

Chapter 1

Introduction

Boris Tomashevsky's essay »Literature and biography« briefly outlines the biographical legend surrounding such authors as Voltaire and Pushkin.¹ Composed, he writes, in the shape of letters and diaries and carefully distributed anecdotes a biographical legend was deliberately plotted through the use of autobiographical modes of representation, creating a *fiction of autobiography*. In this way, Pushkin chose to portray a fictional »Pushkin« in his writings and Voltaire, who was conscious of the ideological uses of a public self, contributed willingly to the myth of the solitary and exiled thinker at Ferney. Their biographies were composed alongside their literary work, and the biography (the author's biographical legend) came to reflect a prescribed or preferred mode of reading and interpretation. The audience was thus prepared to interpret the texts through a thin yet distinct veil of biography, adding yet another layer to the literary work through, as Tomashevsky writes, the literary functions of biography »as the traditional concomitant of artistic work«.² Many biographers, Tomashevsky added, still »cannot be made to comprehend an artistic work as anything but a fact of the author's biography: on the other hand, there are those for whom any kind of biographical analysis is unscientific

¹ Boris Tomashevsky, »Literature and biography« [orig. »Literatura i biografija«, *Kniga i revoljucija*, 4 (1923), 6–9], in *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, ed. by Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska, MIT Press: Ann Arbor 1978, 47–55.

² *Ibid.*, 47.

contraband, a ‘back-door’ approach».³ Eighty years later, this still applies.

William Beckford’s literary self (or rather his narrator, disguising himself by the name of William or William Beckford) is a character framed by the textual settings it inhabits and paradoxically camouflaged by the various elements of reality it invokes. It is a carefully choreographed character acting in what could vaguely be construed as a plot traditionally interpreted as autobiographical and often used for the purposes of a biographical discourse. While Beckford’s narrator has frequently been misinterpreted as merely an artistic rendition of the ‘real’ William Beckford, this present study will focus on the literary strategies that allow for the creation of a narrator that is, in Tomashevsky’s sense of the term, a *biographical legend*, i.e. a deliberate synthesis of fact and fiction. It is an obvious feature in Beckford’s early prose works (such as *The Vision*)⁴ but it is also a feature of Beckford’s writing that never fully disappears. His last two published works, *Italy; with Sketches of Spain and Portugal* (1834) and *Recollections of an Excursion to the Monasteries of Alcobaca and Batalha* (1835), are – though presented as straightforward memoirs of travels – heavily fictionalised accounts of travels where fiction is allowed to dominate fact and where fact is seldom allowed to compromise the narrative flow of a good story.

Beckford’s early letters are perhaps the most obvious examples of this literary strategy. Always a compulsive letter-writer, Beckford was also constantly rewriting his letters, often decades after having sent them, with a zeal that is explained only by his desire to mould them into literature. The letters (of which some seventy of varying literary density are conveniently collected within the covers of a red leather copy book)⁵ are on the one hand accounts of Beckford’s daily life and on the other heavily

³ Ibid.

⁴ Appendix 1, MS. Beckford c. 46, *The Vision*, or, *The Long Story* and Chapter 5.

⁵ Appendix 2, MS. Beckford e. 3, *The Red Copy Book* and Chapter 8.

revised and rewritten fictional narratives. Their narrator may sign the letters and present himself as »William« or »William Beckford« – thus masking the authorial control which any writer maintains over a narrative with the supposed autobiographical authenticity of the intimate confession contained within the confines of the familiar letter – but it is fiction, not fact, which is at the heart of these narratives.



William Cowper's letters are in some aspects similar to Beckford's. Even the discrepancies between the two may provide us with some interesting points of comparison. Beckford writes of Fonthill, a place of picturesque and sublime splendour; Cowper writes of rural Olney, a place, as Bruce Redford describes it, containing »the ultimate *sanctum sanctorum*« where peace and tranquillity is the real essence of existence.⁶ Beckford focuses on volatile emotions, Cowper on subtle and every-day events. Beckford's Fonthill is, as we will come to see, ever expanding, incorporating worlds invoked by programmatic poetic enthusiasm; Cowper's Olney reflects an introspective perspective, focused on minute transformations.

Yet two defining elements emerge as invariable and shared focuses of Cowper's and Beckford's epistolary narrative: the narrator or the letter-writer, who is almost always at the centre of attention, and the uncommonly strong emphasis on the place of the narratives – Fonthill and Olney.⁷ Though Beckford and Cowper both appear in the guise of their 'real selves' in these texts, they project themselves really as characters within the confines of a fiction that focuses on descriptions of landscape

⁶ Bruce Redford, *The Converse of the Pen. Acts of Intimacy in the Eighteenth-Century Familiar Letter*, The University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London 1986, 50.

⁷ The role of the narrator in Beckford's prose is discussed in Chapters 5 and 6 and the place of the narrative is partly the subject of Chapter 8 in the present study.

and mental imagery. The letter, Cowper wrote poignantly, in many ways resembled the travelogue and ordered the narrative and the landscape of the narrative accordingly: »A Letter is Written, as a Conversation is maintained, or a Journey perform'd, not by preconcerted, or premeditated Means, by a New Contrivance, or an Invention never heard of before, but merely by maintaining a Progress». ⁸ Yet Beckford's and Cowper's letters are rarely this ingenuously put together as they constitute a hybrid form of familiar letter and fictitious narrative that is, at times, highly artistic; a skilful example of *life turned art*, playfully exploring the various ways in which the practice of art may transform life into literature. Nevertheless, critics have continued to read Beckford as a confessor. Miniature lives, for instance, of either Beckford or Alexander Cozens, Beckford's drawing-master and close friend, often repeat in a few lines of biographical narrative most of the standardised elements of what may be termed a Beckford-Cozens mythology. Most of the biographical details that make up this mythology are presented as facts by critics and biographers alike, when really they are mere anecdotes; fragments of a myth extracted from a disjointed narrative that disguises itself as a series of letters, diaries and jottings.

Beckford's letters are almost never mere reflections of a biographical truth immersed in a sea of poetic prose. He writes his letters through the use of the combined aesthetic layers of the genre of the intimate message and the well-known rhetoric of a fictional narrative. Beckford's confession remains firmly grounded in fiction, not in fact.

»Cozens» – a mimetic element in Beckford's prose on the same level not only as the signature character »William» but also as »Fonthill» – is a result, to quote Beckford's own words, not of

⁸ William Cowper, *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, ed. by James King and Charles Ryskamp, Oxford University Press: Oxford 1979, vol. I, 374.

»the realisation of romance in its most extravagant intensity»⁹ but of the romancing of reality. If we were to reconstruct a Beckford legend (in Tomashevsky's sense of the word) we would have to fuse various details, fragments or anecdotes together which to some extent would reflect or represent the archetypal '*life of Beckford*'. But these fragments would inevitably fail us. The biography, the miniature life and the chronology – which are all genres of critical discourse in varying degrees – all function merely as added fictions: as variations on the biographical legend.

While Cozens has been used on numerous occasions as a key to unlock the biographical 'enigma' of Beckford, few attempts have been made to explore the various ways in which he is allowed to act in Beckford's writings as a fictional character. Timothy Mowl describes this character as an idealised companion »and inspiration of [Beckford's] idyllic youth».¹⁰ To some extent this is true. Cozens is a literary figure with characteristics derived from several popular literary sources with which Beckford was well acquainted. Yet as a biographical figure he remains distressingly anonymous. Employing the rhetorical framework of the genre of the familiar letter, Beckford's early letters of reverie – which are sometimes poignantly referred to as the Cozens letters but which are directed at other correspondents as well – focus almost entirely on the emotions of the *narrator*. The narratee all but disappears in a haze of non-descript address-anonymity, merging narrator and narratee in the process. »Cozens» exists only as a transitory addressee, as a momentary reflection of the »I». He is the »you» of many letters and essays and appears in a highly fragmented fictional guise in which he must be considered.

The setting may be seen as a sketchy map of the psyche of the narrator. He designs a textual place of fancy to which he may

⁹ MS. Beckford c. 18, »Origins of the Halls of Eblis» [folder], fol. 19v., 8.

¹⁰ Timothy Mowl, *William Beckford: Composing for Mozart*, John Murray: London 1998, 53.

retire. He has already chosen his companion, yet the narratee remains, named or unnamed, mainly a reflection of the narrator. It is a deliberate play with identities, a fiction or code of autobiography. »Cozens» must not be understood either as a forgery or as an invocation of the ‘real’ Alexander Cozens. Created by Beckford as literary characters, as elements in a narrative that deals explicitly with the fiction of autobiography, with a poetics of autobiographical ambiguity – a poetics, ultimately, of the invention of the self – both »Cozens» and »William» act and partake in a larger fictional undertaking.

It is precisely this literary undertaking, this fiction, which is the object of the present study. I will attempt an investigation into the nature of the biographical legend in light of Beckford’s texts, reading them (regardless of genre) as fragments of a disjointed narrative dealing with a literary self. I will show that the *biographeme*, as the basic element of the *biographical legend*, may have other origins; that the biographical legend is the combined effort of author and biographer. Whilst Beckford’s »Beckford» is at the centre of attention in this narrative, other characters also add to a plot which is firmly set in the borderland between fact and fiction.



The first set of questions with which this present investigation is concerned is theoretical and methodological:

What is a *biographeme*?

What is a *biographical legend*?

Beginning with a brief discussion of Roland Barthes’ term *biographeme* – and adjusting and redefining this term to fit into a model of the creation and transformation of a *biographical legend* – Chapters 2 and 4 represent a methodological and theoretical starting point. Though both terms, the biographical legend and the biographeme, derive from Tomashevsky’s and Barthes’

writings, I have adapted and transformed them to the present situation (Chapter 3 is an extensive investigation into the nature of a specific biographeme and constitutes a practical expansion of Chapter 2).¹¹

The second set of questions is interpretative:

What is the nature of the *narrator* and the *narratee* in Beckford's early writings?¹²

May we extract a *narrative* from Beckford's letters, diaries and journals (his so called autobiographical writings) that lies without the scope of 'pure' autobiography? If so, what is the nature of this narrative?

Which characteristics define the relationship between *fact* and *fiction* within the scope of this narrative?

Chapters 5 and 6 will expand this investigation into the nature of Beckford's narrator (or, as we will see, *narrators*); these chapters will explore Beckford's early prose works *The Vision* and *L'Esplendente*. Chapters 7 to 9 will deal in more detail with the question of the biographical legend and the nature of the disjointed narrative that emerges through Beckford's letters and travelogues.

The third set of questions revolves around place and topography, around setting, stage and scene:

What is the function of the *place* in Beckford's early writings?

What is the function of *Fonthill* and what purpose does it play in the setting of the stage of the biographical legend?¹³

¹¹ This investigation also offers an historical cross-section of earlier research.

¹² This is not, of course, a question regarding addressee attribution. It is a question directed at the nature of the literary relationship between narrator and narratee.

¹³ Fonthill, Beckford's ancestral home in Wiltshire, is a pivotal element in his writings.

How do the various landscapes in Beckford's early writings relate to the actions and thoughts of the characters that occupy them?

What is the nature of the relationship between *place* and *movement*, between *setting* and *transformation* in Beckford's writings?

Chapter 8 also contains an analysis of the function of place in Beckford's early writings. It naturally focuses on Fonthill, yet involves other places as well, both real and imaginary. The chapter also analyses the various ways in which this imaginary topography is activated through the actions and movements of the characters it contains. The elements of self, place and time, and the pivotal process of transformation of fact into fiction, are also discussed in Chapters 8 and 9. Beckford's aesthetic dichotomy of fancy and reason, partly derived from a Lockean philosophy of perception and understanding, is, as we will see, at the centre of his early writings.



This book is concerned with Beckford's early years as a writer. It begins in the middle- and late 1770's – when Beckford starts writing – and ends in 1786, when *Vatbek*, his *chef d'oeuvre* is published. *Vatbek* is followed by a cessation of publishing which lasts a decade. When Beckford re-emerges as an author he does so shielded by pseudonyms and protected by the cool detachment of satire.¹⁴ He has reinvented his authorial self.

¹⁴ Lady Harriet Marlow [pseud.], *Modern Novel Writing, or the Elegant Enthusiast; and Interesting Emotions of Arabella Bloomville. A Rhapsodical Romance; Interspersed with Poetry*, London 1796 [probably published in 1795; cf. Arthur Freeman, »William Beckford's *Modern Novel Writing*, 1795–6: Two Issues, 'Three States'«, in *Book Collector*, 41:1 (1992), 67–73]; and Jacquetta Agneta Mariana Jenks [pseud.], *Azemia: A Descriptive and Sentimental Novel. Interspersed with Pieces of Poetry*, London 1797; published in facsimile and introduced by Herman Mittle Levy,



This process of reinvention defines the end of this investigation. Beckford had published two books before *Vathek* – the satirical ‘life of the artists’, *Biographical Memoirs of Extraordinary Painters* (1780) and the suppressed travelogue *Dreams, Waking Thoughts and Incidents* (1783) – and both of these works, which constitute two stylistical extremes of Beckford’s early writing, are of course important to our understanding of his oeuvre. But behind these, mostly hidden from the public eye, lay an uninterrupted flow of manuscript writings that encompassed letters and diaries as well as outright fiction. Many of these manuscripts have remained unpublished. Some have been published in incorrect transcriptions or as fragmented quotations in biographies. Only a few have been meticulously transcribed and analysed. No study, however, has so far attempted an investigation of Beckford’s manuscript writings in their own right.

Though two rather simple terms, *biographeme* and *biographical legend*, may dominate the theoretical and methodological stance of this investigation, there are other concepts that, in a way, are more important and appear more complex. I will, for instance, discuss the relationship between *fact* and *fiction*. Concepts such as *biography* and *autobiography* will be used, describing, in the words of Patricia Meyer Spacks, »the organic development of plot from the very substance of life experience». ¹⁵ Beckford’s manuscripts, and in particular his early letters, may be said to showcase such a development. Yet the concepts of authenticity and life experience may very well disguise the fictional mechanics of literary self-dramatisation.

Jr., Scholars’ Facsimiles & Reprints: Gainesville, Florida 1970. See also Deborah Joanne Griebel, *A Critical Edition of William Beckford’s »Modern Novel Writing» and »Azemia»* [diss., not published], University of Delaware: UMI 1986.

¹⁵ Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Imagining a Self. Autobiography and Novel in Eighteenth-Century England*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England 1976, 229.

As we will come to see, Beckford staged an entire literary production based on the pivotal character of »Beckford«, and made Fonthill its topographical vortex. Other characters were allowed to perform on the same stage yet the ‘story’ rarely touched on matters outside the main character’s field of perception. Beckford staged this ‘autobiography’ – his letters and diaries – as a literary undertaking conforming mainly to various rhetorical or fictional strategies. The diary, the letter and the novel; all these genres reflected aesthetic choices first and private choices second. Beckford’s narrative of the self – fragmented yet strangely consistent – is a fictional construct.¹⁶

Beckford’s early development as an author is reflected in the development of the plot of a fragmented narrative which, to quote Hans Meyerhoff, »invariably involves two dimensions: a subjective pattern of significant associations (poetry) and an objective structure of verifiable biographical and historical events

¹⁶ See also Huntington Williams, *Rousseau and Romantic Autobiography*, Oxford Modern Language and Literature Monographs, Oxford University Press: Oxford 1983, 3: »Rousseau’s autobiography is a textual exchange with his own pre-autobiographical writings. The *Discours sur l’inégalité*, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, *Émile*, and Rousseau’s other theoretical, fictional, and dramatic works are present there, just as Scripture is present in Augustines’s *Confessions*. Rousseau constructs an image of himself, literally invents himself in these pre-autobiographical texts. They are sources of certainty and value, important points of reference whereby he interprets his past existence. The autonomous self must write its own scriptures». Rousseau’s autobiography, Williams writes, is »an attempt at closure [...] Rousseau passes from [autobiography or life] to [life or autobiography] through fiction, by fabricating a textual world through which he performs an exegesis of his life«. Ibid., 7. This present study does not wish to make such far-reaching psychological assumptions in regards to Beckford’s writings, yet the duality of *fiction* and *life* (‘fiction’ and ‘fact’) – and the construction of a textual world which is somehow linked to a notion of biographical authenticity – are key concepts in Beckford’s early works.

(truth)».¹⁷ It is this uneasy dichotomy of poetry (*i.e.* fiction) and truth (*i.e.* fact) that forms the basis of Beckford's early writings, informing the various narratives of the biographical legend with a subtle amalgamation, or synthesis, of fact and fiction.

¹⁷ Hans Meyerhoff, *Time in Literature*, University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles 1955, 27. Meyerhoff's dichotomy is related to the title of Goethe's *Dichtung und Wahrheit*.