# "Non, non! Si, si!": Commemorating the French Occupation of Egypt (1798–1801)

*Elliott Colla*

> Au nom de Dieu Clément et Miséricordieux. Il n'y a de Dieu que Dieu, et Mahomet est son Prophète… Habitans de l'Égypte, écoutez ce que j'ai à vous dire au nom de la République Francaise. Vous étiez malheureux; l'armée française est venue en Égypte pour vous porter le bonheur.[1]
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> Sous l'occupation britannique et la monarchie, l'expédition était considérée comme marquant le début de la modernisation du pays. Avec la révolution [de 1952] des Officier libres, en revanche, elle n'était plus que la première invasion occidentale impérialiste. Aujourd'hui, les bonnes relations franco-égyptiennes obligent à n'en retenir que les résultats positifs.[2]

Calling the two hundredth anniversary of the French Expedition in Egypt (1798–1801) "l'année franco-égyptienne," cultural institutions in France and Egypt planned a wide range of events—from academic

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[1] "Proclamation of 6 Brumaire, an 9," *The Journals of Bonaparte in Egypt, Vol. 9: Recueil des arrêtés et proclamations de l'autorité française en Égypte pendant l'occupation*, ed. Saladin Boustany (Cairo: al-Arab Bookshop, 1971) 151.

[2] Kamal Mughith, as quoted. in Ramadan al-Khuli and 'Abd al-Raziq 'Isa, "Un bilan controversé: le point de vue des historiens égyptiens," *Égypte/Monde Arabe* 1 (1999): 35.

conferences[3] to book publications[4] and gala exhibitions[5]—to commemorate the special relationship or, as it was officially labeled, "les horizons partagés," that this colonial encounter engendered.[6] The participation of leading Egyptian intellectuals—historians, artists, novelists, critics—was a crucial part of the official commemorations, as if to show, as one dissenting writer noted at the time, "there are really no hard feelings, two centuries on."[7] While Egyptian participants packed for Paris, a debate broke out in the Egyptian press: was it really appropriate for Egyptians to "celebrate" the French Expedition? The question was not only raised by Egyptian intellectuals; even the French editor of the *Centre d'étude et de documentation économiques, juridiques, et sociales* (CEDEJ) in Cairo asked:

> Fallait-il commémorer l'expédition d'Égypte? Et pouvait-on le faire ensemble? Français et Égyptiens pouvaient-ils s'associer dans le souvenir d'un épisode qui les opposa? Telles sont les inévitables questions laissées en suspens par les manifestations de l'année franco-égyptienne célébrée conjointement, mais bien inégalement, à Paris et au Caire en 1998?[8]

Clearly, part of the debate was about the nature of colonialism. In France, the Expedition has been represented largely—and often

[3] Such as: "Bonaparte, les îles méditerranéennes et l'appel de l'Orient," Ajaccio, Musée Fesch, May 29–30, 1998; "L'expédition d'Égypte, une entreprise des Lumières," Paris, Institut de France et Muséum d'histoire naturelle, June 8–10, 1998; and the largest conference, framed so as to sidestep the controversy, "La France et l'Égypte à la époque des vice-rois (1805–1882)," Aix-en-Provence, July 5–7, 1998.

[4] See for example: Marie-Noëlle Bourguet, Bernard Lepetit et al., *L'Invention scientifique de la Méditerranée, Égypte, Morée, Algérie* (Paris: Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 1998); Patrice Bret, *L'Égypte au temps de l'Expédition de Bonaparte* (Paris: Hachette, 1998); Yves Laissus, *L'Égypte, une aventure savante* (Paris: Fayard, 1998); Laure Murat and Nicolas Weill, *L'Expédition d'Égypte: le rêve oriental de Bonaparte* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998); Olivier Nolin, *Bonaparte et les savants français en Égypte, 1798–1801* (Paris: Arte, 1998); André Raymond, *Égyptiens et Français au Caire, 1798–1801* (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1998); and Robert Solé, *Les Savants de Bonaparte* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1998).

[5] Among them: "Il y a 200 ans, les savants en Égypte," Paris, Muséum d'histoire naturelle, March–June 1998; "De l'impressionisme à la modernité, un siècle de peinture française," Cairo, Gallerie du Nil, April–July 1998; "La Description de l'Égypte, reflets d'une civilisation," Ajaccio, Musée Fresch, April–August 1998; and "La Gloire d'Alexandrie," Paris, Petit Palais, May–July 1998.

[6] In Egypt, such events were sponsored by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Culture.

[7] Pascale Ghazaleh, "When is a door not a door?" *al-Ahram Weekly* 388 (30 July–5 August 1998).

[8] Ghislaine Alleaume, "Des incertitudes de la mémoire aux exigences de l'histoire: le bicentenaire de l'expédition d'Égypte," *Egypte/Monde Arabe* 1 (1999): 7.

fêted—as a event of scientific discovery and unprecedented cultural exchange.[9] In contrast, others have argued that this narrative of the Expedition represses other facts, namely that for most Egyptians living at the time, the Expedition marked a bloody, inept three-year military occupation.[10] In short, should one refer to it as "the Expedition" or "the Occupation"? Or, as the question was phrased in Arabic: "al-Matba' aw al-madfa'?"—"The printing press or the cannon?"

But another part of the debate had as much to do with key narratives of Egyptian nationalism as it did with those of colonialism. Insofar as the question challenged the *Eurocentric* representation of the Expedition, it also challenged a dominant *Egyptian nationalist* representation which portrays the Expedition/Occupation as a turning point in Egyptian history, the end of Mamluke rule and the beginning of a national renaissance brought on by the new ideas and technology of Europe. In the narrative of the national elites, the French occupation has often appeared as a necessary precondition for Egyptian modernity.[11] For example, in a speech given in Toulouse in 1895, the Egyptian nationalist Mustafa Kamil goes so far as to call the French occupation a gift of civilization:

> Cette France généreuse, qui a réveillé l'Égypte de son profond sommeil; cette France qui y a répandu la lumière des sciences et des arts et qui en a

[9] For a critical recapitulation of the French and Egyptian historiography of the Expedition, see Laïla Enan, "Si tu le sais, alors c'est une catastrophe: la commémoration, pourquoi, pour qui?" *Égypte/Monde Arabe* 1 (1999): 13–23; and Ramadan al-Khuli and 'Abd al-Raziq 'Isa, "Un bilan controversé: le point de vue des historiens égyptiens," *Égypte/Monde Arabe* 1 (1999): 25–45.

[10] Without a doubt, the three-year colonial occupation of Egypt greatly impacted the French and European vision of Egypt and the Ottoman Empire, but for the inhabitants of Egypt, its legacy is far less clear. The loss in human life and industry caused by the military campaigns, not to mention the confiscation of property were no doubt great burdens on Egyptian society. Many of the economic, political and cultural reforms said to have been initiated by Bonaparte's colonial state had already been under way in Egypt before his arrival; some, but not many, of the legal reformations imposed by the French during their brief and tenuous rule in Cairo were maintained after the expulsion of the French. See Khaled Fahmy, *All the Pasha's Men* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Pres, 1997).

[11] This narrative, namely that Ottoman Egypt was stagnant and that "modernity" arrived in Egypt with European colonization, has been convincingly rejected in favor of others that suggest that many of the processes associated with modernization were already taking place in Egypt before the arrival of the French. See Peter Gran, *The Islamic Roots of Capitalism: Egypt, 1760–1840* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998); Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, "L'Expédition d'Égypte et le débat sur la modernité," *Égypte/Monde Arabe* 1 (1999): 47–54.

> fait une France orientale; cette France qui nous a toujours traités comme ses fils les plus chéris, et qui nous a gagnés tous, cœur et âme.[12]

And, nearly seventy years later, one of the key *anti-imperialist* documents of the Nasserist years, the 1962 Charter of the United Arab Republic—written only a few years after another military conflict with France—recapitulated the essential terms of this representation, even if the tone had changed:

> L'expédition française apporta . . . un nouvel adjuvant à l'énergie révolutionnaire du peuple d'Égypte à cette époque. Elle apporta quelques aspects des sciences modernes que la civilisation européenne avait perfectionnées, après les avoir puisées ailleurs, et plus particulièrement dans les deux civilisations pharaonique et arabe. Elle a également amené les grands maîtres qui entreprirent l'étude de la situation en Égypte et découvrirent les secrets de son histoire ancienne.[13]

There are good reasons why Egyptian nationalists were willing to repress some of the negative aspects of the French Expedition so as to construct an image of benevolent exchange. Foremost is the fact of genuine Franco-Egyptian collaboration—from Saint-Simoniste engineers, doctors, and military officers, to the delegations of Egyptian students sent to Paris—throughout the crucial decades of Egypt's state-building during the nineteenth century. The memory of this exchange remains vivid for contemporary Egyptian intellectual elites, and France continues to be the main emblem for modernist inspirations, especially when it comes to projects that rest on the rhetorics of secularism, rationalism, socialism and republicanism. And, when one considers that for 150 years the imperial regimes governing Egypt have been largely of an English (and now, American) character, it is easy to see why anti-imperialist intellectuals—from the late nineteenth century to the present—have looked especially toward France as an alternative, even to the point of downplaying its colonial and mandate records in the Maghreb and Mashreq. Thus, despite the apparent contradictions, for some leftist intellectuals, France has represented a source for resistance to European colonialism. For others, it has represented an imperfect, perhaps slightly more attractive counterbalance, first to British occupation, now to American neo-imperialism.

[12] Kamil, as quoted. in Solé 191.
[13] As quoted. in Solé 192.

The opposition to these bicentennial commemorations that emerged in the spring of 1998 challenged the benevolent narrative about French colonialism in Egypt and what it meant for Egypt's emergence as a regional power in the nineteenth century. Some debated whether it was accurate to portray the Expedition in primarily cultural terms:

> L'expédition d'Égypte . . . est une expédition militaire purement coloniale. Elle n'avait pas d'objectifs culturels. De tels objectifs ne s'imposent pas par les armes. Une mission scientifique ou culturelle s'affirme par la conviction, les paroles ou les actes, et non par l'épée ou le canon.[14]

Others freely acknowledged the cultural accomplishments of Bonaparte's savants, but questioned their motivation and interest:

> L'impérialisme se définit comme la politique d'un État visant à réduire un autre État à sa sujétion et c'est ce qu'a fait l'expédition d'Égypte. Mais l'autre volet de la question est que l'expédition n'était pas que militaire. À la différence de toutes les invasions que l'Égypte avait connues jusque-là, l'expédition française comprenait aussi des savants . . . [Bonaparte] s'attachait à connaître la société, exigeait de ses savants des mémoires détaillés sur le prix, les poids et mesures, le régime des terres, les mœurs et les costumes. Toutes les études qui étaient faites étaient destinées à servir le décideur. Les informations recueillies dans le cadre de ce projet culturel étaient un investissement politique. La guerre, d'autre part, ne peut pas être évaluée selon des critères moraux puisque, d'une manière générale, toute guerre est immorale. Se proposer d'évaluer l'impact culturel de l'expédition, c'est vouloir juger des résultats moraux d'un événement immoral.[15]

In fine, some Egyptian intellectuals boycotted the bicentennial celebrations and many, including those who were never invited to participate, used the opportunity to criticize the skewed framework in which Egyptians were being asked to commemorate a moment in the history of their own colonization. Coming at a period in which Egypt has been struggling with the political expansionism and military hegemony of the US and Israel in the region—and a period in which Egyptians saw their domestic economy increasingly dominated by various agencies of global capital (the IMF, World Bank, USAID)—it is easy to see why an otherwise innocuous bicentennial became a focal

[14] 'Abd al-Wahhab Bakr, as quoted. in al-Khuli and 'Isa 36.
[15] 'Asim al-Disuqi, as quoted. in al-Khuli and 'Isa 36.

point for talking about the enduring legacies of European imperialism and the active (and passive) roles that intellectuals play in collaborating with, or resisting colonial regimes.

## Occupation *and* Expedition

> . . . the French entered the city like a torrent rushing through the alleys and streets without anything to stop them, like demons of the Devil's army. . . . And the French trod in the Mosque of al-Azhar with their shoes, carrying swords and rifles. Then they scattered in its courtyard and its main praying area and tied their horses to the *qibla*. They ravaged the students' quarters and ponds, smashing the lamps and chandeliers and breaking up the bookcases of the students, the disciples, and scribes. They plundered whatever they found in the mosque. . . . They treated the books and Qur'anic volumes as trash, throwing them on the ground, stamping on them with their feet and shoes. Furthermore they soiled the mosque, blowing their spit in it, pissing and defecating in it. They guzzled wine and smashed the bottles in the central court and other parts. And whoever they happened to meet in the mosque they stripped. They chanced upon someone in one of the students' residences and slaughtered him.[16]
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> The administrators, astronomers, and some of the physicians lived in this house in which they placed a great number of their books and with a keeper taking care of them and arranging them. And the students among them would gather two hours before noon every day in an open space opposite the shelves of books, sitting on chairs arranged in parallel rows before a wide long board. Whoever wishes to look up something

[16] 'Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti, *al-Jabarati's Chronicle of the French Occupation, 1798*, trans. Shmuel Moreh (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1975) 93.

> in a book asks for whatever volumes he wants and the librarian brings them to him. Then he thumbs through the pages, looking through the book, and writes. All the while they are quiet and no one disturbs his neighbor. When some Muslims would come to look around they would not prevent them from entering. Indeed they would bring them all kinds of printed books in which there were all sorts of illustrations and *cartes* of the countries and regions, animals, birds, plants, histories of the ancients, campaigns of the nations, tales of the prophets including pictures of them, of their miracles and wondrous deeds, the events of their respective peoples and such things which baffle the mind. I have gone to them many times and they have shown me all these various things. . .[17]

The debate about "Occupation or Expedition" is striking because it enacts a question which, though central to the critical study of empire, is rarely ever played out in such stark terms. Indeed, in the struggle to represent the enduring legacies of European imperialism, cultural criticism has stretched in diverging directions. At the risk of oversimplification, we might say that there has been a palpable difference between one tendency which describes colonialism in terms of pure binary opposition and another which portrays it as contact; one kind of criticism which reads colonialism as a sharply bifurcated struggle between Self and Other, and another which reads ambiguities instead of binaries.

This divergence may simply be a factor of historical periodization, the contexts of different colonial regimes, and the sites from where criticism speaks:[18] indeed, we might be tempted to associate the first kind of criticism with critics involved in the national liberation movements of the twentieth century, and the second with those critics

[17] al-Jabarti 108–09.

[18] See Aijaz Ahmad, "The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality," *Race & Class* 36:3 (1995); Arif Dirlik, "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism," *Critical Inquiry* 20:2 (Winter 1994): 328–56; H. D. Harootunian, "Postcoloniality's Unconscious/Area Studies' Desire," *Postcolonial Studies* 2:2 (1999): 127–47.

writing on those "phone" literatures—Anglophone, Francophone—which emerged following formal independence. Before, and immediately following formal independence, criticism from the formerly colonized world tended to depict culture as part of a sharply bifurcated struggle between Self and Other. To take one example: Albert Memmi would reject the term "colonial" as meaningless in his application of Hegelian dialectics to the exigencies of African liberation.[19] For Memmi, the focus, indeed the moral imperative of cultural critique was to underscore how texts participated as part of a culture that is either colonizing or colonized, oppressive or oppressed. In the work of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, this project of separation is even more explicitly named: decolonization.[20] Within this model, the task of criticism is to negate the injustices of the colonial thesis, to remove the contaminating influence of colonial culture so as to "return" to the unsullied cultural formations of the pre-colonial period, as if that were possible. In these readings of colonial culture, there is no ground for in-betweenness: textual ambiguity becomes tantamount to obfuscation, ambivalence becomes collaboration.

In recent decades, postcolonial criticism has parted ways from what Abdul JanMohamed described as "the Manichean allegory"[21] with the understanding that those binary oppositions were a conceptual fetish of nation-state formation during and following the struggle for independence. As nation-states emerged from this colonial aftermath and were unable to fulfill the promises pledged by independence, in short, as national liberation in a neo-colonial world proved to be not so liberated or liberating after all, cultural critique began to reconsider some of the binarisms that nationalist discourse had insisted

[19] See Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Orion Press, 1965). To describe Memmi as a Tunisian nationalist would be problematic, since his status as a Jew in the French colony meant that he enjoyed the privileges of French citizenship, a privilege not enjoyed by Muslim Tunisians living under colonial rule in the Maghreb. Moreover, his own discomfort with the "Arab" elements of his Tunisian-Jewish background are quite clear in his later writings. For the later Memmi, the choice between these elements would be pushed to full contradiction: to be Jewish is to be Zionist is to be anti-Arab. Nonetheless, Memmi's early work remains a critical moment in the articulation of nationalist anti-colonial thought during the historical moment of decolonization.

[20] Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986).

[21] Abdul JanMohamed, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature," in *Race, Writing and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

upon. Such criticism notices that national independence had proven unable to unwrite the history of colonization that preceded it, that the official discourse of decolonization, like the binaristic model of colonial domination and national liberation that informed it, was philosophically naïve and politically destructive.

As Anthony Appiah and Gayatri Spivak have persuasively argued,[22] the intervention of the "post" in the critique of colonial culture has also been rooted in *post*structuralist habits of reading: not only has such critique problematized the binary thinking that pits colonialism against nationalism all too neatly, but it has also turned to reflect on the representational nature of its object of study: it studies its object—colonial conflict and exchange—from a position that is inside rather than outside. Furthermore, the "post" in postcolonial criticism, as Anne McClintock, Ella Shohat and others have pointed out,[23] does not refer to a neat historical moment that comes *after* colonialism. This sense of "post" relates to the ways in which the political dynamics of *imperialism*—racist state policy, relations of economic domination, the domination of national elites—have continued long after the end of direct colonial rule, and have prevailed quite strongly within the nationalist cultures that were initially articulated as the negation of colonial discourse. One could argue that the real focus of postcolonial criticism has been to deconstruct not so much colonialism, but colonial structures of domination as they are reproduced by the discourses of the nation-state. In these readings of colonial culture, we find ambiguity instead of binaries, hybridity in the place of pure opposition, and insofar as the identities of the colonial Self and Other necessitate each other, they also coexist—perhaps painfully—within each other. In many ways, all the attention that has been paid to the prefix "post" in the term "postcolonial" has concealed what may have been the real work of the postcolonial criticism of the eighties and nineties: to rehabilitate the ambiguities posed by the very term "colonial" which Memmi (and the policies of decolonization) had tried to negate.

[22] Anthony Appiah, "The Postcolonial and the Postmodern," *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Gayatri Spivak, "Poststructuralism, Marginality, Postcoloniality and Value," in *Literary Theory Today*, eds. P. Collier and H. Geyer-Ryan (London: Polity, 1990).

[23] Anne McClintock, "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term Post-Colonialism," *Social Text* 31/32 (1992); Ella Shohat, "Notes on the Post-Colonial," *Social Text* 31/32 (1992).

I want to risk pushing this inadequate outline of anti- and postcolonial criticism one step further by recasting the distinction between the binary description of colonial struggle and the more ambiguous one of colonial hybridity as the expression of two models of power and violence. The binary model, in describing relations of domination in terms of direct confrontation, has tended to present the category of "resistance"—especially collective action—as moral orthodoxy or fetish; it also describes "non-confrontation" and "non-resistance" with a great deal of moral condemnation. Pejorative terms like "collaboration," "fraternization," and "cooptation" belong most properly to the binary model. In contrast, these terms have neither a special place nor any negative connotations in the model of colonial ambiguity. In describing colonial relations of domination in more ambiguous terms, this second model suggests that opposition to colonial rule can take place in large and small acts of subversion, even private moments in which the colonized, in appearing to mimic the colonizer faithfully, manages to undermine the latter's authority.[24] Nonetheless, the model of ambiguity—while using fairly wide parameters to celebrate the possibilities of subversion—has often been silent on the politics of mass, direct action.

This division is too exaggerated to pursue much further, but it does launch the theoretical questions motivating my reading of the French Occupation/Expedition: surely it is a false choice to think that resistance to colonialism has to be as narrow as direct, violent confrontation between wholly separate entities, "France" vs. "Egypt"; similarly, it seems problematic to reject the efforts of those whose resistance is direct, just as it seems overly optimistic to think that the faintest smirk on a servant's lips connotes counterhegemonic practice. Rather, as I will argue, power as articulated in the texts of the French Occupation/Expedition might be most accurately described as *both* opposing *and* ambiguous, conflictual *and* ambivalent. In other words, colonial power and resistance seem to be phenomena best expressed as *neither* wholly binary *nor* wholly ambiguous and it would be wrong to think that our reading of colonial texts would have to choose between the model of pure binary opposition and that of benevolent exchange.

[24] Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimickry and Men," in *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

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The literary record on this early, failed attempt to colonize Egypt is filled with dozens of French-, English-, and Arabic-language descriptions of the violence and cultural exchange that characterized this moment. However, it is important to note that the texts of this encounter have seldom been read with reference to one another for the simple reason that they were composed by authors on "opposing" sides of the French Expedition/Occupation. Instead, each text is usually treated as part of a self-contained national literature, which has tended to turn these texts into one-sided portrayals of an event that was more than two-sided, and to scatter what certainly was a dialogic literary phenomenon into disconnected sets of monologues. Conversely, a comparative reading of such colonial texts necessarily transforms this description and recasts the event according to a complicated dynamic of antagonism *and* ambiguity, violence *and* exchange.

And yet, comparative readings remain the exception rather than the rule in postcolonial studies. This, despite an often expressed desire for comparatism within the field. Perhaps the most illuminating example of the necessity for, and difficulty of, being a comparative reader of empire is to be found in Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism,* which explicitly attempted to correct the monologism of *Orientalism* with a more contrapuntal method. As Said notes, the field in which the texts of colonialism are read is one that is uneven and charged, one in which comparison is abandoned in favor of dispute, or even the *différend*:

> The tragedy of this experience, and indeed of so many postcolonial experiences, derives from the limitations of the attempts to deal with relationships that are polarized, radically uneven, remembered differently. The spheres, the sites of intensity, the agendas, and the constituencies in the metropolitan and ex-colonized worlds appear to overlap only partially. The small area that is perceived as common does not, at this point, provide for more that what might be called a *rhetoric of blame*.[25]

In place of this habit of reading, Said suggests what a more fleshed-out comparative model might look like:

> I want first to consider the actualities of the intellectual terrains both common and discrepant in the post-imperial public discourse, especially

[25] Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993) 19.

> concentrating on what in this discourse gives rise to and encourages the rhetoric and politics of blame. Then, using the perspectives and methods of what might be called a comparative literature of imperialism, I shall consider the ways in which a reconsidered or revised notion of how a post-imperial intellectual attitude might expand the overlapping community between metropolitan and formerly colonized societies. By looking at the different experiences contrapuntally, as making up a set of what I call intertwined and overlapping histories, I shall try to formulate an alternative both to a politics of blame, and to the even more destructive politics of confrontation and hostility.[26]

*Culture and Imperialism* remains a monumental work in the critical study of imperialism precisely for its scope of reference and its insistence on joining the various worlds of empire to the literatures that seek to describe, critique and remake them. True to his promise, Said focuses precisely on those richly suggestive points where histories overlap and intertwine, while also paying close attention to their differences. Nonetheless, the comparative models employed in the study are ones that tend to join texts composed within metropolitan languages, cultures and literary canons. Surprisingly, Said offers few extended readings that compare metropolitan literatures and those from the formerly colonized world. Thus, in some senses the book is sharply bifurcated: the first half of the book is dedicated to revealing the colonial character of metropolitan literatures and it is not until the second half that the study engages in a extended fashion with the literatures of the colonized. In sum, despite the overarching contrapuntal structure of *Culture and Imperialism*, it establishes what "a comparative literature of imperialism" would look like more as a global phenomenon than as local readings.

What follows is an attempt to pursue Said's lead by localizing a comparative reading around issues raised by the contemporary debate in Egypt I've described above. To do this, I would like to counterpose two texts, Vivant Denon's *Voyage dans la basse et la haute Égypte*, and Hasan al-'Attar's "Maqama fi-l-fransis." The author of the first text was one of the most prominent of the 170 savants who accompanied the French army. Vivant Denon was a novelist, illustrator and travel writer, and was General Desaix's companion during the southern military campaigns against Murad Bey. He was one of the main contributors to *La Description de l'Égypte*, and later became the

[26] Said 19.

politically powerful director of the Louvre Museum. The author of the second text had no less illustrious a career: at the time of the French occupation, Hassan al-'Attar was a student at al-Azhar, in time he became an accomplished poet of verse, and one of the great intellectuals of the nineteenth-century reform movement in Egypt. He turned his training as a grammarian toward the project of modernizing the Arabic language, and used his status as an educator to modernize the university itself.[27] I say that the two writers were on "opposite" sides of the conflict, but this deserves some qualification: their texts describe moments in which they cross lines, when they identify with their Other, when they desire their Other, and when they become *collaborators*.[28]

What is particularly striking is that these texts, despite all their differences, share motifs and narrative conventions which allow them to agree in their description of the event as both conflict *and* contact. Insofar as these two texts describe the colonization of Egypt both in terms of binary conflict and ambiguous exchange, they seem to offer a way out of the false choice posed by critical positions which insist that the critical description of the French Occupation/Expedition (and colonialism more generally) must be one or the other.

[27] On al-'Attar's life, see Peter Gran. The ambiguity of the *maquana* stands in contrast to the revisionist chronicle of the Occupation Mazhar al-taqdis bi-zawal dawlat al-fransis authored with 'Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti, which highlights the brutality of the French and the resistance of the Egyptians. Like al-'Attar, al-Jabarti was accused of collaboration. As Gran and others point out, the two hoped their co-authored, more orthodox history would restore them into the graces of the Ottoman Powers. There is a possibility that Denon and al-'Attar may have even met: Denon was quite active in the formation of l'Institut de'Égypte (although he spent most of his time away from Cairo); al-'Attar, who lived in Cairo throughout the Occupation, clearly had some contact with the Institute, although mostly with the members of the Committee of Orientalist study. For one translation of a small work by al-'Attar, see: *Petite Traité de Grammaire Arabe en vers, par El Attar*, trans. J. Sicard (Alger: Imprimerie Orientale, 1898).

[28] Debate continues on the extent of Egyptian collaboration during the Expedition/Occupation, focusing especially on those notables, such as Shaykh al-Mahdi and Shaykh al-Sharqawi, who participated in the French administration of Cairo and General Ya'qub Hanna, commander of the Coptic Legion of the French Army. See Mustafa al-Ahnaf, "Cheikh al-Mahdi: uléma, médiateur, et businessman," *Égypte/Monde Arabe* 1 (1999): 115–49; and Shafiq Ghurbal, "Le Général Ya'qub, le chevalier Lascaris et le projet d'indépendance de l'Égypte en 1801," *Égypte/Monde Arabe* 1 (1999): 179–203.

## Violence and Storytelling in Denon's *Voyage dans la basse et la haute Égypte*

Denon's account of his travels in Upper and Lower Egypt was the most popular European work on Egypt in the nineteenth century: published in French and English within months of Denon's return to the continent, *Voyage* went into over forty editions over the course of the next hundred years—it was precisely the sort of text that archaeologists, explorers and later, tourists, would take with them in order to frame their experiences as they toured the Egyptian landscape.[29] Most readers have celebrated Denon's ability to describe the sentiments aroused by travel, especially the feelings experienced while visiting ancient Egyptian monuments. However, his account is also very much a text about war. And, as a war narrative, it is very invested in depicting the conflict in terms of absolute separation, absolute conflict between opposing moral forces. In his account, Egyptians are presented as "sullen, mistrustful, avaricious and uncareful"[30] because they fail to recognize that the French have come to liberate them from the tyranny of Mamluke rule. Throughout his text, Egyptians appear as marauders, constantly harassing the French army and undermining the dignity of their mission. They often appear as thieves who, in an inventive reversal of the colonial enterprise, have come to take property that rightfully belongs to France. And in the face of such Egyptian audacity and atrocity, the French have no choice but to respond with force. Moreover, the text expresses a confidence that the rational values of the Revolution were uniquely universal—and that Egyptian resistance to the French was based in irrationality and superstition. As in this account of a boy executed for stealing rifles from the French Army:

[29] See Jean-Marie Carré, *Voyageurs et écrivains français en Égypte* (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire, 1956). Alongside *La Description de l'Égypte*, Denon's account was the most widely read text produced out of the Expedition. But it is only one of the many memoirs published by French officers and *savants*. See also Desaix, Berthier, Massena, Regnier, Labaume, Girard, Petit, Beauchamp, Rocca and Miot's accounts collected and translated in *Original Journals of the Eighteen Campaigns of Napoleon Bonaparte*, vol. 1 (London: J. Davis, c. 1820); Prosper Jollois, "Journal d'un ingénieur attaché à l'Expedition d'Égypte 1798–1802," *Bibliotheque Égyptologique*, vol. 7 (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1904) 1–164; additionally, the two regular publications of the Institute of Egypte, *La Decade Egyptienne* and *Le Courier de l'Égypte*, are reprinted in *The Journals of Bonaparte in Egypt*, ed. Saladin Boustany (Cairo: al-Arab Bookshop, 1971).

[30] Vivant Denon, *Voyage dans la Basse et la Haute Égypte* (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire, 1989 [1802]), 30–31.

> [On] amena au général Desaix un criminel. On crioit, C'est un voleur; il a volé des fusils aux volontaires [égyptiens], on l'a pris sur le fait; et nous vimes paroître un enfant de douze ans, beau comme un ange, blessé au bras d'un large coup de sabre; il regardoit sa blessure sans émotion: il se présenta d'un air naïf et confiant au général, qu'il reconnut aussitôt pour son juge. O puissance de la grace naïve! pas un assistant n'avoit conservé de colere. On lui demanda qui lui dit de voler ces fusils: *Personne*; qui l'avoit porté à ce vol: *Il ne savoit, le fort, Dieu*; s'il avoit des parents: Une mere seulement, bien pauvre et aveugle: le général lui dit que s'il avouit qui l'avoit envoyé, on ne lui feroit rien; que s'il s'obstinoit à sa taire, il alloit être puni comme il le méritoit: *Je vous l'ai dit, personne ne m'a envoyé, Dieu seul m'a inspiré*; puis mettant son bonnet aux pieds du général: *Voilà ma tête, faites-la couper*. Religion fatale, où des principes vicieux, unis au dogme, mettent l'homme entre l'héroïsme et la scélératesse! Pauvre petit malheureux! dit le général; qu'on le renvoie. Il vit que son arrêt étoit prononcé; il regarda le général, celui qui devoit l'emmener, et devinant ce qu'il n'avoit pu comprendre, il partit avec le sourire de la confiance. . .[31]

The colonial righteousness of Denon's text may be jarring to contemporary sensibilities—but it is the rhetorical base from which he legitimates the violence of the French Expedition. Denon's account describes the death of thousands of Others—Egyptian peasants, Bedouins, and Ottomans—sometimes in a tone of indifference, sometimes with pity and regret. Especially while pursuing the fleeing Mamlukes in Upper Egypt, the French army encounters resistance everywhere—Bedouins who appear suddenly from the desert, peasants who rebel with crude weapons, Muslim fighters from Mecca and Jeddah who crossed the Red Sea to help repulse the new crusade. The organizational and moral superiority of the French military comes through over and over in Denon's account as they brutally put down the opposition they meet along the way. Take for example Denon's description of an encounter outside the town of Girga:

> Le 23 [de Frimaire], nous apprîmes que notre cavalerie avoit rencontré un rassemblement à Menshieth, avoit sabré mille de ces égarés, et avoit poursuivi son chemin; leçon rien moins que fraternelle, mais que notre position rendoit peut-être nécessaire: cette province, que, de tout temps révoltée, avoit la réputation d'être terrible, avoit besoin d'apprendre que ce n'étoit pas lorsqu'elle se mesuroit contre nous; nous avions d'ailleurs à leur cacher que nos moyens étoient petits et disséminés; peut-être enfin, n'ayant pas le temps de les catéchiser, falloit-il, par un malheur de

[31] Denon. 88.

> circonstance, punir sévèrement ceux qui s'obstinoient à ne pas croire que tout ce que nous faisions n'étoit que pour leur bien.[32]

Denon's elliptical description of violence is spelled out, in more prosaic terms, by General Desaix's account:

> [We] received intelligence on the 1st of January that a great number of the peasants had risen and were assembled in arms, near Souage [Sohag], a few leagues from Girgeh. It was important that a speedy and terrible example should be made of the insurgents, in order to retain the inhabitants, generally, in their obedience, and to crush all opposition to the payment of the taxes. Gen. Davoust was ordered to set out immediately with the cavalry, and to attack the insurgents. This officer, on the 3rd, encountered a multitude of armed men near the village of Souage. He instantly prepared for battle, and formed his corps in echelon order; he caused the advanced guard, consisting of the seventh hussars, and the twenty-second chasseurs, to charge the enemy with impetuosity. The insurgents were unable to sustain the shock; they fled in the greatest confusion and were pursued to a considerable distance, more than eight hundred were killed. . . . [Scarcely] had the cavalry returned to Girgeh than General Desaix was informed that a body of armed peasantry, still more numerous than the first, was assembled at a distance of several leagues from Siut . . . he ordered Davoust again to march at the head of the cavalry against the insurgents, to inflict a terrible chastisement upon them. . . . At the moment [General Davoust entered the village of Tahta] he was apprised that a considerable corps of the enemy's cavalry had attacked his rear guard . . . he instantly formed his corps, and precipitately charged the enemy, whom he cut to pieces; more than a thousand laid dead on the field.[33]

The irony of French peasants killing Egyptian peasants on Egyptian soil in the name of liberty, equality and brotherhood is perhaps mind-boggling in this scene, but it illustrates the sharply defined positions drawn out by Desaix. Denon's account, like Desaix's, tells a story of binary oppositions: French righteousness vs. Egyptian ignorance, rectitude vs. impunity, the order of European enlightenment vs. the confusion of Muslim irrationality.

What makes this reading incomplete are the pages that immediately follow this description of battle in Girga. While resting from the labor of these massacres, Desaix's troops bivouacked outside the

[32] Denon.105.

[33] Desaix, *Original Journals of the Eighteen Campaigns of Napoleon Bonaparte*, vol. 1 (London: J. Davis, c. 1820) 231–32.

town. To entertain the officers, the officers hired local storytellers to come to the camp. Translators attached to the French expedition provided simultaneous translation. According to Denon, the French reveled in the fantasies offered to them by the Egyptian storytellers:

> Nous nous faisions réciter des contes arabes pour dévorer les temps et tempérer notre impatience. Les Arabes content lentement, et nous avions des interpretes qui pouvoient suivre ou qui ralentissoient très peu le débit: ils ont conservé pour les contes la même passion que nous leur connoissons depuis le sultan Schahriar des mille et une nuits; et sur article Desaix et moi nous étions presque des sultans: sa mémoire prodigieuse ne perdoit pas une phrase de ce qu'il avoit entendu; et je n'écrivois rien de ces contes, parcequ'il me promettoit de me les rendre mot pour mot quand je voudrois. . .[34]

Trusting the stories to Desaix' memory was to prove a mistake: he was killed on his way home to France—and we perhaps may never know what particular stories Denon heard on that evening. But what stands out is the playfulness of this scene—how Denon, who often speaks out against the despotic character of Eastern rulers, finds pleasure in imagining for the evening that he is none other than Shahrayar. The stories allow Denon to fantasize—for a moment—that he is the Enlightenment's Other par excellence: the Oriental despot, the Mamluke tyrant, the enchanted audience of *The Arabian Nights*.[35] The scene marks a departure from the demands of being an orthodox revolutionary or enlightened colonizer. This passage even suggests that Denon has crossed over to the other side for a moment—has willingly, even happily, begun to inhabit the image of Eastern tyranny to which the French Republic of Egypt had posed itself as a negation. But the text quickly passes through this identification and Denon takes up the rational critique of the stories he is hearing. As the spell of cross-cultural, cross-political identification comes to an end, sharp lines of difference are drawn:

> Mais ce que j'observois, c'est que si les histoires n'étoient pas riches des détails vrais et sentimentals, mérite qui semble appartenir particulièrement aux narrateurs du nord, elles abondoient en évènements extraordinaires, en situations fortes, produites par des passions toujours exaltées: les enlèvements, les châteaux, les grilles, les poisons, les poignards, les scenes

[34] Denon 105.

[35] See Alain Grosrichard, *Structure du sérail: La fiction du despotisme Asiatique dans l'Occident classique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1979).

> nocturnes, les méprises, les trahisons, tout ce qui embrouille une histoire, et paroît en rendre le dénouement impossible, est employé par ces conteurs avec la plus grande hardiesse; et cependant l'histoire finit toujours très naturellement et de la maniere la plus claire et la plus satisfaisante. Voilá le mérite de l'inventeur: il reste encore au conteur celui de la précision et de la déclamation, auxquelles les auditeurs mettent beaucoup de prix: aussi arrive-t-il que la même histoire est faite consécutivement par plusieurs narrateurs devant les mêmes auditeurs avec un égal intérêt et un égal succès; l'un aura mieux traité et déclamé la partie sensible et amoureuse, un autre aura mieux rendu les combats et les effets terribles, un troisieme aura fait rire; enfin c'est leur spectacle: et, comme chez nous, on va au théâtre une fois pour la piece, d'autres fois pour le jeu des acteurs, les répétitions ne les fatiguent point.[36]

What seems remarkable here is that the description of aesthetic culture allows Denon to leave for a moment the binary of the war narrative and allows him to compare Egyptian and French culture. Is it a comparison based in sameness or difference? At first glance, the tone of the description seems to pose an essential distinction: the practice of Egyptian story-telling differs greatly from that practiced in Europe; their fantastical stories lack the verisimilitude of our stories. But this distinction is made possible because it is based on a underlying resemblance: Egyptian attention to storytelling is like the French interest in theater; "comme chez nous," one might return to a stage performance in order to observe it more carefully, so too with them, one might enjoy multiple performances of storytelling for a similar reason.

It is tempting to think that we need to make a decision about the place of this moment in Denon's narrative: it might represent a moment in which the authority of Denon's voice is subverted, where the asserted Self of the colonizer unravels in the image of its colonized Other; in contrast, it might represent a place where sharp moral distinction is asserted. Despite the fact that these two readings are more or less incompatible with one another, the language of the text suggests both: storytelling allows Denon to leave himself, it allows him to find resemblances between French and Egyptian culture, but it also is the grounds on which he asserts essential difference: it marks the site of both opposition and exchange. Denon's description of Egyptian culture thus remains undecided and ambivalent, although

[36] Denon 106.

soon after this interlude, his narrative returns to the binary story of war.

## Poetry and (In)Decision in al-'Attar's "Maqama fi-l-fransis"

If the war narrative is the dominant rhetoric of Denon's travel account, Hassan al-'Attar's account of the French Occupation begins instead with the utopian, mediating possibilities offered by poetry. al-'Attar's "al-Maqama fi-l-fransis" was printed with the new publishing technologies brought into Egypt by the French army.[37] The work, composed in the rhyming prose of *saj'*, is short enough to be summarized quickly. It begins with the phrase "hadathani" one of the key conventions of the genre of the *maqama*[38]—the narrator describes how some fellow Muslims "had told him" about the disturbances the French had been causing in the Cairene quarter of Ezbekiyya. These friends had told him that the French had taken over the streets and harassed those Egyptians who wandered out. The narrator leaves his house—"kharajtu min dari, la adri ayna yakunu qarari" ("I left my home, not knowing where I would settle")—and begins to wander. The language of this phrase doubles the theme of displacement so common in the genre. Indeed, the rhyming words of this phrase—

[37] al-'Attar's work is appended to a lithographic edition of al-Siyuti's *Maqamat*, (Bulaq: [1858]) 91–96. al-'Attar's fiction is not the best known Arabic language account of the French invasion, although it is perhaps the most famous *fictional* account. The chronicle of 'Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti is the one most often cited; see also: Niqula al-Turk, *al-Hamla al-Fransiyya 'ala Misr wa-l-Sham* (Beirut: al-Farabi, 1990 [1839]); and 'Abd al-Salam ibn 'Umar ibn Muhammad al-Maridini, "Istila' Banaburtih 'ala Misr al-Qahira, wa-huwwa min a'jab al-'ajayib wa-aghrab al-gharayib," in *Mélanges Taha Husain*, ed. A. Badawi (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1962) 375–98.

[38] In the Arabic literary tradition, the *maqama* is a picaresque genre of prose narrative that includes embedded poetry. Each *maqama* composes a brief scene and was usually authored as part of a collection of *maqamat* (pl.) involving a recurring roguish character (often in disguise) and a narrator (who is usually duped), who meet in all sorts of situations throughout the Muslim world. The genre is known for its difficult word play, obscure vocabulary, and the emphasis it places on the difficulty, if not *impossibility* of definitive interpretation. Though the genre is especially associated with the names of Badi' al-Zaman al-Hamadhani (969–1008 CE) and Abu Muhammad al-Qasim Abu 'Ali al-Hariri (1050–1122 CE), Arab authors were still composing *maqamat* until the twentieth century. Some Egyptian authors, such as Ibrahim al-Muwaylihi and Muhammad al-Muwaylihi, serialized their *maqamat* in the new print media of the late nineteenth century. "al-Maqama fi-l-fransis" is the only *maqama* attributed to al-'Attar. For critical work on the genre, see: Abdelfattah Kilito, *Les Séances: récits et codes culturels chez Hamadhânî et Harîrî* (Paris: Sindbad, 1983); and James Monroe, *The Art of Badi' al-Zaman al-Hamadhani as Picaresque Narrative* (Beirut: The American University in Beirut, 1983).

"dari" (my home) and "qarari" (my decision, my sense of settledness)—underscore this doubling: like the narrators of the *maqama* genre always find, nothing can happen unless one leaves one's familiar abode, until one becomes unsettled. Thus the phrase—"la adri ayna yakunu qarari"—suggests not only a sense of being "out of house" and unsettled, but also *undecided*.

Although the narrator mentions that he wanted to avoid French-controlled areas, nonetheless that is exactly where he finds himself—"qad waqa'tu, fi-ma minhu farartu." Thus, the opening lines describe a wonderful moment of indecision on the part of the narrator: he fears the French, but is also curious; he wants to flee from them, but walks straight toward them. At this point, his curiosity gets the best of him. As he announces, he has also heard that this people treads only on those who fight them and strikes fear only into those people who oppose them. It is as if the narrator has fully digested the official French version of the expedition. Finally, he notes that these French are famous for their interest in the sciences and philosophy and that one could exchange a word of knowledge with them.

At this point in the story, the narrator decides to visit a well-respected friend whose house happens to be next to the palace in which the French *savants* are staying. Finally, the narrator sees a group of the Frenchmen he's heard so much about and finds them to be ravishingly beautiful. In these passages, the gender of the language playfully shifts between masculine and feminine:

> Wa-bi-janib darih al-lati biha ma'wahu, fityatun minhum, barazna ka-l-shumus
> Wa-hunna yatamayalna tamayul al-'urus. . .
> Fa-tatalla'tu ilayhunna tatallu' al-ha'imi ila-l-wurud
> Wa-waqaftu anzur ila husni tathani hatik al-qudud[39]
>
> Next to his house, I saw a group of the young men, who shone [feminine] like the stars
> While bending affectionately with the compliance of brides . . .
> So I looked at those [girls], as a lover looks at flowers
> And my glance fell upon the swaying of those bodies!

Not only do the pronouns shift from "humma" to "hunna," but the French *savants* in the subsequent scene appear alternately as brides, scholars, beautiful gazelles, masters of poetry. The attractive young

[39] al-'Attar 92. The accompanying translations are mine.

French scholars invite the narrator to look at their books on subjects as diverse as law, theology and natural science.

There is the possibility that one could read the feminization of the *savants* as satire, that in feminizing the French, the narrator figuratively rescrambles the "top" and "bottom" of a familiarly gendered, sexual model of colonial relations. But the central place of poetry in the narrative—and the recognizable codes of homoerotic poetry in which the poet-lover desires to submit to his beloved—seem to undermine a simple ironic reading. Indeed, poetry becomes not a medium of satire, but rather a register for articulating desire and exchange. One Frenchman who is especially proficient in the recitation of classical poetry dazzles the narrator with his beauty and command of the Arabic language. The narrator is smitten and, upon leaving, promises to return the next day to look at more books together. That night, the narrator unable to sleep, composes a poem—

Ra'a al-mahabbata min 'ayni fa-khatabani
Bi-durri lafzin bihi lutfun wa-ta'nithu
Tajanasa al-husnu fi-mar'ahu hayna ghada
Bayna al-kalami wa-bayna-l-thaghri tajnisu
Wa-sada 'aqli bi-lafatati fa-wa-'ajaba
Hata 'ala-l-'aqli qad tastu-l-fransisu[40]

He saw the affection in my eyes and spoke to me
With pearls of words, sweetly and effeminately
The beauty of seeing him became
a metaphor that transforms lips into words
He pursued my mind with his gestures and, O my!
The Frenchmen have invaded everything, even my mind!

Thus the *maqama* gestures toward the politics of domination that the French invasion represents—but it is a gesture that expresses, in terms of attraction, submission to the colonizing Other. The narrator of al-'Attar's *maqama* admires the book knowledge of the French, he admires their printed books, their technology, their language, their lips and their gazelle-like bodies; the homoerotic conventions al-'Attar draws upon transform the French enemy into a beloved, a beloved whose gaze invites the lover to submit.

[40] al-'Attar 94.

Again, the feminization of the Frenchman is important to the reading of this passage, and it is clear that this feminization is linked to a desire which seems as epistemological as it does erotic. But this line of bookish desire unsettles the first reading of erotic desire. For, if in that reading it is the narrator who submits himself to the beauty of the feminized Frenchman, in this reading, there is reason to suggest that it is the feminized party that might submit to the narrator. To make sense of this, we need to refer to the eroticized and gendered character of *Sufi* pedagogical traditions. There is no reason to doubt that Hassan al-'Attar—the Azhari student—would have been familiar with the eroticized terms by which *Sufi* masters might describe learning, power and the transmission of knowledge to their disciples. What Abdellah Hammoudi has argued with regard to Moroccan *Sufi* institutions, might easily apply to this case as well:

> The disciple is so to speak impregnated through a teaching process which resembles procreation. The master transforms into a saint the young man who rushes to him in a sense-awakening encounter, the basically feminizes his disciple in order to produce charisma: it is a metaphor of insemination, gestation, and birth. . . The disciple becomes a woman for a while. But his submission does not exclude either feelings of ambivalence or awareness of the transitional nature of this role.[41]

To bring this to bear upon 'Attar's narrative: although it is the narrator who is "turned onto" books by his French interlocutor, the feminization of that interlocutor in this pedagogical situation suggests a reversal of sorts. The Frenchman becomes initiate, the Egyptian a master—this becomes especially clear when the Frenchmen call upon him to explain their books. Thus, this code of eroticized, gendered pedagogy begins to destabilize the terms of the homoerotic poetic code. In the latter, it is the Egyptian narrator who has been overcome by the feminized Frenchman, and who subjects himself to the *savant* beloved; in the former, it is the Egyptian narrator, who appears master, who has knowledge to impart, power to disseminate over the *savant* initiate. The way the narrative resolves this suggests that al-'Attar's descriptive theory of colonialism is to be found in undecided space where these two codes—the homoerotic and the pedagogic—diverge, conflict and engage.

The narrator arrives the next morning to continue his intercourse

[41] Abdellah Hammoudi, *Master and Disciple: the Cultural Foundations of Moroccan Authoritarianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) 139.

with the Frenchman who has captivated him. Wine is passed around, although he disapproves, and finally discussion turns to poetry: the *savants* ask the narrator to explain obscure lines of poetry. He notices that they write down his every word in an encyclopedia. Annoyed that he has not yet been able to spend time with his lover in private, the narrator improvises a poem which contains his complaint. The poem describes the Frenchman in conventional figures of the beloved—the whiteness of his skin, the pearls of his teeth, the wine of his lips—and ends with the lover-poet sadly complaining about his unconsummated passion. The last line of this Arabic poem contains some French words which pose a special problem for reading:

| | |
|---|---|
| Al-waslu minhu ghadan muhalan | idh laysa yurthi ila rasisi |
| Aqulu, "Waslan?" Yaqulu "Non, non!" | Aqulu "Hajran?" Yaqulu "Si, Si!"[42] |

To consummate my love for him has become impossible
Because he has no pity for passion

I ask, "Shall we get together?" He replies, "No! No!"
I ask him, "shall we leave each other?" He replies, "But, yes!"

This last line demands close attention, but I would like to first say how it shapes the course of the rest of the narrative: immediately after finishing this line of poetry, the Frenchmen invite the narrator to come dwell with them in their house. The narrator says that he delayed his answer, and finally declined. In fact, the *maqama* ends as the narrator/poet realizes that spending more time with the French would bring him the rebuke and scorn of his society. As the narrator puts it, he repents of his collaboration and decides to "go straight": "fa-raji'tu li-rushdi aqtafihi, wa-staghfartu allaha mima kuntu fihi." In other words, the *maqama* concludes with precisely the sort of decisive opposition that is so absent from the body of the narrative. This leads us to return to the line of poetry that pronounces the narrator's decision before it fully materializes on the level of the plot: "Aqulu, 'Waslan?' Yaqulu 'Non, non!' / Aqulu 'Hajrin?' Yaqulu 'Si, Si!'"

In a way, this line announces the narrator's own ability to reverse the linguistic game that he plays earlier with the French—the impressive linguistic and poetical competence of the French lover is now returned as the Arab poet-narrator improvises lines in French in

[42] al-'Attar 96.

order to develop classical erotic themes. Moreover, it is not so much the *savant* in the narrative who rejects the narrator/poet, but rather the poet who declares an end to the love affair between them—and he declares it, not by direct admission, but rather by expressing his decision in the mouth of the figure of his beloved-Other. In other words, al-'Attar's narrator expresses first an erotic attraction for the French colonizer, then as poet, obliquely announces an end to their relationship—and it is this poem which first introduces decisiveness into the narrative. But, while this end announces the beginning of a decision—the Egyptian's break with the French—it does so without rejecting the ambiguous motifs of fascination and attraction. And it accomplishes this break by representing it as the decision, not of an Egyptian Self, but of the French Other. The poet thus manages to appear *decided* about his return to an orthodox, anti-French position, and as *undecided* as when he left his house.

Our reading of decision hinges on the last line of the poem: "Shall we consummate our love? No, no!" Are we to read the repeated negative as simply emphatic or as overly emphatic, does the Frenchman protest too much? And what about the phrase, "Si, si!"? Obviously, it expresses an emphatic reply, the Frenchman's rejection of the poet's desire. Thus it represents the strange case of a negation that negates in the affirmative, a resounding "Yes!" that means no. In other words, as the pivotal phrase in the *maqama*, the words that announce a clear decision, could not be more ambiguous—not only because they are in the language of the colonial Other, but also because in that other language, we are encouraged to read them as both earnestly emphatic *and* overly emphatic.

**Houses and Empty Spaces: Culture and Violence**

> Then Bonaparte assembled the clerics and notables and said: "I want to inscribe the houses and alleys and to know their houses, their leaders, their people." So they sent a group of Frenchmen and a group of Copts, and they counted the alleys and houses and recorded the names of their inhabitants. . .[43]

Readers of Denon and al-'Attar will find both attraction and violence, ambiguity and opposition in the two texts, but find neither of them in

[43] al-Maridini 381.

a pure way. Instead, one finds in both texts an explicitly *ambivalent* description of colonial culture. By way of conclusion, I would like to talk about the specific figures by which these motifs are articulated. It is striking that in each text, the rhetoric of binarism occurs in the description of violence and is based in figures of open space—the fields, *les champs*, "les champs de bataille" and the "midan," the military parade grounds, the polo grounds, the public square, the streets. Moreover, in each text, the rhetoric of ambiguity occurs around figures of closed, constructed spaces—*la estrade*, the alcove, *al-hara* and especially *al-dar*.

In al-'Attar the development of the motif of space is especially clear: the *maqama* narrates a movement towards intimacy, the narrator moves from streets and avenues and square (*shawari'*, *sikak*, *midan*) to a closed alley (*hara*), likewise he moves from his house (*dar*), through non-descript open spaces (*makan*, *jiha*), toward the house of his friend, next to which he finds the house of the French (*dar al-fransis*) which we might suppose is *l'Institut de l'Égypte* itself. Indeed, the word *dar* (house, domain) recurs often in the *maqama*—it is the place he leaves behind, the goal of his travel and the site of his exchange with his French interlocutor and lover. Moreover, their exchange is itself an exchange of structures—they open books, discuss "diwans" of poetry and share "abyat al-shi'r," verses (*bayt, abyat*) which are, figuratively, "abodes" of poetry. This play on abodes becomes the ground for the description of their relationship in poetry: the first thing the narrator pleads to the Frenchman is protection in terms of spatial proximity "inni dayfun bi-jarrikum" ("I am a guest of your neighbors, seeking your protection"). Thus, he cites conventions of protection—embedded in the language—which extend social ties beyond the narrow bounds of kin and religion, as in the phrase "Huwwa jarri bayt bayt," or "He is my neighbor, [and under my protection] by contiguity of our habitations."[44] Along with the eroticism of the poetry, "the house of the neighbor" seems to be the text's most explicit theory of the relationship between colonizer and colonized. And this reference redoubles the play between *dar* and *bayt*, home and verse, once again: the poet and the Orientalist thus become neighbors by contiguity of verse.

Finally, 'Attar's narrative ends with the narrator repenting from the situation, the relationship—the structure—in which he had met the

[44] Edward Lane, "bayt," *An Arabic English Lexicon* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1863), 1:280.

French. Indeed, the maqama is entitled "The Maqama *in* the French." Figuratively, the preposition "*fi*" means "on" or "about," but the spatial quality might lead us to ask also about the place to which the preposition literally refers? The colonial quarter of Ezbekiyya, the house of the French, *l'Institut de l'Égypte*, the diwan of poetry, the verses of poetry themselves? It is not that such abodes—*al-bayt*, *al-diwan*—are without conflict. Indeed, the confiscation of the homes of notables, and the formation of a council of collaborating notables (called al-Diwan)—major themes in contemporary reports of the events—suggest that al-'Attar's recurring references to these sites are, again, playful, ironic, and perhaps even undecided. The state of "being in abodes" is where formative exchange can happen in al-'Attar's account of the colonial, and it is where the conflict takes place as well. In either case, however, it is preferable to the empty spaces of the street: after leaving the abode of the neighbor, the house of culture, *al-Diwan* (*la Douane*), the verse of poetry, there is nothing to describe but the open spaces of violent conflict, spaces in which the French wreak havoc and Egyptians run confused, binary spaces in which sharp lines are drawn between the colonizer and the colonized.[45]

'Attar's description of the cultural exchange of structures is interrupted by the binary rhetoric of conflict. In contrast, Denon's war story—the story of Egypt as a battlefield—is interrupted by the description of structures. Again, violence in Denon's text is linked to the open space of the fields, the battlefields, the campaigns; structured spaces—buildings and monuments—are the site of the less contentious exchange.[46] Indeed, what Denon has become best known for is his descriptions—especially his pictorial representations—of the ancient Egyptian temples of Upper Egypt. However, the framing narrative remains one dominated by the binary rhetoric of colonial war. Nonetheless, his descriptions of monuments are the clearest moments in his text in which Denon attempts to break down the distance between him and the landscape of the French colony.[47] And

[45] Other Arabic narratives of the Occupation, and especially accounts of the Rebellion of Cairo, repeat this link between violence and the street.

[46] See also his description of a musical and dance performance in Rosetta during *Mawlid al-Nabi* (45).

[47] In other words, for the most part the rhetorical move by which Denon's text breaks with the war narrative is through identifications with Egypt which are dissociated along two axes: identification with the material objects of culture rather than humans (Egyptian monuments, not Egyptians); and identification with the past rather than the present (ancient Egypt, not modern Egypt). See my dissertation, "Hooked on Pharaonics: Literature and the Appropriations of Ancient Egypt," UC Berkeley, 2000.

then there are other moments—like the performance of the *1001 Nights*—in which the terms of conflict are suspended in favor of identification and pleasure. Taken together, these passages suggest an indecision about which rhetoric best describes the event of colonization—the rhetoric of opposition or the rhetoric of exchange, the rhetoric of conflict and dispute or the rhetoric of mediation and translation.

I do not want to imply that the description of structure in Denon redeems the narrative of war, nor do I want to suggest that a reading of his whole text produces a synthesis between the thesis of war and the antithesis of culture. Rather, I want to argue instead that the description of culture marks a significant—but merely momentary—break in his binary rhetoric of colonial violence. It signals a moment of possible collaboration and exchange, a moment of fantasy in which one can identify with the one's Other, a moment in which the colonizer imagines himself to be both like and unlike the colonized. A moment which stands out because of the rich utopian potential these things suggest, but a moment which passes before it seriously transforms the binary rhetoric of war.

As fictions of colonialism, these two texts mirror each other in unexpected ways, drawing upon like figures to describe the events of colonization from opposing sides: figures which acknowledge both the brutality of the colonial event and its utopian possibilities, figures which suggest that the legacy of the French Expedition/Occupation was brutal, violent and *also* the occasion of structured meeting and exchange. Only by reading these texts in isolation from one another could one be led to believe they are stable texts that tell the tale of *either* unmitigated violence *or* brave resistance, free exchange *or* subversion. Reading them together, we begin to notice those larger, undecided and undecidable figures shaping the description of colonialism. Echoing the work of other critics of empire, I have called the mode of reading these undecided figures "ambivalent"—but this appeal to ambivalence does not mean we have to forfeit the sharpness of our ideological motivations, nor our (optimistic) openness towards the slightest glimmers of cultural exchange in the most brutal of colonial stories.

*Brown University*