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The Hegemonic Outsider: William Beckford's Lisbon Journal

This day three years ago I little dreamt of ever having a conference with friars in Portugal. I was then on the high road to fame and dignity, courted by Mr. Pitt, fawned upon by all his adherents, worshipped and glorified by my Scotch kindred, and cajoled by that cowardly effeminate fool William Courtenay.

The Journal of William Beckford in Portugal and Spain 1787-1788

In March 1787, William Beckford (1760-1844) landed in Lisbon. One of the richest men in England, he was the only son of a Jamaican planter and an aristocratic mother. In his adolescence and early adulthood he had refined his precocious artistic tastes, a process which had culminated in the writing of *Vathek* (1786), the work which was to establish his fame as a Gothic novelist and orientalist. He had also travelled widely throughout Europe, producing his first volumes of travel reflections and acquiring the reputation of a connoisseur,

collector and ‘eccentric half-genius’.¹ In order to control his erratic (bi)sexual leanings, Beckford’s authoritarian mother had made him marry Lady Margaret Gordon. His possessions already included a rotten borough, but his family’s overall plan was to secure him a peerage to strengthen his prestige and political career.

As the introductory epigraph shows, in the early 1780s the plan was likely to be fulfilled,² but the so-called Powderham scandal radically changed the course of events. In those years, Beckford had begun a liaison with seventeen-year-old William Courtenay. In 1784 rumours were circulated by the Press that the two had been caught in an unnameable act during a sojourn at Powderham Castle, and the ensuing scandal grew to national proportions. This utterly destroyed Beckford’s reputation. He moved to Switzerland with his wife, who never abandoned him even in the face of her relatives’ indignation. There, in May 1786, she died after giving birth to their second daughter. Recently widowed and bitterly ostracised at home, in 1787 Beckford accepted his family’s suggestion that he visit their Jamaican estates. Lisbon was meant to be only a temporary

place of transit. Unexpectedly, he took up his residence in the Portuguese capital for six months and forever renounced his Caribbean destination.

The present essay focuses on Beckford's diary of those months, which testifies to his attempt to regain his respectability through a series of intricate interactions with some forms of authority of his time: the social position of West Indian planters, the Portuguese aristocracy and Court, the English trading community in Lisbon, accepted norms on gender boundaries and religious influences between Protestantism and Catholicism. Textual authority is equally worthy of inclusion in this list: Beckford never made his journal public during his lifetime, probably fearing further damage to his vilified image. His biographer Boyd Alexander published it only in 1954. The author's 1834 published version is heavily expurgated of almost all the issues examined in this essay.

This Lusitanian perspective offers insights into Beckford's inconsistencies and contradictions towards power structures such as those listed above. These pages examine several ambiguities: first, his political 'conflict ... between his

outlook as a radical and his position as one of the greatest slave-owners of the day'.³ Secondly, his attraction for power and his opposite tendency to imaginative isolation. Thirdly, his repressed homosexuality. And finally, his half-hearted participation in Catholic liturgies. What is proposed here is that these attitudes seem to denote an ambivalent stance that impaired the full accomplishment of both his re-inclusion in power-wielding circles and his assumption of the defiant role which is sometimes conferred on him (supposedly, a precursor to the Romantic rebel). Hence the oxymoron in the title, 'the hegemonic outsider', meant to define what I here call his 'liminality', i.e. his manifold ways of indulging himself along a threshold between conflicting resolutions.

This operation implies a critical re-assessment of his figure, which is here attempted with the help of critical contributions from fields as diverse as Beckford studies (with a special emphasis on some postcolonial perspectives), travel writing and the history of sexuality.

The Forgetful Slavocrat

This investigation into the *Journal* starts from a feature its entries surprisingly omit: Jamaica, Beckford's original destination and source of his immense wealth. In the course of a six-month-long diary, only a single immaterial jotting is dedicated to this facet of his existence, even though many critics emphasise the uninhibited character of these written pages.⁴

Beckford's personal trajectory may be seen as exemplary in the context of eighteenth-century Britain. The Beckfords had occupied centre stage in Jamaica's plantocracy since the time of William's great-grandfather Peter, ruthless Lieutenant-Governor of the colony, whose son had proved equally powerful and unscrupulous. William's father had been a famous city radical, Member of Parliament and twice Mayor of London.⁵ Therefore, William descended from the typical planters' family who had amassed enormous fortunes and lavishly displayed them at home, 'buying a country estate or even a

seat in Parliament ... a familiar figure in English society'; this was the origin of the ludicrous literary stock character of the 'ostentatiously moneyed' planter.⁶ According to Sypher, 'one of the most obnoxious of West-Indian families was the Beckfords, who succeeded better than most in buying their way into Parliament; in 1753 three Beckford brothers held seats.'⁷ William Beckford, too, became the Member for Wells.⁸ It is likely that this reputation impinged upon the virulence of the Courtenay scandal with its ensuing ostracism.

Creole planters' absenteeism⁹ from the Caribbean was yet another feature which Beckford incarnated or, rather, magnified. Before he set out on his voyage, one of his letters from Falmouth said 'I cannot help confessing that no one ever embarked even for transportation with a heavier heart'¹⁰ – an observation which, amongst others, led to the supposition that that 'he had never bothered the slightest about his Jamaican sugar crops and plantations'.¹¹ The fact that Jamaica is conspicuous by its absence in the *Journal* seems to lend credit to Stephanie Smith's more drastic theory: 'Throughout his life, he displayed an effectively psychosomatic abhorrence of the very idea of travelling there.'¹²

The ‘high road to fame and dignity’ (*J* 61) which he recalls in the introductory epigraph is to be identified with his increasingly obsessive wish for a peerage, evident in his rejection of his father’s cobbler-and-slavocrat ancestry and in his romanticisation of his mother’s aristocratic lineage.¹³ Maria Hamilton was also a strict Calvinist, who took over William’s education after her husband’s sudden death in 1770 – her son nicknamed her ‘Her Supremacy’.¹⁴

In any case, the 1784 allegations of homosexual misconduct with young Courtenay were so socially impairing as to block his pursuit of a barony forever. At that time, allegations of homosexuality could lead to either being publicly disgraced and ridiculed, or being jailed or even sentenced to death. As George Haggerty notices in his *Men in Love*, this would greatly depend on the social class of the alleged ‘criminal’: ‘Records of 18th-century sodomy trials, such as they are, suggest no precedents for prosecuting a person of Beckford’s class or social status.’¹⁵ Nevertheless his career, reputation and dignity were certainly ruined.

A brief digression is in order here, to attempt an explanation of the situation in which Beckford found himself. His biographers certainly provide the most factual reasons for the scandal: Alexander¹⁶ shows how Beckford was probably a victim of a political rivalry between Lord Loughborough (Viscount of Powderham and uncle to Courtenay) and Lord Thurlow: 'Everyone knew that Beckford's coming peerage was due to Thurlow's influence; the latter could be wounded through his protégé's disgrace.' Alexander also hints at some bitter resentment on Loughborough's part, due to personal jealousies.¹⁷

If one places these specific struggles in a wider context with the help of homosexual studies and of research on the history of sexuality, Beckford's case acquires a significant resonance. Even though trials never involved upper-class people, the stereotype of that age saw sodomy as 'the final corruption of aristocracy'.¹⁸ Beckford had aristocratic connections through his mother and his wife, but ironically the scandal damaged precisely the possibility of his being awarded a peerage. Aristocrats would not attend the so-called molly houses¹⁹ and would not employ homosexual urban subcultures very often: rather, they

would rely on their travels abroad and on their family's tacit consent. Trumbach compares Beckford's case with Lord Bateman's, because they were both magnified to scandalous proportions by their being ostracised by the families of their wives.²⁰

Another interesting contextualisation of Beckford's misfortune is offered by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who emphasises a subtler strategy of control by dominant male culture alongside the violent pogroms against molly houses: homophobic blackmail, described as a very private and psychological pressure increasing vulnerability in its victims.²¹ She positions Beckford within this general phenomenon by combining the political struggle described by Alexander with anti-planter feelings: according to her, the scandal was 'created and periodically revived to keep his newly rich family from a peerage.'²²

On a more general level, many critics (including Trumbach and Kosofski Sedgwick) identify an epochal change in sexual roles that took place in the eighteenth century. During this period, a tacit acceptance of male sexual activity with both women and adolescent boys gradually ossified into rigid boundaries

for sexual activities and erotic fantasies - into the assumedly natural categories of normative heterosexuality and deeply stigmatised homosexuality.²³ As a consequence, sodomites and mollies were completely identified (against all material evidence) with women-haters and the effeminate.²⁴ The first epithet well fits the horrid slanders circulated long after the Powderham scandal, when the Press campaign 'reached new depths in accusing him [Beckford] of being responsible for his wife's death.'²⁵ The second epithet traces yet another connection with the stigma on aristocracy, whose degeneration came to be seen as incarnated in the unproductive sodomite. McKeon analyses how women and aristocrats shared some 'standard markers', such as dress and complexion, and how the kind of effeminacy formerly associated with cultural gentility was increasingly disparaged as unnatural.²⁶

The Missed Courtier

This, then, is the complex cultural context that contributed to the ostracism of Beckford.²⁷ To return to his arrival in Lisbon, his Portuguese *Journal* registers his attempts at recovering social status through various forms of authority, diplomatic and cultural channels.²⁸ With the support of some aristocrats, a plan was soon conceived for ‘smoothing my way home to England’ (*J* 133): a formal presentation at the Court of Queen Maria I, conceived as heralding a rehabilitation at home. This conviction, shared by both Beckford and his critics, shows how political influence could be manoeuvred from abroad.²⁹

Actually, both objective and psychological factors fatally hindered this project. First of all, social stigma proved to be just as supranational as political undercurrents. Beckford met with the cold hostility of most of the influential British commercial community, the so-called ‘Lisbon Factory’. At the time, trade exchange between the two countries was rich.³⁰ More generally, in Anglo-Portuguese relations the English acted as a protecting presence against Spain’s ambition over Portugal; Prime Minister Pombal’s modernising reconstruction of Lisbon after the disastrous 1755 earthquake had been inspired by English

commercial institutions.³¹ The Lisbon Factory met by Beckford was championed by the envoy Robert Walpole (Sir Robert's nephew and Horace's cousin), and placed great value on the prestige and influence of their Ambassador.³² Unfortunately for Beckford, Walpole always refused to introduce him officially to Court, as etiquette would require. Alexander and Jack both explain this ostracism as a personality battle between two difficult characters: a proud, well-established diplomat and an equally haughty, extremely rich esquire; moralistic gossip from the rest of the British community in Lisbon is supposed to have added spice to it.³³ One of the crucial aspects of the *Journal*'s entries is constituted by the many unsuccessful tries by Beckford's supporters to overcome the Queen's reluctance to disregard etiquette, resulting in spiteful references to 'that malevolent cuckold Walpole', 'a venomous reptile' (*J* 42, 125) and to what Beckford calls 'the English cabal' (*J* 122).³⁴

Secondly, Beckford's scheme was further undermined by his own half-hearted commitment. His artistic temperament and refined education increasingly jarred with the piety dominating Portuguese society and

government, where ‘the influence of the Church and the Inquisition had almost completely ousted what remained of the reforming spirit of the previous [Prime Minister Pombal’s] age’.³⁵ Beckford wondered at the narrow cultural horizons he met; artistic conversations were deflated by ridiculous observations from characters such as a famous Jesuit and ‘a tall, knock-kneed rhubarb-faced physician in a gorgeous suit of glistening satins, the most ungainly, ill-favoured, conceited puppy I ever beheld.’ (*J* 100) Beckford’s sarcasm about what he was finally to call ‘this region of poverty and ignorance’ (*J* 214) is often unsparing, verging on disgust when witnessing a bull fight

The poor beasts gave no sign of courage or ferocity, no furious pawings, no tearing up of the ground. I never saw a quieter party in one of the cow yards of Tottenham Court Road.
(*J* 126)

or a play:

the actors, for there are no actresses, below criticism. Her majesty, who to be sure is all prudence and piety, has swept females off the stage and commanded their places to be supplied by calvish young fellows. (*J* 149)³⁶

Significantly, the following entry is limited to: ‘No paladin who drank at the fountains of Merlin was ever more suddenly disenchanted.’ (*J* 150)

His reference to the world of knightly romance can be interpreted in the light of his much-quoted penchant for escapist sallies into dreams, visions and other-worldly artistic musings, especially in his earlier works, which has prompted scholarly references to his writings as anticipating Romantic aesthetics.³⁷ In the *Journal*, Beckford repeatedly refers to fits of boredom and ennui (‘I sink deeper and deeper in the slough of idleness and stupidity’, *J* 159), against which he opposes re-creations of reality, narrations of his dreams and imaginative voyages to natural retreats: ‘regions of chalk and pasture, where I may sleep upon new mown hay, and breathe the fresh mountain air uncontaminated by the breath of slaves and bigots wallowing in the slough’ (*J* 148); not by chance, the *Journal* twice mentions his reading of Theocritus, father of the pastoral genre (*J*

238, 244). Beckford's long stays in the village of Ramalhão (in the Sintra area) seemed to partially satisfy his bucolic longings.

If one follows the shared assumption that, in travel writing (of which journals are usually considered a subgenre),³⁸ the balance of that dialogue 'between the mind of the traveller and the observable world has not remained a constant',³⁹ Beckford's imaginative flights could be taken as exemplary of the late-18th-century shift from world/object to mind/subject, whereby: 'the emotions, thoughts, and personal quirks of the narrator become more accessible and more dominant within the narrative.'⁴⁰ Barbara Korte notices how, contemporaneously with this new value attached to subjective experience, '[i]t is not a coincidence that travel writing is now frequently published in the form of the diary, the journal or the letter – autobiographical forms which are particularly suited to the immediate expression of personal experience.'⁴¹

To return to Beckford's frustrations, one exception to that cultural atmosphere is certainly concerned with music, the Portuguese Court being renowned for its lavish patronage and training of European (particularly Italian) singers.⁴²

Beckford did not miss the opportunity to hire many of the most important among them, in order to cultivate his musical talents and provide some entertainment for his guests.

But the rest of the scenario appeared rather bleak for his sophisticated tastes, including his dearest connection in Lisbon, the influential 5th Marquis of Marialva, faithful friend of his Portuguese months, ‘open and disinterested’ (*J* 231). ‘His regard for me is truly parental’ (*J* 140), Beckford writes of the man who had not hesitated to confront Walpole publicly for his sake (*J* 123, 268). Nevertheless, he could not help noticing how consistent Marialva’s character was with his country’s unlearned insularity:

I am grieved to find a man I honour and esteem, so far gone in the labyrinth of bigotry ...
Not a book to be seen at the Marialvas. They never read. (*J* 118, 141)

The Marialvas were one of the most influential families in Portugal; they had enjoyed the Crown’s protection for a long time and occupied important positions

at Court, such as ‘Hereditary Masters of the Horse’.⁴³ Their role is not to be neglected, also because they offered Beckford the most solid hope of recovering political authority: ‘he destines me for D. Henriqueta his eldest daughter and flatters himself with prevailing on the Queen to offer me such honours and distinction as may engage me to establish myself in Portugal.’ (*J* 87)

The Missed Husband

The planned marriage with one of the most influential families in Portugal would certainly have overcome any obstacle to a formal introduction at court: ‘D. Henriqueta in point of blood and connections has few equals in Europe’ (*J* 98). On the other hand, it might have implied a further severance from longed-for England. This is one of the reasons why, once again, Beckford’s enthusiasm in the face of an alluring opening into political authority often wavered, undermined by his recurrent bouts of nostalgia for

the various and tender ties that bound me to England – the place of my nativity [Fonthill] which I had rendered so eminently beautiful, the spot where my poor Margaret's remains were laid [she had died in childbirth some thirteen months earlier], my mother, my children!

as he tried to explain to the Marquis (*J* 117).⁴⁴ His regard for the Marialvas constituted a further source of hesitancy: 'I have no fixed plan concerning her [the Marquis's daughter], and should be miserable to disturb the peace of a family I so sincerely love and honour.' (*J* 105)

But most of all, Beckford appeared reluctant to accept a marriage which would thrust him into the already mentioned mechanisms of power. Predictably, his free-thinking frame of mind abhorred the time Marialva wasted in dancing attendance on the Queen, 'twirling our thumbs round and round' (*J* 107), and which 'may be too justly termed a state of downright slavery' (*J* 276). He became increasingly impatient with 'this servile country' (*J* 75), 'this servile Court' (*J* 233), 'the dirt, dullness and despotism of Portugal' (*J* 136) magnified

in his eyes by pervasive hordes of servants and beggars (*J* 59, 277). Regarding the marriage issue and its implications, he reached moments of disarming self-insight:

I should make a wretched courtier and should grumble myself into total disgrace the first evening I was forced to dangle after the Queen to a convent or sit down to a card table ... But what talents have I for Court intrigue? None. I am too indolent, too listless, to give myself any trouble. (*J* 124, 200)

Beckford's indecision on the issue, however, was also intensified by his restless and uncertain sexual identity. The scholars on homosexuality mentioned above would probably consider his behaviour residual of an idea regarding sexual roles that the eighteenth-century change would decisively oust, whereas George Haggerty appears to see the phenomenon at its initial stage: 'same-sex desire is rarely spoken of in exclusionary terms at this time ... the homo/hetero binary is meaningless in the 18th century, even if the cultural advantages of sexual discrimination were just beginning to be understood.'⁴⁵ In any case, all these

scholars share the view of a slow, gradual shift. Within this fluid context, in his volume *Sultry Climates* Ian Littlewood aptly discusses the great number of Grand Tour travellers who were longing for greater sexual freedom (both hetero and homosexual) abroad and whose actions formed a hidden, unspeakable palimpsest for their official cultural activities, thereby opening a gulf between their published travel literature and their private diaries and letters.⁴⁶ Littlewood does not examine Beckford's *Journal*; nevertheless, similarly to those private jottings of Boswell's which he analyses in depth, the *Journal* is peppered with sexual stimuli, daydreams and innuendoes.⁴⁷ A 'romantic' beach is enough to trigger off a sensual fantasy:

How I should enjoy stretching myself on its sands by moonlight and owning all my frailties and wild imaginations to some love-sick languid youth reclined by my side and thrown by the dubious light and undecided murmurs into a soft delirium. Alas, will my youth pass away without my feeling myself once more tremblingly alive to these exquisite though childish sensations? (*J* 46-47)⁴⁸

These lines hint at his having to refrain from indulging in his whims, since he was now living in a strictly religious society he was not familiar with, and had to be wary of his reputation. Thus, unlike Boswell, in most cases his impulses were not put into practice.⁴⁹ Similarly unrealised were his encounters with those ladies and girls who awakened his fantasies (*J* 72-74, 153, 155); besides, upper-class women were not allowed much freedom of movement in Catholic Portugal. Possibly for this reason, too, his attraction to boys seemed to push him much closer to physical intercourse. This was the case in his relationship with 17-year-old Gregorio Franchi, a choir-boy at the Patriarchal Seminary, whom Beckford took under his protection and would later employ as his secretary in England: ‘I loaded Franchi with childish caresses and he gambolled along with an awkward calvish vivacity’ (*J* 164).⁵⁰ To this, Alexander added a footnote saying ‘After *caresses*, a whole line is too heavily deleted to decipher’, as if Beckford had felt the necessity to expunge his own thoughts.⁵¹ This passage is significant of how little one can be certain about the real nature of these relationships: Alexander ambiguously writes that all was kept ‘within certain

bounds (far though he went)';⁵² Jack states that Beckford 'may have resisted sexual involvement', though with difficulties;⁵³ Fothergill vaguely supposes that he and Franchi had been lovers for a while.⁵⁴

A similar position (with an ensuing similar uncertainty on the critics' part)⁵⁵ was reached with Dom Pedro, the 13-year-old son of the Marquis, to whom the *Journal* dedicates the most frequent and heartfelt professions of love, such as:

The idea that my affection is so tenderly returned gave me such transports that I could not eat ... Tomorrow! Tomorrow! He loves me. I have tasted the sweetness of his lips; his dear eyes have confessed the secret of his bosom. (*J* 242)⁵⁶

Their connection had its ups and downs, because Beckford was often impatient at Pedro's passivity and tameness, 'cooped up with a herd of toothless duennas and superannuated chaplains, equally narrowing his mind by their threats and their praises' (*J* 53);⁵⁷ he detected in the boy the same servile spirit he felt about the local aristocracy (*J* 233). In any case, at the apex of their relationship, Verdeil (Beckford's personal physician) warned him about 'the danger which

might arise from D. Pedro conceiving for me too fond and unlimited an attachment', leaving Beckford 'lost in an ocean of perplexities' (*J* 243, 244). Three days later, a frightfully gory dream involving his family in England (*J* 247) sharpened his anxiety. Even though one can hardly define these relationships fully, the *Journal* clearly shows how emotionally fraught they were. When analyzing Beckford's early 1780s writing on his feelings for William Courtenay, George Haggerty emphasises what he calls 'Beckford's sexual sensibility':

the nervous anxiety, almost irritability, the romantic fiction, the imaginative isolation, the mist, the barrier between life and death ... These elements are so worked and reworked over the next five years – some throughout his entire life – that they begin to have an identificatory quality quite unlike that of any simple report of sodomitical behaviour.⁵⁸

Haggerty elevates Beckford as a writer expressing a complex sexual identity and reacting to stigmatising labels attached to homosexuality at the time. In this light, he views Beckford's fits of pain and melancholy as a natural reaction to

‘the codification of gender and to the increasing pathologisation of love between men’, and the same goes for his escapist visions. Therefore, Beckford’s complex sexual identity is taken as paradigmatic of what Haggerty means by the transgressive potential of ‘love’:

Two men having sex threatens no one. Two men in love: that begins to threaten the very foundations of heterosexist culture.⁵⁹

Situated beyond the five-year span mentioned by Haggerty, Beckford’s *Portuguese Journal* (not mentioned by the critic) seems to describe other subtle love feelings, like the one for Dom Pedro; but the instability of Beckford’s situation discussed so far, besides his bitter past experiences, might have conferred a more cynical, caustic and drastic shade to his tone and perspective on the whole affair.⁶⁰ In one case, he fantasises about Franchi, soon to be presented to him:

I have half a mind to sleep in peace and coolness at Sintra; but then the Patriarchal and Polycarpo's *young friend* –. I shall get into a scrape if I don't take care. How tired I am of keeping a mask on my countenance. *How tight it sticks – it makes me sore*. There's *metaphor for you*. I have all the fancies and levity of *a child* and would give an estate or two to skip about the galleries of the Patriarchal with the menino *unobserved*. D. Pedro is *not child enough for me*. (J 41, emphases mine)

Here he blends self-censorship (the dash following his mention of Franchi), sexual desire (the 'scrape'), a salacious joke not devoid of self-irony (the tight mask that makes him ache, possibly alluding to other parts of his body) and his objection to Pedro's character. The 'child' reference adds a further nuance to Beckford's complex case; Anderson euphemistically calls it 'his childlike vivacity', as in the following self-description: 'the high clear notes of my voice ... My movements, gestures, attitudes become, whenever I please, as careless, sportive and supple as those of a child.' (J 120)⁶¹ Wahba rightly identifies a 'general obsession with "childishness" in Beckford's personal reveries', to which he gives a threefold interpretation: a form of narcissism; an anticipation

of later Romantic issues; and an escape from responsibilities.⁶² The third option might explain his constant hesitations, misgivings and falterings. In any case, any further sexual scrape would have run the risk of thwarting another facet of his strategy towards rehabilitation, i.e. his approach to religious authority.

The Celebrated Devotee (and Missed Recanter)

From the very beginning of his Portuguese stay, Beckford conducted himself devoutly, but his *Journal* reveals a self-awareness which exposes his church-going as a pose:

I was exalted into heaven as they were executing [music at the Patriarchal church], and will certainly return tomorrow. Much staring at me as I went out and great demonstrations of respect etc. etc. ... I knelt near the altar with much devotion. My piety I believe caught the eyes of the high priest, a good old man but a determined bigot I hear, and so orthodox that

the Queen, who is clemency itself, would not trust him with the office of Grand Inquisitor lest his zeal might thin her kingdom, depopulated enough o' my conscience. (*J* 39, 42)

Inevitably, his liberal disposition is at odds with the pious climate he has to deal with, and his usual dry irony acquires tones of impatience: 'Gabble, gabble, gabble – never heard such a jabbering in all my life', he writes about the Marialvas reciting the rosary (*J* 156). Besides, his undermining self-awareness increases with the passing of time: 'The opportunity of perfecting myself in hypocritical cant was too good to be neglected' is his comment on a conversation with Father Almeida (*J* 84).

True, he sometimes seems honestly captivated by religion. His renowned gothic taste is tinged with awe 'when I beheld by the glow of flaming lamps so many venerable figures in their black and white habits bending their eyes on the pavement and absorbed in gloomy meditations.' (*J* 182)⁶³ Lees-Milne aptly writes that he was drawn to the ritual, rather than accepting the dogma.⁶⁴

His attachment to St. Anthony of Padua is likewise marked by ambiguity. It began before Portugal and lasted until the end of his life, but it certainly reached its apex in his 1787 Portuguese months, when he shaped for himself the reputation, which ‘spreads prodigiously’ (*J* 76), of favourite of the saint.⁶⁵ One aristocratic gossip even claimed that the saint had appeared to Beckford (*J* 71). Though ‘undoubtedly sincere’, this attachment comes out as ‘a sort of offhand manner which was as much affectionate as devotional, amused as reverential.’⁶⁶ The following quote supports this interpretation:

I hear there is no conversation in Lisbon but of my piety. Really this joke begins to have its inconveniences. I am incessantly plagued with deputations from convents, epistles and holy greetings ... But in for a penny in for a pound, as the vulgar saying is. I have talked myself fairly into this scrape⁶⁷ and must get out of it as well as I can. (*J* 81)

Two further interferences weaken his complete adherence to the role of devotee. First, his sexual desires did not vanish within holy bounds: at the Patriarchal he fantasised about the choir-boys, but ‘the fear of scandal kept me in prudent

silence and gravity.’ (*J* 44)⁶⁸ Secondly, his behaviour started rumours about a possible conversion to Catholicism which scared his relatives at home (*J* 109, 194). Although the *Journal* clearly shows no intention of abjuring (*J* 124), the rumour might have loomed as yet another source of misgivings, working against a more permanent bond with Portugal.

His worry was probably not misplaced. When Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick analyses the presence of homophobia in the Gothic novel, she lists a series of eighteenth-century associations to homosexual roles which are all linked to the genre: ‘effeminacy, connoisseurship, high religion, and an interest in Catholic Europe’⁶⁹ – it is curious how Beckford increasingly fitted the stereotype, also considering his authorship of *Vathek*, one the masterpieces of Gothic fiction.

The Hegemonic Outsider

On the eve of his departure from Portugal in November 1787, Beckford wavers between feelings of relief and sudden bouts of melancholy: the Marialvas lamenting his departure are described ‘like a chorus of a Greek tragedy’ (*J* 274). He visited Portugal again in 1793-6. In the interim, he travelled on the Continent, in Switzerland and in France, where he was a witness to some key events of the French Revolution.⁷⁰ In 1795 he was presented to the Prince Regent, in spite of Walpole’s complaints.⁷¹ In 1798-9 he paid his third and last visit to Portugal.

Thereafter he secluded himself at Fonthill and later at Bath until his death, but his rapport with Portugal is deemed seminal for his life and literary output.⁷² This is particularly evident in Malcolm Jack’s monograph *William Beckford: An English Fidalgo* (1996), whose pivotal idea is the influence of his Portuguese years on the second part of his life and its literary output, architectural enterprises and final reclusion. Amongst other things, this essay is meant to be a modest integration to Jack’s volume, showing how Beckford’s ambivalence towards power structures was developed in Portugal and contributed to the

formation of his character as a whole. His letters after 1800 testify to his recurrent nostalgia for ‘my own true country’, and of his plans to return definitively despite the blockades.⁷³ As Wahba observes, he never really belonged to either country.⁷⁴ This, too, is linked with what this essay has attempted to emphasise: Beckford’s liminality, his tiptoeing along many thresholds, his flirtations with different (sometimes antithetic) identities and forms of authority.

An analogous conclusion may be reached if one follows Ian Littlewood’s classification of Grand Tour travellers in three general categories: Connoisseur, Pilgrim and Rebel. Beckford could sometimes be seen as fitting the first, when his astonishing erudition backs his detached, judgemental gaze on Portuguese beauties and flaws. At other times, he seems not far from the Pilgrim type, thanks to the empathy of his inconstantly involved perspective: in spite of his scathing irony on many Portuguese customs, after all, Beckford is said to have immersed himself in Portuguese society more than most foreign writers travelling there – and to have reacted less irritably.⁷⁵ Given the reason for

Beckford's voyage, Littlewood inserts his figure in the third group, as the prototype of the Romantic Rebel;⁷⁶ had he included the *Journal* amongst his sources, he could have quoted the passages where Beckford likens himself to the Wandering Jew and expresses 'sympathy for the old Dragon ... Alas, we are both fallen angels!' (*J* 124, 213)

However, had Littlewood done so, he could have come to the same conclusion as this essay, i.e. that things are not so simple. Beckford's relationship with power structures is too ambiguous and wavering to allow a definite categorisation as 'rebel'. Possibly influenced by the unprecedented popularity enjoyed by travel narratives between 1770 and 1840⁷⁷ (and by their increasing focus on the Iberian Peninsula),⁷⁸ in 1834 he even published his 1787 *Journal* as part of his *Travel-Diaries*, expunging all private facets – his contest with Walpole, sexual longings and devout performances, amongst others, as if hoping for a late rehabilitation.⁷⁹

Earlier than that, too, he showed other contradictory attitudes. In 1796 he was back in England with a political mission entrusted to him by the Regent of

Portugal, but snubbed by William Pitt. Hence, his growing defiance towards the Establishment resulted in the corrosive satires of the regime's antidemocratic ideas in his novels *Modern Novel Writing* (1796) and *Azemias* (1797)⁸⁰ and in his charity towards the impoverished labourers,⁸¹ both echoing his intolerance of the slavish character of Portuguese society. It is evident, though, that these political positions (Radical Whig, at times Jacobin) jarred with his resolute opposition to the cries for reform, and especially to the abolition of slavery and to Wilberforce's parliamentary campaign: as an outsider, he often proved to be a markedly hegemonic one.⁸² He seems to epitomise that 'glaring discrepancy between thought and practice', typical of western Enlightenment, with regard to the right to freedom.⁸³

Recent postcolonial criticism has deeply investigated this discrepancy. Beside the abovementioned Stephanie Smith, one should recall P.H. Knox-Shaw's reading of *Vathek* through the perspective of the heated debate around slavery in the West Indies.⁸⁴ The issue has been well known for a long time, as the quotation from Alexander's 1962 biography (see introduction to this essay)

shows. Nevertheless, for many decades before and after Alexander's volume, many critics, while showing awareness of it, seemed to undermine it at the same time, by defining Beckford as someone who protested all his life 'against those conventions of society that made men and women into machines';⁸⁵ a 'champion of rights'⁸⁶ with an 'intellectual integrity';⁸⁷ someone with a 'fundamentally humanitarian spirit',⁸⁸ who, in any case, did not suffer from racial prejudice.⁸⁹

One such case of this critical idealisation can be found in his *Lisbon Journal*, where a 'negro beldame' is seen being dragged out of a city ditch, 'whether by a Familiar of the Inquisition or no I will not pretend to answer. Be that as it will, I was happy to be driven out of sight of this hideous object whose howlings struck me with horror.' (*J* 61) The entries contain a number of descriptions like this, fitting what Stephanie Smith noticed in *Vathek* and the *Episodes*, i.e. some indulgence in Eurocentric stereotypes, with black slaves often showing animal-like traits.⁹⁰ Despite this evidence, Maria Laura Bettencourt Pires refers to the presence of servants of different races to come to the conclusion that 'As a

descendant of West Indian planters, Beckford was not uncomfortable with a multiracial and mixed society.’⁹¹

If Beckford can be considered as a precursor not only of Romantic aesthetics (thanks to his visionary outlook), but also of some Romantic ruptures, such as Byron’s and Shelley’s, with political, sexual and religious authority, then one should elaborate on this definition through the series of provisos examined here, and take into account his compromising attitude with power structures.

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Warning

NB: This paper is published despite the effects of the Italian law 133/08. This law drastically reduces public funds to public Italian universities, which is particularly dangerous for scientific free research, and it will prevent young researchers from obtaining a position, either temporary or tenured, in Italy.

Biodata

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literary translator of fiction, drama and poetry, he has recently edited and translated the Italian edition of *The Journal of William Beckford in Portugal and Spain 1787-1788*.

Abstract

In 1787 William Beckford, author of *Vathek*, left England following some allegations of homosexual activity. Focusing on his private Lisbon journal, which he never published during his lifetime, this essay examines Beckford's attempts at recovering a dignified status in Lisbon by relating to various forms of authority, such as plantocracy, court aristocracy, normative sexuality and religion. What emerges is a constant ambivalence towards power structures, which helps in locating his figure as a Romantic precursor. This is especially evident in his contradictory espousal of radical politics and anti-abolitionism, exposed by some postcolonial critics and reinforced by the present study of his

Journal, in contrast with a widespread idealisation of his figure. In order to contextualise Beckford historically, reference is here made to travel-writing scholarship and, above all, to studies on homosexuality and on the history of sexuality.

Keywords

Authority, Beckford, Catholicism, eighteenth century, homosexuality, Portugal, slavery.

¹ Boyd Alexander, *England's Wealthiest Son: A Study of William Beckford* (London: Centaur, 1962), 29.

² See also Alexander, *England's*, 107.

³ Alexander, *England's*, 151.

⁴ The observation is dated 23 August 1787, three months after his arrival in Lisbon, and confirms his lack of commitment to Jamaica: 'I have received some letters from England, but they contain nothing material, except accounts of the preparations which were making [sic] in Jamaica for my reception, and which will cost me a swingeing sum. Mr James Wildman [Beckford's solicitor] pretends my not proceeding on my voyage was felt by the whole island as a severe disappointment.' William Beckford, *The Journal of William Beckford in Portugal and Spain 1787-1788*, ed. with an introduction and notes by Boyd Alexander (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), 169. Further page references will be given parenthetically in the text, with a *J* followed by page number. As for the *Journal's* uninhibited tone, see also Brian Fothergill, *Beckford of Fonthill* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 201; James Lees-Milne, *William Beckford* [1976] (London: Century, 1990), 33; Timothy Mowl, *Composing for Mozart* (London: John Murray, 1998), 299.

⁵ Alexander, *England's*, 29-33.

⁶ Anthony J. Barker, *The African Link: British Attitudes to the Negro in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1550-1807* (London: Frank Cass, 1978), 12.

⁷ Wylie Sypher, *Guinea's Captive Kings: British Anti-Slavery Literature of the 18th Century* [1942] (New York: Octagon, 1969), 86.

⁸ Malcolm Jack, *William Beckford: An English Fidalgo* (New York: AMS, 1996), 23.

⁹ On planters' absenteeism, see Keith Sandiford, *The Cultural Politics of Sugar: Caribbean Slavery and Narratives of Colonialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 7.

¹⁰ Alexander, *England's*, 127.

¹¹ Lees-Milne, *William Beckford*, 81.

¹² Stephanie Smith, 'Ill-favoured by the Sun: The Orientation of Slavery in William Beckford's Imagination', *The Beckford Journal* 9 (2003): 63-9 (65).

¹³ Smith 256. See also Jerry Nolan, 'Liber Veritatis or Why Has the Child Been So Abused', *The Beckford Journal* 7 (2001): 2-10 (4).

¹⁴ Alexander, *England's*, 38.

¹⁵ George Haggerty, *Men in Love: Masculinity and Sexuality in the 18th Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 5, 57, 195.

¹⁶ Alexander, *England's*, 108-17.

¹⁷ Alexander, *England's*, 108.

¹⁸ Randolph Trumbach, 'London's Sodomites: Homosexual Behaviour and Western Culture in the Eighteenth Century', *Journal of Social History* 11, no. 1 (Autumn 1977): 1-33 (19).

¹⁹ Taverns where homosexual men and transvestite met.

²⁰ Trumbach, 'London's Sodomites', 19.

²¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992 [1985]), 88-90.

²² Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 93.

²³ See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, vol. I*, trans. Robert Hurley [1976] (New York: Vintage, 1990), 33, 37-9; Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 82; Randolph Trumbach, 'Erotic Fantasy and Male Libertinism in Enlightenment England', in Lynn Hunt, ed., *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity 1500-1800* (New York: Zone Books, 1993), 253-82 (254-9); Michael McKeon, 'Historicizing Patriarchy: The Emergence of Gender Difference in England, 1660-1760', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 28, no. 3 (1995): 295-322 (301). Interestingly, Trumbach ('London's Sodomites', 2-9) highlights the uniqueness of this phenomenon through comparisons with non-European cultures. McKeon ('Historicizing Patriarchy', 298-300) connects it with the Industrial Revolution and modern division of labour and class formation. Moreover, this change in sexual roles has also been construed as a passage from various kinds of non-penetrative sex to heterosexual, penetrative, and procreative sex as the only approved form: see Tim Hitchcock, 'Redefining Sex in Eighteenth-Century England', *History Workshop Journal* 41 (Spring 1996): 72-90 (passim).

²⁴ Trumbach, 'London's Sodomites', 17-8; McKeon, 'Historicizing Patriarchy', 310.

²⁵ Alexander, *England's*, 121.

²⁶ McKeon, 'Historicizing Patriarchy', 310-2. McKeon also highlights (308) how in the same period the word 'effeminate' dropped his other meaning, i.e. 'men who like women'.

²⁷ As for the actual need for his departure from England, some critics seem to go too far when they write such things as 'forced into exile' (see, for example, Trumbach, 'London's Sodomites', 19). Alexander opts for a sort of impasse: 'certain dangerous papers' held by Loughborough are believed to include some love letters by

Beckford to Courtenay, not enough to get the former convicted but potentially ruinous for his reputation if produced in court, if he had brought a libel action (*England's*, 110-4). His family's decision to send him away might then be seen as an attempt to break the stalemate; the *Lisbon Journal* contains two references (*J* 87, 133) to some unspecified unsuccessful attempts at recovering those papers.

²⁸ The Spanish entries of the *Journal* are mostly dedicated to a factual recording of Beckford's social rounds. Furthermore, in terms of space they occupy less than one tenth of the volume. This is why they do not constitute an object of examination in the present essay.

²⁹ See, for example, Jack, *William Beckford*, 36.

³⁰ Also involving the Falmouth-Lisbon regular packet-boats on which Beckford travelled; see Giuseppe Baretta, *Narrazione incompiuta di un viaggio in Inghilterra, Portogallo e Spagna* [1762] (Rome: Biblioteca del vascello, 1994), 63.

³¹ Jack, *William Beckford*, 29-34.

³² Jorge Borges de Macedo, 'William Beckford and Portugal', in Various Authors, *Exposição/Exhibition: William Beckford & Portugal. A viagem de uma paixão / An Impassioned Journey, 1787, 1794, 1798* (Lisbon: Instituto Português do Património Cultural, Palácio de Queluz, Maio-Novembro, 1987), 15-29 (20).

³³ Alexander, *England's*, 127-8; Jack, *William Beckford*, 36-7, 44-5.

³⁴ See also *J* 54.

³⁵ Fothergill, *Beckford of Fonthill*, 192.

³⁶ On the state of theatre in Portugal at the time, see D.I. Cruz, 'The Theatre Seen by William Beckford', in Various Authors, *Exposição/Exhibition*, 62-9 (passim).

³⁷ See, for instance, Mirella Billi, 'William Beckford: rappresentazione come narrazione di sé', in Diego Saglia and Giovanna Silvani, eds., *Narrare Rappresentare: Incroci di segni fra immagine e parola*, (Bologna: CLUEB, 2003), 81-90 (passim). See also Robert J. Gemmett, *William Beckford* (Boston: Twayne, 1977), 75.

³⁸ Casey Blanton, *Travel Writing: The Self and the World* [1995] (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 2.

³⁹ Blanton, *Travel Writing*, 3.

⁴⁰ Blanton, *Travel Writing*, 11-2.

⁴¹ Barbara Korte, *English Travel Writing from Pilgrimage to Postcolonial Explorations* [1996] (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000, trans. Catherine Matthias), 53.

⁴² See Manuel Carlos De Brito, 'Music in Portugal in William Beckford's Time', in Various Authors, *Exposição/Exhibition*, 50-61 (passim).

⁴³ Alexander, *England's*, 129; Jack, *William Beckford*, 35.

⁴⁴ See also Parreaux, 'Beckford et le Portugal en 1787: Du nouveau sur quelques problèmes', *Bulletin des Etudes Portugaises et de l'Institut Français au Portugal* 18eme (1954): 93-130 (104-5).

⁴⁵ Haggerty, *Men in Love*, 154.

⁴⁶ Ian Littlewood, *Sultry Climates: Travel and Sex since the Grand Tour* (London: John Murray, 2001), 7-10, 27. Dennis Porter posits an analogous tension between desire and duty in the 18th-century traveller; Dennis Porter, *Haunted Journeys: Desire and Transgression in European Travel Writing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 10-11, quoted in Blanton, *Travel Writing*, 30. Littlewood (31) notices how private papers generally constitute a fortunate rarity, because they would often be kept by relatives and friends, interested in guarding the authors' reputation.

⁴⁷ Littlewood, *Sultry Climates*, 31-54.

⁴⁸ See also *J* 208

⁴⁹ The sound of music, for example, 'awakens a thousand enervating and voluptuous ideas into my bosom. Extended on my mat, I look wistfully around me in search of an object to share my affection. I find a silent

melancholy void. I stretch out my arms in vain. I form confused and *dangerous projects*, and as they successively rise and wither in my imagination, am depressed or elated.' (J 198, emphasis mine) See also J 73, 266.

⁵⁰ See Boyd Alexander, introduction to William Beckford, *The Journal of William Beckford in Portugal and Spain 1787-1788*, 9-31 (21); see also Fothergill, *Beckford of Fonthill*, 206-33.

⁵¹ For similar cases, see J 279, 281.

⁵² Alexander, *England's*, 114.

⁵³ Jack, *William Beckford*, 48, 133.

⁵⁴ Fothergill, *Beckford*, 292.

⁵⁵ See, for instance, Jack, *William Beckford*, 40-1, 129.

⁵⁶ See also J 85-6, 196, 241, 247, 249.

⁵⁷ See also J 246, 249.

⁵⁸ Haggerty, *Men in Love*, 139.

⁵⁹ Haggerty, *Men in Love*, 140, 151, 19-20.

⁶⁰ Perhaps, if Haggerty had pondered over Beckford's relationship with Franchi and on how it was bitterly concluded in later years (see Fothergill, *Beckford of Fonthill*, 330-3), he would not have idealised Beckford's love feelings as untainted by the class imbalance.

⁶¹ See Patrick Anderson, *Over the Alps: Reflections on Travel and Travel Writing, with Special Reference to the Grand Tour of Boswell, Beckford and Byron* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1969), 135.

⁶² Magdi Wahba, 'Beckford, Portugal and "Childish Error"', in Fatma Moussa Mahmoud, ed., *William Beckford of Fonthill 1760-1844: Bicentenary Essays* [1960] (Port Washington (N.Y.) and London: Kennikat, 1972), 51-62 (58-9).

⁶³ His gothic taste is compared by Darton to the 1830s Oxford Movement; Eric Darton, 'William Beckford and Religion', *The Beckford Journal* 4 (1998), 33-8 (38).

⁶⁴ Lees-Milne, *William Beckford*, 136.

⁶⁵ See Jerry C.M. Nolan, 'The Devotee Glances at the Glorious One', *The Beckford Journal* 4 (1998): 39-47 (passim).

⁶⁶ Lees-Milne, *William Beckford*, 137.

⁶⁷ It is noteworthy how the word 'scrape' is used for both his feelings towards Franchi and his religious devotion.

⁶⁸ Blanton (*Travel Writing*, 32) quotes an analogous sexual fantasizing during a religious services from Boswell's writings.

⁶⁹ Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 93.

⁷⁰ Jack, *William Beckford*, 57-9.

⁷¹ Jack, *William Beckford*, 73.

⁷² Jack, *William Beckford*, passim.

⁷³ William Beckford, *Life at Fonthill 1807-1822 with Interludes in Paris and London: From the Correspondence of William Beckford*, trans. and ed. Boyd Alexander (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1957), 83, 57-8.

⁷⁴ Wahba, 'Beckford', 56.

⁷⁵ See Parreaux, 'Beckford et le Portugal en 1787', 143 ; Wahba, 'Beckford', 58-9. Consequently, the traces left by Beckford in Portugal are also evident in the number of works by Portuguese authors featuring him: see Maria Laura Bettencourt Pires, 'William Beckford and Portugal: A Different Perspective of the Man and the Writer', in Various Authors, *Exposição/Exhibition*, 12-7.

⁷⁶ Littlewood, *Sultry Climates*, 105.

⁷⁷ Nigel Leask, *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel Writing: 'From and Antique Land'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 11.

⁷⁸ Korte, *English Travel Writing*, 53.

⁷⁹ Parreaux, 'Beckford et le Portugal en 1787', 114 ; Jack, *William Beckford*, 84-9.

⁸⁰ André Parreaux, 'The Caliph and the Swinish Multitude', in Moussa Mahmoud, ed., *William Beckford of Fonthill*, 1-15 (passim).

⁸¹ Lees-Milne, *William Beckford*, 135.

⁸² See Fothergill, *Beckford*, 346-7; Alexander, *England's*, 218-9.

⁸³ Susan Buck-Morss, 'Hegel and Haiti', *Critical Enquiry* 26 (Summer 2000): 821-65 (821). Similar ambiguities persisted in his attitude towards sexual and religious identity (Wahba, 'Beckford', 57; Darton, 'William Beckford and Religion', 38).

⁸⁴ P.H. Knox-Shaw, 'The West Indian *Vathek*', *Essays in Criticism* 43, no. 4 (1993): 284-307 (passim); Smith, 'Ill-favoured by the Sun', passim.

⁸⁵ Lewis Melville, *The Life and Letters of William Beckford of Fonthill (author of 'Vathek')* (London: William Heinemann, 1910), 352.

⁸⁶ James Lees-Milne, 'Blake and Beckford: A Television Script', *The Beckford Journal* 4 (Spring 1998): 16-23 (17).

⁸⁷ Lees-Milne, *William Beckford*, 134.

⁸⁸ Gemmett, *William Beckford*, 124.

⁸⁹ Fothergill, *Beckford of Fonthill*, 346.

⁹⁰ 'Ill-favoured by the Sun', 67-8.

⁹¹ 'William Beckford and Portugal: A Case of Mutual Attraction', in Kenneth W. Graham and Kevin Berland, eds., *William Beckford and the New Millennium* (New York: AMS Press, 2004), 131-63 (139). In another case of this kind, John Garrett focuses on Beckford's tendency to follow 'a mercurial muse', his being 'a free spirit', 'uncommitted to any of the moral or aesthetic codes of his day ... a surfer on earth's undercurrents of swift and slow, a window shopper in the emporium of light and dark' fitting our contemporary 'threshold of the New Millennium'. Unfortunately, not considering the material terrain from which Beckford's attitude grew, Garrett seems to fall in the widespread exaltation of the author, especially when he highlights the author's presumed 'sentiment that in a world where commerce and self-interest set the agenda, altruistic behaviour is wasted'; 'Uncouth Characters: Tonal Instabilities in Beckford's Men without Qualities', in Graham and Berland, eds., *New Millennium*, 73-94 (92, 74).