

The Fonthill Legend : William Beckford's Landscape Architecture

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The fascination of the brilliant yet baffling personality of William Beckford (1760-1844) has resulted in a great deal of discussion concerning the author of *Vathek*. One of the most persistent problems presented by his long and extravagant career is the difficulty of accounting for the paucity of his literary output. Beckford commenced his career with bright promises of success. Always scribbling from his boyhood, he became an author at the age of seventeen when he wrote *The Long Story*.¹ His first published work, *Biographical Memoirs of Extraordinary Painters*, appeared in 1780, and in a few years time he had written the two works, *Vathek* and its companion piece, *The Episodes of Vathek*, which were to become the crowning achievements of his career. Then a great silence fell. Aside from two slender volumes, *Modern Novel Writing* (1796) and *Azemia* (1797), it was only in old age that the long hiatus was broken by the publication of his journals, *Italy ; with Sketches of Spain and Portugal* (1834) and *Recollections of an Excursion to the Monasteries of Alcobaça and Batalha* (1835), both of which gave his career an added splendour.² What were the reasons for this prolonged silence on the part of an inveterate scribbler who had started with more than sufficient inner drive to express himself? Had his creative inspiration dried up in the early stages of his career?

Part of the explanation has often been sought in the complicated nature of his personal history. In the years that followed the composition of *Vathek* in 1782, Beckford got entangled in one frustrating discouragement after another. In 1783 his family, politically ambitious for him, persuaded him to suppress his lengthy and favourite work, *Dreams, and Waking Thoughts and Incidents*. He also found his reputation damaged beyond repair because of the homosexual scandal of 1784. In May of 1786, while the Beckfords were in Switzerland, his wife Lady Margaret passed away after the birth of their second daughter. The death of his beloved wife, who had supported him steadfastly throughout the traumatic period of the scandal, was a bitter blow. To the sorrow of his bereavement was added his enemies' calumny against him, insinuating that he was responsible for her death. He had no time to recover from this setback before yet another blow was dealt to his literary aspirations. A trusted friend of his, the clergyman Samuel Henry, who had been entrusted with the French original of *Vathek*, published in the following month an English translation, contrary to Beckford's strict instructions, and robbed him of his masterpiece and of any credit for its originality, claiming that it was based on an Arabic original.³ These early discouragements may explain in part the reason for the great hiatus in his writing career as well as the fact that he became an

increasingly embittered and solitary misanthrope.

The broader and more general context of eighteenth century culture may also be deserving of some consideration in making sense of the paucity of his literary output. It was an age in which literature was not deemed a vocation worthy of devoting one's life to; to write a book was in fact considered conduct unbecoming to a gentleman 'in the green fields of aristocratic provincialism'.⁴ If not of noble birth, Beckford came at least from the higher social stratum who were apt to think it beneath them to apply themselves assiduously to literature. He was, in truth, a private gentleman so favoured by vast wealth and an exceptional education that he was able to live in a manner no less aristocratic than that enjoyed by any genuine member of the nobility. This privileged status itself may have caused his literary talents to be dissipated to no small extent.

Yet this is not to conclude that Beckford's artistic muse remained unstirred all this while. For he found another outlet for his creative imagination when he decided to settle himself at Fonthill in 1796. The greater part of his creative energies were, henceforth, increasingly diverted into a quite different channel, that of building and landscape gardening. The present essay is concerned with the whole period of Beckford's reign as the Caliph of Fonthill; that is, from 1796 until 1822 when he severed his sixty-three year connection with his parental home, a period during which he ruled and exercised his creative will over the vast kingdom of Fonthill. In attempting to determine within Beckford's entire canon the credit due his garden architecture, we propose to examine the process underlying his accomplishments at Fonthill, which eventually earned him as much celebrity as his writing.

I

The return from the second Portuguese sojourn, which ended Beckford's romance with the country more or less for good, marked the serious beginning of his landscaping project at Fonthill. Although the preceeding ten years were those of self-exile, they were also years of introspection, for Beckford, though too flamboyant to have suppressed his flair for indulgence, had learned to face up to the disreputable facts of his own life and to steer a course in a different direction. He was now approaching middle age, having attained none of the spiritual peace that might have lulled him into a sense of calm resignation. Still a social outcast shunned by the gentlemen of his own country, he had never retrieved the respect and honour which he deemed was his due. If he was destined to continue to live in isolation, then he might as well make that isolation as splendid as possible. He determined to seclude himself from the world that had turned its back on him. His love of nature, not to say solitude, was to be the virtue that would redeem him.

Beckford had already become proprietor of the Fonthill estate in 1781 when his father died. The family property stretched from Fonthill Splendens, his birth place and

home, away to the north and west, and rose gradually towards the heights of the surrounding plains. The great range of its woods, hills, dales and rivers had always been a source of unending delight to Beckford since his early days. Having realized the scenic possibilities of this rich domain of his, he could regard it as the future realm of dream, and make schemes for shaping it into something nearer his desires. Furthermore, Beckford had just returned to Fonthill, with his mind effervescing with vivid impressions of Portugal including not merely natural but also architectural images. At Batalha and Alcobaca, for instance, his imagination had been enraptured when he saw how the massive monastic structures dominated the smaller surrounding buildings, while at Mafra, he was impressed by the 'gloomy portals and the deserted halls' of the palace-monastery of the Portuguese kings.⁵ These ecclesiastical buildings, built on such a grand scale, inspired in him the idea of the architectural scheme he now felt he had to carry out at home.

His apparent object was to lay out the whole estate at Fonthill, but his real interest was to secure the delights of an idyllic seclusion. He desired to have a sequestered retreat into which he could withdraw to indulge in his dreams amid the scenic beauties that would best suit his sensibilities. His yearning for this sort of seclusion was not new ; it originated in his early adolescence. At the age of seventeen, while he was staying in Geneva, he had first expressed the idea of a sanctuary dedicated to nature and art to which he gave the name of 'the Dome of the Setting Sun.' 'The Dome shall be situated upon some sequestered hill,' he wrote,

Three parts of its circle shall be gilt with the thickest foliage : the fourth alone freely open to the West shall receive the mild Rays of the declining Sun. Its Western Slope shall command a still retired landscape confined to Woods and Waters, where ancient Persians met to pay their adoration to the departing God. Rapt in that calmness and serenity which this sober Hour inspires, I will enter the consecrated Dome and repose in luxuriant leasure describe the Scenes which it presents all round me as if my Artists had already executed them.⁶

Thoughts similar to this adolescent fantasy had never left him and were now taking concrete shape in his mind, united with the image of the tower, a symbol of retirement which provided the elevated shelter he had always sought from the turmoils of the world.

It was in this context that Beckford's architectural ambition began to take on key importance in his career. What he did first was to give orders that a wall twelve feet high and seven miles long should be erected to enclose the area of 519 acres within which the building was to take place. This was the high, bare land approximately a mile south west of Splendens, a vast extent of barren heath, with scattered trees upon it. The axis of this area was formed by the Fonthill Ridge, dominated at each end by Hinkley Hill and Stop's Beacon, the highest point of the estate. Having become aware that the ground was being used without leave for the pleasure of the chase by a company of huntsmen, he had

commanded that the 519 acres be sealed off by the construction of the seven-mile wall. His Domain of Arnheim, for the romantic conception is thinly disguised in Poe's stories,⁷ had to be walled off before the building could begin to rise from the ground. Rumours were circulated concerning his mode of life within the barrier wall, making him out to be a monster of iniquity. This was in fact a deliberate ploy intended to keep out the huntsmen rather than the prying locals: Beckford loved all forms of wild life and hated the idea of any suffering being needlessly inflicted on them.

The next step taken by Beckford was to launch a partnership with James Wyatt, one of the leading architects in the Kingdom, who was Surveyor-General to the Board of Works and a personal friend of the King. It was presumably a collaboration which involved a constant struggle between patron and architect; the former was a man of unusual, blazing temper who had firm, aesthetic tastes even if he was not professionally trained in architectural design, whereas the latter was both celebrated and imaginative as well as most unbusinesslike and dilatory. Once Wyatt had drawn up the plans and seen the work started, he tended to lose interest, and it was a laborious business to have him inspect or supervise the later stages of a building.⁸ Yet it was from this combination of troublesome factors that after so many delays and serious setbacks the vast fabric of a cathedral-like structure would one day grow to dominate the peaceful Wiltshire countryside.

It may come as something of a surprise to realize that what became the most extraordinary private dwelling in England grew from a rather humble beginning. Originally it was meant to be a solitary tower on Stop's Beacon, where his father had once started to build a 'Beacon Tower', which had never been finished, but of which the foundations and lower wall were still standing. This scheme was soon replaced by more ambitious plans for the same site when Beckford asked Wyatt in the early part of 1796 to design him a 'Chapel upon Stop's Beacon',⁹ a convent with a separate tower, partly in ruins but grand enough to produce a striking effect as a decorative feature of the landscape. The design was elegant, appropriate and intelligible, but it did not satiate Beckford's megalomania. What his heart craved was something more magnificent, an imposing Gothic structure in an entirely laid out setting.

He eventually hit upon a final plan in the latter half of the same year; Beckford laid out the foundations of a huge edifice to the north-east of the Beacon on Hinckley Hill, nearer to Splendens and commanding extensive views of the neighbouring country. A ridge on the southern slope of this hill was chosen for his Gothic retreat (for it was meant so far to be a sort of summer residence) which was to be markedly larger in scale than the previous plans had allowed. In 1798 the name, Fonthill Abbey, was adopted for this monastic building; at this stage the Abbey consisted of the south and west wings, retaining as its main feature the central tower Beckford had cherished in his mind since his earliest dreams of seclusion. The spire-capped tower collapsed in a storm in May

1800, and was immediately reconstructed without its spire, in time for an elaborate reception, that Christmas, in honour of the celebrated Lord Admiral Nelson. The honoured guests stayed at Splendens and a one-mile evening trip to the Abbey is said to have been the highlight of the visit. By the middle of 1801 building at the Abbey had made enough progress for Beckford to consider living there, although it was not until 1807 that he finally moved in, after the addition of a north wing.

At all events, Fonthill Abbey grew to grand proportions, in what to many seemed a relatively short period, to suit the enlarged conceptions of its founder, and remained for twenty years at once a wonder and an enigma to all who saw it or heard of it. In its final form the Abbey took the shape of a huge cross, three hundred and twelve feet in length from north to south and two hundred and seventy feet from west to east ; at the far end of the north wing stood the two large square towers, which were balanced at the other extremity of the southern wing by a group of buttressing turrets, with embattled parapets ; and in the centre was the great octagonal hall from which radiated the four wings and above which rose the huge octagon tower, two hundred and seventy-six feet high, crowning the whole structure.

The dimensions of the interior of this cruciform residence were equally unusual. The main entrance was at the west, and its thirty-five foot high doors gave access to the Great Western Hall, seventy feet long, thirty feet wide and eighty feet high. At the end of this a flight of twenty-two steps led up to the centre of the building, the Octagon, which, having itself an internal height of one hundred and twenty-eight feet, was justly claimed to be the loftiest room in any private house in England. From here there stretched in a north-south direction two long galleries of over one hundred and twenty feet. To the north lay the King Edward III Gallery, enriched with 'the arms of the seventy-one Knights of the Garter from whom Beckford claimed descent' ; while the St Michael's Gallery, decorated in the same sumptuous way 'with lofty arched windows, and heraldic decorations,' extended to the south. From the southern end of this gallery one of the most poetic moments was to be had ; the gaze, travelling without interruption through the full length of each gallery and the central Octagon in between, finally came to rest on the blaze of light that surrounded the statue of St Anthony of Padua, Beckford's favourite saint, standing on an altar in the oratory—a distance of three hundred feet.¹⁰

On the whole the subdued lighting effects as well as the interior layout accentuated the distinctive feel Beckford contrived to create within this extraordinary monastic residence. He himself lived in the eastern transept, comprizing a series of public rooms and apartments, which were comparatively modest in their furnishings and fitted for convenience rather than visual effect. He dined in a modest manner and slept in 'his spartan bedroom with its simple uncurtained bed,'¹¹ which made a singular contrast to all the treasures of every variety such as exotic carpets, tapestries and crimson damask wall coverings, costly furniture, rare books and pictures by Claude, Breughel, Veronese,

Bellini, Raphael and Rembrandt, with which Beckford embellished other parts of the building.

In terms of its architectural style Fonthill Abbey was not the first example of modern Gothic; Strawberry Hill, the home of writer and parliamentarian Horace Walpole, had emerged as an earlier specimen of the phenomenon. Yet Beckford's Fonthill stood unique because it reflected with greater intensity the spiritual upheavals of the time—the Romantic pursuit of new sensations. Before Fonthill, modern Gothic building usually aimed at the transformation and extension of an existing building. With Fonthill, it became for the first time dramatic and sublime, as Kenneth Clarke has aptly pointed out:

As scenery it is superb. All that the eighteenth century demanded from Gothic—unimpeded perspectives, immense height, the sublime, in short—was present in Fonthill, and present more lavishly, perhaps, than in real mediaeval buildings. Even we, who pride ourselves on classicism, cannot be quite dead to this sudden outburst of romantic rhetoric. We know very well that the plaster tower is mere trumpery, but its sudden vehemence sweeps away our judgment; as Berlioz may suddenly sweep us away from Haydn, and El Greco's nightmare vision of Toledo seduce our eyes from the judicious Poussin.¹²

Architects, painters and writers, including Turner, Constable, and John Martin, flocked to see or paint Fonthill; despite some of 'the glaring faults in external textures and the detail of mouldings', the Perpendicular style of the Abbey was, in its almost unequalled splendour, far more spectacular than 'the purity in style of even such a masterpiece as Salisbury Cathedral.'¹³ However arbitrary Beckford's idea of the Gothic might seem today, his Gothic fantasia became a living legend for his contemporaries; it not only epitomized the architectural and artistic fashions of the day but exerted an influence on many buildings of later generations.¹⁴

II

Yet the Beckford legend did not end with Fonthill Abbey alone. Although there is no doubt that the Abbey constituted the central feature of the entire estate, the fact remains that the building should be considered not as an independent eminence but as an integral part of the organic whole of the garden architecture. This is another way of saying that the intrinsic value of the Abbey could be best appreciated when the building was considered in the context of the surrounding setting; the two complemented each other to make a single work of art.¹⁵ The Abbey was, to some extent, the joint effort of Beckford and his architect, reflecting the character and temperament of each man. In his landscaping activities, Beckford had no expert to collaborate with, except for the gardeners working under his instructions. This was why Beckford placed as much emphasis on the planting and landscaping at Fonthill as he did on the building itself.¹⁶

Whatever might be said against the Abbey and its founder, no one had anything but praise for the well-composed woods and gardens, which were incomparably beautiful.

Beckford's landscaping at the family estate actually predated his building activity on the new Abbey by a number of years. The original Fonthill property Beckford inherited from his father in 1781 lay, as we have seen earlier, on the eastern side of the estate. Occupying a site at the base of a thickly wooded hill, and marked by the Old Park and a broad river, Fonthill Splendens looked eastward over the river, at the other side of which the meadow rose somewhat abruptly, shutting in the prospect in that direction. While this Palladian mansion stood as a remarkable piece of architecture against its background of dark hills and rising forests, the layout of the circumjacent grounds of the house was singularly ill-harmonized. As John Rutter, a contemporary topographer, witnessed, the grounds were not 'constructed upon one pervading principle of art : but have in many parts a wild and uncultivated character, and derive their attraction from the beauty of their situation, rather than from the taste of their embellishment.'¹⁷

Beckford attempted to correct some of this clumsy composition when he assumed proprietorship. One of the first alterations he made was to fill in some of the barren, unplanted areas with trees, exotic plants and shrubs to avoid the monotonous effect of the flat, rolling style of landscape that Lancelot 'Capability' Brown had made popular. This work continued for the following few years in conjunction with other improvements. He also enlarged the river bed by ordering a dam, and transformed it into a large deep lake which greatly enhanced the beauty of the place.¹⁸ All this might have proved to be mere experiment compared with his later work, but it still served as a useful preliminary to what became a more grandiose scheme, for it exhibited the same taste for asymmetrical beauty and the same topographical concern for variety of landscape that were to strike the keynote of his grand designs for the new Fonthill.

It was towards the early part of 1796, when the engirdling wall was receiving its finishing touches, that Beckford's major landscaping projects began in earnest. Consolidated by his additional purchase of 1700 acres, the entire estate of Fonthill now comprised an extensive area of nearly 6000 acres. Over one hundred men were hired to work on the improvements to the grounds alone, and more than one million trees were to be newly planted to transform an uncultivated wilderness into a harmonious, woodland garden. Beckford's aesthetic principles were to banish all notions of a formal plan, typified in the eighteenth century by the conventional park with its avenues of trees drawn up like regiments on parade, and to produce instead a visual effect of calculated informality. Straight lines and orderly planting were to be avoided ; where topographical circumstances necessitated straight and direct lines, the formal effect was to be broken either by planting flowers, shrubs and trees as visual accents in the woods or by carpeting the path with varied moss or fine turf. The rolling plains and slopes were to be used to underline the shape of the wooded glades and foliage, while native trees and flowers were

to be encouraged to grow in spontaneous profusion. All about natural elements abounded: with verdant vales, undulating hills and water, Fonthill was the perfect location to put such principles into practice.

Once the site for the Abbey had been chosen, Beckford directed his energies towards the planning and arrangement of the 519 acres immediately surrounding the structure. While the building was progressing rapidly, the planting and landscaping proceeded, under the direction of his gardener, Vincent, who remained in Beckford's service for fifty years and helped to plant the slopes of Lansdown Hill for his master when he moved to Bath. In a letter addressed to his mother, dated 29th November, Beckford outlined some of the progress he had made as follows:

You are much mistaken, my dear Mother, in supposing the approach of Winter to have relaxed the vigour of my proceedings at Fonthill. Everything is going on with the same alacrity as at the time when you and my dear Children were here. I have extended the front of the Abbey in the Woods from the dimensions you saw us working upon, to near two hundred feet, and a good part of the building has already reached the first floor. The Conservatory and flower Garden, which are to surround it, are begun. My Walk, which you will recollect is, according to the Plan, to be carried considerably more than twenty Miles thro' and round the Woods (to which I have just made an addition of ground by the completion of a new purchase), has already proceeded to nearly the length nine Miles. The Season proves admirable for my planting, and, if it continues as open till Christmas, I think Vincent will by that time, with all the hands allowed, have got above a million trees into the Ground for this Year's work'¹⁹

It may not be inopportune at this point to note that Beckford's taste was a reflection of general trends in the eighteenth century art of landscape gardening. By the time he was planning and planting at Fonthill, the picturesque principles of landscape gardening had gained much greater support amongst English landowners. It was the period of the picturesque, which admittedly meant the romantic as opposed to the classic in the laying out of woods and gardens, the taste for the irregular and asymmetrical rather than the formal and orderly. This taste for the picturesque in gardening went hand in hand, in the case of Beckford, with a taste for the Gothic in architecture.²⁰ It was not an unusual pastime for a writer of his day. Alexander Pope and Horace Walpole were typical practitioners of the tendency, and garden architecture was highly appreciated as a visual art in eighteenth century England.²¹ What made Beckford unique was that he went to greater heights of extravagance than other men did, not because he was less sensible, but simply because he was wealthier.

Beckford's taste for the picturesque is best exemplified in the types of improvements to the grounds he undertook especially in the clearing operations and opening of vistas, together with the new planting. With the Abbey as the principal ingredient, carefully planned vistas were opened, beautiful paths of considerable size were cut and three great avenues laid out. The most impressive of these was the Great Western Avenue, the main

approach to the Abbey, running a hundred feet wide for over a mile to the west front. A person with a classical taste for the formal and regular would have sanctioned a broad stately avenue on level ground leading up to a building ; not so Beckford. He contrived to avoid the appearance of formality by making a depression half-way along the avenue, and by bounding both sides with a variety of trees and shrubs, that formed an irregular line as though the avenue had been cut out of a primeval forest. The trees were mostly of the spiry-topped kind, which brought to mind the atmosphere of 'monasteries in alpine countries.'²²

Towards the Abbey, the avenue, carpeted with a fine close turf, gave way in a gradually widening stretch to a broad, open area. Round the building itself the ground was cleared of trees, and there were no gravel paths or made-up roads visible ; all was bare grass except by the south entrance for an apricot and a fig tree as might have been planted 'by some monk who had brought the seeds of these fruits from some Italian or Swiss monastery.'²³ Attention was also paid to colour in order to obtain an aesthetically pleasing effect. The Abbey was set off by dark masses of Scotch firs and oak, which contrasted with an undergrowth of hazel, holly, thorn and furze, and a few larch and birch. The purpose everywhere was to confirm the impression that everything grew from a natural setting. The art which had contributed to its creation was concealed with the utmost care.²⁴ As a knowledgeable landscape designer, Beckford had learned that a natural interrelationship amongst building, grounds and woods was essential for a unified design. Developing the ideas he had tried out at Monserrate in Portugal,²⁵ he intended to make certain that the building and the surrounding elements were carefully arranged and shaped into a harmonious whole, according to the underlying principles of picturesque garden architecture.

III

The unwavering dedication with which Beckford approached the landscaping task is also shown in the other types of improvements he made in creating two more significant features within the Abbey estate, the Nine Miles Walk and a carriage ride. Both were completed by the spring of 1801 to become indispensable elements in the whole scheme, because they provided many picturesque settings and magnificent views of the surrounding country and, above all, of the Gothic cathedral-like structure rearing up with its many pinnacles against a background of rich and varied foliage.

In laying out the Nine Miles Walk Beckford was again guided by principles of design that guaranteed visual effects of naturalness and diversity. Beginning from the south of the building, the first leg of the Walk ran curving north parallel to the engirdling wall through the thickly planted woods to the Lower Street Gate. This was the northwestern extremity of the Abbey grounds, whence the second leg was designed, in contrast to the

first, to meander southwest amongst 'the plantations more penetrable to the eye.'²⁶ A beautiful view of the north side of the Abbey was presented at the intersection of the Walk with another great avenue, called the Clerk's Walk, running northwest from the building. From this intersection the remaining leg could be pursued for a quarter of a mile, until it reached the Stone Gate, the beginning of both the Great Western Avenue and the third leg of the Walk.

Turning east from the entrance, the west front of the Abbey would suddenly come into view with a solemn and imposing majesty, with its central tower soaring into the sky. Following the western approach for half a mile, the third portion of the Walk was also intersected in the middle by yet another great avenue, Beacon Terrace, which was again a fine open avenue, lying in a northeast-to-southwest direction, and bounded by a great variety of forest trees and garden shrubs such as oaks, firs, thorns, birchs, laburnums, and acacias. The Terrace gradually ascended from the intersection to Stop's Beacon, the end of the third leg and the highest southwestern point in the vicinity of the Abbey, commanding some of the most extensive and delightful views over the surrounding country (p. 89).

As the wanderer descended down the eminence towards the northeast along the final, winding leg of the Walk, splendid prospects across the valley suddenly and beautifully spread out in front of him (p. 90). Over a long stretch of ground, 'varied by gentle undulations and studded with clumps of trees, displaying a rich assemblage of glowing and luxuriant tints,' the Abbey with its lofty octagon appeared 'backed by an elevated woodland of a sombre aspect, which by contrast heightened the striking and brilliant effect of the edifice.'²⁷ As one descended further down the picturesquely wooded pine grounds, that emphasised the interplay of light and shade across Bitham Vale, the enchanting scenery then shifted to the beauties of the trees and thickets surrounding Bitham Lake, a graphic attestation to Beckford's skill as a landscapist. By excavating and damming up the bottom of the dale he produced the strong visual impressions a painter would find so pleasing to the eye; the surrounding trees, thickets and sky reflected in the glassy surface greatly enhanced the charm of the scene, with flocks of wildfowl gracing the water. From its southern bank Turner and a host of other artists often sketched the most romantic of all views of the dreamy Abbey hovering over the misty water, its walls tinged pink, and its window panes glinting like diamonds in 'the mild Rays of the declining Sun.'²⁸

It was not long before Beckford made a further refinement by creating an American plantation on the eastern side of the Lake. As a well-informed botanist and horticulturist as well, Beckford cultivated common trees and shrubs native to the area rather than exotic specimens as a rule; when certain foreign trees were introduced, they were planted in such a manner as to blend as unpretentiously as possible with the native varieties. The American garden was one of the few exceptions to this principle. Bordered

on one side by the hardest of English and Mediterranean heaths, sloping on the other into the Lake and intersected by winding paths, the garden was filled with the astonishing wealth of colour produced by the mauve rhododendrons, white magnolias, azaleas, arbutus, Portugal laurel and the Carolina rose. There also flourished here the Angelica tree, the Andromeda shrub, the Yulan tree and the Carolina Allspice.²⁹ Leaving behind this picturesque dale of sophisticated plantation and climbing up a steep incline to the southern side of the Abbey, the wanderer found himself nearly at the point from which the nine-mile excursion started.

Similarly, portions of the carriage ride within the enclosure were laid out, with the same, special emphasis on the variety of scenic beauty. In addition to the western approach by the Stone Gate, the Abbey could be approached from the opposite direction by way of Tisbury Lodge. Thence two routes were designed to extend in different directions. The first was a broader drive, which ascended about half a mile through a dark wood of lofty firs, and skirted the north side of the building up Hinkley Hill. After crossing the Abbey site, the drive took the visitor to the nut lawn, 'so called on account of the variety and abundance of hazels : here are likewise to be seen American and exotic oaks in high perfection.'³⁰

Meanwhile, a second ride ran down through the Abbey Wood at the southern end. First this followed in a meandering course almost entirely amidst deep green gloom, for it was 'bounded and shut in by a thick plantation of pine, fir and larch, with wild underwood and flowering shrubs filling the spaces between the trees so that the extent of their thickness could not be judged.'³¹ The ride then passed the southern margin of Bitham Lake, traversed the lofty and beautiful expanse of the pine lawn, and turned abruptly to the right skirting round the Norwegian Lawn, the southern extremity of the ground. In the vicinity Beckford constructed the Norwegian Hut, a log house 'of very tasteful proportions [...] which were in perfect harmony with the general scenery' of the Alpine woods growing on the slopes of Beacon Hill (p. 91). The gradual descent from the Beacon to the Stone Gate was exceedingly pleasing. On the left-hand side was the fine extent of vale, bounded by hills ; and on the right, the turrets of the Abbey occasionally burst upon the visitor's leafy seclusion. As he came through the barrier wall, an opposite gate admitted him into Riddlemoor woods and a long labyrinth of shady rides brought the visitor finally to Knoyle Corner, the western extremity of the entire estate. The prospect from this point was seldom exceeded in range and richness (p. 98).

Having brought these remarkable features inside the Abbey domain to completion, Beckford continued to apply himself over the next several years to the general work of planting and laying out his whole estate. Occasionally as many as five hundred men were taken into employment, to work in shifts by day and by lamplight at night, regardless of the weather. The total result was the remarkable extension of the carriage ride, which eventually encircled twenty two miles throughout the entire 6000 acres, and the comple-

tion of the Great Terrace, a huge ridge running for three miles from Knoyle Korner to the Entrance Lodge of the Old Park. The latter was 'a green avenue, varying in width from 50 to 200 yards; its greatest attraction is the grandeur of the prospects which it presents of the Abbey. On this side, the hill offers one broad mass of wood, of prodigious extent, with a deep glen between; and the eye ranges from its base, till the outline is terminated by that remarkable edifice, which seems to reign over a vast region of lonely magnificence' (p. 98).

Although the vast extent of Fonthill renders it impossible to give a detailed picture of Beckford's landscaping in its entirety, it is evident from the work thus conducted on such a grand scale and scope that he was striving for the most perfectly picturesque visual environment. Whether designing the elements of landscape such as avenues, walks and pathways, or planting flora like trees and flowers, Beckford made every effort to bring into his very living quarters the aesthetic harmony of his architectural and artistic visions, 'a union of the wildest and the most ornamented scenery, the picturesque and the sublime, in close society' (p. 83). Beckford's idea was to approach every object from its most picturesque side and he succeeded in transforming what had been a mere interminable expanse of bare down into one of the most remarkable seats in England, adorned by almost all the natural beauties that could belong to a place of the kind, and crowned by a structure of unrivalled height and grandeur.

It was no small wonder that the domain of Fonthill evoked unfeigned admiration amongst the contemporary experts and writers who witnessed in awe the astounding metamorphosis of Fonthill 'by one tasteful possessor' (p. 84). By comparison with preceding landscaping enterprises, which had been confined to the successful improvement of an existing garden, as in Humphrey Repton's achievements, Beckford had gone so far as to incorporate the whole of wild nature into one of the most enchanting landed estates in England. J. C. Loudon, an expert in his field, who visited Fonthill in 1807 and 1833 to examine the Abbey estate for its intrinsic merits as a landscape garden, wrote: 'This place...deserves to be visited by every person...desirous of improving himself in landscape gardening; because it is the only one in England in which he will find the most perfect unity of character belonging to an age long since past in this country, and only now to be found in certain mountainous regions of Catholic countries on the Continent....'³² William Cobbett, a political essayist and journalist who loathed the landed classes, was as impressed as Loudon by Beckford's grounds: 'Well, we saw Fonthill, but, even if I had the talent to do justice to it in a written description, ten such sheets as this would not suffice for the purpose. When I see you I will at times give you an hour's account of it. After that sight, all sights become mean until that be out of the mind. We both thought Wardour the first place we had ever seen, but Wardour makes but a single glade in Beckford's immense grounds and plantations.'³³

IV

This was the whole process of Beckford's architectural and artistic extravagance at Fonthill which, combined with his immense wealth and mysterious seclusion, had resulted in a legend concerning the Abbot and his creation. It is only natural that Beckford's name has always been associated with this extravaganza, for it symbolized so much of that in his personality that sought for expression in some physical shape. On the one hand the creation of Fonthill was the realization of a dream of seclusion in an aesthete who had long been preoccupied with the image of a golden age, a state of prelapsarian innocence, and regarded childhood as the prime source of happiness. For that matter he was the quintessential romantic, and even anticipated Wordsworth in the *Prelude*. Whether Beckford's ideal was good or bad was not the question. The vital point was that he had in his adolescence determined to comply with his own natural predilections and stood sincere in his calm resolve to fulfill them in his own way: 'I am determined to enjoy my Dreams my phantasies and all my singularity, however irksome and discordant to the Worldlings around. In spite of them I will be happy....'³⁴

On the other hand his seclusion at Fonthill bore eloquent testimony to the way Beckford asserted himself against the changing spirit of the age. It must be remembered that he belonged to a social class that were destined to decline in prosperity amid the rising tide of science, industrialism and democracy. Just as the solitary Abbey epitomised the splendid isolation of the most romantic man, who did not fit in with society, so the other-worldly ambience of the Arcadian demesne was as much a silent proclamation as the edifice itself of his attitude, a poetical counterclaim against an increasing trend in society towards prosaic materialism. Making a hermitage of his Domain of Arnheim, Beckford lived there as a man of taste, neglectful of his private affairs and his responsibilities as a citizen, and careless of money, apparently with no other objects in life than the collection of books, furnishings and works of art.

Yet one cannot live for ever in an unworldly dream. If Beckford can be said to have established his dream kingdom in some sense as an act of defiance against the outside world, and in particular against the rapid expansion of materialism, then it was an act he had to pay for in terms of the ever-growing threat of financial crisis as well as, for all his protests to the contrary, the risk of ennui.³⁵ His extravagances, inattention to his affairs, the depreciation of his West Indian property and unfortunate lawsuits—all combined to reduce Beckford's income, though still huge, and made it impossible for him to maintain such a vastly expensive estate as Fonthill. In 1822, therefore, he decided to part with the Abbey and to depart from his cherished place of retirement. Whatever feelings he had are unlikely ever to be known, although his manner of leaving Fonthill appears to have spoken volumes. On the very morning he was due to leave, he rose at his

usual hour and after having breakfast, summoned his gardener Vincent to follow his usual routine. The two rode round the grounds, as they had done hundreds of times before. Beckford pointed out to Vincent the further improvements and alterations he wished to make, as though his realm would ever remain intact. On returning to the front door of the Abbey, he dismounted and, entering his carriage without a word, bade farewell to his home forever.³⁶

A brief account suffices for the sequel to the history of Fonthill. With the disposal of the Abbey, the greater part of Beckford's collection, including the library, paintings and furnishings, were dispersed in a series of sales and auctions, and the huge tower tumbled in upon itself for the last time in 1825, destroying the western wing and most of the northern and southern galleries. Beckford, who had since moved to Bath, is said to have noticed the absence of the great tower from his new and more modest retreat at Lansdown Tower. Had he still been the Abbot of Fonthill, he might have dismissed the occurrence as trifling and immediately ordered the tower to be rebuilt yet again to salute the surrounding countryside. But the new owner, a rich merchant who, reversing Beckford's history, had accumulated a vast fortune from the humblest beginnings, observed: 'Now the house is not too big for me to live in'³⁷ and sold portions of the estate a few months later. This deed virtually marked the end of the glorious period of Fonthill, for the collapsed building gradually fell into a state of ruin, while the neglected grounds began to run riot and became so overgrown that the original contours were all but obscured. Only a small portion of the northern wing survives, and along with the tranquil water of Bitham Lake, appears to convey vestiges of the former glory of Fonthill.

The didactic have loved to dwell on the imprudence of a wealthy eccentric and the transitory magnificence it induced. There may be some truth, indeed, in assuming that the fate of Fonthill and its creator could illustrate a sermon on the extent to which vanity can go when backed by almost unbounded wealth. Yet there is something more to be said, even while admitting, in part, the justice of the ridicule and stricture that have been heaped upon Beckford and his creation. Was he unaware from the outset that his dream would not outlast the will that had evoked it? Beckford always stressed that his idea was to weave spells and to produce 'illusions that carried the mind into a pleasing captivity.'³⁸ If his creation 'always appealed primarily to the imagination, was always an Arabian Nights' dream,' in Kenneth Clarke's phrase,³⁹ then its transience could not possibly be a matter to be deplored. Beckford must have had the wit to know that with the march of scientific, utilitarian and industrial values, the old bases of society, with its tolerance and leisurely ways, were giving way, and that an era characterized by the dissipation and impractical daring of rich men was drawing to an end. It is not inconceivable that Beckford could even have acquiesced in the fate that overtook Fonthill as a justification of himself and his dream. The dramatic collapse of his soaring tower was in the true sense of the word an emblematic climax to the magical dream that might have pleased

him with its very ephemerality. In this context Beckford was a self-dramatizer who chose to assume the role of stage manager ; all he was concerned with was to create theatrical effects of an idyllic and dramatic nature.

The fact that Fonthill did not outlive its creator is therefore no indication of his indiscretion, and no criticism of his aesthetic instincts. Fonthill must be judged on its effectiveness, not on its durability. The opinion of Dr. Waagen, Director of the Royal Gallery at Berlin, the foremost European art critic of the day, seems to deserve special attention :

On the whole, I came away with the conviction that Mr. Beckford unites, in a very rare degree, an immense fortune with a general and refined love of art and a highly-cultivated taste....The extensive Gothic building, with a lofty, very elegant tower, from the views which I have seen of it, must have had, in the highest degree, the grandly fantastic character by which this style of architecture exercises so wonderful a charm....conceive it surrounded by all that the art of gardening in England can effect by the aid of a picturesquely-varied ground, luxuriant vegetation, and a great mass of natural running water ; and you will have a general idea of this magical spot, which so far maintained this character that for a long time no strange foot was permitted to intrude....Fonthill Abbey has resembled also in its transitory existence the frail creations of the world of enchantment.⁴⁰

The 'frail creations of the world of enchantment'—this was probably how Beckford hoped to resist the changes occurring in the reality of the outside world. All contemporary descriptions of Fonthill, whether in the press or in the correspondence of men of discernment, stress the magical character of the place. Amidst the accelerating transfigurations that progress was causing within English society, Beckford's landscape architecture might have been intended to pay a parting tribute to 'the mild Rays of the declining Sun' of the old aristocratic order. As such, Fonthill convinced discerning contemporaries. As such, it passed away like a mirage, leaving behind just the trace of a legend.

Notes

- 1 Guy Chapman published the manuscript of eighty-seven pages in 1930, naming it *The Vision*. See Robert J. Gemmett, *William Beckford* (Boston : Halls, 1977), pp.40-41.
- 2 Sacheverell Sitwell, *Beckford and Beckfordism* (London : Duckworth, 1930), p.21.
- 3 See, for example, Boyd Alexander, *Life at Fonthill 1807-1822* (London : Ruper Hart-Davis, 1957), pp.11-13.
- 4 Sitwell, p.35.
- 5 Malcolm Jack, *William Beckford : An English Fidalgo* (New York : AMS Press, 1996), p.80 ; 120.
- 6 Brian Fothergill, *Beckford of Fonthill* (London : Faber and Faber, 1979), pp.225-226.
- 7 For details, see Kenneth W. Graham, ' "Inconnue dans les annales de la terre" : Beckford's Benign and Demonic Influence on Poe' in *Vathek & The Escape from Time : Bicentenary Revelutions*, ed. by Kenneth W. Graham (New York : AMS Press, 1990), pp.201-223.

- 8 Alexander, p.14.
- 9 John W. Oliver, *The Life of William Beckford* (London : Oxford University Press, 1932), p.233.
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp.252-253
- 11 Fothergill, p.298.
- 12 Kenneth Clark, *The Gothic Revival : An Essay in the History of Taste* (New York : Harper & Row, 1962), p.89.
- 12 Turner recorded his impressions of Fonthill Abbey in at least seven watercolours, 'haunted by the astonishing structure rising from a bower of trees on the edge of the forbidding downs'. See Lees-Milne, *William Beckford* (Tisbury : Compton Russell, 1976), p.59.
- 13 H. A. N. Brockman, *The Caliph of Fonthill* (London : Werner Laurie, 1956), p.113.
- 14 W. Porden's Eaton and Hadlow, and Barry and Pugin's Houses of Parliament were, to name only a few, the celebrated examples of the nineteenth-century Gothic that derived from Beckford's Gothic fantasia. See Lees-Milne, p.59.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p.62.
- 16 Boyd Alexander, *England's Wealthiest Son : A Study of William Beckford* (London : Centaur Press, 1962), p.172. Beckford once told Cyrus Redding, his friend and earliest biographer, that his greatest artistic achievement at Fonthill was the creation of a picturesque landscape round the Abbey.
- 17 John Rutter, *Delineations of Fonthill and Its Abbey* (Shaftsbury : John Rutter, 1823), pp.92-93.
- 18 Robert J. Gemmett, 'Beckford's Fonthill : The Landscape as Art', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, LXXX (December, 1972), pp.336-337.
- 19 Lewis Melville, *The Life and Letters of William Beckford of Fonthill* (London : Heinemann, 1910), pp.221-222.
- 20 It has been pointed out that Beckford was possibly influenced by the publication in 1794 of *An Essay on the Picturesque* by Uvedale Price. For details, see Brockman, pp.107-108.
- 21 Gemmett, *William Beckford*, p.121.
- 22 Brockman, pp.109-110.
- 23 Lees-Milne, p.66.
- 24 Alexander, *England's Wealthiest Son*, p.173.
- 25 See Malcolm Jack, pp.115-118.
- 26 Rutter, p.87. The quotations and information in the next few pages are taken, unless otherwise indicated, from the same book with page numbers given in parentheses.
- 27 James Storer, *A Description of Fonthill Abbey, Wiltshire* (London : W. Clarke, 1812), pp.4-5.
- 28 Lees-Milne, p.67.
- 29 *Ibid.*, pp.66-67.
- 30 Storer, p.2.
- 31 Gemmett, 'Beckford's Fonthill', p.346.
- 32 Quoted by Alexander in his *England's Wealthiest Son*, p.175.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p.180.
- 34 Quoted in Melville, pp.65-66.
- 35 Stanley Lane-Poole, 'The Author of *Vathek*', *Quarterly Review*, CCXIII (1910), p.377.
- 36 Lees-Milne, p.83.
- 37 Fothergill, p.326.
- 38 Alexander, 'William Beckford, Man of Taste', *History Today*, X (October, 1960), p.691.
- 39 Clark, p.86.
- 40 Alexander, *England's Wealthiest Son*, p.170.

Résumé

In the long and extravagant career of the author of *Vathek*, the years which covered the period from his return to Fonthill in 1796 to his move to Bath in 1823 were a singularly unproductive period. All the literary works upon which his fame rests, from *Vathek* (1786) to *Italy ; with Sketches of Spain and Portugal* (1834) and *Recollections of an Excursion to the Monasteries of Alcobaca and Batalha* (1835) were written either prior to his Fonthill years or after he had left the beloved home in which he had been at his happiest and loneliest. Yet this does not mean that Beckford's creative energies were on the wane all this while, for his artistic drive was increasingly directed into other channels. Of these the foremost was his garden architecture, a combined achievement of building and landscape gardening.

The present essay concentrates upon this particular period, during which he reigned and executed his plans over the immense kingdom of Fonthill. Begun in a tentative way in 1793, with the construction of a seven-mile barrier wall, the Fonthill project expanded from 1796 over the next ten-year period, until it became in the end one of the most remarkable seats in England. Our primary aim here is to describe the course of his landscape architecture at Fonthill before we confirm the due significance of Beckford's creation, in which his knowledge and taste were no less conspicuous than in any other of his creative undertakings.