

## THE RESISTANCE OF WORDS AND THE CHALLENGE OF IMAGES: VISUAL WRITING IN LATE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN

**Laurent Châtel**

Université Paris-Sorbonne

*In memoria Michel Baridon*

The great age of book illustration in Britain did not flourish in the Georgian, but in the Victorian period (Gordon Ray viii-xix). In fact, eighteenth-century writers' attitudes to illustration were fraught with ambivalence and sometimes anxiety. As I pondered over this, I remarked upon a seeming paradox: why did a rich writer such as William Beckford (1760-1844), 'England's wealthiest son', a prime collector and patron, never commission any illustrated edition of his books? Why did he not lavish some of his fortune on a luxurious copy of *Vathek* or his *Dreams, Waking Thoughts and Incidents*? I wish to investigate whether such a local, marginal phenomenon as that of Beckford actually points to a paradoxical attitude towards imaging at large – at a wider level among eighteenth-century British and French writers.

First of all, let me turn to the microphenomenon; the facts related to Beckford's printed works are as follows. Beckford was a patron, an avid collector of prints, and especially, in the 1830s, of almanacks, vignettes and original drawings for illustrations; he was obsessed with proofs and had an acute, demanding, uncompromising eye:

The Continent.[al] Annual disappointed me. There is a sameness in Prout's views which by repetition becomes tiresome. Most of the engravings are hard and cold...I return the specimen of the Byron illustrations with great pleasure. It is a poor, stiff, niggling, silly, uninteresting half Frenchified sort of a morceau of high finishing. The little, simple, unpretentious Killarney views please me a great deal more. What would I not give for a proof of L.E.Byrne's Waterfall at p.32! (Gemmett 99)

In view of such sensibility to illustrations, it seems to me to be puzzling, if not absurd, almost senseless, that Beckford did not splash it out visually. In 1780, *Biographical Memoirs of Extraordinary Painters* were published without illustrations; in 1824 and 1834 one was included, which served as a frontispiece representing 'Saint Denis bearing his own head' but it is not known whether Beckford himself had

instigated it. In 1783, *Dreams*<sup>1</sup> was printed with two plates by Bartolozzi after drawings by Giovanni Battista Cipriani (1727-1785), an Italian artist residing in London.<sup>2</sup> Beckford was directly involved since a letter from him checks that the artist has been paid (Oliver 120). One plate represents *St Bruno* and the other *The Guilty Lovers*, the heroine plunging into the abyss, which inevitably recalls illustrations to Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Chateaubriand's *Atala*, or possibly even Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*. As for the best-known work, *Vathek*, it was published many times in Beckford's lifetime, in French and in English, and only three times did it appear with a frontispiece: the first time in 1815 with a frontispiece and vignette by Isaac Taylor father and son<sup>3</sup>; in 1823 with one by Richard Westall (engraved by C. Warren); and the third time in 1834 with a work by Francis Pickering (engraved by J.M. Cooke). That Beckford was aware of the graphic dimension and publication costs is evidenced below:

Send me two French Vatheks. I am continually pestered for them. Why do you not put forth a cheap edition of small size, in the style of the Family Library etc but with a frontispiece? (Bath, May 24th 1832; Gemmett [2000] 143)

But we know very little of the role he might have played in commissioning drawings to Isaac Taylor of Ongar in 1815 or indeed watercolours to Richard Westall (now at the Victoria and Albert Museum, one of which served as the basis for the engraved frontispiece). Taylor's father was considered one of the most eminent British eighteenth-century illustrators; with his eye on excellence, Beckford would no doubt have approved of supporting the Taylors. As for Westall, he was a prominent Royal Academician artist who witnessed Benjamin West's work at Fonthill; so he may well have been persuaded to work for Beckford through the intercession of West and the bookseller William Clarke. Although Beckford's books are not a case of complete absence of visual accompaniment, one cannot but be struck by the paucity of evidence and the lack of authorial initiative in supplying visual supplements. To be

---

<sup>1</sup> *Dreams* was never published as most copies were destroyed in 1801 by Beckford himself. A limited number of copies is extant today : one at the British Library and three at the Bodleian Library (MS. Beckford c.40, MS. Beckford c.41 & Arch. H d. 14). See Chapman (1937) 151-153.

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that in 1783—precisely the year *Dreams* was printed—a pupil of Cipriani, Mauritius Lowe, had painted a Deluge which was exhibited at the Royal Academy through the intercession of Samuel Johnson (see Morton D. Paley 12-13).

<sup>3</sup> The phrasing under the plate is “engraved by Issac Taylor junior.” As Isaac Taylor the Elder, the best known in this family of illustrators, had stopped designing in 1780 through poor eyesight (Hammelman 74), he is unlikely to have designed the work: the draughtsman named on the plate must be his son, Isaac Taylor the Younger, and the engraver his grand son, Isaac junior. (Should Isaac Taylor the Elder have produced a drawing for Beckford in the 1780s, the option would be that it was later engraved by his son in 1815).

nonplussed by this and slip into speculations might be considered counterproductive. What is the point of trying to understand what is not there, or what is missing? Still it might be worth taking the risk of working from the hypothesis that ultimately the reason for such a paucity of illustrations is that Beckford wished to steer clear of it. This opens up a field for speculation : why would he shy away from supplementing his tales with what he cherished most, images? What reasons could be raised against illustrating one's work? I began to wonder whether he suspected images might compete with his words. It is as if illustrations might have been repetitive, redundant, and superfluous. A doubling effect. And the idea of a suspicion towards images is precisely what triggered off this paper about the resistance of verbal culture vis-à-vis visual culture.

Such a paradoxical attitude to illustration – a micro, even marginal phenomenon at Beckford's level – seemed to me to point towards the paradoxical attitude to imaging at a wider level among late eighteenth-century British, but also French, writers. Indeed book illustration was on the rise throughout the eighteenth century but that rise had a counterpart: a parallel scenario of caution, not vis-à-vis images at large, but rather vis-à-vis an alliance *with* images. Narratives and illustrations jostled for the reader's attention. Various degrees of incompatibility, compromise or emulation between wording and imaging can be identified. While it obviously is not possible here to present a comprehensive typology of word-image (mis)alliances, I wish to spell out these relational patterns on a scale that records their interdependence, separate agendas, and mutual challenges. For the affinities and oppositions between prose and its visual derivatives are inevitably bound up in cultural interests and ideologies:

- *from entente cordiale and half-hearted cooperation to conflict*: this political or diplomatic phrasing of the negotiation of illustrations reflects attitudes whereby writers submitted to frontispieces, but nothing more; or yielded to illustrations, but kept authorial control; or simply skipped the illustrating process.

- *from sisterhood to male government*: discussions about illustrations gave rise to arguments with 'gender' implications such as the masculine authorial control of the reader's gaze, the importance of an iconoclastic guardian of reason over feminine spectacle or exhibition, and the disparaging treatment of illustration as ornament and feminine parasite (see Will Pritchard). The trope linking the feminine with illustration secured the male solidity of text and guaranteed the servile inferiority of illustration.

- *from benevolent co-existence to private isolationism*: the issue had necessarily ideological implications which ranged from a reactionary, patriotic, iconoclastic belief in printed material, a "composite art" of text/image mirror effect, to a rebellious secession (the challenged writer aimed at being visual, the illustrator challenged by the words aimed at creating an autonomous image).

### ‘Reactionary Resistance’ (I) : Attitudes vis-à-vis Book Illustration

Far from being isolated, Beckford’s attitude echoes responses across the Channel where signs of distrust and protest against illustrations may be found; the French case was studied by Christian Michel back in the 1970s and more recently by Antony Griffiths, Nathalie Ferrand and Christophe Martin (see bibliography). Various letters and personal accounts can be adduced to show that illustrating in France was feared. Robert Hecquet is emblematic of the widespread irritation and fear about illustrating: “a sort of mania (...) substitutes the desire of seeing to that of learning. It imposes on the authors the need to reduce all to actions and causes the greatness of ideas to seem to issue from the desire to make them picturesque.”<sup>4</sup> Diderot, an immensely visual temperament, wholly devoted to painting and *ekphrasis*, himself betrayed signs of irreverence to too close an association with illustrations. He never prepared editions of *La Religieuse* or *Jacques* with illustrations:

En relisant les œuvres romanesques, on perçoit, insérés dans le dialogue ou la trame narrative, des textes brefs mais denses, qui se distinguent aisément par leur caractère insolite, et qui jouent le rôle d’une *vignette*, c’est-à-dire d’une figure indissociable du texte. L’illustrateur de Diderot, en somme, ce n’est ni Eisen, ni Marillier, c’est Diderot lui-même.<sup>5</sup>

Closer even to Beckford, Jacques Cazotte in France, who was producing a *Suite des Contes arabes* right at the same time as Beckford, expressed the same distrust : « Malgré la nécessité indispensable que tout le monde connaît, d’orner de gravures tous les ouvrages qu’on a l’honneur d’offrir au public, il s’en est peu fallu que celui-ci n’ait été forcé de s’en passer. [...] Donner son ouvrage sans cela, c’était le perdre; aussi était-il résolu à le garder... » (*Le Diable boîteux* [1772], preface ; see Martin 13). Voltaire’s disregard for illustrations is even clearer : « Je vous avoue que dans ces ornements je demande célérité plutôt que perfection. Je n’ai jamais trop aimé les estampes dans les livres. Que m’importe une taille-douce quand je lis le second livre de Virgile ? » (Voltaire, “Letter dated 8 oct 1761”; see Martin 13) The plates attached to his works owed nothing to his involvement. As for Jean-Jacques Rousseau, he was most enthusiastic about illustrating his books; but interestingly enough, his enthusiasm was accompanied by authorial control of the reader’s gaze: he sketched out designs himself and when *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* was published in 1761 in Amsterdam, he raised enough money to have plates printed and wrote an *ekphrasis* explaining the relevance of the plates in relation to his

<sup>4</sup> *Catalogue de tableaux, sculptures, dessins, estampes... provenant de la succession de feu M. Lebas, précédé d’un éloge de l’artiste* (cat n° 176), Paris, 1783, p. XXXIV. Quoted by Michel, 84 & Martin, 14 ; my translation.

<sup>5</sup> Isabelle Vissière, « Une Originalité de Diderot : le texte-image », *Diderot, les beaux-arts et la musique* (Aix-en-Provence, 1986), p. 111.

novel. The plates were printed in Paris, separately, and were not inserted in the book. As it happens, all other “illustrations of Rousseau’s works were produced without his co-operation or after his death” (Griffiths 48).

I now wish to point to a number of cases in England. A famous case right in the middle of the century which may serve as a clue to later attitudes is that of the novel *Pamela* (1740-1) by Samuel Richardson – perhaps the first novel to lend itself to a high visual commodification, nearing what one might call ‘media hype’ today (see Thomas Keymer & Peter Sabor as well as Lynn Shepherd). It is ironic that a show was produced in wax works two years after its publication with scenes derived not from the novel itself, but from illustrations in pirated versions of *Pamela* or from fans illustrating the novel even before Richardson had had the chance to produce his own official visualisation of *Pamela*. “The numerous illustrations engendered by Pamela in the wake of the fan were largely beyond Richardson’s control [...]” (Keymer & Sabor 146). I wish to seize on this vicarious visual production or second-hand illustration – an illustration after an illustration – to indicate the potential of book culture to feed on visual culture, but also a dangerous drift whereby words are ousted out of books. Richardson’s handling of the illustration of his novel was punctilious enough in 1741 since he carefully orchestrated the visualising process and shied away from including what perhaps Elizabeth I in her days would have called “unseemly images”. Hogarth was to produce two plates for the first edition but this actually never came to be; the artist acting in his stead failing to give full satisfaction, the whole visual project collapsed. Richardson explained in his preface to the second edition: “it was intended to prefix two neat Frontispieces to this Edition, (and to present them to the Purchasers of the first) and one was actually finished for that purpose; [the second one] having fallen very short of the Spirit of the Passages they were intended to represent, the Proprietors were advised to lay them aside. And were the rather induced to do so, from the following Observation of a most ingenious Gentleman, in a Letter to the Editor, “I am so jealous, says he, in Behalf of our inward Idea of Pamela’s Person, that I dread any figur’d Pretence to Resemblance” (*Pamela: or, Virtue Rewarded*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1741, pref., p.xxxvi). What the ingenious Gentleman (being no other than Richardson himself) conveys is his distrust towards seeing Pamela encased in illustrations. The dangerous slip represented by the taste for imaging also surfaced in a poem published in *The Gentleman’s Magazine* (1740) which features a Tom Jones fan and incites an artist to use this “rich fund, for the Pencil”, since the scenes would “still please, tho’ stript of Words.” (Keymer & Sabor 144)

Let us now turn to yet another case of friction between the writer and the illustrator. The ‘power of images’ is evidenced most ironically by the affair around Thomas Gray’s poem ‘A Long Story’ (1753). This playful poem was deemed futile by its author but gained a reputation on the basis

of the illustrations it elicited, first by Richard Bentley and then by William Blake (see Châtel 2009). As Gray put it himself, ‘The Long Story’ was only suffered to be published once in his lifetime on account of illustrations having been produced which would be meaningless without the poem. This editorial quirk, as it were, places the poem as subtext and the image as the real object of interest. In fact, Gray was very sensitive about the whole affair: for fear he might seem to give too much importance to his verse by publishing it with designs, Gray insisted that the title be dropped and that the book be changed to “Six Designs by Mr Bentley for six Poems by Mr T Gray.” The image maker had pre-empted the writer. After Gray’s death, in illustrating the poem yet again, William Blake’s doubling gesture dramatized even further the ironic reversal of the tale of subservience of painting vis-à-vis poetry. With Blake, drawing was gaining precedence over writing.

That illustrations may simply drive the reader out of the book and turn him into a spectator can also be gauged by the editions of illustrations later published separately, such as *Illustrations of Smollett, Fielding, and Goldsmith : in a series of 40 illustrations by George Cruikshank* (1832). This way of isolating illustrations tends to present the book as almost an avoidable commodity. The book may have struck as expensive and not always easy to handle as it was serial – thus necessitating a long and patient consumption; in its stead, the compact volume of illustrations was handy: “The general admiration with which they were received, and the anxiety expressed by the collectors of Mr Cruikshank’s works, to possess the plates without the expensive purchase of the ten volumes in which they appeared, have induced the publisher to bring them out in the present form” (preface to *Illustrations* [London: Charles Still, 1832]). Some may argue this was an invitation to get back to the novels, or even, one might have hoped, a reciprocal, to-and-fro relation between word and image, but the preface continues: “each plate is accompanied by an extract from the Novels, fully explaining the subject. The volume is thus rendered complete in itself, while the reader is enabled to judge how fully the wit and humour of the early novelists is embodied by the pencil of our unrivalled artist. Fleet Street, May 1832”. This is tantamount to a reader’s digest, even more, a “reader’s visual recapitulation”, and leads to two forms of *lèse-majesté* towards the textual: first, the fact that access to the text is bypassed or circumvented and second, the fact that novels are itemized. Illustrations initially meant to serve the book might dangerously undercut the words from the original text. Ironically enough, cuts (the names used for illustrations in mid-eighteenth century Britain) turned into cuts in the book itself, and sold themselves as pre-cinematographic cuts. By the 1830s, the regulated management of vignettes and plates -textual cuts – had been transformed into a commercial strategy of self-authorizing cuts.

### **‘Reactionary Resistance’ (II): The Malaise with Visuality?**

That words may serve as props, prompts or aids to viewing and visions was not welcomed by everyone in late eighteenth-century Britain. Not only was there a general distrust of images, but some feared words might be infected with the visualizing rage. However fallacious the awareness of a sudden turn may be, late eighteenth-century literary critics, writers, and poets alike felt as if society as a whole increasingly favoured visuality and was experiencing a ‘pictorial turn’. It is indeed possible to chart a resistance of the verbal camp vis-à-vis the temptation of ‘viewing’ practises.

There were those I could call ‘word supporters’ who stuck to words and maintained the *status quo* (i.e. the predominance of *logos*) and they could still easily do that because they lived in a culture that still massively relied on words; to a large extent the production of images itself still relied heavily on *ekphrasis*, which was then also called ‘illustration’. Words could still do the illustrative job. John Dixon Hunt remarked that the subtitle of Thomas Whateley’s *Observations on Modern Gardening* (1770) was “Illustrated by Descriptions”, a gloss, he continues, that was retained even when in a subsequent edition of 1801 several engravings by Woollet were first introduced (Hunt 63). Moreover the discourse on the *belles lettres* was far from carried off on a visual tide. Although aesthetic discourses such as Addison and Shaftesbury obviously paved the way for bringing the external world, and nature, into the realm of prose and poetry, there seemed to have been a resistance to the possible application of Locke’s epistemology to the writing sphere. On the one hand, Locke’s definition of impressions and ideas vouchsafed the metaphor of the mind as a theatre, a storehouse of images. The phrasing itself used seems cinematographically-friendly as he refers to a “dark room” and the “train of thoughts”:

17. *Dark room*. [...] External and internal sensation, are the only passages that I can find, of knowledge, to the understanding. These alone, as far as I can discover, are the windows by which light is let into this dark room. For, methinks, the understanding is not much unlike a closet wholly shut from light, with only some little opening left, to let in external visible resemblances, or ideas of things without; would the pictures coming into such a dark room but stay there, and lie so orderly as to be found upon occasion, it would very much resemble the understanding of a man, in reference to all objects of sight, and the ideas of them. (Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), II, xi.17.158)

On the other hand, few argued in the wake of Locke that writing had a visual potential that could compete with paintings. For instance, Burke’s *Enquiry* in 1757 did nothing visual for words. Burke’s definitions of the beautiful and the sublime were not expounded within a visual frame of reference; they still echoed Longinus and the classical discussion of rhetoric:

But I am of opinion, that the most general effect, even of these words, does not arise from their forming pictures of the several things they would represent in the imagination; because, on a very diligent examination of my own mind, and getting others to consider theirs, I do not find that once in twenty times any such picture is formed, and when it is, there is most commonly a particular effort of the imagination for that purpose. [...] (Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Ideas of the Beautiful and the Sublime* [1757], Part V, Section I, ‘Of Words’)

Suppose we were to read a passage to this effect: “The river Danube rises in a moist and mountainous soil in the heart of Germany, where winding to and fro, it waters several principalities, until, turning into Austria, and leaving the walls of Vienna, it passes into Hungary; there with a vast flood, augmented by the Saave and the Drave, it quits Christendom, and rolling through the barbarous countries which border on Tartary, it enters by many mouths in the Black Sea.” In this description many things are mentioned, as mountains, rivers, cities, the sea, &c. But let anybody examine himself, and see whether he has had impressed on his imagination any pictures of a river, mountain, watery soil, Germany, &c. (Burke, Part V, Section IV, ‘The Effect of Words’)

Retrospectively, in view of his reception in aesthetics and art history, it is tempting today to think of Burke as conferring visual proficiency on words. But he clearly concluded in Section VI (‘Examples that Words May Affect Without Raising Images’): “The picturesque connexion is not demanded; because no real picture is formed; nor is the effect of the description at all the less upon this account.” He was concerned with undermining the theory of poetry as one of the imitative arts, not with granting words with the potential to raise images. Burke seemed reactionary to some, and no less to Blake.

Another way of resisting illustrations was to face the challenge they posed and respond visually. Such is the case of the experience of reading as viewing, or what I may call reading as “camera obscura”. While the collective, public, shared reading taking place in the café, tavern, or the salon was so characteristic of the early part of the century, and resurfaced again in the nineteenth century with the fashion for public readings, another pattern increasingly emerged: the phenomenon of reading as a personal, private entertainment (ranging from ladies’ enjoyment of reading to the books read with one hand which I am tempted to call ‘peep-show reading’). Roland Chartier has drawn attention to the intricate controversies related to the so-called “revolution in reading” – another ‘turn’ that reportedly would have taken place in the middle of the eighteenth-century. Taking on board his cautious advice about the need to register various changes in reading habits, rather than pin down a specific shift (Chartier 113-116), one may interpret the absorbed, private ‘intensive’ gaze in the context of our discussion

of viewing and illustration practices. What the illustration was thought to jeopardize was the private relation to the text and the inner idea the reader had formed regardless of any external, peripheral pretty picture. Competition or rivalry with illustrations could then be fought on the reading terrain itself if the reader was invited and trained – literally – to see for himself. This textual negotiation of visual culture is exemplified by Richardson’s mid-eighteenth century own reading of his *Pamela*: “I am so jealous, says he, in Behalf of our inward Idea of Pamela’s Person, that I dread any figur’d Pretence to Resemblance”. (*Pamela* (1741), 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, preface) The ‘inwardness’ promoted by Richardson ties in with an exclusive, increasingly private *jouissance* in the act of reading. In a way, this is a first stage in conceiving reading as a private spectacle with the reader as spectator, engaged in an image-inducing or image-raising act.

Far from revealing an improved cooperation with visual culture the late eighteenth-century attitude betrayed a mix of guilt, machoism and intellectual pride. The hang-up, or malaise about descriptiveness or excessive pictorialism in Thomson, Gray or Collins, was charted by John Dixon Hunt in *The Figure of the Landscape* (‘The Mind’s Creative Eye’) and by Ralph Cohen in *The Art of Discrimination*. But it continued after 1789, since, as Mitchell put it, “for all the talk of imagination in theories of romantic poetry, it seems clear that images, pictures, and visual perception were highly problematic” (Mitchell 1994, 114). Wordsworth, Shelley and Coleridge especially would rather have seen words as things, than as images, thus endowing them with masculine, active principles. Coleridge dismissed allegory for being a mere picture language, Keats worried about description, and Wordsworth called the eye “the most despotic of our senses”, rejecting the younger poet of *An Evening Walk and Descriptive Sketches* (1793): “I had once given to these Sketches the title of “Picturesque”, but the Alps are insulted in applying to them that term. Whoever, in attempting to describe their sublime features, should confine himself to the cold rules of painting, would give his reader but a very imperfect idea of those emotions which they have the irresistible power of communicating to the most impassive imaginations.” (*Descriptive Sketches*, footnote to line 299). Later on, Wordsworth admitted in the *Prelude* that the picturesque was a “strong infection of the age” (11:155-61); he saw his diction as having impaired his youth, “Pampering myself with meagre novelties/ Of colour and proportion” (see Nicola Trott).

That some of the Romantic poets over-reacted in their anti-visual rhetoric shows how viewing actually raised a nexus of ideological, social, gendered questionings. This brief presentation highlights a number of questions that were implicitly raised by the timidity, reluctance and distrust of writers: had reading become less accessible than viewing? Was it tempting to skip over Milton’s poem and look at John Martin’s mezzotints? Was the kind of entertainment provided by exhibitions, shows, pre-

cinematographic innovations posing a threat to or rather challenging writers? What was left for the man of letters? I present these questions in a deliberately exaggerated way as if there had been a choice between two mutually exclusive agendas in order to highlight the traps best avoided. This leads me at this stage of my presentation to three conclusions:

First of all, one must guard against the fallacy of a ‘pictorial turn’ (Mitchell 1994), as if British (and French) late eighteenth-century societies were about to fall prey to the domination or, in Samuel Johnson’s words, the ‘dangerous prevalence’ of images. The feeling of a pictorial turn among contemporaries (ranging from suspicion, to distrust or envy) is actually an age-old, cyclical moment when idolatry is pitted against iconoclasm. The fallacy of contemporary reactions was of a teleological kind since they presented the phenomenon as climaxing in their own day and age; this is exemplified in Grimm’s apt phrase that the “rage of placing images into books” will be the downfall of the arts (*Correspondance littéraire*, vol. VIII, p.113; quoted by Martin 17).

Secondly, I think it would be wrong to present writers faced with a difficult alternative as if they had to achieve a form of compromise between the intellectual and the sensuous, the easy-accessibility of watching and the more complex, mediated act of reading. Presented this way one would err on the side of oversimplification as the scopic regimes attendant on visual culture were as complex as those of reading:

The figural is resisting subsumption under the rubric of discursivity ; the image is demanding its own unique mode of analysis. The linguistic and the discursive have not, to be sure, been simply replaced by the pictorial and the figural but rather in complicated ways infiltrated by them. As the title of a recent book suggests, « viewing texts » and « reading pictures » are now chiasmically intertwined. (Jay 3)

Thirdly, it is best to see word and image in the eighteenth century as overlapping at an increased rate, with a greater degree of complexity. Allowing for the amount of resistance to images that came to the fore, one should also identify the resilience of the print world in a more positive light, notably attitudes embracing, welcoming and feeding on the various types of intersections engendered by the encounter of visual and verbal culture : book illustration as an act of reading-viewing – a simultaneous, double act for the reader now turning to the page, now to the plate; contemporary tales adapted to the stage (gothic novels turned into plays); novels inspiring paintings (thus engendering a topicality) etc.

### “Rebellious Challenge”? The Scope for Visuality in Writing

That some writers were enticed by and tended unabashedly towards visuality can be evidenced on the basis of various novelists such as Defoe, Swift, Sterne, or Ann Radcliffe. There has indeed been some scholarly interest in the visual prowess of fiction (see Novak for Defoe, Gerard for Sterne, Wagner for Swift, Chloe Chard for Radcliffe and Ogborn & Withers). The study of visualization through words is too often confined to essentially two regimes: *ekphrasis* and graphic allusions. Laudatory reports about the allegorical, vivid, graphic, and picturesque qualities of a particular page abound in reviews or scholarly analyses, but such modes are closer to pictorialism than viewing *per se*; this might explain Beckford’s remark about his own travel tale *Dreams*: “I shall not at all relish its being only praised as a lively, picturesque excursion” (see Châtel 2010).<sup>6</sup> The way some writers refer to other images to achieve a visual effect are a mediated, vicarious, second-hand strategy but could words be visual other than by reference to paintings? What was exactly the scope for visualizing through words? I wish to explore the power of words to turn readers into spectators.

The extent of expertise on exhibitions, spectacles and shows in British public life after 1760 has brought to the fore the specificities and politics of visuality notably with studies by Altick, Solkin and de Bolla. The degree to which this knowledge about ‘scopic regimes’ has been brought to bear on prose is still limited and is thus worth investigating further:

[...] visuality encompasses social and cultural productions and practices as well as philosophical and technical descriptions of optics. This larger focus is particularly helpful in regard to the Enlightenment since visuality, for this period, is not only located in the virtual spaces created by cultural forms ; it also tropologically determines the landscape upon which concepts are mapped. (Peter de Bolla, “The Visibility of Visuality”, in Jay 65)

What emerges out of scholarly discourse that best applies to novels or tales is that picturing and viewing were regulated by moral philosophy and aesthetic theory was still grounded in the neo-classical theory of virtue and beauty united. The gaze educated itself at once socially, morally and pictorially, seeking to raise its perception of beauty simultaneously with the public good. More to the point here, Peter de Bolla (2005) coined the phrase “sentimental look” to designate the process of visual sympathy:

Neither gaze nor glance, the sentimental look operates via a fully somatic insertion into the visual field. It makes the body present to sight, folding it into a set of gestures or attitudes that enable the viewer to feel his or her presence in the visual sphere, feel the self in sight, and in so doing it stimulates the cognitive process of affective response. (De Bolla 2003, 11)

---

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Beckford to his tutor Lettice, dated “Fonthill, August 31st 1781”, MS Beckford e.1, n°49.

Grounding his demonstration on Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), he explained that sympathy projects the mind into imagination: "the spectator must, first of all, endeavour, as much as he can, to put himself in the situation of the other, and to bring home to himself every little circumstances of distress which can possibly occur to the sufferer" (Smith, 21). To a large extent Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* proves the best instance ten years later of the benevolent gaze, and many studies have tried to trace the sagacious or benevolent reader in English novels (see Ross Ballaster). However, I would like to show that for all the interrelation between benevolence and gazing, there is an over-indulgence in viewing which transcends the picturing caused by sympathy. One celebrated passage is that of the Bastille, where Sterne makes fun and subverts the emerging theory of the arbitrariness of signs. The word 'Bastille' is deliberately presented as disconnected with the reality of the Bastille. This antinomialist passage is a down-to-earth call to relate to reality:

As for the Bastille, the terror is in the word. Make the most of it you can, said I to myself, the Bastille is but another word for a tower, and a tower is but another word for a house you can't get out of. [...] Beshrew the sombre pencil! said I vauntingly, for I envy not its power, which paints the evils of life with so hard and deadly a colouring. The mind sits terrified at the objects she has magnified herself, and blackened: reduce them to their proper size and hue, she overlooks them. [...] but strip it of its towers, fill up the fossé, unbarricade the doors – call it simply a confinement, and suppose tis some tyrant of a distemper and not of a man, which holds you in it – the evil vanishes, and you bear the other half without complaint.

What follows this passage is a tearful, sympathetic gaze on a bird in a cage. But in the absence of the bird, as the passage continues, the gaze turns inward and there the reader is invited to reach out beyond the bird, and beyond his fellowmen. In that sense the 'sentimental gaze' which viewed forth the bird in the cage transforms itself into a 'private gaze':

I sat down to my table, and leaning my head upon my hand, I began to figure to myself the miseries of confinement. I was in a right frame for it and so I gave full scope to my imagination. [...] I took a single captive, and having first shut him up in his dudgeon, I then look'd through the twilight of his grated door to take his picture. I beheld his body half wasted away...

With the first person narrator, the reader is entranced into a private show, absorbed in a self-engrossing picture that paradoxically enough transports him out of his self. Words guide the reader into a 'dark room': "As I darkened the little light he had, he lifted up a hopeless eye towards the door, then cast it down, shook his head, and went on with his work of affliction". The abruptness with which the image suddenly vanishes actually reinforces the semblance of a show. To me, this passage points to another

look which is disconnected from the theory of sympathy and civic humanism, and which could be termed ‘heteroviewing’ as the eye is radically moved elsewhere into otherness.

In concluding this paper on heteroviewing I wish to draw attention to a scopic regime that is emancipated from the mimetic comparative *paragone* between word and image but also from the moral imperative of benevolence and public good. Although an identification process takes place akin to empathy, heteroviewing differs from sympathy as it is not concerned with preservation, sociability and harmony but rather with risk, temptation, rupture and isolation- the characteristics of the sublime. After Sterne, experimentation with the dilation of the reader or spectator’s eyes was exemplified precisely by Beckford’s prose. Thus I may have come some way towards answering the question of his mysterious neglect of illustration (apart from an overall negligence with publishing matters). Beckford offered a scriptural attempt at visuality which avoided mediation at all cost, subverting ekphrasis and pictorialism – as best exemplified at that time by Ann Radcliffe : “the scene was such as only the dark pencil of a Domenichino, perhaps, could have done justice to” (Radcliffe, chap.xxxi); he played with literalization (generating an image for the reader by interpreting action *au pied de la lettre*): “More of this interesting conversation has not been communicated to me, and I find an interval of three months in his memoirs, marked by no other occurrences than his painting a flea. After this last effort of genius, his sight grew dim, his oppression increased, he almost shrunk away to nothing, and in a few weeks dropped into his grave.” (Beckford, *Biographical Memoirs*, 158) Finally he could display mobile immobility (narrator often in a roving bed, gondola, chaise, horse-riding, viewing from towers) and achieve a suspended prose with oniric qualities. This passing reference to Beckford’s marginal experimentation may open up fields of exploration for regimes of visuality in other late eighteenth-century British writers.

**Laurent Châtel** is Senior Lecturer at Paris-Sorbonne University. He specializes on the interaction between literature and the visual arts, notably garden and landscape aesthetics. He has published widely on William Beckford, garden history, and the reception of the *Thousand and One Nights* in Britain.  
see: <http://www.paris-sorbonne.fr/l-universite/nos-enseignants-chercheurs/article/chatel-laurent>

## WORKS CITED

### Primary works

- BECKFORD, William. *Biographical Memoirs of Extraordinary Painters*. London, 1780.
- BURKE, Edmund. *A Philosophical Enquiry into Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. London, 1757.
- RADCLIFFE, Ann. *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. London, 1794.
- RICHARDSON, Samuel. *Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded*. London, 1741.
- SMITH, Adam. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Edinburgh, 1759.
- STERNE, Laurence. *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*. London, 1768.

### Secondary sources

- ALTICK, Richard D. *The Shows of London*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap, 1978.
- BALLASTER, Ros. « The Eastern Tale and the Candid Reader : *Tristram Shandy*, *Candide*, *Rasselas* ». *XVII-XVIII RSEAA* 67 (2010) 109-125.
- CHAPMAN, Guy and John HODGKIN. *A Bibliography of William Beckford of Fonthill*. London: Constable & Co., 1930.
- CHARTIER, Roland. *Inscription and Erasure: Literature and Written Culture from the 11<sup>th</sup> Century to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania Press, 2007 (especially ‘Commerce in the Novel’).
- CHÂTEL, Laurent. “W.B & W.B: A Long Story – Sublime Congruences between Gray, Beckford and Blake” *Interfaces* 30 (2009) 57-74.
- . “Au-delà du ‘Voyage Pittoresque’, le voyage esthétique en Italie de William Beckford (1760-1844) , *Voyages d’artistes en Italie du Nord XVIe-XIXe* (Rennes : PUR, 2010) 235-250.
- COHEN, Ralph. *The Art of Discrimination. Thomsons’s The Seasons and the Language of Criticism*. Berkeley: U of California Press, 1964.
- DE BOLLA, Peter. *The Education of the Eye. Painting, Landscape, and Architecture in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005.
- DÉAN, Philippe. *Diderot devant l’image*. Paris : L’Harmattan, 2000.
- FERRAND, Nathalie. *Livres vus, livres lus: une traversée du roman illustré des lumières*. Oxford : Voltaire Foundation (SVEC), 2009.
- GANDELMAN, Claude. *Reading Pictures, Viewing Texts*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana Univeristy Press, 1991.
- GEMMETT, Robert, ed. *The Consummate Collector. William Beckford’s Letters to his Bookseller*. Norwich: Michael Russell, 2000.
- GERARD, William Blake. *Laurence Sterne and the Visual Imagination*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006.

- GRIFFITHS, Antony. *Prints for Books. Book Illustration in France 1760-1800. The Panizzi Lectures*. London : The British Library, 2004.
- HAMMELMANN, Hanns, & T.S.R. BOASE. *Book Illustrators in Eighteenth Century England*. New Haven: Yale University, 1975.
- HUNT, John Dixon. *The Figure in the Landscape. Poetry, Painting and Gardening during the Eighteenth Century*. Baltimore; London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1976.
- . "Ekphrasis of the Garden", *Interfaces* 5 (1994) 61-74.
- JAY, Martin & Teresa BRENNAN. *Vision in Context- Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Sight*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- KEYMER, Thomas and Peter SABOR. *'Pamela' in the Market Place: Literary Controversy and Print Culture in Eighteenth-Century Britain and Ireland*. Cambridge: CUP, 2005.
- MARTIN, Christophe. « *Dangereux Suppléments* »: *l'illustration du roman en France au dix-huitième siècle*. Louvain/Paris : Peeters, 2005.
- MICHEL, Christian. *Charles-Nicolas Cochin et le livre illustré au dix-huitième siècle. Avec un catalogue raisonné des livres illustrés par Cochin, 1735-1790*, Genève, 1987 (*Histoire et civilisation du livre*, n° 18).
- MITCHELL, W.J.T. *Iconology, Text, Ideology*. Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1987.
- . *Picture Theory : Essays in Verbal and Visual Representation*. Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1994.
- NOVAK, Maximilian E. 'Picturing the Thing Itself, or Not : Defoe, Painting, Prose Fiction and the Arts of Describing', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 9 (1996) 1-20.
- OGBORN, Miles and Charles WITHERS. *Georgian Geographies. Essays on Place, Space and Landscape in the Eighteenth Century*. Manchester :UP, 2004.
- PALEY, Morton D. *The Apocalyptic Sublime*. New Haven/London: Yale UP, 1996.
- PRITCHARD, Will. " 'Woman, that fair Copy': Gender and Painting in English writing, 1650-1700" *Word and Image* 25 (Issue 1, March 2009) 74-89.
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau face aux arts visuels du premier discours au rousseauisme (1750-1810) [exposition, Neuchâtel (Suisse), 20 septembre-23 novembre 2001]*. Neuchâtel : Bibliothèque publique et universitaire : Institut d'histoire de l'art, Université de Neuchâtel , 2001.
- RAY, Gordon N. *The Illustrator and the Book in England from 1790 to 1914*. New York/Oxford, 1976; New York: Dover Press, 1991.
- SHEPHERD, Lynn. *Clarissa's Painter. Portraiture, Illustration, and Representation in the Novels of Samuel Richardson*. Oxford : OUP, 2009.
- SOLKIN, David, ed. *Art on the Line: the Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House, 1780-1836*. New Haven/ London: Paul Mellon Publications, 2001.

- THOMAS, Julia. *Picturing Victorians: The Inscription of Values in Word and Image*. Athens, Oh.: Ohio UP, 2004.
- TROTT, Nicola. "Wordsworth and the Picturesque: A Strong Infection of the Age", *The Wordsworth Circle* 18 (1987), 114-21.
- VERMEULEN, Ingrid R. *Picturing Art History. The Rise of the Illustrated History of Art in the Eighteenth Century*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2010.
- WAGNER, Peter. *Reading Iconotexts from Swift to the French Revolution*. London: Reaktion Books, 1995.