Book V, lines 1120-26; Vol. 2: p. 205.

⁵⁷ *Nature*, Book III, lines 1074-83; Vol. 1: p. 287.

Vathek. The description of the ruins at the entrance of Eblis or the destruction of Carathis' high tower may have been influenced by Lucretius's fifth Book, which shows the collapse of temples because of the inevitable laws of nature. Lucretius stresses the beauty of nature but also its extreme violence. One of the images conveying major impact is the representation of a terrible sea storm at the beginning of the second Book. However, it is the sixth Book of the *Nature of Things*, almost completely dedicated to the most intense phenomena, that conveys particularly dramatic portrayals of the disruptive character of nature. Interestingly, frightening atmospheric events take place in *Vathek* and their effects are both devastating and ominous: "before they could reach the ascent of the steepest rock, night overtook them, and a boisterous tempest arose. (...) The dark clouds that overcast the face of the sky deepened the horrors of this disastrous night".⁵⁸ The same strong wind and an even more formidable storm breaks out when Carathis starts her last journey towards Eblis. The most dramatic effects of nature accompany all the protagonists. Intriguingly, both Beckford and Lucretius depict a particularly lugubrious environment, which instils deep pessimism.⁵⁹ Once the illusion of power has been destroyed, all characters in *Vathek* are suddenly taken by a terrible inner pain coming from their hearts that "took fire", a fire that will burn in perpetuity. The strange counterpart in Lucretius is the account of the plague in Athens: "The Head was first attack'd with furious Heats, and then the Eyes turn'd bloodshot and inflamed; the Jaws within sweated with black bloods; the Throat (the Passage of the Voice) was stopt by Ulcers; the Tongue (the Interpretation of the Mind) o'erflowed with Gore, and falter'd with the Disease, felt rough, and scarce could move".⁶⁰ What is particularly interesting is that all of the terrible effects of the disease finally flow to the heart before provoking a horrible death. I would argue that the image of the heart as the centre of physical (Lucretius) and moral (Beckford) contamination is particularly strong and effective and further confirms the deep connection between the two authors and the undeniable influence of Lucretius on Beckford.

⁵⁸ *Vathek*, p. 46.

⁵⁹ The last part of Lewis's novel *The Monk* is equally mournful and violent. A horrid finale was chosen by Lewis to conclude his protagonist's sad parable.

⁶⁰ (VI, 1145-51; 2: 321)

Vathek contains a variety of sources, ideas and images that make it difficult to decipher the work in a final satisfactory way. Its dimension is complex, its real meaning completely obscure. Its Oriental façade is majestic, but actually hides many other essential components that belong to different cultural universes. Whereas the French Enlightenment leaves some traces, and the Dantesque *Inferno* moulds Beckford's finale, the Gothic dominates the plot on various occasions releasing strange fears that are deeper than in previous Gothic novels by Horace Walpole, Clara Reeve, or Sophia Lee.⁶¹ Beckford constructs a strange narrative performance that is at the same time poetic and theatrical, based on extreme visual effects. The text's classical stance and Lucretius's ideas permeates every page despite its apparent exoticism.

Historical observation played an important role in the genesis of *Vathek*. An outstanding historical work, published in the decade between the 1770s and the 1780s, is Edward Gibbon's majestic *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. The historian's encyclopaedic masterpiece was an exhaustive analysis of the genesis, development and end of the Roman Empire. An admirer and friend of David Hume, William Robertson, Adam Smith, and Adam Ferguson, Gibbon had developed his historical method following the patterns dictated by Enlightenment and Nicolò Machiavelli's teachings connected with civic humanism. Machiavelli and, I would add, Francesco Guicciardini), were observers of virtue and its potential development or degeneration in politics. Their studies had a deep impact on Gibbon, who extensively travelled to Switzerland and Italy to make observations and researches to complete his historical works. Gibbon also extended his study to important details on Asian and Arabian civilizations, which had been comprised in some regions of the Empire and became very popular. *Vathek*'s excesses are exaggerated and improbable, but his whims might revive notions of ancient Roman Emperors' folly, such as those of Caligula and Nero. It may be plausible to think that Beckford, who had been an attentive and brilliant student, had reversed all of his possible knowledge in *Vathek*, a text that is comparable to a literary and cultural blend of composite styles and ideas. A further credible comparison can be carried out with a classical

⁶¹ For Dante in *Vathek*, see Maria Teresa Marnieri, "Infernal Imagery. Dante in William Beckford's *Vathek*, and Matthew G. Lewis's *The Monk*, in *European Academic Research*, Vol. V, Issue 7 (October 2017), 3927-53.

text that was extremely inventive and at the same time profoundly critical of its contemporary corrupted society. *Vathek*'s extravagant protagonist could also be considered as the double of the shamefully rich Trimalchio who indulges in every pleasure. Trimalchio is one of the most hideous characters in Petronius Arbiter's *Satyricon*.⁶² The work, whose entire text was never retrieved and that is narrated in the form of a novel, had been translated by William Burnaby in 1694, but could be found in multiple versions. It was a scandalous text, but also a precious analysis of the customs of the times, especially of the lower classes, which were not generally depicted when Petronius was active. One of the possible meanings of Petronius's text is that opulence and wealth cannot save Trimalchio. Neither can *Vathek* use his unlimited riches to save himself from his horrible doom in a Gothic hell, the perfect representation of Lucretius's "Abyss of Misery".

London, 2016

⁶² Petronius Arbiter *Elegantiarum* (ca. 27-66 AD) came from the ancient town of Massalia, now Marseille in France. He belonged to a later generation (compared to Virgil, Horace and Ovid), being a contemporary of Emperor Nero. Petronius was a person of rare and superior elegance. A lover of riches and luxury, he led a profligate and voluptuous life, according to Tacitus's testimony in his *Annals*. Petronius described the decadence of Rome in his celebrated *Satyricon* (ca. 60-4 AD), a semi-fantastic ironic story describing luxury and excesses, which was actually full of allusions to real people. The protagonist is in love with his young servant, a handsome sixteen-year-old boy and object of sexual desire for both men and women.

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