

Abstract

The narratives of the biographical legend: the early works of William Beckford

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WILLIAM BECKFORD'S (1760-1844) literary persona 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 Boris Tomashevsky's sense of the term, a BIOGRAPHICAL LEGEND, *i.e.* a deliberate synthesis of fact and fiction. It is, as this book will show, an obvious feature in Beckford's early prose works (such as *The Vision*, which, together with the letter-collection *The Red Copy Book*, is here published as an appendix) but it is also a feature of Beckford's writing that never fully disappears.

The present book is an exploration into Beckford's early aesthetics, focusing on this very strategy of SELF-DRAMATISATION and PSEUDO-AUTOBIOGRAPHY. It investigates the various biographical narratives which make up Beckford's *mythopoeia* – the myth of the artist. Establishing a rhetoric or grammar of the REVERIE and the ILLUSION, Beckford's early writings subtly reflect a strategy of fictional self-dramatisation wherein the place of the reverie, and the narrator who inhabits it, become focal points of a biographical legend. Using Roland Barthes' term BIOGRAPHEME (here defined as a narrative unit of anecdotal detail, canonised by the critical and biographical traditions) as a key element in the larger biographical legend, the book shows how these 'micro-narratives' of biographical discourse thematically reflect the larger outline of biography (the dissertation also offers a model for the transformation of the biogramme through the various modes of critical, biographical and fictional discourse and of its assimilation into the larger biographical legend with which it is inextricably linked). Through these theoretical and methodological perspectives, Beckford's writings are analysed. Exposing the fictional functions of the multi-faceted layers of self, place and time – as well as exploring the tenuous relationship between *fact* and *fiction* within the framework of the early writings – the dissertation offers a new perspective on Beckford's literary art. It is an investigation into the nature of the biographical legend in light of Beckford's texts, reading them as fragments of a disjointed narrative dealing with a literary self and the deliberate transformation of reality. 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.

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