Between the Book and the Lamp: Imaginative Geographies of Egypt, 1849-50

Derek Gregory


Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0020-2754%281995%292%3A20%3A1%3C29%3ABTBATL%3E2.0.CO%3B2-K

Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers is currently published by The Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers).
Between the book and the lamp: imaginative geographies of Egypt, 1849–50

Derek Gregory

This essay compares the imaginative geographies of Egypt produced by Florence Nightingale and Gustave Flaubert as they travelled up the Nile Valley and back to Cairo in 1849–50. Their experiences are used to emphasize the physicality (rather than merely the textuality) of travel writing. The differences between their imaginative geographies and in particular between their representations of landscape, space and people, illuminate the complex and fractured formation of Orientalism as a constellation of power, knowledge and spatiality, and its entanglements with patriarchy, sexuality and various colonialisms.

key words Egypt imaginative geographies Orientalism travel writing

Professor, Department of Geography, University of British Columbia, 217–1984 West Mall, Vancouver, British Columbia V6T 1Z2, Canada

revised manuscript received 13 June 1994

For the philosophy of history, what country stretches out its hands to press such facilities upon us as Egypt? the fantastic were captured in intricate display. And Florence Nightingale, Letters from Egypt 1849–1850

Let's not get lost in archaeology — a widespread and fatal tendency, I think, of the coming generation ...

Gustave Flaubert to Louis Bouilhet, Cairo, 27 June 1850

Introduction

My title is indebted to two awkward companions: Michel Foucault and Edward Said. It was Foucault who posited the discovery of what he called ‘a new imaginative space’ in the middle of the nineteenth century. He suggested that conjuring up dreams of the fantastic was no longer confined to the stillness of the night but now took place in the hushed precincts of the modern library. Hence his claim that ‘the imaginary now resides between the book and the lamp’.¹ This was a specifically European space, at least as Foucault described it, but when travellers ventured beyond Europe they took their pre-texts with them. In fact, of course, they had done so for centuries. The voyages of discovery and other expeditions and explorations all took place within a complex web of textualizations in which dreams of the fantastic were captured in intricate display. And it is that process of spinning, capturing and displaying, a process of inscription, uneven and unequal, that preoccupied Said when he urged the critical reading of what he called ‘imaginative geographies’. These are figurations of place, space and landscape that dramatize distance and difference in such a way that ‘our’ space is divided and demarcated from ‘their’ space. For Said, imaginative geographies are discursive formations, tense constellations of power, knowledge and spatiality, that are centred on ‘here’ and projected towards ‘there’ so that ‘the vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning for us here’. He derived the basic idea from Gaston Bachelard, but Said’s particular purpose was to show how such a poetics of space — which was Bachelard’s concern — is simultaneously a politics of space. This fed into his critique of Orientalism as a discourse that worked through a representation of space in which the Orient was constructed as a theatrical stage on which the Occident projected its own fantasies and desires.²

Although Said made no secret of his admiration for and indeed his debt to Foucault, the connections between the two of them have always seemed

¹ Let's not get lost in archaeology — a widespread and fatal tendency, I think, of the coming generation ...

² Although Said made no secret of his admiration for and indeed his debt to Foucault, the connections between the two of them have always seemed

Printed in Great Britain
fracious. Critics have usually drawn attention to the difficulties of coupling Foucault’s anti-humanism to Said’s own humanism. But I am more interested here in the ways in which they invoke spatiality and I want to make two comments that bear directly on what follows. First, Foucault insisted that his pre-occupation with space was more than metaphorical and that it enabled him to identify ‘those points at which discourses were transformed in, through and on the basis of relations of power’. In much the same way, Said has consistently remarked on the worldly nature of representations of space and on the relations of power in which they are implicated:

Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas and forms, about images and imaginings.

It is those images and imaginings, and their dense imbrications in the materialities of travel and colonialism, that are my main concern in the present essay. I want to move critical discussion of Orientalism beyond the library, to disrupt the usual distinctions between the text and the world, and recover the ways in which the physical passage of European travellers through other landscapes and other cultures marked the very process of their writing and their representations of those spaces. Secondly, both Foucault and Said offer accounts of the production of space that focus on what John Rajchman has called ‘spaces of constructed visibility’. Their spatial analytics are not the same to be sure but they both focus on sites of enframing and envisioning, strategies of ‘making seen’ and ‘making scene’. My particular interest is in the production of imaginative geographies in the middle of the nineteenth century that brought Egypt within European horizons of intelligibility and visibility, and so in much the same way I will examine a series of discursive strategies that rendered Egypt as a text to be read or as the object of a gaze.

I accentuate the plural and the indefinite, however, because I want to resist the tendency in some versions of cultural theory and cultural geography to essentialize ‘the’ text or ‘the’ gaze. Instead, I insist that the processes of textualization and visualization that were involved in the construction and colonization of Egypt were complex, scored through multiple and often contradictory subject-positions. In saying this, I follow those critics who have found Said’s construction of Orientalism to be too homogeneous. As he has since conceded, any account of its imaginative geographies must of necessity attend to the uneven topographies of these discursive formations. For this reason I have found Lisa Lowe’s reformulation of Said’s project in more Foucauldian terms extremely helpful. Her use of Foucault’s concept of heterotopicity is especially instructive in the present context because it conveys the multiple, interpenetrating and often antagonistic sites through which various constellations of power, knowledge and spatiality are put in place. She thus treats Orientalism as heterogeneous and contradictory, and makes two main claims:

On the one hand, that Orientalism consists of an uneven matrix of Orientalist situations across different cultural and historical sites, and on the other, that each of these Orientalisms is internally complex and unstable.

My own view is that these multiple sites, instabilities and ambiguities assume a particular importance in the case of European travel writing in the nineteenth century, where constellations of class, culture and gender could be even more tense than they were at home, where the friction of distance between one site and another had an insistently physical dimension and where identities were often labile and subtly renegotiated in the course of the passage.

With these differences in mind I return to my title because it also signals, somewhat more obliquely, two even less likely travelling companions: Florence Nightingale, whose nursing service with the British Army during the Crimean War (1854–6) earned her the soubriquet of the Lady with the Lamp — according to her (premature) obituary, the Victorian public pictured her carrying a lamp ‘through miles of sick soldiers in the middle of the night’ — and Gustave Flaubert, one of France’s greatest novelists, whose writings were in fact the immediate inspiration for Foucault’s ‘fantasia of the library’ to which I referred at the beginning. These are the principal subjects of my paper. They travelled through Egypt at more or less the same time, though quite independently of one another, when they were both in their late twenties. In their letters and other travel writings they mapped a series of imaginative geographies in exactly Said’s sense of that phrase. As one might expect, given their ages,
bourgeois origins and the cultural baggage of nineteenth-century Europe inevitably carried with them, they shared a number of assumptions and responses. But there were also significant differences between them – one a woman, one a man; one British, one French – that marked their constructions in other, equally salient ways. I hope that my emphasis on the physicality of their journeys helps to foreground their different subject-positions and the different degrees of freedom that framed their actions. In particular, there were experiences open to Flaubert which, by virtue of her gender, were denied to Nightingale. This bears directly on the intersections of Orientalism with other discursive formations, on those critical terrains in which, as Lowe says, class, 'race', gender and sexuality reinforce, cross-cut or contradict one another.

I will begin with Florence Nightingale and then move to Gustave Flaubert, following each of them from Alexandria to Cairo and then tracing their voyages up the Nile Valley and back (see Fig. 1). As my argument proceeds, however, I will also try to layer my account by making a number of comparisons between their readings. I will conclude with some general reflections on the relations between imaginative geographies and the production of colonial space.

A world turned upside down: Florence Nightingale in Egypt

'cairo', wrote Eliot Warburton of his visit in 1843, 'is now the crowded thoroughfare of England and India; our flag has become as familiar to the Arabs of the Red Sea as to the people of Alexandria'. By the early 1840s there were regular P & O steamship services from Southampton to Alexandria and, by the end of that busy decade, four English steamers taking passengers up the Nile to Cairo; a string of post-houses dotted the desert between Cairo and Suéz; and a regular steamship service made its way from Suéz down the Red Sea to Bombay and Calcutta.10 If most British travellers who visited Egypt in the first half of the nineteenth century were en route between Britain and India, however, an increasing number of them had come to see Egypt. One such was Florence Nightingale, who was then 29 years old. She had already caused her parents great consternation by announcing her intention to become a nurse. Like others of their class and generation in early Victorian Britain, they regarded the nursing profession as at best a rung above prostitution and pleaded with her to consider a career as a teacher or, better still, marriage to a suitable young man. But in vain. With her parents' approval – a sentiment which was not shared by other members of the family circle – Florence embarked on a tour to Egypt in the company of Charles and Selina Bracebridge. They were wealthy and accomplished travellers who had taken Florence to Italy with them a few years earlier, and all three of them had a keen interest in antiquity.

The Bracebridges, together with Florence and her maid 'Trout', arrived in Alexandria on 18 November 1849 and a week later the party set off by steamer for Cairo. They spent three weeks at the Hôtel de l'Europe on the Ezbekeiah, and then hired a dahabeeah (an Egyptian houseboat) for the Nile voyage. Although the boat had never carried Europeans before – apparently it had been built for a Bey's harem – it was much the same as the other houseboats hired by European travellers of means (Fig. 2). Its accommodation consisted of a day cabin, with a divan around the walls, and two sleeping cabins separated by a passage containing large closets. The crew lived on the open deck and meals were cooked in a small kitchen – little more than an open box – at the prow. The dahabeeah was chartered for three months at £30 per month. Provisions were stored in two chests on the deck and a basket of bread and two cages of oranges and meat hung overhead. These supplies were to be supplemented during the voyage: the crew baked bread in village ovens, Charles Bracebridge went out shooting, and milk, butter and other provisions were bought as circumstances allowed. The British flag was hoisted at the stern, Bracebridge's colours run up the rigging and Florence embroidered in Greek letters the name they had chosen for the dahabeeah – Parthenope, her sister's name11 – on a blue pennant that fluttered at the yardarm. The party set off upriver on 4 December and, like other travellers, intended to make Aswan and the First Cataract as fast as possible. Such a plan almost always involved 'tracking' for much of the time, when the boat would be pulled on a long rope by the crew; Florence claimed this was because they had no idea of sailing or tacking. Most parties turned back at the First Cataract and sailed downriver with the current, inspecting the antiquities and sites at their leisure. But the Bracebridges and Florence were determined to travel up into Nubia and to get as far as Abu Simbel, which they made on 15 January 1850. They returned slowly and were not back in Cairo until
Figure 1. Egypt. This was the map produced to accompany Maxime Du Camp’s version of his travels through Egypt with Gustave Flaubert
mid-March. The following month the party left from Alexandria on their way home through continental Europe to England.

My account of Florence Nightingale’s travels in Egypt is drawn from the long letters she sent home from Alexandria, Cairo and the dahabeeah. There is no record of the letters the party received while they were in Egypt, although Florence often refers to her pleasure at receiving them. The mails were, of necessity, haphazard beyond Alexandria and Cairo, and Florence always kept a letter ‘ready and sealed’ in case of a chance meeting with another boat. She excused her brief dispatch at one point by explaining that she was ‘writing in the greatest possible
haste for a steamer(!) which . . . is going on to Cairo'. Still, making allowances for the uncertain progress of a Nile voyage, communication could be quite rapid. On 21 January, for example, Florence wrote: 'At last I have a letter from you – dated 22nd November'. Two months must have seemed a long time to her, but it was really rather short, all things considered. All her letters were sent to her immediate family. She usually addressed them collectively ('My people') but sometimes the letters were addressed specifically to her mother; in any event, they were presumably read by the entire family because her sister edited and published them privately in 1854.12

It was by no means uncommon for such letters to be circulated in this way, but the prospect of publication was not uppermost in Nightingale's mind when she wrote them.13 She looked upon the adventure as an occasion to gather her thoughts about her future. For many European visitors, however, the Nile voyage was fast becoming an extended house party with its own elaborate social conventions. For example:

Every boat ascending the Nile hoists the flag of the country to which its proprietor belongs. Besides this, each traveller, before leaving Cairo, adopts a private flag, and registers it at the hotels with his own name and that of his boat. Thus, every stranger, on arriving at Cairo, learns who is 'up' the river, and for what flag to look.14

As this etiquette implies, many – perhaps most – of these European travellers sought out the company of their fellows. In Egypt, Nerval declared, 'any European becomes, in the eyes of another, a Frank, in other words a compatriot', and 'the map of our little Europe . . . loses its fine distinctions'.15 During the day their dahabeahs would race one another and, if they found themselves moored together at night – as they usually did – invitations would be extended to the neighbours and, after tea, a game of bridge or even dinner, the day might end with an entertaining display of fireworks. The Parthenope was – inevitably and unavoidably – caught up in these trappings, the signs of European tourism and colonialism, but for the most part Florence and the Bracebridges avoided the company of other travellers. At Aswan, they stole away before sunrise to avoid the 'ruck' of English boats and, when the Hungarian count, the German professor and any one of a number of other visitors made their social calls at Thebes, Charles Bracebridge retired to bed at the first 'dreadful plash of oars', leaving his wife and Florence to 'unwillingly but nobly sacrifice ourselves to our duty' – though they soon learned never to serve tea, 'which has greatly limited these visitations'. As Nerval cautioned, 'the moment one meets one of these worthy travellers, all is lost. Society takes possession of you'. Florence and the Bracebridges understood that only too well: 'It is very hard to be all day by the deathbed of the greatest of your race', she wrote, 'and to come home and talk about quails or London'.16

The journey was a serious undertaking for all three of them, then, and for this reason Nightingale's letters also cast considerable light on her views of the Egyptian past and the European present. On several occasions she described Egypt and Europe as 'the two ends of Time and Space' and I want to read her letters through the grid which this suggests (Fig. 3).17 The figure has several implications even in this dramatically simplified form but I will pay most attention to the way in which she sought on the one side to establish an essential distance and difference between Egypt and Europe while on the other side simultaneously moving to annul that separation.

Distance and difference: de-naturing the Egyptian landscape

In the first place, Florence Nightingale had immense difficulty in coming to terms with – in finding the terms for – the Egyptian landscape. 'All the colours of Africa are those of precious stones', she wrote, and the Nile itself appeared to her (as it did to countless other travellers) as a sheet of 'molten gold'. The sense of astonishment, of wonder, is
unmistakable. But it was not to last long. These metaphors had a materiality that was profoundly disconcerting. She determined that the whole valley seemed

so unlike nature – the descriptions of the gardens in the Arabian Nights, with the precious stones, seem no longer here fantastic or exaggerated – it is the description of the country.

And this ‘un-natural nature’ soon produced a feeling of unease, even of dislike:

I cannot describe the unnatural colouring, a bright line of yellow green bordering the Nile, barley or lupins, the hard brown of the desert behind, a white ghastly Cairo in the background, dabs of Prussian-blue-and-gamboge trees stuck about. It looked as if a child had painted it and did not know how, and had made it unlike nature.¹⁸

Eventually, even these garish colours were bled from the landscape. ‘The colourlessness of Egypt strikes one more than anything’, she wrote. ‘In Italy there are crimson lights and purple shadows; here there is nothing in earth, air, sky, or water, which one can compare in any way with Europe; but with regard to absence of colour, it is striking.’¹⁹

This Egypt was not only unlike any ‘nature’ she had ever known in its colours and compositions. In contrast to the familiar, changing landscapes of Europe, it seemed to her petrified, literally mortified. The desert was diabolical – ‘an earth tumbled up and down; not as if Providence had made it so, but as if it had been created otherwise’; ‘one almost fancies one hears the Devil laughing’²⁰ – and it was only the heavens that lifted her heart. Her letters accordingly made much of the opposition between the beauty and the animation of the sky and the deadness of the earth below.

While the earth in our country is so rich and variegated with light and crowded with animation, the sky above contrasts by its deadness. Here, on the other hand, the sky is radiant, the light is living . . . One looks down, and the ungrateful earth lies there, hopeless and helpless, a dying, withered desert.²¹

Perhaps not surprisingly her imagery, as she passed through the nightmare landscape of tombs and temples, increasingly turned from the un-natural to the spectral. The European aesthetic literally deserted her. ‘Travelling here is nothing like the tourist seeing sights of beautiful art and sunny landscape in Italy or the South of France’, she wrote: ‘It is like the gho11 haunting the tombs . . .’²² She described the island of Elephantine thus:

The island looks as it were a world turned upside down, and then stirred up . . . It was such a world as might have been turned out of the cauldron of Macbeth’s Weird Sisters . . . It was as if a devil had been there, heaving underneath, upturning, tossing and tumbling it till everything was in atoms and confusion.²³

Even here, of course, Europe was not far away, and Nightingale repeatedly called on Shakespeare’s Macbeth to conjure up this strange and terrible world. But the image never fully satisfied her. ‘It is useless to try to describe these things’, she wrote at Syene, ‘for European language has no words for them. How should it, when there is no such thing in Europe? All other nature raises one’s thoughts to heaven: this sends them to hell.’²⁴ Although women travel-writers typically despised of their attempts at description – Billie Melman suggests that they were ‘painfully aware of their own inadequacy as writers’ and repeatedly confessed the limitations of their powers of observation²⁵ – Nightingale’s frustration turns not so much on the inadequacy of her descriptions as on the inadequacy of their object: the Egyptian landscape. It was, to her, a world turned upside down, an inversion of the ordered and Christian world of Europe: a Biblical landscape where the devil was now abroad.

The contemporary inhabitants of Egypt were identified with – and on occasion directly assimilated to – this diabolical un-nature. When Arab porters and hawkers boarded the ship at Alexandria, she was already persuaded that they were ‘an intermediate race between the monkey and the man’. On shore, rattling through dusty streets to her hotel, the city – apart from ‘the Frank Square’ where the Europeans lived – reminded her of ‘a vast settlement of white ants’. Upriver, she found huts in villages ‘all tumbled together, up and down, as animals might build their nests, without regularity or plan’. In her eyes the city of Asyut, the capital of Upper Egypt, was no better: ‘the sort of city the animals might have built when they had possession of the earth’. Sailing away from Luxor she was shocked at what she took to be the ‘voluntary debasement’ of the people. ‘To see human beings choosing darkness rather than light’, ‘choosing to crawl upon the ground like reptiles’, ‘it seemed as if they did it on purpose to be as like beasts as they could’: ‘It felt as
if one had trodden in a nest of reptiles.26 Then, at Durr, the capital of Nubia, the textual recoil, the shudder of revulsion becomes palpable:

A sycamore by the river's shore, which was the coffee-house, was the only thing human—the white domes or bee-hives, the mud walls without windows, which enclosed a yard, in the corners of which were the lairs of families, the nests of little naked children, squatting between two stones (like nests of young foxes) — running away when you looked at them, and then baying like jackals after you . . . things about four months old, climbing about like lizards . . . Whether I was Gulliver or Captain Cook, I don't know, but certainly all this was as much out of our common habits of thought as if I had been either.27

A sycamore tree 'the only thing human', and human beings living in 'lairs' and 'nests', 'baying like jackals' and climbing 'like lizards': these were hideous commonplaces of colonial discourse.28 In fact, Nightingale had prepared herself by reading the adventures of Mungo Park and James Bruce but she was now persuaded that their accounts completely failed to convey the 'debasement and misery' of African villages. At Elephantine she and her companions were greeted by what she called 'troops of South Sea savages' and, when she gazed down on six other houseboats moored at Mahatta, below the First Cataract, she described them as 'the English fleet' and thought it 'exactly like a wood-cut of one of Captain Cook's voyages — the savage scene, the neat English boats and flags in the little bay'.29

But there was a profound difference and one which required a second rhetorical movement. David Spurr has identified a rhetoric of negation as one of the characteristic tropes of the European colonial imaginary, and suggests that it involves both a 'negative space' and a 'negative history'.

The discourse of negation denies history as well as place, constituting the past as absence, but also designating that absence as a negative presence: a people without history is one which exists only in a negative sense; like the bare earth, they can be transformed by history, but they cannot make history their own.30

But this could hardly be deployed very effectively in Egypt, which was the cradle of antiquity, of ancient civilization; or, at any rate, it required the metaphorical displacement of the present population. 'South Sea savages' were thus literally out of place in Egypt: they did not belong to its past and had no claim on its future. As I must now show, however, there was another, more general rhetorical strategy through which Nightingale articulated this discourse of negation.

**Passages to antiquity: supernatural landscapes**

In the second place, Nightingale effectively depopulated these landscapes of their human inhabitants and it was by this means that she was able to annul the distance between past and present. This was a familiar strategy too, of course, and Mary Louise Pratt has identified the effacement of human presence as a characteristic trope of colonial discourse. The residents of the country turn up in the narration mainly as traces on the landscape, she writes, as 'scratches on the face of the country'.31 But this is given a peculiar power in Nightingale's letters by the metaphorical conversion of native people into beasts and reptiles, by the identity she presumes between them and 'un-natural nature', and also by the elective affinity between this 'dead nature' and what John Barrell has seen as a death-wish, a fantasy of extinction common in the writings of Victorian travellers in Egypt. Perhaps, as he concedes, this is only ill-considered hyperbole, a wish for silence and space in which to contemplate the sublime. Certainly, she often wished to be alone. And yet perhaps it also signals a real desire for a violent end to the horrors of the present: in Egypt, Nightingale declared, 'there is such a Past, no Present, and for a Future one can only hope for extinction!'.32

Be that as it may, Nightingale simultaneously repopulated these landscapes with figures of the dead drawn from Egypt's ancient past. And she did so through a device that Walter Benjamin later made central to his vision of the Arcades Project: the dream. Nightingale's simple use of this dream motif bears little comparison with Benjamin's richly textured writings but there is something about his reflections on ruins, on dreamworlds and on wish-images that can be turned back on her writings. For Benjamin, modernity was itself a dreamworld but one whose dreams could be dispelled from within, so to speak, 'dissolving mythology into the space of history'. Nightingale's writings led in the opposite direction, dissolving history into the space of mythology, but her use of the dream motif can also be read (with Benjamin) as an attempt 'to overcome and transfigure the deficiencies of social reality'.33

But *whose* social reality?

It should be said at once that 'dreaming' had an acutely personal significance for Florence
Nightingale. Throughout her late teens and into her twenties she had been consumed by "the habit of dreaming". Her diaries document how "she fell into "trance-like" states in the midst of ordinary life" and how she gave way (and here one imagines Nightingale and her biographer shuddering together) "with the shameful ecstasy of the drug-taker". By 1849, Cecil Woodham-Smith maintains, she was drawing towards a crisis:

'Dreaming' became uncontrollable. She fell into trances in which hours were blotted out, she lost sense of time and place against her will. In daily life she moved like an automaton, could not remember what had been said or even where she had been. Agonies of guilt and self-reproach were intensified by the conviction that her worst fears were being realised and that she was going insane.

Again and again she made resolutions to end dreaming, to 'tear the sin out', to 'stamp it out' — but they were always broken.34

Woodham-Smith attributes these 'dreams' to a spiritual crisis — to a 'call from God' whose exact nature remained undisclosed for years and which tormented Nightingale almost beyond endurance — but it would not be difficult to see a crisis of repressed sexuality in them too. In any event, Egypt pushed her resolve to the limit. Although her letters home gave no outward sign of her secret agonies, I suspect that her recourse to the dream motif may have been, in some measure, cathartic. It is important to distinguish between the dreams and the dream-images, of course, but there is a link between them. Woodham-Smith describes Nightingale's dreams as consoling visions, as withdrawals from the demands (and denials) of her everyday life, and in Egypt her dream-images gave her access to a parallel world that was, in its way, comforting and perhaps even consoling.

The dream-image was a commonplace of Victorian travel writing but it has a particular resonance in the case of Florence Nightingale in Egypt.35 It suggests both her inner turmoil, her sense of disengagement and the disappointment she recorded in her small black notebook at the effect present-day Egypt was having on her, but also and, so to speak, redemptively, her proximity to Egyptian mythology and its intimations of (im)mortality.36 Entering into that parallel world of the past was also perhaps a way of comprehending — of mapping? — her shifting subjectivity. Bénédicte Monicat has suggested that many women travellers in the nineteenth century came to question their identities, that they could neither locate themselves in the context of their "previous existence" nor [were] they certain of what they [had] become through their travels. She argues that this process of estrangement was characteristically linked directly to a gendered identity — that it was an 'estrangement from the norm of the feminine' — and it is, I think, significant that both of her examples involve dream-images.37 These suggestions might assume even greater significance here because it was during her travels in Egypt that Nightingale determined that she had been 'called' to nursing, which was itself coded, gendered and sexualized in ambiguous and complex ways.38 But these are beads of speculation strung on a thread of autobiography and I am reluctant to attach too much weight to them. I am more interested in the consequences of the dream-image for the connections Nightingale saw between ancient Egypt and modern Europe.

To Nightingale, as to many other European visitors, Cairo was the locus of the fairy-tale world of the Arabian Nights.39 Before she set off upriver she set down her first impressions.

No one ever talks about the beauty of Cairo ever gives you the least idea of this surprising city. I thought it was a place to buy stores at and pass through on one's way to India, instead of its being the rose of cities, the garden of the desert, the pearl of Moorish architecture, the fairest, really the fairest place of earth below ... Oh, could I but describe those Moorish streets, in red and white stripes of marble; the latticed balconies, with little octagonal shrines, also latticed, sticking out of them, for the ladies to look straight down through; the innumerable mosques and minarets; the arcades in the insides of houses you peep into, the first storeys meeting almost overhead, and yet the air with nothing but fragrance in it, in these narrowest of narrow wynds! But there are no words to describe an Arabian city, no European words at least ... 40

This is a far cry from her harsh impressions of the landscape of the Nile Valley but notice how her final sentence situates the city. She is indeed dissolving history into the space of mythology — into the space of the Arabian Nights — and she later underlines the distinction: 'Cairo is not Egyptian', she announced, 'it is Arabian'. Her language failed her here, so she seemed to be saying, not because the experience was un-natural but precisely because it was out of nature, beyond nature, virtually
super-natural. When she returned to Cairo at the end of her voyage she remained convinced that it was impossible to describe it. ‘You might as well try to record a dream’, she wrote, ‘and I do not know whether the waking dream of the living city within or the silent vision of the dead city without is most unreal’. And she presented the journey upriver – which separated these two encounters – as a voyage into the supernatural.

You feel, as you lie on the divan, and float slowly along, and the shores pass you gently by, as if you were being carried along some unknown river to some unknown shore, leaving for ever all you had known before – a mysterious feeling creeps over you, as if it were the passage to some other world. ... You lose all feeling of distance [and] all feeling of identity too, and everything becomes supernatural.

Indeed, ‘when in the evening a spectral bark with its glassy white sails comes standing in silently like a phantom ship upon this molten sea, you fancy yourself anywhere but in this world’. She and her companions were being ‘carried away in a phantom-ship to Jinnee countries’ and, later that night, when one of the crew roused himself from the deck, ‘scattering fire upon the waves from his hand’, he looked ‘like anything certainly but a man’.

Like other travellers, Nightingale saw the Nile passage opening the European present directly into the Egyptian past. Six years earlier Warburton had felt that ‘as you recede from Europe further and further on, towards the silent regions of the Past, you live more and more in that Past’. Similarly, for Nightingale and no doubt for many other Europeans, crossing that threshold was, in its way, a limit-experience ‘perfectly distinct from that in any of our living countries’ (my emphasis) and yet at the same time only accessible to travellers from those places.

It is like going into the Sun, and finding there is not one living being left; but strewed about, as if they had just been used, all the work, books, furniture, all the learning, poetry, religion of the race, all the marks fitted to give one an idea of their mind, heart, soul and imagination, to make one feel perfectly acquainted with their thoughts, feelings and ideas, much more so than with those of many of one’s own kin ... But still, the star is a deserted one ... [and] that Egypt is all but uninhabited. The present race no more disturbs this impression than would a race of lizards, scrambling over the broken monuments of such a star. You would not call them inhabitants, no more do you these.

Brushing away the contemporary inhabitants of Egypt thus, she wondered at how she and her companions had ‘become so completely inhabitants of another age’ and ‘how completely we were living in the time of 4000 years ago’. What made this possible was partly the ruins themselves and partly her educated sensibility. She marvelled at the paintings in the tombs and their delineation of ‘all the details of everyday life’; the sheer prosaicness of it all afforded what she saw as a ‘magic lantern glimpse into the domestic economy of 4000 years ago’. At the same time, she realized, ‘every monument is its own interpreter’ and the decipherment of the hieroglyphs had made it possible for educated European travellers – but not, by implication, the barely human Arabs who lived among the ruins – to appreciate Egypt’s ancient past and hence to claim it as their own. She herself had consulted with eminent Egyptologists, read widely in Orientalist literatures and, according to her sister, had set off for Egypt laden with learned books. And what did she find? ... at Beni Hassan she declared:

All that one wants to know is that on this soil nearly 4000 or 5000 years ago men stood who felt and thought like us ... I think the Egyptian must have been very much like some of the English clergy wives of the present day, who preach out of the Old Testament and make muslin curtains.

Less extravagantly, but otherwise similarly, she found it ‘astonishing how alike the human heart is in all periods and climates; at Thebes she saw ‘the same feelings we have in every sculpture and tomb and temple here’.

Ambivalence and the philosophy of history
Yet this double strategy of estrangement/effacement, however consoling its vision may have been in personal terms, was shot through with a mesmerizing ambivalence. Nightingale was frankly appalled by most of what she saw of Egypt’s present and not only the grinding poverty and misery of ordinary people. She also hated the physical violence, the resort to the cudgel and the bastinado, and was taken aback by ‘what it is to be a woman in these countries’. And she realized that this could not all be laid at the door of the common people, however ‘un-natural’ she supposed them to be and no matter how ‘voluntary’ their ‘debasement’. She dismissed the successive rulers of Egypt – Muhammad ‘Ali, Ibrahim and Abbas – as
between the book and the lamp

being as bad as one another, presiding over 'the kingdom of the devil', but she reserved her most withering contempt for the present Pasha, Abbas, whom she deemed 'below all sentiment, either for the glories of his temples or the miseries of his people'. On occasion, however, and in the margins of her accounts, she conceded that these indignities and horrors were present in Egypt's past too. She disliked the Pyramids intensely for this very reason: they were a record of 'the most hideous oppression in the world', a monument to tyranny, and so she was not in the least surprised that her first impression of them should be nothing but repulsive.49

If these continuities could be held in suspense most of the time, so that she could find solace of some kind in antiquity, it was much more difficult to negotiate the identities and commonalities she presumed between Egypt as the cradle of ancient civilization and Europe – and most particularly Britain – as the climax of modern civilization. For they surely called into question the very notion of 'progress' inscribed within European conceptions of modernity:

It is good for a man [sic] to be here – good for British pride to think, here was a nation more powerful than we are, and almost as civilised. 4000 years ago – for 2000 years already they have been a nation of slaves – in 2000 years where shall we be? – Shall we be like them?50

Not surprisingly, this admonition soon turned into trepidation:

It cannot be a law that all nations shall fall after a certain number of years. God does not work in that sort of way: they must have broken some law of nature which has caused them to fall. But are all nations to sink in that way? ... And will England turn into Picts again ... as Egypt has turned into Arabs?51

One might expect such concerns to have had a special resonance in the wake of the revolutions of 1848; that famous 'springtime of peoples' must have seemed quite otherwise to many members of the bourgeoisie. Even those separated from continental Europe by the English Channel had been rudely awakened by the spirited Chartist campaigns of the 1840s and, after the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, the middle class was probably even more alienated from the British working-class movement.

But the system of identities and oppositions set out in Figure 3 had another consequence for Nightingale's philosophy of history. Egypt and Europe, antiquity and modernity, were opposing poles and this made it virtually impossible for her to recognize 'modernizing Egypt' as it came into being at the centre of this force-field of tension. She was able to get her bearings on the Orient by using European constructions of Nature and History as sighting devices, but she deployed them in such a way that the idea of 'modern Egypt' simply could not be thought within the compass of her conceptual grid. Certainly, at mid-century it was a blurred and jagged image. If Muhammad 'Ali had been the modernizing autocrat, opening Egypt to Europe, introducing new cash crops and new agricultural practices, dredging and deepening irrigation canals, setting up new factories with modern machinery and planning improvement schemes for Cairo, then his grandson, Abbas, was a reactionary despot. During his brief rule, 1848–54, he set his face against the incursions of European modernity and abandoned many of his grandfather's innovations.52

And yet, in so many ways, it was too late. In 1843 it had taken Warburton four days to travel between Alexandria and Cairo; in 1849 Nightingale was able to make the same trip on an English steamer, the Marchioness of Breadalbane, in just 24 hours. Where others would have seen this as a sign of the fragility of the Orient, of the fading of its imaginative geography, and mourned its disappearance, overwritten by the bolder and brasher strokes of modernity, Nightingale simply saw the Orient crumbling under the burden of its own unchanging present.53

At the end of her Nile voyage there is a moment which might serve as a metaphor for her philosophy of history. She is in her cabin as dusk falls, writing one of her last letters from Egypt, with the khamsin raging outside and sand blowing in through the shutters. 'I could write much more easily on the table with my finger', she tells her family, 'than on the paper with my pen'.54 Is it unduly fanciful to see in this an image of Egypt disappearing in the dust, the inscriptions of Europe struggling to make themselves visible, only to be overwhelmed by the deadening embrace of the desert?

A fantasy of escape: Gustave Flaubert in Egypt

Gustave Flaubert's writings about Egypt are textually more complicated than Florence Nightingale's
because their construction is so multiform. Flaubert kept two notebooks during his travels and he used them to provide the raw materials for his letters home. The surviving correspondence consists of 31 letters from Flaubert and, since there is no trace of the 30 or so letters he received while he was in Egypt, we have direct access to only one side of these often intimate conversations. Each letter presents his travels to a different audience and is thus composed from a different position. Although he often copied and reworked passages from one letter to another, there is a vivid contrast between the letters to his mother and those to his close friend, Louis Bouilhet. He wrote to Bouilhet much less often but at much greater length, returning to descriptions drafted in letters to his mother and elaborating them, by which I mean not only giving more detail – including erotic encounters which he kept from his mother – but also polishing and perfecting his prose. This is of the utmost importance, for this correspondence mattered greatly to Flaubert. He was comforted by news from his family and friends and was always worried when he did not hear from them but he had other reasons too: he tormented himself with the thought that some of his own letters might have been lost in the post not least, I think, because he intended to make use of them himself. He had promised to incorporate extracts from the letters into articles for the Revue de l’Orient et d’Algérie, the bulletin of the Société Orientale de France, but soon after he arrived in Egypt he decided ‘to publish nothing for a long time yet’. When Flaubert returned to France he re-read all the letters he had sent to his mother (he had instructed her to number them in sequence and keep them safe), probably those to Bouilhet and perhaps even the notes taken by his travelling companion, and then used them in conjunction with his own notes to compose his Voyage en Egypte. As he had said, however, this was not intended for publication. It was a purely private project in which Flaubert tried to lay down his experiences like a young wine to mature for his literary future: ‘to make the Orient into a place of personal memory, a sort of immense treasury of images’.55

Flaubert left France in the fall of 1849 in the company of Maxime Du Camp. Both men were in their late twenties and had been friends since university. They had long been fascinated by the Orient but it was Du Camp who took the initiative in making arrangements for the expedition. He persuaded the French government to entrust each of them with a diplomatic mission that he hoped would open various doors en route. The Ministry of Public Instruction endorsed his own proposal to photograph ancient monuments and their inscriptions, while the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce charged Flaubert with collecting commercial information. Du Camp took his task very seriously – Flaubert often describes his companion busy with plates and negatives while he sat around talking or writing – and he eventually published a remarkable series of photographs.56 But Flaubert was quite uninterested in his own mission. He enjoyed the status it conferred upon him but in Cairo, at the very beginning of the adventure, his ministerial instructions already ‘seem[ed] to be waiting patiently for the day I’ll use them as toilet paper’. They simply got in the way of what he wanted to do. Towards the end of the journey, he confessed:

I pay no more attention to my mission than to the King of Prussia. To ‘discharge my duties’ properly I should have had to give up my journey – it would have been absurd . . . Can’t you see me in every town, informing myself about crops, about production, about consumption? ‘How much oil do you shit here? How many potatoes do you stuff into yourselves?’57

Counter-discourse and contaminated geographies

Flaubert’s motives were complex. Like many other European writers and artists of the time, he was haunted by the desire to escape the conventions and confinements of bourgeois Europe. ‘If France is in the same state as it was when I left’, he wrote towards the end of his journey, ‘if the bourgeoisie is still as ferociously absurd and public opinion as base as it was, in a word, if the whole kettle of fish smells as bad then I don’t miss any of it’.58 Perhaps he hoped to find in the counter-experience of Egypt the terms of what Richard Terdiman calls a counter-discourse ‘from which the ennui and the banality characteristic of Flaubert’s life and his consciousness for a long time would have been banished’.59 Like Florence Nightingale, there were also intensely personal reasons for Flaubert wanting to get away from Europe – the death of a close friend, the mental illness of his brother-in-law – but, unlike her, he had no desire to efface the distance between modernity and antiquity. Terdiman compares him to Jules in the first Education sentimentale: ‘Modern life began to seem too restricted to him and he returned to antiquity to find subjects for pleasure and objects of desire’. In Terdiman’s eyes, Flaubert hoped to
hold the two apart, to leave the one and lose himself in the other, and realize a dream

not so much of naturalizing within his own writing (in the form of some sort of curative antidote) the discourse of the Orient, but much more radically of absorbing himself – almost obliterating himself – in this other discourse.60

The preoccupation with antiquity was scarcely novel and neither was its particular identification with the Orient but in Flaubert’s case these associations assumed a special form. I have mentioned their presence in the first Education sentimentale, which was completed in 1845; they are also centrally involved in Flaubert’s Conte Oriental, which was his next project and which he abandoned in order to work on La tentation de Saint-Antoine. This extraordinary text was set in Egypt and Flaubert completed a first version immediately before his departure: the stinging criticism it received from Du Camp and Bouilhet provided another reason for him to get away.61 But this was more than an escape into the exotic. Eugenio Donato argues that Flaubert’s ‘nostalgia for antiquity’ (if that is what it was) was a longing for ‘an absolutely original, unmediated form of writing’ and that his Orient was constituted within a complex metaphorical network that, among other functions, staged his own act of writing: that it was, in effect, ‘a spatial metaphor for an absolute difference which would permit a textually unmediated representation’.62

And yet, as Donato also remarks, such was not (and could not be) the case for the Egypt of La tentation or the Carthage of Salammbô, the first novel in which Flaubert drew directly on his travels in the Orient:

Between them and Flaubert [stood] the archaeological museum and the library of erudition, and it is only through the Museum and the Library that the modern writer [could] have access to them.63

Foucault captured these textual mediations in his striking reflection on the fantasies that fill La tentation, to which I referred earlier:

Possibly, Flaubert was responding to an experience of the fantastic which was singularly modern and relatively unknown before his time, to the discovery of a new imaginative space in the nineteenth century. This domain of phantasms is no longer the night, the sleep of reason, or the uncertain void that stands before desire, but, on the contrary, wakefulness, untiring attention, zealous erudition, and constant vigilance. Henceforth, the visionary experience arises from the black and white surface of printed signs, from the closed and dusty volume that opens with a flight of forgotten words; fantasies are carefully deployed in the hushed library, with its columns of books, with its titles aligned on shelves to form a tight enclosure, but within confines that also liberate impossible worlds. The imaginary now resides between the book and the lamp.64

One might say the same of Flaubert’s travel writings. He read widely in the literature of Orientalism between 1845 and 1849, and these ‘pre-texts’ enframed his own texts.65 It is thus scarcely suprising that, as Terdiman claims,

Despite the plenitude which stems from a constant reference to places, monuments, terms and mores which were exotic for [Flaubert], these texts really represent an absence of rupture from the protocols of the dominant discourse. On the contrary: these protocols are unexpectedly inscribed at the center of a mode of writing whose mission was precisely to exclude them.66

In Egypt, Flaubert found a modernity always present in his antiquity and an antiquity always present in his modernity. But – and this is central to my own argument – this was more than a matter of poetics, of textual enframing. It had the most material of dimensions too:

The West, having preceded Flaubert to the East, is obliging him to record it there, like an unanticipated referent which forces its representation upon the text whose function had nominally been to evade it . . . Thus it is that Flaubert’s text registers its contamination by Europe as a systematic and more or less conscious critique of this mode of intervention and domination. It organizes itself in the form of a network of tiny points of European infection, distributed over its pages as they seem to have been over the map of the Orient itself. Such contaminated geography it takes as its model.67

Terdiman’s reading seems to me largely persuasive, and I will make use of it in what follows, but it is hardly inclusive. Lowe draws attention to the complex, often contradictory foliations of Flaubert’s texts: to the preoccupation with defining a coherent national identity, an ‘imagined community’ in Benedict Anderson’s sense of that phrase, at a time when it had been called into question by the
revolutions of 1848; to the eroticization and sexualization of the Orient as female Other, different from and desired by a masculine European subject; and even, in his later writings, to the ironic counter-commentary on Orientalism as 'sentimentality'. My sense is that these themes are all present in his appropriations of Egypt.

**Landscapes and ruins**
Flaubert and Du Camp arrived in Alexandria on 15 November 1849, accompanied by their Corsican servant, Sassetti. The trio left for Cairo 10 days later – perhaps travelling on the same steamer as the Bracebridges and Florence Nightingale – and stayed first at the Hôtel d'Orient and then at the Hôtel du Nil, where they remained for over two months. They then hired a houseboat, a blue-painted cange which was somewhat smaller than the Parthenope. Flaubert wrote to his mother,

> For quarters we have a room with two little divans facing each other . . . a large room with two beds, on one side of which there is a kind of alcove for our baggage and on the other an English-type head; and finally a third room where Sassetti will sleep and which will serve as a store-room as well.70

Still, it must have been capacious enough; Flaubert had more than 1200 pounds of baggage. It was certainly well-equipped and came with a crew of nine.

They set off up the Nile on 5 February 1850 and, although they were hit by a succession of storms and the crew had to track for long distances, they reached the First Cataract on 11 March. They travelled up into Nubia as far as Wadi Halfa which they reached on 22 March. As was the custom, their return was more leisurely but it was made even longer by a 10-day excursion overland across the desert from Keneh to the Red Sea at Koseir. They then resumed their voyage and returned to Cairo on 25 June, where they stayed at the Hôtel du Nil for a week or so before travelling back to Alexandria. They spent a fortnight there and left Alexandria (for Beirut) on 17 July 1850.

For the most part, Flaubert affected not to be greatly interested in either Egypt's landscape or the ruins of its past civilizations. But this apparent neglect needs to be treated carefully. Soon after his arrival in Cairo Flaubert wrote to Louis Bouilhet that he was 'very little impressed by nature here – i.e. landscape, sky, desert (except the mirages'). And certainly he rarely presented panoramas in his notes and letters or his novels, preferring to focus on images of particular moments; but these had a visual density so vivid, a focalisation so intense that passages in his travel writings have reminded several critics of an artist's sketchpad rather than a writer's notebook.71 One evening at Denderah, for example, when Flaubert was strolling under the palms, gazing at the purple-red of the distant mountains, the blue of the Nile, the ultramarine of the sky and the livid green of the vegetation, nothing moving, he imagined that the scene was like 'a painted countryside, an immense stage set made expressly for us'.72 But this was not the artistic conceit of Florence Nightingale, who thought the landscape looked 'as if a child had painted it and did not know how'. Not only did Flaubert exult in these landscapes; he 'painted' them and he did know how: in fact, one commentator regards these as the great pages of his Voyage.73 Flaubert's descriptions were often acutely physical in their ability to convey changing and intersecting arcs of sensation in which vision virtually fades into sound and back again and in their almost physical recomposition of the scene itself. Consider this passage, written after Flaubert had climbed to the top of one of the Pyramids to wait for the sunrise:

> The sun was rising just opposite; the whole valley of the Nile, bathed in mist, seemed to be a still white sea; and the desert behind us, with its hillocks of sand, another ocean, deep purple, its waves all petrified. But as the sun climbed behind the Arabian chain the mist was torn into great shreds of filmy gauze . . . Everything between the horizon and us is all white and looks like an ocean; this recedes and lifts. The sun, it seems, is moving fast and climbing above oblong clouds that look like swan's down, of an inexpressible softness; the trees in the groves around the villages . . . seem to be in the sky itself, for the entire perspective is perpendicular; . . . behind us, when we turn around, is the desert – purple waves of sand, a purple ocean.74

The passage begins with an image of arresting stillness but the scene – the canvas? – is suddenly cut by the sun and its composition thrust into motion: even the trees are rotated into the sky. Nightingale was struck by the colourlessness of Egypt but here waves of colour wash over sky and land, and one can almost hear them crashing into the desert sand.

> It is necessary to be equally cautious about Flaubert and antiquity. At Abu Simbel he flatly
declared that ‘the Egyptian temples bore me profoundly’ and his notes on them as he returned downriver seem to be increasingly perfunctory; there is certainly nothing in his writings that approaches the endless descriptions of ruins that filled Florence Nightingale’s letters. Yet what bored him, I think, was not so much the ruins as their incorporation within the increasingly elaborate textual apparatus of Orientalism and, in particular, within the discourses of archaeology and tourism that policed their appropriation. ‘Are they going to become like the churches in Brittany, the waterfalls of the Pyrenees?’ he demanded.

Oh, necessity! To do what you are supposed to do; to be always what, according to the circumstances (and despite the aversion of the moment) . . . a young man, or a tourist, or an artist . . . is supposed to be.78

Flaubert was genuinely moved at a number of sites, most notably at Giza, Luxor and Thebes, and he had an eye for detail so acute — sometimes much more so than Du Camp — that at least one commentator is sceptical about his show of disinterest. He was drawn to the figures shown on the frescoes and, while he sometimes chaffed at the rigidity of Egyptian art, he paid particular attention to its representation of the human body — to the lines of naked captives displaying their hands and uncircumcised penises to the king, to the naked women and the ‘deliberately lubricious aspect of the[ir] thighs, with the knee deeply inset’ — as a confirmation of what de Biasi calls ‘the unchangeable modernity of desire and eroticism’. Flaubert’s own account was more prosaic: ‘So dirty pictures existed even so far back in antiquity?’76 But the point is, I think, essentially the same. Far from being unmoved by the traces of antiquity, Flaubert found in their very physicality — at least in his response to and his rendering of that physicality — the possibility of bringing that past into his present. In much the same way, death was not contained by the lost worlds of the temples and tombs. It was constantly all around Flaubert and reached out to touch him: thus dogs tearing at the remains of a donkey; the muzzles of hunting-dogs purple with clotted blood caked in the sun; camels dying in the desert while vultures wheel in the sky; the shrill cries of an Englishwoman in her death agony; the dessicated corpse of an Arab, ‘the mouth screaming with every ounce of human strength’.77

When Flaubert wrote that landscape and architecture ‘seem the work of the same hand’, therefore, this was not to render them as flat and immobile surfaces but to situate their geometries within a multidimensional, almost kinetic representation of space that was intensely corporeal. If Flaubert’s space is one in which places are crisscrossed by glances in a geometric quadrillage, those glances and their geometries are not disembodied.79 On the contrary, Michel Butor suggests that Flaubert’s travel writings were shot through with a critique of what one might call the body-culture of the bourgeoisie. For Flaubert.

The contemporary epoch, that of the bourgeoisie, destroys the human body by covering it with clothes and cutting it out. Generalised castration.79

When Flaubert declares that ‘everything in Egypt seems made for architecture’, therefore, ‘the planes of the fields, the vegetation, the human anatomy, the horizon lines’, his ‘architecture’ is not a formal exteriority but rather an organic interiority.80

Physicality, passivity and representations of space
I have made this point in relation to landscape and antiquity, but it can be sharpened most acutely in those other fields that Flaubert made intersect with them. And it needs to be sharpened in a particular way, as Butor’s invocation of castration — and, by implication, of desire — implies. There can be no doubt that, as Flaubert said himself, he was ‘enormously excited by the cities and the people’ and that his appropriation of them was a thoroughly sensual one.81 Like Florence Nightingale, Flaubert landed in Alexandria ‘amid the most deafening uproar imaginable’; unlike her, however, when he recorded himself ‘gulping down a whole bellyful of the basses rumbling and the flutes sighing away; each detail reaches out to grip you; it pinches you; and the more you concentrate on it the less you grasp the

scarcely over the initial bedazzlement. It is like being hurled while still asleep into the midst of a Beethoven symphony, with the brasses at their most ear-splitting, the basses rumbling and the flutes sighing away; each detail reaches out to grip you; it pinches you; and the more you concentrate on it the less you grasp the
whole. Then gradually all this becomes harmonious and the pieces fall into place of themselves, in accordance with the laws of perspective. But the first days, by God, it is such a bewildering chaos of colours that your poor imagination is dazzled as though by continuous fireworks...84

As the physicality of the prose suggests—once again, sound fading into vision and the details of the scene reaching out, gripping and pinching—Flaubert’s responses were more than mental exercises. ‘I try to take hold of everything I see’, he wrote to his mother, and he was greatly exercised by the sheer physicality and corporeality of his encounters.85

This was true in the most literal of senses. Where Florence Nightingale was sickened by the physical brutality that she took to be part of everyday life in Egypt, Flaubert was entranced by it. ‘You would scarcely believe the important role played by the cudgel in this part of the world’, he wrote to his mother. ‘Buffets are distributed with a sublime prodigality, always accompanied by loud cries; it’s the most genuine kind of local colour you can think of’. He was amused by the assaults he witnessed—on one occasion his own servants forced another man into the ocean with their sticks and he and Du Camp laughed ‘like fools’—and he and Du Camp questioned the Nazir of Ibrim about the bastinado with something approaching relish.86 But physicality entered still more intimately into Flaubert’s images. A wedding procession with ‘two naked wrestlers, oiled and wearing leather shorts, but not wrestling, just striking poses’; a performance by ‘dancers [whose] gauze ripples on the hips like a transparent wave with every move they make’; a visit to the baths, alone in the hot room, ‘very voluptuous ... while the naked kellaas call out to one another as they massage you’; a night with the courtesan Kuchuk Hanem, ‘feeling of her stomach against my buttocks ... her mound warmer than her stomach, heated me like a hot iron’; the clown of the mendicant monks who swam to the side of the boat against my buttocks ... pretending to piss and shit on their heads’.87

This is not quite the passivity that Sartre finds in Flaubert and, although I cannot discuss his reading in the detail it deserves, I do need to establish the distance between our two Flauberts. Sartre’s interpretation is derived from a mix of Marxism and psychoanalysis. Of particular relevance is his account of Flaubert’s sexuality, which he uses to characterize Flaubert’s being-in-the-world as essentially passive. Through his sexual encounters Flaubert tries to ‘recuperate’ his being by constantly placing himself in the hands of others—literally so—and ‘turning himself, through complaisant submission, into a fascinating object for his executioners and simultaneously for himself’. The object of this recuperation, so Sartre contends, is ‘his passivity itself’; in another formulation, Flaubert’s passivity ‘desires to become flesh under the manipulations of others’. For Sartre this is indicative of ‘a secret femininity’ of Flaubert’s vision of himself as an ‘imaginary woman’, and his sexual encounters in Egypt and elsewhere reveal a desire to submit ‘in order to coincide in orgasm with his objective being’.88 These are, I think, tendentious claims, and for several reasons. Less preoccupied with diagnosing Flaubert’s sexuality, Said none the less seems at least half-convinced by Sartre’s analysis and translates ‘passivity’ into Flaubert’s penchant for the theatrical: at its best, he writes ‘this provides a spectacular form, but it remains barred to the Westerner’s full participation in it’. In the Orient, so Said claims, Flaubert—‘like so many others—felt his detached powerlessness, perhaps also his self-induced unwillingness, to enter and become part of what he saw’.89

If one accepts these interpretations, then Flaubert in Cairo, dressing up ‘in a large white cotton Nubian shirt trimmed with little pompoms’, shaving his head ‘except for one lock at the occiput (by which Mohammed lifts you up on Judgement Day)’, adorning himself with ‘a tarboosh which is of a screaming red’, was doing exactly that: dressing up (Fig. 4).90 ‘We look quite the pair of Orientals’, he wrote to Bouilhet, and that was precisely the point. They were playing a part; they could not be—and neither, I think, did they wish to become—‘Orientals’. Towards the end of their journey on the Nile they entertained themselves by faisant les sheikhs: play-acting as sheikhs and asking portentous questions about literacy, railways and the spread of socialism. That this was, in part, a satire on Flaubert’s neglected mission and, perhaps, on a ‘modernization’ that made the inhabitants strangers in their own country, does not detract from their ridicule of the ‘informants’ but the fact remains that this was not how Flaubert and Du Camp conducted themselves; their impressions did not rely on formal interrogatories.91 I think that de Biasi claims too much when he asserts that Flaubert was somehow
Figure 4. Gustave Flaubert in the garden of the Hôtel du Nil, Cairo, 1850 (photograph: Maxime Du Camp)
able 'to represent the other in his or her alterity', since, as I will show shortly, the hermeneutic circles in which Flaubert's narrative moved were uneven and unequal.  Nevertheless, neither Flaubert nor Du Camp sought to insulate themselves from local society and there are several passages in which Flaubert records his contempt for those who travelled through Egypt without making any concessions to their surroundings (most notably - and one hopes imaginatively - an Englishman travelling in Syria who insisted on eating four meals of roast beef a day and taking regular cold baths).  Flaubert's homoerotic adventures in the baths in Cairo were frissons of arousal and anticipation but not, if we are to believe Sartre, consummation.  Although here too Flaubert satirized his mission - 'Travelling as we are for educational purposes, and charged with a mission by the government, we have considered it our duty to indulge in this form of ejaculation' - this was, I think, more than play-acting on his part.  Flaubert was not merely making a gesture to the symbolic homoeroticism that some contemporary critics now see in the colonial European encounter with the exotic East.  He seemed to be remarkably well-informed about the practical arrangements:

You reserve the bath for yourself . . . and skewer the lad in one of the rooms . . . The final masseurs, the ones who come to rub you when the rest is done, are usually quite nice young boys. We had our eye on one in an establishment near our hotel. I reserved the bath exclusively for myself. I went, and the rascal was away that day!

Flaubert's first encounter was unsuccessful - 'a man in his fifties, ignoble, disgusting' - but he later told Bouilhet that he did indeed consummate 'that business at the baths' and that he was determined to do it again.  His admission may have been perfunctory but, when these passages are seen in the light of the highly mobile, intensely physical sexuality that is so vividly present in Flaubert's writings, it becomes difficult (for me, anyway) to treat his appropriations of Egypt as essentially and intrinsically passive.

That said, there was one sense in which Flaubert's passage through Egypt was as passive as Florence Nightingale's.  At the start of her voyage she declared that she was 'no dahabeiah bird, no divan incumbent' and that she longed 'to be wandering in the desert by myself, poking my own nose into all the villages and running hither and thither, making acquaintances où bon me semble.'  But it quickly became apparent that, for all their excursions, she and her companions constituted a sort of collective moving eye on which successive sights/sites were registered.  In much the same way, Flaubert boasted that he and Du Camp lived

in the grossest idleness, stretched out all day on our divans watching everything that goes by: camels, herds of oxen from the Sennar, boats floating to Cairo laden with negroes and elephants' tusks.

Du Camp went much further and claimed that his companion

would have liked to travel, if he could, stretched out on a sofa and not stirring, watching landscapes, ruins and cities pass before him like the screen of a mechanical panorama.

But Du Camp was being less than fair (as he was in a number of other places).  For there is also a real sense of Flaubert plunging into Egypt's present that is almost wholly absent from Nightingale's letters and which is the product of more than a difference in style.  I say 'almost wholly absent' for good reason; the exceptions are revealing.  Soon after their arrival in Alexandria, Nightingale and Selina Bracebridge disguised themselves as Egyptian women in order to visit a mosque during the mid-day prayers.  They had to confine themselves to the women's gallery, but 'the people' (whether men or women is unclear) crowded round them, laughing and pointing.  'That quarter of an hour seemed to reveal to one what it is to be a woman in these countries', Nightingale recalled: 'God save them, for it is a hopeless life'.  The sense of hopelessness was at once lessened and heightened by her visits to the sisters of St Vincent de Paul, who ran a hospital and a school for the poor in Alexandria.  Her engagements were mediated by a (feminized) charitable apparatus that not only, I imagine, helped harden her resolve to become a nurse: as the sisters of the order intervened in the everyday life of the city, so they also amply confirmed her horror at Egypt's present, at what she took to be its culture of improvidence and indifference.  Nightingale made no secret of the fact that 'without the past' she conceived Egypt 'to be utterly uninhabitable', and she exulted in the 'absolute solitude' of the Great Temple at Abu Simbel precisely because it provided 'the absence of a present, of any of one's fellow
creatures who contrast the past with that horrible Egyptian present'. 102 For Flaubert, however, it was an inhabited version of the present — and, in particular, the complex temporalities of past and present, the sometimes grotesque, sometimes dazzling irruptions of the past into the present — that was so exciting.

And if one thinks about Flaubert’s topoi, the places in which these experiences take place and the representation of space within which they are convened, then his experiences and encounters are scarcely passive. In a letter to his mother Flaubert wrote that when he galloped across the desert with Du Camp ‘we were devouring space’ and the image captures the sense of physical engagement that I want to invoke more generally here.103 It is quite different from the way he has his mother figure the space of Egypt. He often suggested that she follow his progress on the map he had sent her from Paris, and at Philae he imagined her tear-filled eyes looking on ‘that map that only represents an empty space where your son is lost’.104 Yet Flaubert’s own space was not empty; the image of his mother and her map functions as a contrast that has the effect of confirming that his Egypt was not an abstract cartography but rather a physical space constituted as sensation and plenitude.

Sexuality and representations of space

This must be pressed further, however, because this space is constituted in part through Flaubert’s writing, and there are filiations between his sexualization of writing and his representation of space. The first is surely unexceptional. ‘Literature!’ Flaubert exclaimed to Bouilhet, in a vividly graphic transposition of the two,105 That old whore! We must try to dose her with mercury and pills and clean her out from top to bottom, she has been so ultra-screwed by filthy pricks106

The connections between sexuality and writing — which are scarcely foreign to French critical theory in general or criticism of Flaubert in particular — are of course considerably more complicated than such a casual, scatalogical image can convey.106 But if these connections are granted, then it becomes all the more important to ask about the gendering and sexualization of Flaubert’s imaginary geographies. Butor regards Flaubert’s European travels as sketches for his expedition to the Orient and argues that his descriptions of the Pyrenees, Corsica and parts of western France feminized those landscapes. Of most direct relevance to my own discussion is the suggestion that, in those early descriptions, ‘light circulates through the interior of this feminine landscape . . . and the spectator desires to become a moment in that circulation’.107 These are clearly heterosexual readings and one needs to recognize (and make space for) the ambivalence of Flaubert’s sexuality but, seen like this, his view from the Pyramids — or, rather, his act of viewing — becomes not only aestheticized but also eroticized. Flaubert represents the sky and its play of light as ‘a medium that envelops, penetrates and transforms the body and subjectivity’.108 Throughout his writings about Egypt and, for that matter, the corpus of his work as a whole, this sense of transubstantiation is usually achieved through metaphors of fluidity and liquidity. Gazing down on the city of Cairo from a minaret, for example, across to the desert, the Nile and the Pyramids beyond, Flaubert remarked how ‘the liquid light seems to penetrate the surface of things and enter into them’.109 The metaphor is precise; for Flaubert, water is almost always associated with sexuality. In Cairo, the voluptuousness of the baths is blended with and conveyed through their humidity; in the Red Sea, Flaubert ‘ lolled in its waters as though I were lying on a thousand liquid breasts that were caressing my entire body’.110 What is particularly arresting is that Flaubert invokes water to convey not just the clouds floating in the sky, the waves in the sea or the flowing currents of the Nile but the desert too. Like many travellers he was fascinated by the mirage, by those great stretches of water with trees reflected in them, and at their farthest limit, where they seem to touch the sky, a gray vapour that appears to be moving in a rush, like a train

but his whole sense of the desert, of its oceans of sand and waves of colour, was a liquid one. Riding back from the Pyramids in the early evening, Flaubert describes the desert pavement thus:

The small stones covering the ground glitter, literally bathed in purple light; it is as though one were looking at them through water so transparent as to be invisible.

During their excursion to the Red Sea, Flaubert and Du Camp were enveloped in a dust-cloud as a caravan passed them from the opposite direction. It seemed to him
that the camels were not touching the ground, that they were breasting ahead with a ship-like movement, that inside the dust-cloud they were raised high above the ground, as though they were wading belly-deep in clouds.111

Whatever one makes of these images, they are quite dramatically different from Florence Nightingale’s representations of Egypt: her landscapes are hard, angular, dessicated, mortified; she maintains a scrupulous distance from them. I do not mean to read her as somehow representative of all European women travellers but it is true that, by and large, women writers did not eroticize the landscapes through which they travelled and there are very few passages in which Nightingale explicitly engendered or sexualized the landscape. She constantly referred to the Nile in the masculine but then so did most European travellers; she described Cairo as ‘a bride adorned for the marriage’ and Egyptian ‘nature’ as ‘an oriental queen in gorgeous jewellery’ but—as she more or less said herself—these were common clichés of Orientalism.112 If many women travellers adopted what Sara Mills has termed a ‘confessional’ mode of writing, and Nightingale was no exception, her letters (like her experiences) were far removed from the licentious confidences Flaubert eagerly shared with his young male friends back in France.113 Her account of her own visit to the baths in Alexandria provides a vivid contrast to Flaubert’s ‘haunting’ of the baths in Cairo. She dwells on the marble interior and the shafts of sunlight, ‘the whole like an Arabian Night’s description’, and likens the ‘enchanted gardens’ outside to ‘the Chatsworth conservatory’, whereas Flaubert’s sense of enchantment derived from more corporeal architecture.114

And yet: if Flaubert was able to disrupt at least some of the conventions of Orientalism—to free himself from the abstracted gaze that framed Nightingale’s accounts and to construct a series of imaginative geographies in which the inhabitants of Egypt were indelibly present, not as traces or imprints but as bodies and subjects—he was able to do so, in large part, by virtue of the privileges conferred upon him by a particular constellation of masculinity and patriarchy. Not only did he have considerably more freedom of action than Nightingale—he was a young man travelling with a close male friend, not a young woman chaperoned by friends of the family—but the powers inhered in masculinity and patriarchy enabled him to make visible the spaces that remained opaque (‘impenetrable’) to Nightingale.115 This makes it impossible to disentangle his evident pleasure in Egypt’s present from his eroticization of the Orient and there is a sense, I think, in which Flaubert’s plunging into Egypt’s present was, at the same time, an invasion and even an exploitation that Nightingale’s horrified recoil, grounded as it was in unalloyed racism, denied to her. Flaubert found a place for bodies and subjects in his imaginative geographies but they were bodies and subjects in the most literal of ways.

Under the sign of Europe

This is an unsettling reading and I need to make three further, closely connected remarks. First, I hope it will be clear that—vivid and engaged as Flaubert’s account is—I do not wish to imply that it was somehow more ‘real’ than Nightingale’s. His were carefully wrought presentations in which the Orient was scripted, and I mean by this more than an artful re-working of his notes and letters. There is something artful about the way in which Flaubert set up many of his encounters in the first place. Julian Barnes provides a witty and erudite gloss on Flaubert’s view from the top of the pyramid. Gazing down, Flaubert saw a small business card inscribed ‘HUMBERT FROTTEUR’ and he realized that Maxime Du Camp had climbed up ahead of him and left it there for him to find. And yet a few lines later it turns out that this ‘sublime surprise’, this ironic eruption of the everyday into the extraordinary, had been planned by Flaubert himself, who had deliberately brought the card with him from Croisset.

So, ever stranger: Flaubert, when he left home, was already preparing the special effects which would later appear entirely characteristic of how he perceived the world. Ironies breed; realities recede.116

Or again, he writes to Bouilhet of his visit to ‘the whores’ quarter’ at Kena, where he walked back and forth through the streets, ‘giving baksheesh to all the women, letting them call me and catch hold of me’. But, he continues:

I abstained deliberately, in order to preserve the sweet sadness of the scene and engrave it deeply in my memory. In this way I went away dazzled, and have remained so. There is nothing more beautiful than these women calling you. If I had gone with any of
them, a second picture would have been superimposed on the first and dimmed its splendour. 117

These were experiences constructed in Egypt from within a European imaginary and with a European sensibility in mind.

Secondly, I have made much of Flaubert's physical appropriation of the Orient - 'gulping down a bellyful of colours' at Alexandria, 'devouring space' in the desert and, I might have added, 'filling [himself] with sun and light' and 'inhaling the vastness' at Bulak118 - but this metaphoric of consumption had an insistently, intrusively material dimension too. Not only did Du Camp and Flaubert inscribe Egypt and carry it home with them as the trophies and records of an imaginative geography; their stay in Cairo and their passage on the Nile was freighted with many of the assumptions and usages of colonial consumption. The most striking image is one that I have already cited without comment. When Flaubert watches 'boats floating down to Cairo laden with negroes and elephants' tusks', it is surely not his idleness that is so unsettling but rather the casual elision between the objects of his gaze: between black women - who, it seems from descriptions elsewhere in his letters, were slaves - and animal trophies.119 They were reduced to the same level, objectified and commodified, and these elisions entered into a complex chain of colonial privileges and appropriations. Let me list just some of them: in Alexandria, soldiers were supplied to hold back the crowds when Du Camp set up his photographic apparatus; at Rosetta, the pasha entertained them to a dinner at which they were waited on by 10 negro servants in silver jackets; prostitutes, 'their hair spangled with gold piastres', were hired to dance for them at a party on the river; in Cairo, hospital patients stood on their beds and, at a sign from the doctor, displayed the chancres on their anuses to the entranced visitors; the French consul suggested they ask their guide to have a prostitute by the aqueduct for 60 paras; upriver, men dived into the cataract to entertain them; Flaubert had tresses and ornaments cut from the heads of two women for 10 piastres apiece; and, climactically, Flaubert and Du Camp were entertained by Kuchuk-Hanem, who performed an erotic dance and had sex with them.120 Terdiman's reading of these appropriations is uncompromising:

The text and the appropriative dynamic which energizes it moves from spectacles and entertainments to women's tresses to whole women: everything is made the Occidental's lawful prize in that accelerating absorption of the foreign which structures the Voyage.121

As I have said, I accept that these are invasions and so, in his way, did Flaubert. 'One curious thing here', he wrote to his mother, 'is the respect, or rather the terror, that everyone displays in the presence of "Franks", as they call Europeans'.122 But the practices through which these incursions were put in place were more complicated than Terdiman seems prepared to acknowledge. The slaves and the ivory were not the exclusive objects of a European economy, and Flaubert and Du Camp were not simply travelling under the sign of an all-powerful European colonialism. If the ties between Egypt and the Ottoman Empire were frayed by the middle of the nineteenth century, Egypt was none the less still a colonized country, ruled and policed by an Albanian-Turkish elite under the nominal authority of the Porte. And there were other grids of power - of class, of religion, of gender - that scored Arab society too. The practices of colonial power in which Flaubert and Du Camp were imbricated were thus multiple and interleaved with intricate local grids of power: thus local dignitaries supplied the soldiers and arranged dinners for them, doctors and donkey-drivers evidently had no compunction about using their power over patients and prostitutes and, while there is no way of knowing what the other people involved in these transactions made of them, it seems unlikely that these exchanges - however unequal - were all one-way affairs between a dominant Occident and a submissive Orient. Flaubert's encounter with Kuchuk-Hanem in particular was highly ambivalent, at once disavowing and fetishizing, and it did not leave him unmoved.123

Thirdly, and in some degree against the grain of the previous paragraph, Europe was never far from Flaubert's construction of the Orient. 'You ask me whether the Orient is up to what I imagined it to be', he replied to his mother.

Yes, it is; and more than that, it extends far beyond the narrow idea I had of it. I have found, clearly delineated, everything that was hazy in my mind. Facts have taken the place of suppositions - so excellently so, that it is often as though I were suddenly coming upon old forgotten dreams.124
And later:

Anyone who is a little attentive rediscovers here much more than he discovers. The seeds of a thousand notions that one carried within oneself grow and become more definite, like so many refreshed memories.125

Flaubert constructed his Egypt in advance, in Europe: he even wrote a description of the view from the top of one of the Pyramids before he left France. He arrived in Egypt with dreams of a timeless Orient, of a place which, precisely because it had escaped the compulsions and conventions of nineteenth-century Europe, had somehow stolen a march on time itself. His voyage was more than an aide-mémoire, of course, and his travel writings more than a record of his dreams turned to sand and stone. But once he arrived in Egypt, his idealized, exoticized Orient did not disappear; he was still enough of a Romantic to recognize (and even be entranced by) its shimmering images. And he was already enough of a realist to see that these imaginative geographies were terribly vulnerable. For many critics, this oneiric precariousness, if I may so call it, was the paradoxical product of an Orientalism that both valued the region 'because it could be imagined as unknown' and yet 'impregnated [it] by a textual network so dense that it threatened to exhaust its own referent completely', to make it strangely familiar, the place of Flaubert's 'forgotten dreams' and 'refreshed memories'.126

But nineteenth-century Orientalism was not self-sufficient; it was articulated with the ideological grids of capitalist modernity and one might argue that it was, in part, the immanent disappearance of the exotic – the fading of the dream – that made its revival so desperately necessary. For the Orient to become a commodity like any other in the age of commodities, its 'fictive otherness' had to be reproduced, those 'worked landscapes of the imagination' assiduously, artfully reworked.127 Even this seems inadequate, however, because the presence of Europe in Egypt was more than textual conceit: or, rather, those textualizations were also acutely material. Flaubert complained endlessly about the graffiti left by previous European travellers on ancient monuments but these were not only marks of their 'unshakeable stupidity', as he wrote to his uncle Parain, they were also petty inscriptions of the advent of capitalist modernity.128 'It’s time to hurry', he wrote to Gautier:

In a little while the Orient will have ceased to exist. We may be its last witnesses. You can't imagine how much it has already been ruined. I've seen harems go by on steam boats.129

Conclusion

That final image from Flaubert juxtaposes with great economy a timeless, traditional and thoroughly exotized Orient with a changing, modern and increasingly familiar Egypt. By the middle of the nineteenth century the transition from one to the other, or more accurately the coincidence between them, was beginning to be registered through a shift in the European spatial imaginary. But it was a complicated, fractured ideological landscape. Florence Nightingale and Gustave Flaubert shared the same viewpoint – the commanding heights of European modernity – but their prospects were vastly different. Where Nightingale looked back to the ruins of ancient Egypt, Flaubert anticipated the ruins of present-day Egypt; where Nightingale dreamed of the past, Flaubert saw the West as the 'executioner of its own dreams'.130 This makes it difficult, perhaps even foolhardy to generalize but I want to make three final observations about the European construction of imaginative geographies of Egypt at mid-century.

In the first place, the accounts that I have considered here rendered Egypt as a text to be read and as the object of a gaze. These strategies overlap and I do not think they correspond to any simple distinction between imaginative geographies produced by writers and those produced by artists. Neither Florence Nightingale nor Gustave Flaubert spent time sketching in Egypt but there is an intensely visual quality to their images. They were both caught up in what Linda Nochlin calls a 'politics of vision' which, as she shows in one of her own essays, allows Said's critique of Orientalism in its textual forms to be brought to bear on the visual arts.131 But I want to emphasize that, for both Nightingale and Flaubert, this was a politics of reading or looking rather than listening and in this they were not alone. Most Europeans had little choice but to read the landscape because they could not speak the language. Many of the dignitaries they met spoke French or English, and it is perfectly true that Flaubert made some attempt at learning Arabic script and that Nightingale had a lesson in Arabic from the English Consul-General in Cairo; presumably both of them picked up the odd word
or phrase in Arabic, perhaps in Turkish too. But neither of them could conduct a conversation with ordinary people: 'We are only sorry we don't get on with our Arabic', declared an exasperated Nightingale, and a bemused Flaubert wrote of 'love-making by interpreter'.

Like other travellers, they had to rely on a dragoman – a cicerone, an interpreter-guide – to act as an intermediary, and even the best dragoman could not overcome the one-sidedness of these exchanges. He invariably took pride in his superiority over the common people, and often over his European charges too, but he also redoubled the different expectations of Nightingale as a woman and Flaubert as a man. As I have repeatedly emphasized, the conventions of bourgeois Europe allowed Flaubert considerably more freedom of manoeuvre than Nightingale but her 'priceless cicerone' was also keenly aware of the proprieties to be observed by a woman in Egypt. He 'is so careful of me that he won't let anybody come near me', she wrote, and 'if they do, he utters some dreadful form of words, which I don't understand, and they instantly fall back'. How different from Flaubert, dressing after a night in a Cairo brothel, who records his dragoman 'Joseph's expression amid all this'.

In the second place, the textualization of Egypt occurred in a number of different, interlocking registers. By the middle of the nineteenth century, European visitors could invoke a dense web of textual associations which constituted a collective 'fantasia of the library' in something like Foucault's sense of the phrase. As Said has shown, Orientalism was inherently citationary: it re-presented the Orient less as a place rooted in history and geography than as a chain of references embedded in the library. It was in this spirit that Nightingale called Egypt 'a vast library, the finest, the Alexandrian library of the world' and sprinkled her letters with references to Champollion, Lane and others. Similarly, Flaubert often suggested that his mother might consult a book to get a better idea of what he was describing and several times drew her attention to the plates in the Description de l'Égypte and to Lane's Modern Egyptians. But these references were not only helpful injunctions to the audience at home. They were also sighting-devices for the visitors themselves, a discursive apparatus that enabled them to make (their) sense of what they saw.

Murray's Handbook recommended an essential library of some 30 scholarly books to accompany the independent traveller to Egypt and most seem to have taken the advice to heart. When Warburton recalled reclining on cushions under a thick awning, gazing at the landscape, 'our books and maps . . . beside us, ever ready to explain or illustrate what we saw', he was describing a common experience – and expectation – of the Nile voyage that shaped the way in which it was appropriated. European travellers read their texts, wrote their journals and letters and, in the very act of doing so, enfamed Egypt itself as at once a text to be transcribed and translated and as a picture to be composed and exhibited. Thus, when Flaubert described the village of Mahatta as being 'like an engraving, an oriental scene in a book', he was invoking one of the conventions of Orientalism's imaginative geographies. But it was a convention that, as I have implied, gained much of its power from the incursions and even corruptions of European modernity. Nochlin suggests that the very notion of the picturesque is premised on its (creative) destruction: 'Only on the brink of destruction, in the course of incipient modification and cultural dilution, are customs, costumes and religious rituals of the dominated finally seen as picturesque'. It is in this light that I peer over Flaubert's shoulder, as he and Du Camp 'have translations of songs, stories and traditions made for [them] – everything that is most folkloric and oriental'. Conversely, Nightingale welcomed the destruction of Egypt's 'horrible present', not by modernity but certainly from its privileged position, and even she succumbed to the picturesque in Moorish Cairo. 'In riding home by moonlight', she wrote, with 'the Turk sitting cross-legged smoking under a low vaulted arch, there is not a corner that is not a picture: at least, not to a sophisticated European traveller who had seen such sights in books or galleries.

In the third place, these imaginative geographies cannot be severed from the tangled but tightening ties between Europe and Egypt. It was always a complicated relationship, riven by political and economic rivalries between England and France and made all the more uncertain by the geopolitical ambitions of imperial Russia and the shifting sands of the Ottoman Empire. 'At the first sign of trouble in Europe', Flaubert predicted, 'England will take Egypt, Russia will take Constantinople, and we, in retaliation, will get ourselves massacred in the mountains of Syria'. It did not come out quite like that, though several years later Nightingale found herself in the thick of the Crimean War. But I
want to emphasize that the tottering balance of power between Europe and the Orient cannot be measured on the scales of profit and loss or in the currency of influence and intrigue alone. The readings that I have been describing here were moments in the installation of what Timothy Mitchell calls ‘the world-as-exhibition’. He suggests that by the closing decades of the nineteenth century, it was a characteristic of European ways of knowing to render things as objects to be viewed and to ‘set the representation was not confined to the zoo, the museum and the exhibition – all European icons of the nineteenth century and all of them involved in the appropriation and re-presentation of the Orient – but was, so Mitchell claims, constitutive of European modernity at large. The colonial process, he argues, re-ordered Egypt to appear as a world enframed. Egypt was to be ordered up as something object-like . . . it was to be made picture-like and legible, rendered available to political and economic calculation. Colonial power required the country to become readable like a book, in our own sense of such a term . . .

In other words, reading Egypt was never an innocent metaphor. As I have tried to show in this essay, it was implicated – and continues to implicate us – in constellations of power, knowledge and spatiality.

Acknowledgements

The research for this essay has been supported by a grant from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council. Early versions were presented to audiences at the University of British Columbia, the University of California at Berkeley, Rutgers University and the University of Washington, and I am grateful to them for their comments and suggestions. I am also grateful to Trevor Barnes, Alison Blunt, David Ley, Geraldine Pratt, Michael Smith, Bruce Willems-Braun and to two anonymous referees for improving successive drafts of the essay.

Notes

1. Foucault M 1977 Fantasia of the library in Bouchard Donald F ed Language, counter-memory, practice: selected essays and interviews Cornell University Press, Ithaca 87–109; the quotation is from p. 90


4. Foucault M Questions on geography in Gordon C ed Power/knowledge: selected interviews and other writings Harvester, Brighton 63–77; the quotation is from p. 70


7. Said Culture and imperialism op cit. xxiv

8. Lowe L 1992 Critical terrains: French and British Orientalisms Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London 3, 15. Foucault defines a heterotopia as both a juxtaposition of ‘several sites that are in themselves incompatible’ and as a space of compensation, ‘a space that is [radically] other’: Foucault M 1986 Of other spaces Diacritics 16 22–7. He goes on to define this other space as ‘another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy’, which might seem out of joint with Orientalism but it gestures towards the Orient as a counter-site, a space of ambivalence in which both the superiorities and the anxieties of the Occident are inscribed. Foucault’s own account is not unproblematic, however, and (in its closing paragraphs in particular) seems to shade into its own Orientalism


11. ‘Parthenope’ had been given the Greek name for the city of Naples, where she was born, and in this sense 1 suppose the Bracebridges and Florence were literally travelling under the sign of classical antiquity

12. Nightingale F 1854 Letters from Egypt A and G A Spottiswoode. All my quotations are drawn from the modern edition selected by Sattin A 1987
Between the book and the lamp

Letters from Egypt: a journey on the Nile 1849–1850 Weidenfeld and Nicolson, New York. Details of the dahabeeah in the previous paragraph come from pp. 45–6, 60, 68; details of mail deliveries in this paragraph come from pp. 49, 106, 130

13. In fact, one of her biographers says that she was not pleased at their publication, 'but acquiesced and corrected the proofs': Cook E 1913 The life of Florence Nightingale Vol. 1: 1820–1861 Macmillan, London 95

14. Warburton Crescent and cross op cit. 87

15. De Nerval G 1927 Voyage en Orient Le Divan, Paris (first published in 1851) Vol. 1 389. De Nerval exempted the English from these remarks, however, 'for they stay on an island apart'.

16. Sattin Letters 120, 137, 139; de Nerval Voyage en Orient op cit. 254

17. See, for example, Sattin Letters op cit. 123

18. Ibid. 45–7

19. Ibid. 81

20. Ibid. 34, 49

21. Ibid. 49

22. Ibid. 72. The contrast between 'travel' and 'tourism' was a common one: see Buzard J 1993 The beaten track: European tourism, literature and the ways to 'culture', 1800–1918 Oxford University Press, Oxford. But I am not sure of its purchase here. Nightingale had visited Italy with the Bracebridges in 1847–8, and she was surely not implying that it was a less intellectually serious destination than Egypt. See Keeler M ed. Florence Nightingale in Rome American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia

23. Sattin Letters op cit. 86

24. Ibid. 87


26. Sattin Letters op cit. 22, 24, 44, 61, 81

27. Ibid. 111–12

28. John Barrell suggests that this reached its ugly climax in Martineau H 1848 Eastern life past and present Edward Moxon, London, in which the inhabitants of Egypt were likened to apes, ants, beavers, bees, camels, deer, frogs, pigs, rabbits and sheep: Barrell J 1991 Death on the Nile: fantasy and the literature of tourism 1840–60 Essays in Criticism 41 97–127, see p. 27

29. Sattin Letters op cit. 61, 86, 120


31. Pratt Imperial eyes op cit. 58–9

32. Barrell Death on the Nile op cit. 115; Sattin Letters op cit. 74


34. Woodham-Smith C 1950 Florence Nightingale 1820–1910 Constable, London 46, 76

35. On the dream-image and travel writing see Buzard Beaten track op cit. 181–2

36. Woodham-Smith Florence Nightingale op cit. 79. Her entries in her notebook are tantalizingly brief, which is why I have had to rely on her letters

37. Monicat B 1994 Autobiography in women's travel writings in nineteenth-century France: journeys through self-representation Gender, Place and Culture 1 61–70; the quotation is from p. 68


39. This world was first introduced to a European audience in the early eighteenth century with the publication of Antoine Galland's French translation, which was almost immediately translated into English and enjoyed considerable popular success. But Nightingale's imagery was almost certainly drawn from Edward Lane's illustrated translation from the Arabic, The Arabian Nights' entertainment 1839–41. All of these translations were highly expurgated, however, and in accentuating the fantastic and the fabulous they established the collection as a classic of the nursery and the drawing room. It was not until Richard Burton's translation of 1885–6 that the eroticism of the original was available to a wide (and often scandalized) English audience

40. Sattin Letters op cit. 32

41. Ibid. 187, 200. Other European travellers, both men and women, also used the dream-image to evoke Cairo as the city of the Arabian Nights. For example, 'It seems as though one were travelling in a dream through a city of the past inhabited only by phantoms': de Nerval Voyage en Orient op cit. 163

42. Sattin Letters op cit. 48. The loss of 'all feeling of identity' may be an example of the 'estrangement from the norm of the feminine' identified more generally by Monicat Autobiography op cit. 68. But it was not a uniquely female experience. 'All nature seems so tranced', wrote Warburton of his Nile voyage, 'and all the world in such a dream, that we can scarcely realise our own identity': Warburton Crescent and cross op cit. 79

43. Sattin Letters op cit. 65–8

44. Warburton Crescent and cross op cit. 77

45. Sattin Letters op cit. 187–8
46. Ibid. 54–5, 161. Champollion had deciphered the hieroglyphs in 1822, but it was not until mid-century that his successors were able to read more than the odd cartouches.

47. Ibid. 54–5. There is an interesting shift in this passage from the masculine—men who felt and thought like us—to the feminine—like English clergy wives of the present day—which is common in the writings of Victorian women travellers: see Blunt Travel, gender and imperialism op cit. 72–8. This may also speak to the 'estrangement from the norm of the feminine' proposed by Monicat Autobiography op cit. 68

48. Sattin Letters 131
49. Ibid. 26–8, 39, 80, 84; see also pp. 170, 178–82
50. Ibid. 63–4
51. Ibid. 74. Later she confessed that 'the desire of the mind to find some law, to learn some reason, for this rise and fall of nations, is almost painful in Egypt' (p. 85)

52. See Al-Sayyid Marsot A L 1984 Egypt in the reign of Muhammad Ali Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; Vatikiotis P J 1991 The history of modern Egypt: from Muhammad Ali to Muhammad 4th edn Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London. A fuller account would have to nuance the contrast I make here. Muhammad 'Ali's impact on the countryside was perhaps less revolutionary than this implies and some historians would prefer to describe Abbas as merely 'a typical conservative Ottoman governor': see Cuno K 1992 The Pasha's peasants: land, society and economy in Lower Egypt, 1740–1858 Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; Toledano E 1990 State and society in mid-nineteenth century Egypt Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. But Vatikiotis insists that Abbas was indeed a 'reactionary despot' if seen 'in the context of the move inaugurated by the Muhammed 'Ali dynasty to develop a “modern state” in nineteenth-century Egypt'. The momentum of modernity was resumed with the accession of Said in 1854 and especially Ismail, 'the impatient Europeanizer', in 1863: Vatikiotis History of modern Egypt op cit. 70, 508

53. Those others included Warburton—who asked the 'Naiads of the Nile' whether their 'defied stream must now be harrowed up by a greasy, grunting steamship, like the parravences rivers of Europe'—and, as I will show later, Flaubert. See Warburton Crescent and cross op cit. 29, 183n; Sattin Letters op cit. 29–31

54. Sattin Letters op cit. 176

55. I have used the critical edition of Flaubert's letters edited by Sattin A Y 1965 Les lettres d'Egypte de Gustave Flaubert Nizet, Paris; this is more complete than the versions contained in Oeuvres complètes de Gustave Flaubert: correspondance, deuxième série (1847–1957) Louis Conard, Paris (first published 1926). I have also used the critical edition of Flaubert G 1991 Voyage en Égypte edited by de Biasi P M Grasset, Paris; the remark about the Orient as a place of personal memory is de Biasi's and appears on p. 13. Extracts from both of them have been edited by Steegmuller F 1972 as Flaubert in Egypt: a sensibility on tour Bodley Head, London, and since this is so widely available I have cited it wherever possible. All other translations are my own


57. Steegmuller Flaubert in Egypt op cit. 41, 199. For a discussion of their missions, see Sparkie E 1967 Flaubert: the making of the master Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 167–9

58. Naaman Lettres d'Égypte op cit. 264


60. Ibid. 237

61. Flaubert told them that if they did not 'roar with enthusiasm, it will be because nothing is capable of moving you!' Four days later they delivered their awful verdict: 'We think you should throw it in the fire and never speak of it again'. See Troyat H 1992 Flaubert Viking, New York 92–3


63. Ibid. 41

64. Foucault Fantasia of the library op cit. 90

65. Bruneau J 1973 Le 'Conte Oriental' de Flaubert Denoël, Paris 63–70

66. Terdiman Ideological voyages op cit. 234

67. Ibid. 242–3

68. Lowe Critical terrains op cit. 75–101

69. Sattin Lifting the veil op cit. 84 suggests that the Bracebridges and Florence were the 'English family, hideous' that Flaubert records in his travel notes, but there is no way of knowing. Even more intriguing, given their itineraries, is Flaubert being taken to the rock-tombs of old Lycopolis: 'Our guide takes us by the hand and leads us with an air of mystery—to show us the print of a woman's shoe in the sand! She was an Englishwoman, there a few days ago'. This was at the end of February; Florence would have been there in December. But it may be that their guide's sense of time—or their understanding of what he said—was uncertain. See Steegmuller Flaubert in Egypt op cit. 35, 109–10

70. Steegmuller Flaubert in Egypt op cit. 92, 106; Du Camp describes the crew on pp. 223–8.
Contemporaries would not have regarded Flaubert's baggage as excessive. Warburton Crescent and cross op cit. 220 explained that the Oriental traveller had to take 'an assortment of goods like those of an upholsterer, comprising every article his various exigencies may require, from a tent to a toasting-fork'. The desire to recreate the familiar in the midst of the exotic extended beyond these various accoutrements, of course, and was reflected in etiquette and conduct: the hoisting of flags, the invitations to bridge or tea, the shooting parties, and a host of other social practices that helped to bring a comforting Europe into an otherwise disconcerting Egypt.

71. Steegmuller Flaubert in Egypt op cit. 42; de Biasi P-M Introduction to Voyage en Egypte op cit. 64; see also Bottineau L 1984 La représentation de l'espace dans Salammbô in Masson B ed. Gustave Flaubert I (Lettres modernes) Minard, Paris.

72. Naaman Lettres d'Egypte op cit. 246.

73. Sattin Letters op cit. 47; Bart B 1967 Flaubert Syracuse University Press, Syracuse 194; see also Bart B 1956 Flaubert's landscape descriptions University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI 7–11. I ought to qualify these remarks, because there is a sense in which scripting the voyage through Egypt was a process of Flaubert's learning to 'paint'; but even his preliminary sketches and his experimental designs were far from rough or untutored.

74. Steegmuller Flaubert in Egypt op cit. 52. This passage is taken from de Biasi Voyage en Egypte 210–11 and closely follows a letter to Bouilhet: Naaman Lettres d'Egypte 179–80.

75. Steegmuller Flaubert in Egypt op cit. 142. Flaubert was running ahead of himself. Although the Nile voyage was already popular among wealthy European travellers, and Sir John Gardner Wilkinson's Modern Egypt and Thebes – the forerunner to Murray's Handbook – had appeared in 1843, it took another 20 years or more for Egypt to become scripted as a site for popular tourism. See Gregory D (forthcoming) Scripting the Orient: possession, memory and tourism in late nineteenth-century Egypt.

76. Steegmuller Flaubert in Egypt op cit. 142, 173; de Biasi Voyage en Egypte op cit. 386: Dewachter and Oster Voyageur en Egypte op cit. 35, de Biasi Introduction op cit. 60. Flaubert made a similar comparison in a letter to Bouilhet, where he described finding in the rock-tombs at Thebes 'a bordello scene from a dirty Palais Royal picture of 1816'. He continued: 'That gave us a good laugh and made with dizzy... It's all so modern you would almost think condoms must have been known at the time of Sesostris'. See Naaman Lettres d'Egypte op cit. 287–8.
Gillian Rose describes a masculinist conception of

According to Flaubert, the Orient was best represented through the lens of masculine desires and expectations. He saw the Orient as a space that is 'absolutely knowable', in which the limits of geographical knowledge are clear and transparent. However, this perspective is not without its critics. Rose argues that the masculinist denial of the male body leads to a misunderstanding of the Oriental world, which is more complex than Rose's discussion allows.

Naaman discusses the significance of water in Flaubert's work, seeing it as a crucial element in the mythologies of Flaubert and his circle. The water in Flaubert's work is not just a natural resource but a symbol of power, control, and desire.

Flaubert's parrot, a symbol of the Middle East, holds a special place in the author's imagination. It is a creature that is both familiar and mysterious, a link to the exotic and the unknown.

The slave trade is another significant element in Flaubert's work. Naaman describes encountering the slave trade in several places, and Flaubert himself was fascinated by it. The slaves are seen as a commodity, a means of exchange, and a symbol of the Oriental world.

Durr, the two Frenchmen boarded boats belonging to slave traders en route to Cairo – ‘the black women are packed in, in all kinds of positions’ – and bought belts and amulets from them. Their seeming indifference was neither uniquely French nor peculiarly masculine. Nightingale saw the slave traders but the sight of their victims excited little comment: The Ethiopian slaves are sold by their parents willingly for a couple of gildals.

The European streets will have cut right through the old city, dusty and silent, that now crumbles peacefully upon its poor inhabitants. The part that is flourishing, glittering and growing is the quarter of the Franks, the town of the Italians, Provençaux and Maltese, the future emporium of British India. The Orient of former days is wearing out its old costumes, its old palaces, its old customs, but it is in its last days...”

The phrase belongs to Hentsch T 1992 Imagining the Middle East Black Rose Books, Montreal 151. Although this captures Flaubert's sensibility with marvellous precision, Hentsch was in fact referring to de Nerval Voyage en Orient op cit. 407: 'I had seen it so many times in the dreams of my youth ... It seemed to me that I was treading in the footprints I had made before; as I went along I said to myself: “When I get past this wall, when I go through this gate, I shall see such a thing...” and there the thing was, ruined but real'

The Imaginary Orient in The politics of vision: essays on nineteenth-century art and society Harper and Row, New York 33–59. See also Stevens M A ed. 1984 The Orientalists: Delacroix to
Between the book and the lamp


132. See Naaman _Lettres d’Egypte op cit._ 201 for Flaubert’s attempts at learning Arabic script; Sattin _Letters op cit._ 68 for Nightingale’s frustration at her lack of Arabic; Steegmuller _Flaubert in Egypt op cit._ 40, for Flaubert’s amorous interpreter

133. Sattin _Letters op cit._ 44. Whether she would have seen much point in understanding them is a different question: given her interest in the remote past and her belief that present-day Egyptians had no interest in, knowledge of or claim to the ancient civilization whose ruins they inhabited, it seems unlikely

134. Steegmuller _Flaubert in Egypt op cit._ 40
135. Said _Orientalism op cit._ 176–7
136. Sattin _Letters op cit._ 183; Naaman _Lettres d’Egypte op cit._ 229, 261
137. Warburton _Crescent and cross op cit._ 83
138. Steegmuller _Flaubert in Egypt op cit._ 124
139. Nochlin _Imaginary Orient op cit._ 50
140. Steegmuller _Flaubert in Egypt op cit._ 86
141. Sattin _Letters op cit._ 39
142. Steegmuller _Flaubert in Egypt op cit._ 81