

**Zeitschrift:** SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Association of University Teachers of English  
**Band:** 30 (2014)  
  
**Artikel:** Exuberant energies : affect in Vathek, Zofloya and The Giaour  
**Autor:** Karafili Steiner, Enit  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-583886>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 09.07.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

## Exuberant Energies: Affect in *Vathek*, *Zofloya* and *The Giaour*

Enit Karafili Steiner

This essay discusses affectivity in three Romantic texts: William Beckford's *Vathek* (1787), Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya; or, The Moor: A Romance of the Fifteenth Century* (1806) and Lord Byron's *The Giaour, a Fragment of a Turkish Tale* (1813). These texts have in common a symbiosis of Gothic tenor and Oriental features and it is by virtue of this conflation that I discuss them together. The essay considers the ways in which this synergy bears on the representations of the emotions, whereby the emphasis lies on the emotions' political and aesthetic significance at the turn of the eighteenth century. I argue that the affect dynamics of the protagonists of these works embodies a vehement defiance of inherited institutions, in particular the family and the domestic fiction that promoted its social centrality. More importantly, because this defiance expresses itself through an exuberance of visceral and less sociable emotions, one can read the conjunction of the Gothic and Oriental as an aesthetic enclave which resists the social integration and disciplining propagated in the domestic realism that dominated British eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature.

Due to their Oriental representations, William Beckford's *Vathek* (1787), Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya* (1806) and Byron's *The Giaour* (1813), have been affiliated with the Oriental tale that rose to prominence in the eighteenth century after Antoine Galland's translation of *Les mille et une*

*Emotion, Affect, Sentiment: The Language and Aesthetics of Feeling*. SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature 30. Ed. Andreas Langlotz and Agnieszka Soltyś Monnet. Tübingen: Narr, 2014. 125-142.

*nuits* (1704-1708).<sup>1</sup> Already upon its publication in Britain, *Vathek* was praised in almost synonymous terms with *The Arabian Nights*, which had “attracted every reader by the splendour of their descriptions, and the magic of their enchantments before we learnt that they exhibited a faithful copy of eastern manners, and oriental conversations” (*Critical Review* 38). The reviewer of *The Giaour*, too, commended Byron for achieving originality while preserving the “Oriental costume [. . .] with admirable fidelity” (*Edinburgh Review* 299, 308). Not surprisingly, more often than not, *Vathek* and *The Giaour* have been read in response to Edward Said’s contention that the West saw the Orient at best as alien and “if not patently inferior to, then in need of corrective study by the West” (Said 41). Said deemed works like Beckford’s *Vathek* or Byron’s *Turkish Tales*, which capitalized on a fascination with Oriental themes mingled with Gothic “visions of barbaric splendour and cruelty” (118), to be particularly complex. Indeed, Charlotte Dacre’s novel *Zofloya* takes this mixture of “barbaric splendour and cruelty” to sublime extremes, by depicting Zofloya, the Satanic agent of the story, as a “majestic and solemnly beautiful” Moor whose appearance can only be “acknowledged with sensations awful and indescribable” (Dacre 158). It is by virtue of this conflation of Gothic and Oriental elements that I discuss these three texts together. My main interest concerns the ways in which such a conflation bears on the representation of the emotions. I claim that in *Vathek*, *Zofloya* and *The Giaour*, emotions are fraught with political and aesthetic significance, whereby aesthetics encompasses the literal meaning derived from sensory life as well as the moral sense with which the eighteenth century coupled it (Eagleton 106). Thus, the emphasis lies on the perception of British writers and readers of their own society, culture and history rather than their misconceptions of the East.

My analysis rests on two premises: first, in order to preserve the eighteenth-century breadth of the concept, “emotions” are understood as a manifold of associations such as “sentiments,” “affections” and “passions.” As Thomas Dixon shows in *From Passions to Emotions*, it was only in the first half of the nineteenth century that “emotion” came to

---

<sup>1</sup> Galland’s *Les mille et une nuits*, rendered into English as *The Arabian Nights Entertainments*, was popularized by the Grub Street writers in England among the bourgeois public with a thrice-weekly serialization in 445 instalments from 1723-6 in the *London News*. By 1800, more than twenty different editions of the *Arabian Nights* existed and were avidly read (Makdisi and Nussbaum 14-15).

connote a distinctly psychological category (Dixon 2).<sup>2</sup> Before this narrowing of the concept occurred, “emotions,” “sentiments” and “passions” appeared in eighteenth-century philosophical tracts that capture the implications of these phenomena in a process of imaginary intersubjective identification called “sympathy.” Adam Smith’s interweaving of these terms in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), as he sets out to define “sympathy” in the first chapter of the book, is telling:

In every passion of which the mind of man is susceptible, the emotions of the by-stander always correspond to what, by bringing the case home to himself, he imagines, should be the sentiments of the sufferer. (Smith 4-5)

In this passage as well as throughout his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith mobilizes the words “passion,” “emotions” and “sentiments” to demonstrate the moral ties that organize intersubjective relations and civil society.

The second premise of my analysis is based on Paul Stenner’s evaluation of emotions as phenomena that cut across body, mind and culture. Accordingly, I am mindful of psychological reductionism (also regretted by Dixon) and approach emotionality as a set of experiences that depend on the social, biological and psychic life that occasion human emotions (Stenner 8-9). As such, emotionality consists of a range of human responses that are generated from and move within the interplay of social, psychic and organic forms of order.

### *I. Emotions and Disintegration*

The most influential event that affected the late-eighteenth century social order in Britain was the French Revolution. I believe it is also the event that informs the emotional management of *Vathek*, *Zofloya* and *The Giaour*, whose Gothic tone is steeped in the revolutionary energy that preceded and followed this historical turmoil. The connection between the Gothic and the French Revolution was most famously made by the Marquis de Sade, who declared Gothic fictions to be “the necessary fruit of the revolutionary tremors felt by the whole of Europe”

---

<sup>2</sup> The *OED* describes emotion as “an agitation of mind; an excited mental state” and subsequently “any strong mental or instinctive feeling, as pleasure, grief, hope, fear, etc., deriving especially from one’s circumstances, mood, or relationship with others.” Sentiment is closely related to emotion since it can stand for “intellectual or emotional perception” as well as “a sensation or physical feeling.”



(Sade 49). However, considering that the rise of the Gothic genre precedes the French Revolution (Miles 42-43), William Hazlitt's assessment seems more convincing:

It is not to be wondered, if, amidst the tumult of events crowded into this period, our literature has partaken of the *disorder* of the time; if our prose has run mad, and our poetry grown childish. Among those few persons who "have kept the even tenor of their way," the author of *Evelina*, *Cecilia*, and *Camilla*, holds a distinguished place. Mrs. Radcliffe's "enchantments drear" and mouldering castles, derived a part of their interest, we suppose, from the supposed tottering state of all old structures at the time.

(*Edinburgh Review* 335, emphasis added)

Unlike de Sade, who saw the Revolution as giving birth rather straightforwardly to the genre, Hazlitt seems invested in understanding the collective social psyche of the writers and readers of Gothic fiction. Radcliffe published her first novel *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* in 1789, twenty-five years after Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764). Throughout these years of gestation, the steady increase of tales of terror about remote ages and places suggests that the writing and reading of such fiction channelled revolutionary energies before these openly broke out in neighbouring France. Hazlitt refers to the "disorder of the time" as a socio-historical energy that permeated all layers of contemporary human life. Having been defined by Samuel Johnson as "force, influence, spirit," the word energy lends itself to conceive of the "disorder" that links the Gothic and the French Revolution in intersecting rather than sequential terms (Johnson 699). Indeed, Stephen Greenblatt reminds us that, although hard to define, energy, called in the Greek rhetorical tradition *energia*, was characterized as a stirring of the mind and bore social and historical significance (Greenblatt 6). We can speak of social energy where a certain range of repetitions are reproduced and circulated within a variety of receptive communities. This is the case in the three texts discussed here: they produce a set of repetitions that exploit the contemporary aesthetic *energia* derived from scenes of emotional outbursts, or, as the reviewer of *The Giaour* put it, of "the darker passions and more gloomy emotions from which the energy and the terrors of poetry are chiefly derived" (*Edinburgh Review* 309).

Hazlitt suggests that such taste became so popular because the Gothic couched in the language of sensations the anxiety of a civilization that perceived itself as being in decline. As an aesthetic and socio-historical energy before, during and in the aftermath of the Revolution, the Gothic was marked by a tendency to make the old structures that

Hazlitt mentions unambiguously old by removing them in time and space. Medieval and Catholic settings provided diverse communities of readers with a safe distance to contemplate the excess of their estrangement with their own past. This removal became more imprecise, and consequently more estranging, when Gothic and Oriental elements converged. Together, the Gothic and Oriental figured an amplified version of an archaic Other that was at the same time close and far away from home. As Gary Kelly rightly puts it, such figures of the Other stood not only for the danger emanating from the enemy without, but also from the enemy within (Kelly 3).

Beckford's *Vathek*, Dacre's *Zofloya* and Byron's *The Giaour* describe threats from within and without. In these texts, the challenge from outside is Orientalized and thus exoticized: the Caliph Vathek becomes obsessed with a mysterious Indian who alluringly promises him access to the treasures of the pre-Adamite sultans; Dacre's female protagonist Victoria is haunted in her dreams by the Moor Zofloya, who orchestrates the poisoning of her husband; the love prospects between the Giaour, the nameless Byronic hero, and Leila are shattered by the Muslim Hassan, Leila's master and executioner. However, as sensational and menacing as these Orientalized presences are, they only amplify imminent threats that linger within. These inner threats take the shape of exuberant affective drives which all three works link to the domestic particularities in which they originate. Long before the exotic Other (the mysterious Indian, Zofloya or Hassan) enters the scene, the main characters gestate strong emotions that are rooted in their familial history. I will go on to argue that the connection between emotions and domestic relations has political ramifications, but, before doing so, it is important to dwell a little longer on the depictions of family in the three works.

Family history features in the genealogical expositions that initiate the stories of *Vathek* and *Zofloya*. Vathek is not introduced simply as an individual but as the last link in a long chain of Caliphs: Vathek is the grandson of Haroun al Raschid. Dacre's protagonist Victoria as the daughter of Marchese di Loredani descends from a noble Venetian family. With such name-dropping – Haroun al Raschid is mentioned in the *Arabian Nights* and Loredani was the Doge of Venice from 1501-1521 – both narratives draw attention to ancestry and the intergenerational transmission of power and privileges. This gains further significance in light of *Vathek*'s and *Zofloya*'s tragic endings that erase the successors of long-standing houses of rulers. If in *Vathek* and *Zofloya* the family appears in a "tottering state" (to use Hazlitt's wording) and steering toward destruction, in *The Giaour* we are left with its ubiquitous dissolu-

tion. Due to the fragmentary form of Byron's "snake poem," the protagonist's genealogy is lost with other fragments of the story that unite the Western male character with the Eastern Leila and Hassan. Here, the very absence of any sense of familial history turns the Giaour into a ghost. The "Advertisement" of the poem reveals that the protagonist is a young Venetian (Richardson 182), however, the poem not only persistently blurs the traces of his origin, but also builds up an aura of impenetrable solitude that isolates the Giaour both from his native culture and that of the foreign land he treads. His "memory is but the tomb" and his life a "sleep without the dream/ of what I was, and would be still" (Richardson 210: 1000, 997).<sup>3</sup> The erasure of familial belonging is complete toward the end of the poem, where the Giaour is told to have "pass'd – nor of his name and race/ Hath left a token or a trace" (Richardson 219: 1329-30).

I want to suggest that the emphatic presence or absence of the family betrays a deep-seated suspicion of domestic affections. Suspicion of domestic bonds in eighteenth-century Gothic fiction is not uncharacteristic: think of Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764), which is often viewed as heralding the genre, or Anne Radcliffe's novels that fuelled the Gothic craze to an unprecedented extent. However, what *Vathek*, *Zofloya* and *The Giaour* refuse to offer (unlike Walpole's or Radcliffe's novels) is a return to domestic bonds after due suspicion or investigation. Here, we encounter three protagonists who conceive personal fulfilment not merely outside, but in vehement defiance of, their inherited value-system. In particular, the families in *Vathek* and *Zofloya* devour their own children, as the parents' sins haunt the young. *Vathek*, in a rare moment of epiphany while facing eternal damnation, attributes the greatest share of guilt to his mother: "the principles by which Carathis perverted my youth, have been the sole cause of my perdition!" (Richardson 155). Dacre's extra-diegetic narrator and her protagonist Victoria harp on the mother's bad example at every turn of the plot. The novel abounds in resounding condemnations of a woman who left her husband and two children for another man. In her most sympathetic moments, Dacre describes the murderous Victoria as the "hopeless victim of [the] premature corruption" that resulted from "maternal indiscretion" and "destroyed all bonds of respect" (236). The narratives insist that, despite their propensities to anger or haughtiness, *Vathek* and *Zofloya*'s crimes do not spring from unmotivated malignance. Byron's

---

<sup>3</sup> Note that the number before the colon refers to the page in Richardson's edition, the numbers after the colon to the lines of Byron's poem.

Giaour, although very reticent to share any familial affiliation with the monk who takes his final confession, entrusts the latter with a farewell message and a ring for a childhood friend who had prophesied the Giaour's "doom" already in "many a busy bitter scene" of their "golden youth" (Richardson 217: 1138-1139). This relationship, too, is marked by reluctance to conform: the friend had warned the Giaour in the past, but the latter did not heed the voice of prudence and instead murdered Hassan, thus both fulfilling and succumbing to the prophecy.

As a culmination of this pervading defiance, all three works end with a refusal to integrate their protagonists into their inherited social order. Unlike Anne Radcliffe's prudent and compassionate examples of filial devotion, Vathek abhors his mother's "impious knowledge" (Richardson 156); Victoria witnesses unmoved her mother's death, declaring it to be the just expiation for making the daughter the outcast that she has now become: "on thy head, therefore, will all my sins be numbered" (Dacre 246); and the Giaour, rejecting the absolution of the Monk, remains burdened beyond death by the curse of turning into a vampire that will "ghastly haunt" his country and "suck the blood" of his race (Richardson 205: 757-8).

As intimated by some of the above-mentioned quotes, the absence of a restorative and domestic Radcliffian sentimentality does not entail the absence of a language of affect.<sup>4</sup> These are not works of emotional abstinence. On the contrary, they exhibit an exuberance of emotions triggered by hatred, sexual frustration and raw psychic drives. Beckford depicts violent fantasies in graphic terms, writing that Vathek in the "ebullition of his fury had resolved to open the body of the Alboufaki and to stuff it with those of the negresses and of Carathis [his mother] herself" (Richardson 141); in Dacre's novel, Victoria's "outraged pride swelled her heart to bursting and its insatiable fury called aloud for vengeance, for blood" (Dacre 199), while Byron envisions the cursed Giaour tormented by a heart wrapped in flames. Graphically described emotional uproar and perturbed states of mind transmute into spectacles which in strongly theatrical ways convey the protagonists' narcissist consumption of their own feelings as well as their readers' propensity for voyeurism. Such explicitness of physiological and psychic imagery corroborates David Hume's and Adam Smith's view of sensations and emotional responses being likely to occur upon the spectators' or readers' exposure to lively images. For the eighteenth-century understanding,

---

<sup>4</sup> A famous example, which, in the vein of Radcliffe, endorses misgivings about, but also a final return to, domesticity is Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818).



morality is never as pressing as when our senses compel us to ask ourselves: "How do I feel about what is happening before my eyes?"<sup>5</sup> Thus, the question arises: what moral implications could this visual exuberance of emotions that resists integration into an inherited social order have? I would like to offer two possible approaches: the first is informed by the political climate of the 1790s and, the second, by late-eighteenth century aesthetic and cognitive reformulations of sympathy that explore the darkly visceral side of the passions.

## II. *The Politics of Affect*

While for the most part of the eighteenth century, sentimentalism had been (at best) embraced as the glue that held society together or (at worst) satirized for its self-indulging tendencies, the events of the French Revolution saw a thorough politicization of the rhetoric of feeling in fictional as well as political works. Especially after Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), both Anti-Jacobins and sympathizers of the Revolution adopted and condemned the display of sentiments. In this political climate, domestic affections, one of the century's most applauded terms within this culture of sentimentalism, suddenly became politically loaded. Domestic affections had been the cornerstone of Frances Hutcheson's theory of passions and were adopted by most Scottish philosophers, who argued that human communities germinated within the family, which they baptized as the "little society," or in Burke's phrase, "the little platoon" (Dwyer 104; Burke 8: 97).<sup>6</sup> In the wake of the Revolution, Burke insisted that domestic affections were proof and warranty for the spread of public affective sensibility and universal benevolence (O'Neill 204). Burke's *Reflections* "polarized the conservative and radical aspects of sensibility," by appealing to domestic or parental affections (Jones 85). Burke conceived the nation as one great British family and the British Constitution as the product of century-long experience and foresight. In this great national family, the aristocracy took over the role of the parent who educated the masses into social discipline. Burke sought to mobilise readers' loyalties to past

---

<sup>5</sup> Terry Eagleton discusses the specular quality of eighteenth-century moral sense in the first two chapters of his *Trouble with Strangers*.

<sup>6</sup> In the introduction to *Jane Austen's Civilized Women*, I elaborate on the ways in which the Scottish Enlightenment valorized human sociability and extracted the duties of the citizen from the basic circumstances of human life, and, in particular, the life of the family.

authority and the principle of heredity, by laying claim to the value of feelings in the name of traditional values and the preservation of an inherited power balance (Jones 85). For him, the French revolutionaries had overthrown the authority of the nobility and the church, and, after doing away with these parent institutions, their democratizing policies were now aimed directly at the family. But what was even more damaging was that the revolutionaries taught the masses to see family ties as not binding, since blood relations are only rarely the result of free choice. This reminds one, of course, of characters like Vathek and Victoria, who lament the fate of having been mothered by unworthy women. It also throws light upon Burke's description of the revolutionaries as "children of their country who are prompt rashly to hack that aged parent in pieces" (Burke 8: 146). This strong image, which for its intensity could have leapt out of the pages of *Vathek*, *Zofloya* or *The Giaour*, visually invokes the savagery caused by such a breakdown of the family (O'Neill 210). Burke calls this breakdown "savagery" because it estranges the masses from "every civil, moral, and social, or even natural and instinctive sentiment," which for him represent the hallmarks of refined manners and civilization (Burke 8: 462).

As Chris Jones demonstrates in a thorough study that traces the polemics around the role of feelings in the aftermath of the French Revolution, many of those who "recanted their radical opinions under the pressure of conservative reaction [. . .] chose to highlight the valuation of domestic or parental affections to mark their return to the fold" (Jones 109). In the face of such reaction, sympathizers of the revolution, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin and Charlotte Smith, marked their dissociation from conservatives and penitent radicals by a fierce opposition to parental affections. Extended to other forms of social bonds, opposition to parental affection meant a rejection of any kind of traditional authority. In an attempt to redefine the family, Wollstonecraft attacks parental affections in the same narrative that owes its very existence to maternal love: *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* (1798). As a memoir bequeathed upon an infant daughter by her persecuted mother, the novel clearly endorses maternal love; however, it also places its protagonists in harrowingly abusive households, thus deeming domestic ties as toxic and anything but naturally benevolent. The most extreme moment of mistrust in domestic affections is Godwin's famous dilemma, in which he imagines himself having to choose between rescuing Fénélon or his own mother from a burning house. Because Fénélon's writings contribute to the improvement of mankind, Godwin must choose the philosopher.



An even more politicized version of family critique was voiced by Charlotte Smith, who understood the public impact and appeal of Burke's sentimental and conservative domestic politics. She accepted his use of the domestic paradigm to define political matters, but came down on the side of the rebelling children. Thus, in her novel *Desmond* (1792), regarded as the first historical British novel, she interprets the American Revolution as a war between a parent state (Britain) and its child (America). This politicized version of family romance sees the American Revolution as the rightful act of the child who must sever the ties and claim independence from the parent that called her into life.<sup>7</sup> In this context, radical emotional response, or sensibility, materialized in "the capacity of individuals for beneficent action independent of traditional authority" (Jones 111). Universal benevolence that fostered the greatest good of the greatest number rather than usefulness and loyalty in a domestic paternalistic regime drives radical sensibility.

*Vathek*, *Zofloya* and *The Giaour* absorb the political polarization of sentimentalism, while contemplating the possibility of another dimension of emotional response that differs from both conservative and radical sensibility. Portrayals of the family as either a source of vice (in *Vathek* and *Zofloya*) or as a morbid past (in *The Giaour*) discard the conservative stance that considered sentiments to be founded upon established family values and historical precedent. However, on the other hand, by refusing to subordinate itself to the utilitarian narrative of the greatest good for the greatest number, these stories' propensity to strong feelings disappoints a radical agenda, too: the emotional self-involvement of a *Vathek*, *Victoria* or *Giaour* is a far cry from the universal benevolence that the radicals ascribed to sentiments. The crucial implication here is that such rejection of universal benevolence strips sentiments of their utilitarian value, which explains why these three works have been read as emanations of excessive narcissism. Already earlier in the century, sentimentalism had raised suspicion by its disproportionate distribution of emotions with scant regard for their use-value. The melting tenderness of Sterne's Yorick over a dead ass proved the narcissistic hunger for self-indulging sympathy with one's own ability to sympathize. Consequently, although feeling was able to smooth inter-subjective transactions, "it also threatened to derail the whole project in

---

<sup>7</sup> Writing about the American Revolution, Smith states that one does not know "how far the *mother-country* is the worse for this disunion with her colonies, but, I am sure, they are the better," because America has "recovered of those wounds, which its *unnatural parent* hoped were mortal" and is at the time of the French Revolution in "a most flourishing state of political health" (Smith, *Desmond* 106-107, emphasis added).

the name of some less crassly egocentric vision of human society” (Eagleton 18).

The three works compared here embrace a starkly crass egocentric vision of society embodied by a young generation, eager to remake itself, among others, by exploring the less sociable side of sentiments. *Vathek*’s emotionality in particular has been brought into connection with Beckford’s anarchical denial of the need to grow up: Vathek’s outbursts, his kicking and treading venerable elders, his biting, pinching, bellowing and more importantly his unfolding sentiments in face of heterosexual love have led critics to think of this tale as a journey through adolescence, in which the protagonist “is irredeemably damned through growing up.”<sup>8</sup> The tale’s iconoclasm is not least mediated through a linguistic extravagance that conveys emotive energy: in the tale’s own words, Vathek is “impelled by an invisible power into extravagance” (Richardson 93). Without seeking to steer the discussion of affect toward biological determinism, I tentatively use the word exuberance to describe emotive energy in these three texts, because the term links emotivity to a surplus of emotional responses implicated in a process of identity-remaking.<sup>9</sup> In particular, exuberance in neuroscience describes the development of the teenage brain, that is, an “overproduction” of tiny branches of brain cells and synapses (Strauch 15). Until little more than a decade ago, brain growth and wiring was thought to be finished by age five at the latest. But recent research shows that during puberty the brain undergoes a thorough re-branching, growth and pruning before it reaches the state of the adult brain in the early twenties. This exuberance of brain activity reduces inhibition and manifests itself in an exuberance of impulses, making adolescence the age in which the instinctual energy of the id is less resisted by the policing influence of the super-ego. Neuroscientific insights, rather than confirming a sort of bourgeois apprehension of adolescence, should help us interpret the surplus of emotional responses as an integral part of a process of self-fashioning.

---

<sup>8</sup> Adam Potkay calls *Vathek* “the first anti-bildungsroman, ironically poised at the threshold of the nineteenth-century novel of education” (Potkay, “Beckford’s Heaven of Boys,” qtd. in Richardson 301).

<sup>9</sup> I am wary of the possibility that biology can be deployed to substantiate ideology, a path already taken in the study of emotions and their impact on morality: the eighteenth-century “cult of sensibility” that explained women’s acute emotions (but inferior mental powers) with their weak nervous system stands as a cautionary tale in the history of emotions.

Exuberant emotive energy also seems appropriate to characterize Victoria, the protagonist of Dacre's *Zofloya* and Byron's *Giaour*. Victoria is only fifteen at the beginning of the novel and only twenty at the end. However, unlike Vathek, who vents this exuberance in public, Victoria, once a child of a "wild, ardent and irrepressible spirit," is externally disciplined by conjugal life (40). Nevertheless, during a marriage that reintroduces her into the social order of Venetian society, she yearns for another man, a passion that compels her to poison her husband and kill her rival with a barbarity unequalled by another female protagonist. Victoria's crimes are facilitated by a former slave, Zofloya, the Moor of the title, but she appears no less prone to violence than him. Similarly, Byron's young *Giaour* entertains no other wish than to avenge the drowning of Leila by killing Hassan. This crime provokes more remorse in him than Victoria or Vathek ever experience, but, at the same time, such brutality makes him indistinguishable from Hassan, whose barbarity he had loathed previously: "And o'er him bends that foe with brow/ As dark as his that bled below" (Richardson 201: 673-4).

Not fortuitously, the rebellious emotive exuberance of these young protagonists is couched in the Oriental tale. Oriental elements found their way into almost all literary genres thanks to the popularity of the *Arabian Nights* in the eighteenth century. However, this does not account for the fascination that the Arabian tales had in the first place. As Saree Makdisi and Felicity Nussbaum argue, the *Arabian Nights* enjoyed a high-culture prominence and influence in the West that was unparalleled in their culture of origin.<sup>10</sup> This fascination, for example, was commented upon by Clara Reeve in *Progress of Romance* (1785), who also located the power of the tales in the force that only a vigorous, youthful culture could produce (Kelly 9). Consequently, while the fanatical aspects of the East under the Gothic dress would be a reminder of the ruthlessness of the French Revolution, it is also interesting to register the fascination of a young generation of writers (Beckford was 21, Charlotte Dacre claimed to have written *Zofloya* at age 24, and Byron was 25) with emotive energies capable of rejuvenating and driving away the *ennui* of the old civilization evoked by Hazlitt. Clothed in the Oriental dress, youthful emotive exuberance seems implicated in a process of refashioning that averts decline by generating new possible ways of being in the world. The vigour of adolescence could resuscitate the very instinc-

---

<sup>10</sup> "The earliest version of the tales had hardly been regarded by Arabs themselves as particularly prominent features of a rich cultural landscape in which, until the late nineteenth century at least, poetry was considered the pre-eminent literary form" (Makdisi and Nussbaum 2).

tual (innate) quality that made emotional responsiveness the watermark of humanity at the beginning of the eighteenth century, or as Godwin put it at the end of the century, “the magnetic virtue, the hidden essence of our life” (Godwin 318). Not only is this exuberance a sign of humanity, but also of an exalted kind of humanity which defends “the doctrine that the enjoyment of high minds is only to be found in the unbounded vehemence and strong tumult of the feelings; and that all gentler emotions are tame and feeble, and unworthy to move the soul that can bear the agency of greater passions” (*Edinburgh Review* 1813: 301).

This is particularly fitting to appreciate the strength of Victoria’s character, whose emotional inner world captivates the reader (at times against the novel’s moral cautioning) far more than her flat and insipid victims. One is appalled and fascinated by her instinctual energies, which intensify as soon as the beautiful Oriental Zofloya breaks into the *ennui* of her conjugal life. Thus, the emotional excess enabled by the conflation of the Gothic and Oriental can be read in support of Srinivas Aravamudan’s proposition to view the Oriental tale as a new template of transcultural utopia that opposed the nationalist “yoke” of domestic realism which ended up having the upper hand in this contest of social visions (Aravamudan 4).

Attempting to understand whether such relish of a visceral emotional exuberance in fiction would mean a departure from that much theorized eighteenth-century moral sentiment that among others Frances Hutcheson, David Hume and Adam Smith called “sympathy,” I find Joanna Baillie’s revaluation of the term enlightening. Baillie is noteworthy for two reasons: first, she authored 26 plays, tragedies and comedies, all arranged under the title *Plays on the Passions* (1798) – a project that explored the origins and progress of passions; second, in a lengthy introduction, Baillie mapped out the aesthetic concept behind her plays. She named it “sympathetic curiosity.” In this concept, Baillie interweaves something old and new: she applies to drama a term whose spectatorial nature originated with Humean and Smithian philosophy and was responsible for many tear-jerking displays of emotions in the eighteenth-century novel. Baillie agrees with Smith that sympathy is a cognitive process through which the self can “see the emotions of their [the spectators’] hearts, in every respect, beat time with his own, in the violent and disagreeable passions” (Smith 27). The theatricality of minutely performed and described emotions (excessive blushing, weeping, fainting) that crowd the pages of the novel evoke the visuality of emo-



tions and the mimetic response they elicit in the reader.<sup>11</sup> It is this visibility prominent in the novel and its readers' voyeuristic complicity that Baillie renders most visible in her theatre through the concept of "sympathetic curiosity." However, the explicit coupling of visibility with curiosity allowed Baillie to approach an untrodden and even avoided path.

Baillie constructs sympathy as an ambiguous trait that grows out of a primary appetite for spectatorship and particularly of an instinctual lust to view human suffering. Like *Vathek*, *Zofloya* and to a certain extent *The Giaour*, Baillie's drama builds upon crude spectacles of pain, executions, haunting, torture and a tableau of primal emotions and visceral drama. In doing so, these works use violence as a tool essential to the production of sympathy: indeed, others before Baillie argued that the witnessing of sensational scenes could activate the transfer of feelings from character to reader or spectator (Burke made use of public executions to sensitize his readers to the atrocities of revolutions). However, these spectacles are problematic because, first, they could train the reader to view real life as if it were a play or novel, and, second, they could foster pleasure in pain, in particular, the pain of others. Beckford and Dacre acknowledge the second possibility openly: *Vathek* does not make a secret of the "joy that succeeded to this emotion of terror" (Richardson 83), and Victoria wonders complacently "why, there is certainly a pleasure in the infliction of prolonged torment" (Dacre 205). The reader or viewer of such spectacles could either be prompted to emulate or regard similar scenes in real life as if they were fictions. As David Marshall puts it, "the problem is not what we see *in* the theatre but what we see *as* theatre" (Marshall 23). The most humane people may experience real-life suffering with a theatrical distance which in real life would destroy sympathy or produce false sympathy, that is, the mere stirring of emotions and enjoyment of pain, termed by Freud as masochistic pleasure.

The solution that Baillie offers to such a dilemma is the theatre itself. For her, theatre has an enlightening role to play, by fully representing the passions in their primal unchecked force from their genesis until the bitter end. The death of the passion-driven protagonists serves to discipline the reader or spectator in Baillie's tragedy, and comic social chastisement fulfils a similar goal in her comedies. This theatre consists in

---

<sup>11</sup> David Marshall's *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy* treats the mimetic aspect of sentiments and sympathy as first playing a role in seventeenth-century French classical aesthetics, but crossing transgeneric borders only in the eighteenth century, when it is applied to painting, dramatic arts, poetry and the novel, thus encompassing all aesthetic experience.

unveiling the human mind under the dominion of those strong and fixed passions, which seemingly unprovoked by outward circumstances, will, from small beginnings brood within the breast, till all the better dispositions, all the fair gifts of nature are borne down before them, those passions which conceal themselves from the observation of men; which cannot unbosom themselves even to the dearest friend; and can, oftentimes, only give their fullness vent in the lonely desert, or in the darkness of midnight.

(Baillie 509)

Baillie seems to believe that the more profound disciplining of a community of readers or spectators occurs through a detailed representation of troubled states of mind and emotional upheavals, as if suggesting that uncanny emotions are tamed when they are felt, understood and integrated into collective cognition.

Like Baillie's plays, *Vathek*, *Zofloya* and *The Giaour* are similarly unapologetic when it comes to depicting the protagonists' undoing. In the Gothic universe of these tales, too, we encounter protagonists who become slaves to their passions, and, since it is too late to reform, they meet their due doom: Vathek suffers "eternal unabating anguish" for his "unrestrained passions and blind curiosity" (158), Victoria is strangled and hurled into a precipice by Zofloya, her demonic alter ego, and the Giaour is haunted by his dark past without hope of redemption. However, in narratives like *Vathek* and *Zofloya*, where sublime and exuberating visceral outbursts have been savoured in their full vigour, the final punishments of the protagonists pay little more than lip service to morality, whereas the Giaour does not even attempt to relinquish the morbid self-involvement that characterizes him.

It is tempting to interpret the spectacles of pain, torture, murder and sadistic pleasure in these texts in terms of Baillie's belief that better knowledge of human passions through verisimilar representations teaches self-control. However, Dacre and Byron, in particular, seem less sanguine about the disciplining effect of sympathetic curiosity. Their works gesture toward the possibility that not only sociable and benign emotions inspire mimetic doubling in the mind of the spectator, but also destructive ones, like the body of Victoria darkening as her murderous alliance with Zofloya thickens, or the hatred of Hassan for the Giaour, which in a mirroring process blackens the face of the latter: "And o'er him bends that foe with brow/ As dark as his that bled below" (Richardson 201: 673-4). In these works, sympathy has indeed become an ambiguous term (as Baillie rightly observed): its less controllable and social side that originated with the innate taste of the mind for strong excitement gains prominence. This ambiguity renders palpable a deep



uncertainty not only about class, race and gender, but the very essence of being social and its resulting pursuit of human values. *Vathek* inaugurates the Western concern with the “outlawed self” as the “projection of an amoral, secret life into the public domain” (Sharafuddin xxxii). Byron picked up on this sensibility when writing *The Giaour*, while Dacre under the guise of moral instruction went to unprecedented extremes by planting the dark, rebellious heart of the outlaw in a woman’s body.<sup>12</sup> Hence, while on the surface these texts may reflect what the West thought of the Oriental Other, in their depth, they channel otherness in the West’s profound estrangement with its own system of knowledge and ways of life.

### *Acknowledgement*

I am very grateful to Nancy Armstrong for her insightful comments on earlier drafts of this essay and for sharing with me her most recent work on the Gothic and the history of the English novel.

---

<sup>12</sup> It is noteworthy that while the *Giaour* is only briefly associated with the Albanian rebels in his act of revenge against Hassan, Victoria’s life with the *banditti*, whose leader is her brother, takes up the last chapters of the novel.

## References

- Aravamudan, Srinivas. *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.
- Baillie, Joanna. "A Series of Plays: Introductory Discourse." *The Broadview Anthology of the Literature of the Revolutionary Period, 1770-1832*. Ed. D. L. Macdonald and Anne McWhir. Peterborough: Broadview, 2010. 500-514.
- Burke, Edmund. *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*. Ed. Paul Langford. 8 vols to date. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981-.
- Critical Review*. London: A. Hamilton, 1786. Vol. 62. 38-42.
- Dacre, Charlotte. *Zofloya; or the Moor*. Ed. Adriana Craciun. Peterborough: Broadview, 2006.
- Dixon, Thomas. *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Dwyer, John. *Virtuous Discourse: Sensibility and Community in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland*. Edinburgh: John Donald, 1987.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Trouble with Strangers: A Study of Ethics*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
- Edinburgh Review, or Critical Journal*. Edinburgh: Archibald Constable and Co., 1813. Vol. 24.48. 321-338.
- Godwin, William. *Caleb Williams, or Things as They Are*. Ed. Maurice Hindle. London: Penguin Classics, 1988.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*. Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988.
- Johnson, Samuel. *A Dictionary of the English Language*. 2 vols. London: W. Strahan, 1755.
- Jones, Chris. *Radical Sensibility: Literature and Ideas in the 1790s*. London and New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Kelly, Gary. "Social Conflict, Nation and Empire: From Gothicism to Romantic Orientalism." *Ariel* 20. 2 (1989): 3-18.
- Makdisi, Saree and Felicity Nussbaum. *The Arabian Nights in Historical Context: Between East and West*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Marshall, David. *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy: Marivaux, Diderot, Rousseau, and Mary Shelley*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- Miles, Robert. "The 1790s: The Effulgence of Gothic." *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. Ed. Jerrold E. Hogle. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 41-61.
- O'Neill, Daniel I. *The Burke-Wollstonecraft Debate: Savagery, Civilization, and Democracy*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007.

- Richardson, Alan, ed. *Three Oriental Tales*. Boston and New York: Riverside Editions, 2002.
- Sade, Marquis de. "Ideas on the Novel." *The Gothic Novel: A Casebook*. Ed. Victor Sage. London: Longman, 1990. 49-54
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. 1975. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books: 1995.
- Sharafuddin, Mohammed. *Islam and Romantic Orientalism: Literary Encounters with the Orient*. London: Tauris, 1994.
- Smith, Adam. *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. London: W. Strahan et al., 1774.
- Smith, Charlotte. *Desmond*. Ed. Antje Blank and Janet Todd. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2001.
- Steiner, Enit Karafili. *Jane Austen's Civilized Women: Morality, Gender and the Civilizing Process*. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2012.
- Stenner, Paul. "An outline of an autopoietic systems approach to emotion." *Cybernetics and Human Knowing* 12.4 (2006): 8-22.
- Strauch, Barbara. *The Primal Teen: What the New Discoveries about the Teenage Brain Tell Us about Our Kids*. New York: Anchor Books, 2003.