OTTOMANIA

The Romantics and the Myth of the Islamic Orient

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CHAPTER FOUR

Exotic and Erotic

The Myth of the Arabian Nights

De l'Orient arrive les plus beaux contes car on sait qu'en fait de merveilleux, les Orientaux surpassaient toutes les autres nations … alors toute l'Europe fut avide de l'entendre; alors les sultanes, les vizirs, les derviches, les médecins grec, les esclaves noirs, remplacèrent la fée Carabosse et la fée Aurore.
(Hazard, *La Crise*)[1]

I

THE MYTHS OF the Ottoman Empire that flooded into Europe in the eighteenth century were both exotic and erotic, and between them they were as powerful as were the fear and dread of its military might. They were composed of a ready mixture of mystery and quackery, of satanic influences, of supernatural powers, and of sexual thraldom. In the eighth to the thirteenth centuries CE, when the Arabs were the heirs to Greek knowledge and sharers of Jewish kabbalistic lore – their rise to power and conquest was, in the West, ascribed to demonic influence. Alchemy passed into the language of post-Roman Europe as something peculiarly Islamic and frightening, never to be quite banished by occidental and Christian achievements in science and medicine. Hardly a tale of the Crusades was told that did not include sorceresses and magicians, and almost as much of Tasso's epic *La Gerusalemme Liberata* (1580–81) is spent in an enchantress's wonderland as in fighting a furious battle for the deathplace of Christ.

The principal source of both the exotic and the erotic was *The Arabian Nights Entertainments* or *The Thousand and One Nights*, which have presided over the fabulous East ever since Galland published his translation into

French in 1704–07. *Entertainments* was the title that Edward Lane gave them in his translation of 1839–41. *The Thousand Nights and a Night* was the title chosen by Richard Burton (1885–88). Lane wished to de-sex the stories to make them acceptable to the taste of the time, and Burton thirty years later tried to re-sex them. *The Arabian Nights Tales* is the more general title by which they are known in the West. They were the thousand and one nights during which Scheherezade (Shahrazad, Shirazad) recounted her 'entertainments' to King Shahriya. They had to hold the interest of a king who, disgusted at the loose dalliance of his virgin wives with their black attendants during his absence from court, decreed that every one, after a night with him, should be killed. Scheherezade was the elder daughter of his vizier. When the supply of wives understandably dried up and the vizier was unable to find any more for his sovereign's bed, Scheherezade volunteered for the fatal night of pleasure. She carefully arranged for the king to overhear her stories to her younger sister Dinazade, and by stopping them at the most exciting or alluring point she managed to stave off her ritual slaughter for one thousand (or one thousand and one) nights. At that point, having given the king three sons, she sued successfully for an end to the killing and her acceptance as a permanent wife.[2]

Once published in French, *The Entertainments* quickly enthralled a society that had reason otherwise to fear the Islamic world. The collection also suited the taste of the eighteenth century; with pirated editions sweeping Europe, providing an exotic, almost cinemascopic 'treatment of sex, perversion, cruelty and corruption, their simple fantasies of wish fulfilment were all novel flavours that the reading public found greatly to its taste'.[3] The first translations, however, including those of Galland himself, did not set the *Nights* in the framework of the Scheherezade story, with its revelation of a king's obsessive cruelty, and of a voyeuristic younger sister taking pleasure from the story itself and, it was suggested, from the sexual encounter that followed when Scheherezade cut each story off at the most exciting part. This was clearly unsuitable for the general reader of the day, but by the 1840s the Romantic interest in perversity and the *fleurs du mal* had made a tale of barbarity in luxury not only attractive but a morality in itself. King Shahriya may have been the image *par excellence* of an oriental despot but one whom civilisation could tame, and Scheherezade metamorphosed into the 'chaste wife, wise, without debate' beloved of Victorian readers.[4]

The compilation, even composition, of these tales is still disputed. Though they purported to be of Persian origin, Coleridge detected 'a good

deal of Greek fancy' in them and regretted the loss of what he considered to be their inspiration, the *Milesian Tales by Aristides* of Miletus, an ancestor of both the *Decameron* and *Heptameron*. Pretty well nothing is known of these tales, except that they were salacious, that Ovid wrote that they were translated into Latin and that they were read out in the Parthian senate house of Seleucia in order to insult the Romans. This was because, according to Plutarch, they were found on a dead Roman soldier during Crassus's last, fatal, campaign, and demonstrated to the Parthian senate how degenerate were their Roman enemies, who carried such scabrous works with them in their knapsacks.[5]

One Arab chronicler, referring to the collection in the tenth century, called it 'a corrupted book of silly narratives'.[6] Silly they may have been but like many silly tales they have survived as a source of oriental fable, an inspiration for pantomime, a quarry for opera, and an almost inexhaustible matter for anthropologists, textual critics and literary pundits.[7] Scheherezade's seemingly inexhaustible invention was exercised in the harem of a Persian monarch, and one ingenious student identified him as Esther's Ahasuerus. Shahrazad, in Persian Chihr-azad, was the name of the Jewish mother of Queen Humay, the daughter of Artaxerxes Longimanus, son of Xerxes, identified as Ahasuerus, since the Apocryphal chapters of the Book of Esther refer to him as Artaxerxes. When he sent out for virgins to sample after he repudiated Vashti his queen, Ahasuerus may, by his choice of Esther, have suggested the frame in which the *Nights* are set.

Their daughter was credited with authorship of the *Nights*, much as Marguerite de Valois has been credited with writing *The Heptameron*. The stories, however, whether set in Baghdad, Tehran, India or China, are not about Persians but about Arabs, the common core of all editions being almost certainly the fruit of the golden age of the Caliphate in Baghdad, between the eighth and tenth centuries.

A prominent protagonist is the Caliph Harun-Ar Rashid (the Abbasid Caliph between 763 and 809, and a contemporary of Charlemagne). The uncertainties about the original canon (and two of its most famous stories, Aladdin and the Lamp, and Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, were not in the original collection), derive from the peripatetic habits of the professional story-tellers who carried them round the Arab world. The *Nights* were basically popular street literature, and this accounts for the inability of scholars to fix either the authorship, or the date, or the content of the collection. They were not considered part of the canon of classical Arabic letters.

Antoine Galland (1646–1715), who introduced the *Nights* to the western world, was attached to the French mission in Constantinople in 1670, having learned Arabic at the Sorbonne. The principal part of his job was to collect manuscripts for the university library, for which purpose he travelled throughout the Arabic-speaking lands of the Ottoman empire. He was later commissioned by Colbert to be the oriental expert of the newly founded *Compagnie des Indes*, and charged to collect and translate useful documents. In Damascus he found a collection of stories, now generally held to date from 1566, for most scholars accept the middle of the sixteenth century CE as the time when most of these stories were collected and written down in Arabic. One reason given for this dating is that there is no mention of coffee drinking, for coffee did not become a generally acceptable beverage throughout the Muslim world until the seventeenth century. Galland began to publish the tales as *Les Mille et Un Nuits* in twelve volumes between 1704 and 1717, when he was Professor of Arabic at the Collège de France in Paris. His text is still the standard French version.

The first English translation – from the original Arabic, not the French version – was that of Edward William Lane in 1838–40, and he put the date of compilation at 1517 to coincide with the Ottoman conquest of Egypt, where the habits of luxury and wine-drinking, which are a feature of the tales, were general. Linguistic hints, however, suggest that the core of the tales themselves date from between the fall of the Fatimids and accession of Saladdin in 1169 to the sack of Baghdad and the fall of the Caliphate at the hands of the Mongols in 1258.[8] Lane spent 16 years on the task, five of them in Cairo. He lived among the Arabs almost as a true believer, and his translation followed *The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, his classic account of which appeared in 1836. Cairo was at this time the epicentre of Arab culture, and Lane's translation was sound and authentic.[9]

Richard Burton, who also translated the tales as part of his campaign for the sexual freedoms that he believed would liberate English women from frigidity, thought it 'garbled and mutilated, unsexed and unsouled'. Lane certainly exercised his own rigid censorship, excluding those tales that would, in his view, upset the morals of the generation that had just welcomed a virgin and nubile queen after twenty years' rule by adulterers, one of whom, William IV, had sired ten children by his thespian Scheherezade, Mrs Jordan. The collection of *Nights*, as annotated by Lane, constituted a sort of encyclopaedia of Muslim life and manners and Richard Burton, otherwise contemptuous of the sexual exclusions, admitted that

between them the notes he and Lane provided to their translations would enable any reader to 'know as much of the Moslem East, and more, than many Europeans who have spent half their lives in Orient lands'.[10]

Among the later additions to the *Entertainments* were 11 tales told to Galland by a man from Aleppo. These enabled him to complete another volume. One of them, *The Tale of Abu-el-Hasan-al-Khalia*, in a slightly modified version, provided the story for a comic *singspiel* by Carl-Maria von Weber. It is one of the Harun-Ar-Rashid stories, in which the genial caliph is worsted by a man on whom he had himself played a trick. The trick was to make Abu Hassan Caliph for a day, in which he would be able to punish all those friends who, he averred, had treated him scurvily. The short one-act drama is devoted to the return trick that Abu Hassan plays on the Caliph, by pretending that both he and his wife are dead and so securing two funeral grants from the generous monarch. When Harun, checking up on this suspicious pair of deaths, asks who died first, he is informed by Abu Hassan that it was he. Harun, amused and endlessly tolerant, rewards Abu Hassan by making him his cup-bearer.

Weber was not the first to compose a Turkish comic opera. Apart from Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, his music master, the Abbé Vogler, whom Schubert considered a charlatan and Browning rescued from oblivion, had also composed a Turkish opera, *The Merchant of Smyrna* (*Der Kaufmann von Smyrna*). Vogler may have failed in his ambition to rival Beethoven as an improviser on the piano but he succeeded in arousing in Weber that love of the exotic and irrational that led him to his later triumphs with *Der Freischütz*, *Euryanthe* and *Oberon*. At this point in Weber's life (1811) Abu Hassan was cast in the brilliantly playful and joyous mood that looked backward and forward to Mozart and Rossini. The work only reached London in 1825, almost a curtain-raiser for Lane's translation 13 years later.

2

Most of the oriental fables of the day were in French. Barthélemy d'Herbelot de Molainville (1625–95) learned his Arabic and other eastern tongues by consorting with mariners in Italian seaports. He became secretary and interpreter of Eastern languages to Louis XIV, ending his life as a pensioner of Colbert and Professor of Syriac at the Collège de France,

and the author of *La Bibliothèque Orientale ou Dictionnaire Universal contenant tout ce qui regarde le connoissance des Peuples de l'Orient*. France had become the main source and origin of oriental knowledge. French artists moved naturally from fact to fairy tale to fable and magic. The Sun King had established a taste for finery, for *trompe l'oeil*, in which nothing was quite what it seemed to be, for masques and masquerades.

The Arabian Nights Entertainments spawned a prolific rash of orientalia, using the newly discovered Eastern world to point a moral and adorn a tale. For here were pegs on which to hang political criticism, authentic lands requiring no midgets or giants or flying islands like Lilliput, Brobdignag or Laputa to provide a locale from which to pass judgements safely on matters nearer home. Being lands ruled either by wise philosophers such as Mozart's and Schikaneder's Sarastro, or by cruel tyrants, like their Queen of the Night, they provided 'a sense of reality in the midst of unreality'.[11] What was essential was that they were remote, and the more closely the stories followed the style of *The Arabian Nights*, despite being condemned as 'extravagant, monstrous and disproportioned',[12] the more popular they were. Alexander Pope might deplore the existence of the hack who turned a Persian tale for half a crown but nothing could stop the proliferation of eastern make-believe.[13]

The extravagant fancies of Galland provided both an escape into a world of fantasy, an Orient so strange that cunning satirists such as Montesquieu and Voltaire could dress their criticism of contemporary society in the costumes of make-believe.[14] Voltaire's *Zadig* (1748) was set in Zoroastrian Baghdad, being the adventures of a man in pursuit of rational and unexceptionable behaviour in a world governed by 'les huit parties d'oraison, la dialectique, l'astrologie, la démonomanie'.[15] For a short time chief minister of the king of Babylon, Zadig is under no illusion that he is obeyed not because he is either rational or amiable but because 'il était premier vizir'. When his rational judgements and wise advice triumph over folly or crime, they do not lessen the envy, malice and prejudice of the men and women they have exposed to ridicule. Misfortune, therefore, dogs him throughout, for Zoroastrian Babylon is no different from Louis XV's France.

England's Grand Cham was to follow France's *bouleverseteur.* Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* (1759–62) is, like *Zadig*, set in a land as fictional as *Erewhon*, Samuel Butler's *Nowhere.* Rasselas is the Prince of Abyssinia who, having lived in undemanding comfort and ease in 'a happy valley', seeks to

broaden his experience by travel, and goes to Egypt, which in its turn is as real as pantomime. Babylon and Abyssinia, despite available Jesuit accounts to the contrary, are all remote, romantic-sounding places, where Zadig and Prince Rasselas could learn the vanity of human wishes.[16] (Rasselas is a black personage who shares many of the characteristics of Candide, the novel of that name appearing at about the same time; had Johnson ever practised manual labour it would have taught him that *il faut cultiver son jardin.*)

These oriental tales are oriental only in adventitious detail; their principal characters are embedded in the society of their time. *The Arabian Nights*, however, were the genuine article, set in the high noon of Arab civilisation, bringing 'the prime of good Haroun Alraschid' to every polite drawing room and displacing the Disney-like rocococity of wicked Carabosse and good fairy Aurora. One critic called them 'the fairy godmother of the English novel'.[17] Scheherezade had a novelist's skill in providing suspense at every pause in her narrative, but more to the point the picaresque adventures she was telling took place in a world as authentic to their protagonists as Henry Fielding's London to Tom Jones. The stories might be intricate, the characters extravagant, the *mis-en-scène* exotic but they did not moralise or preach a philosophy of life, like *Rasselas*, or expose it to mockery, like *Zadig*. The oriental background gave them a romantic flavour in contrast to the classical euphonics of Augustan London or pre-Revolutionary Paris. It was a world of cool, soft turf, shadow-chequered lawns, thick rosaries of scented thorn and Persian girls with

> argent lidded eyes,
> Amorous, and lashes like to rays
> Of darkness, and a brow of pear
> Tressed with redolent ebony.[18]

The poetic indication was that these were to be found by the lush banks of the Tigris, but Tennyson's *Arabian Nights* (1830) is a poem in which the exotic and erotic derive more from the Muslim gardens of Spain and the Alhambra, such as those then being created, under the influence of Washington Irving, on the banks of the Thames. The young poet was still fascinated by the incense-laden world of a Romantic imagination that was infecting western sensibility; 'the heroic romance had died and left no issue' but this:[19]

And many a sheeny summer morn,
Adown the Tigris I was borne,
By Bagdad's shrines of fretted gold,
High-walled gardens green and old;
True Mussulman was I and sworn,
For it was in the golden prime
Of good Haroun Alraschid.[20]

3

The Arabian Nights Entertainments was not solely responsible. Its most popular and perverse fruit was a tale that appeared in 1786. The supposed author was an American loyalist clergyman, Samuel Henley, who had left his post as Professor of Moral Philosophy at William and Mary College in Williamsburg at the beginning of the American War of Independence. After teaching at Harrow for a few years he was given the living of Rendlesham in Suffolk. His interests had already admitted him by election to the Society of Antiquaries; he had studied the controversial passages in the writings of Saints Peter and Jude on the Angels that Sinned, to see how far Milton had been justified in his portraits of them; and throughout his life he loved stray learning, making himself an expert on the poetry of Virgil.

At the request of a friend in 1784 he translated from the French and published what purported to be an oriental tale he had been given in manuscript form. The French version was, so word had it, itself a translation from the Arabic but, as its style was bold and original, its readers held that Henley had written the tale himself, so that he could append learned footnotes, in which he revelled, on the topographical, literary, linguistic and alchemic references with which the story was filled. Henley always insisted that he had not written the original, but as he possessed the only version of the French original, when he published it as an oriental tale, he appeared to be acknowledging authorship.

The real author had taken his family off to Switzerland and was powerless to substantiate his claim. In order to publish the tale in its 'original' form he put Henley's English text back into French, and then published the French 'original' three years later from both Paris and Lausanne. At last the real author emerged from the shadows: he was William Beckford and the curious story was *Vathek*.[21]

The oddly reclusive Midas knew no Arabic, and had no first-hand knowledge of the East other than what he picked up mainly from *The Arabian Nights*. Indeed, he had had no formal education beyond what private tutors could provide, and he had decided to write the tale in French, his mother tongue being English, to disguise its origins.[22] Beckford remained an enigma all his life. He claimed that he had not written *Vathek* in English owing to 'circonstances peu intéressantes pour le public' but no one really knew what they were. He never provided his own translation, believing that Samuel Henley's was good enough, though he did later translate an oriental tale from the French, titled *Al Raoui*. Despite the elder William Pitt's advice to him as a precocious and mercurial child not to read *The Arabian Nights Entertainments*, Beckford could not resist using the opportunity for embellished conceits about beauty, art and the world of the imagination provided by an ostensibly oriental tale. At the same time, he could not suppress a demurely satirical streak that was later to repeat itself in the work of Oscar Wilde and Ronald Firbank.

He claimed to have written *Vathek* in one continuous narrative, not punctuated by chapters, in three days and two nights while living in Switzerland with his wife. When she died he returned to his family home, Fonthill, and spent the rest of his career building, rebuilding and embellishing the house, collecting art treasures and books, and virtually beggaring himself. *Vathek* remained without a sequel, a solitary work of enthusiasm and genius masquerading as the authentic creation of an oriental world, a quarry for Romantic poets whose imagination luxuriated in nightingales and roses, butterflies of Cashmere and wine of Shiraz. *Vathek* was not their sole inspiration; Shiraz wine was the staple tipple of East India Company factories, while the other images flitted in an out of the Persian poetry of North India, being currently translated by Company officials.[23]

Yet Beckford's interests were not oriental, except in a lazy and circumstantial way. More they belonged to the rococo world, in which his cousin, Peter, had walked with Mozart's father in the gardens of the Villa Medici in Rome, and had persuaded Muzio Clementi to come to London. Beckford had undertaken the Grand Tour with his tutor in 1780–81 and kept a journal, published two centuries later and subtitled *Europe Before the Revolution Seen Through the Eyes of a Quizzical Young Man*.[24] *Vathek* is a rococo tale, the ornamentalism of its imagination winding in curlicues of fancy against a background of casual cruelty and darkening shadows, which seemed to epitomise the eastern world. Byron thought its descriptive

detail, its sense of costume and luxuriant imagination made it hard for those who had visited the East to believe it was not the translation of an original oriental work.[25]

Its eponymous hero, the Caliph Vathek, is the grandson of Haroun el Raschid, so that the tale is set at some time in the tenth century CE, at a time when the Caliphate extended from Egypt to India. The action of the novel takes place in the Arabo-Iranian land between the Euphrates and the Caucasian mountain fastnesses. Most of it is set in a mountain landscape, round lakes and valleys, inhabited by a population of dwarves, ghouls, genii (djinns), and talking fishes. It is a no-man's land in which supernatural powers, none of them friendly to man, lurk to guard the hidden wealth of Soliman (Solomon), the magnitude of which beggars the imagination.

The normal conventions of the eighteenth-century novel do not apply to *Vathek*. There is no hero, no heroine; there is an unpleasant but colourful sorceress, much magical and supernatural intervention, but no real story and no conclusive finale to sort out all the puzzles. Most of the characters start as figures of fun; even the sorceress who, abhorring indolence, cannot resist curing the people whom she intends to die from the wounds she has caused to be inflicted.[26] Vathek himself, in a Firbankian aside, eats succulent fruit at prayer time, and 'calls for the Koran and sugar' to accompany it.[27] It is difficult at first to see past the ironical smoke-screen Beckford wove round the story. Was it the self-indulgent creation of a rococo fancy, or an elaborately disguised morality? The book is a celebration of perversity. Vathek's devotion to Islam is entirely opportunistic and, for the promise of unexampled wealth, he is only too ready to renounce it. He has a persistent anxiety about his next meal, which he expects to be a triumph of culinary art, and is over-anticipatory of the next dalliance with a woman, which he expects to be better than the last. So when the finale comes, it is with the shock of surprise.

A sinister element is first provided by Vathek's mother, Carathis, whom he dislikes but of whom he is afraid. With her one-eyed black Nubian slaves, mummified corpses, supernatural camel and power to talk to fishes, she is a powerful and single-minded sorceress. It is she who urges her son to seek Soliman's treasure with the aid of a sinister Indian *giaour*, whose object turns out to be the Caliph's soul. Beckford seems to have thought that a *giaour* signified the member of some Indian sect of saltimbanques. The word signified any non-Muslim, but acquired in the West a sinister connotation. A *giaour* was not only a non-Muslim but an enemy to Islam.

The orientalism of this tale, apart from its setting in an indeterminately Arabo-Persian frame, lies in the Islamic decoration Beckford gives it, belonging as much to the pantomime stage as to the books he collected and sometimes read. It pretends to be a satire on the vanity, not so much of human wishes, as of human desires. Organised religion is faintly mocked. There is a whole harem of unfortunate women who accompany the Caliph wherever he goes on his supernatural travels, confined to cages, from within which their only contribution to the tale are shrieks and giggles. Vathek has one reigning wife, Dilara, and is surrounded by eunuchs, the chief of whom, Bababalouk, tries to ensure a stream of good food and female comforts for the Lord of the Universe, when he embarks at last on his dangerous mission in search of Soliman's gold. On the way Vathek encounters the incredibly beautiful anti-heroine, Nouronihar, with her ivory limbs, and her light brown hair floating in the hazy breeze of the twilight. She has all the attributes of a houri, all the letters of which word are incorporated in her name. She turns out to be both a flirt and a gold-digger, and she captivates the susceptible caliph by her behaviour at bath-time as well as by her gourmet cooking.

The Reverend Samuel Henley had plenty to write about in his footnotes, as Beckford's imagination pranced about in fields of antiquity and curious lore. The treasure in search of which Vathek travels with his wives, concubines and eunuchs belongs to the Pre-Adamite sultans, the 72 kings who ruled over the anthropoid predecessors of man before God created Adam. Isaac de la Peryère, in 1654, was puzzled by the provenance of Cain's wife in *Genesis*, chapter 4, who seems not to be the daughter of Adam and Eve, and concluded that *Genesis* must have been concerned with the origins of the Jewish people, and that Cain's wife came from pre-Adamite people living in the land of Nod.[28] Most bore the name of Soliman, and Adam's non-evolutionary precursors knew both the power of magic and the value of filthy gold. The Biblical Solomon himself (Soliman ben Daoud) is entrusted with the guardianship of this treasure, as in his latter years, the Bible tells us, in addition to marrying idolatresses, he became obsessed by gold. Of the angels who sinned, about whom Samuel Henley knew all, perhaps more than all, Beckford appears to have been ignorant, but delinquent angels, known in the East as djinns or peris, are charged with protecting the treasure of the pre-Adamite kings.

This forbidding underworld is ruled by a Satan figure, Eblis, who has been commissioned by God to keep these angels exiled, with the treasure, in the furthest part of the earth. Hidden with the treasure is the Talisman of

Soliman, which Vathek's mother, Carathis, most wants, a ring very like that of Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings*, which will give the wearer entire command of everything, human, natural and demonic. The power of a talisman, both benign and malign, given to those who possess it, has exerted on the English imagination a strong attraction from the Holy Grail to Charles Williams's Stone of Solomon.[29] It is morally neutral, which is why its power is so important to control. It finds a wholly new existence in the popular programmes in which Dr Who has to protect his Tardis and in which Harry Potter is engaged on a cosmic contest for possession with the power of darkness. When Vathek finds the treasure, according to the *giaour*, he will be 'solaced with all kinds of delight.'[30]

The quest becomes clearer as it progresses, for *Vathek* starts to turn into a morality tale. The Caliph is too easily distracted from his quest, by a good meal, or by a girl like Nouronihar. His mother is more single-minded, being determined to secure the ring for herself and the rest of the treasure for her son. At long last Vathek, and Nouronihar, who cannot resist the lure of gold, and Carathis, the similarity of whose name to catharsis explains her fate, enter the subterranean world of Eblis. There they meet travellers who have nursed similar ambitions, and who are condemned to stalk the halls with their empty hand on the place where their heart should be. Theirs is the heartburn which results from lust and greed: a perennial flame in the place of a heart.

Having seen the halls of Eblis, Carathis orders all its treasures opened to her, which even the *afrits* and demons have never seen, and all the spirits to bow down before her as their chief. She is about to dethrone one of the pre-Adamite kings when her heart bursts into flames.[31] When they all meet Eblis, who speaks their doom, they see not a Satanic figure in the Dantean image or even a leader of the Dance of Death, but one 'whose person was that of a young man, whose noble and regular features seemed to have been tarnished by malignant vapours. In his large eyes appeared both pride and despair, his hair retained some resemblance to that of an angel of light.'[32] He is remarkably like a creature of William Blake who, while Beckford was writing *Vathek*, was writing his own first satirical works. Beckford ends his tale on a pious note: for the sake of empty pomp and forbidden power, Vathek (and all others like him, implies the author) will be prey to grief without end and remorse without mitigation.

There is only one happy person in this story: the epicene teenage lover of Nouronihar before she meets Vathek. He is blessed to live a life 'remote from the inquietudes of the world, the impertinence of harems, the brutality

of eunuchs, and the inconstancy of women'. He enjoys what Beckford himself would like to have enjoyed, 'the boon of perpetual childhood'.[33] He was fortunate to acquire this state through supernatural intervention for, as Beckford tells us, whether in Christian Europe or in the Muslim East, no one in the way of nature can escape impertinence, brutality and inconstancy.

4

Beckford's hall of Eblis was an oriental nightmare, but Alfred Tennyson's Tigris was the dream of a golden past. When Tennyson came upon the 'great Pavilion of the Caliphat', he was safely evoking the 'golden prime of good Haroun Alraschid' and the innocence of *The Arabian Nights*, not the fearful power of the Ottoman superstate which had established both the caliphate and a secular empire ruled from Constantinople. There, for most people, the sultan personified, with his viziers, pashas and beys, the intricate splendour of Byzantium, which in its time anticipated the perfumed gardens of the Arabian Nights, and which also experienced the inexorable rule of a theocracy. Ottoman Constantinople was Byzantium revived, the only noticeable difference being the disappearance of the women and their relegation to the atrophying seclusion of the harem or child factory, where Islam held they properly belonged, and where they were invisible, in marked contrast to a former Byzantine empress, who was once a circus dancer. Of which emperor, one may ask, was Yeats thinking when he wrote of Byzantium 'of hammered gold and gold enamelling / To keep a drowsy Emperor awake', and of the bird 'set upon the golden bough to sing … / … Of what is past or passing or to come'.[34]

As Europe entered its age of enlightenment, or disillusionment, the East lost its minatory and supernatural power and became instead an exotic 'faraway' for strange and erotic adventures. These were married happily to the fantasies of the age that followed the Ottoman rebuff at Vienna. 'A western coquetry was projected onto the shores of the Bosphorus, reconstructed for the entertainment of the sophisticated upper classes … which the seraglio's seclusion rendered highly seductive.'[35] *Turquoiserie* began to tempt Europeans to sample the exotic comforts that they had seen in Ottoman Turkey and which the English were acquiring from India. Baths, carpets, Turkish delight and, above all, coffee conquered where armies had faltered.

5

Coffee was Ethiopia's gift to the world. There it grew wild. The Arabs, at some time in the fifteenth century, commercialised the twin beans that snuggled in the cherry-like fruit of *coffea arabica*. Its energising, anti-soporific qualities (deduced from the behaviour of sheep grazing on the berries) aroused controversy among the faithful, for it was drunk originally, the mullahs suspected, to keep them awake through interminable sermons. Was it a stimulant, was it intoxicating, was it forbidden to Muslims by the Koran? Divine retribution might attend anyone who developed an addiction to it, but the menace of eternal damnation did not prevent the Arabian ports on the Red Sea, especially Mocha, from becoming *entrepôts* supplying the whole Muslim world. The story that the aroma of roasting coffee wafted from the Ottoman camp at the siege of Vienna drove the besieged to distraction is unproven, but it was not long before the coffee house in Constantinople had its counterpart in Venice. The first coffee house opened in London in Cornhill in 1652, and coffee-drinking spread across Europe in the latter half of the seventeenth century, its popularity contentious, too, in Christian lands, as authority feared that coffee houses encouraged loose talk and political disaffection. Leipzig had eight coffee houses when Bach composed his cantata in praise of the beverage. Official opinion was divided between fears for health and desire for revenue, a not unfamiliar tension throughout the ages.

So quickly had the drink become popular that Johann Sebastian Bach wrote a cantata in 1732 in which a young woman, whose father is seeking a husband for her, insists that she will not entertain any proposal unless she is allowed – in the marriage contract itself – *den Kaffee, wann ich will, zu kuchen.*[36] To meet the world demand, it was not long before the bean's cultivation had migrated to more congenial climates. An enemy to sleep, an aid to boredom, a stimulant to sedition, coffee may have caused anxiety among the authorities, but no medicinal, only moral, harm could be attributed to it. Its discovery and commercialisation by Muslims seemed confirmation to critical western observers that the Ottomans needed it to overcome the general torpor that appeared to afflict the empire in the century during which drinking it became almost a culture in itself.

Drunk in Turkish baths, on Turkish carpets, in Turkish silks and haberdashery, in the abandon of the Turkish harem, coffee added to the image of a people who preferred to loiter, who found sexual triviality more

enticing than intellectual discovery, who believed that violent death was a more effective agent of control than justice, for whom intrigue was more exciting than diplomacy and who considered sucking on a *nargheel* less demanding than conversation. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Lady Hester Stanhope may have been pleasantly and publicly impressed by the charm and liveliness of Turkish ladies, but the society at home in which they used to move did not believe that this could be so. The western view of Turkish curiosity began and ended in the dragoman's interpretation of Alexander Kinglake's discourse on western technology. It was all 'whir! whir! all by wheels! – whiz! whiz! all by steam!'[37]

6

Vathek provided a wishful dream of the Orient, as much as a nightmare. It starts as a romance of a perfumed and luxurious idyll, and ends in a hell of Dantean intensity. It reeks of a drug-induced *cauchemar*, the kind in which, as de Quincey was to claim nearly forty years later, man was a weed, a strange amalgam of high culture and low barbarism, his dreams under opium of cancerous kisses by crocodiles, in which the dreamer, 'confounded with all unutterable abortions, lay amongst the weeds and Nilotic mud'.[38] Opium, which delivered these fantasies, was the oriental drug *par excellence*, and its narcotic monopoly, once the possession of the Muslim rulers of Bengal, was now a principal money-earner for the East India Company.

The real nightmares, however, did not emanate from opium but were the waking dreams of freedom, dreamed by those Europeans unhappy enough to become captives and slaves of Muslim states in Africa and Asia. There, if they did not join the company of apostates, life had little of colour and fantasies that only dreams could provide. The real nightmare in the West was the nightmare of captivity.