

**CLARITIES AND OBSCURITIES: GUSTAVE FLAUBERT'S
EXPRESSION OF THE ORIENT.
REALITY VERSUS 'IMAGINATIVE GEOGRAPHY'¹**

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In *Figures II*, Gérard Genette reveals the semantic links between 'day' and 'night': it is not only a question of opposition, of reciprocal exclusion, but also of inclusion. This definition of boundaries of interpretation is exemplified by the development of Flaubert's travel writing - both in his *Carnets de voyage* and his *Correspondance* - during his journey in the Orient, through Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Rhodes and Turkey, between November 1849 and mid-December 1850. The notes to which I shall be referring here are those that were developed by Flaubert on his return as '*Voyage en Égypte*',² a manuscript which resurfaced only in 1989, allowing the first complete edition by Pierre-Marc de Biasi to be published in 1991.³ The Orient had fascinated Flaubert since his childhood: when he was twelve he had seen moored in Rouen harbour for several months, the Egyptian boat, the Louxor, carrying the obelisk destined for the Place de la Concorde in Paris, an event which precipitated a surge of Orientalism in the heart of provincial Normandy. Predominant amongst the elements of exoticism and mystery in the Oriental fantasies woven through his *Œuvres de jeunesse* (particularly *Rage et impuissance*, *Mémoires d'un fou* and *Novembre*), is the lure of the sunlight. Jean Bruneau, in his key work on Flaubert's never-to-be realised 'Conte oriental',⁴ relates this yearning for the sun - which he considers one of the crucial elements of Flaubert's philosophy and aesthetic - to a confession made in a letter to Louise Colet in 1846: 'J'ai au fond de l'âme le brouillard du Nord que j'ai respiré à ma naissance. Je porte en moi la mélancolie des races barbares, avec ses instincts de migration [...] ils avaient une aspiration frénétique vers la lumière, vers le ciel bleu, vers quelque existence chaude et sonore'.⁵ It was almost predestined that, on arrival in Alexandria, he would see the Orient 'à travers, ou plutôt dans une grande lumière d'argent fondue sur la mer...'.⁶

Flaubert's perception of the Orient was indeed preconceived. Nineteenth-century France was steeped in the phenomenon of an Oriental renaissance, both scholarly and popular, and having done an extraordinary amount of erudite

¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London : Penguin Books, 2003 [1978]), p. 54.

² Gustave Flaubert, *Voyage en Égypte*. Édition intégrale du manuscrit original établie et présentée par Pierre-Marc de Biasi. (Paris : Bernard Grasset, 1991). Hereafter referred to as VE followed by page number.

³ Previous editions were based on the first 'integral' edition authorised by Flaubert's niece, Caroline Franklin-Grout, which she had heavily expurgated. For a full explanation of this see Biasi, p. 14-18.

⁴ Jean Bruneau, *Le « Conte Oriental » de Gustave Flaubert* (Paris : Denoël, 1973), p. 40-41.

⁵ All references to Flaubert's *Correspondance* are taken from the edition established by Jean Bruneau, published by Gallimard in four volumes between 1973 and 1998. Hereafter referred to by volume and page number. C.I.528 to Louise Colet, 13.08.1846.

⁶ C.I.528 to his mother, 17.11.1849.

research for *La Tentation de saint Antoine* between 1845 and 1849, his conception of it was based on a host of black and white textual references, on Orientalist ‘idées reçues’, on what Bruneau terms ‘bric-à-brac oriental’,⁷ and on his dreams. Edward Said’s passionate and often provocative critique, *Orientalism*, provides us with multi-faceted definitions both of the discipline and of ‘that semi-mythical construct’,⁸ that ‘imagined geography’ that was the Orient in the perceptions of politicians, scholars and the public. For Said, the Orient is ‘an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West’,⁹ while Orientalism was (indeed in some cases still is) ‘a system of knowledge about the Orient, an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness’,¹⁰ influencing its description and characterisation. While he acknowledges Flaubert’s ‘systematic and disciplined knowledge of Orientalia’,¹¹ his scrupulous reporting of ‘events, persons, and settings’, his ‘[delight] in their *bizareries*, [while] never attempting to reduce the incongruities before him’,¹² Said insists that his ‘Orient’ is a ‘representation of canonical material’,¹³ and that the political, social, and aesthetic assumptions inherent in Orientalism were too deep-rooted to be eradicated from his texts. Are, then, the clarities and obscurities found in Flaubert’s expression of the Orient in his travel writing, *actual*, that is, based on observed reality, or – as in typical Orientalist texts as defined by Said – constrained and prescribed by the weight of pre-digested doctrine?

It was the oppositional contrast between the clarities and obscurities indigenous to Egypt, a country where he learned that ‘c’est ici qu’on s’entend en contrastes, des choses splendides reluisent dans la poussière’,¹⁴ which stunned and delighted Flaubert from the moment of his arrival at Alexandria. Having climbed up to the crow’s nest of his boat, he caught his first sight of ‘*cette vieille Égypte*’, a phrase he italicised to emphasise his recognition of the cliché of the scene. His first notes and letters glitter with the impact of what he saw then: ‘j’avais aperçu le toit du sérail de Méhémet-Ali qui brillait au soleil... dôme noir, au milieu d’une grande mer’.¹⁵ Already powerful contrasts were dominating his perceptions, yet it was an ‘impression solennelle et inquiète quand j’ai senti mon pied s’appuyer sur la terre d’Égypte’.¹⁶ A young man of nearly twenty-eight, still devastated by the recent brutal rejection of what he had considered to be his first potentially publishable work, *La Tentation de saint Antoine*, suffocating from claustrophobia induced by family pressures and the all-enveloping ‘bêtise’ of the

⁷ Op. cit., p. 41.

⁸ Op. cit., p. xiii.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 5.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 6.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 180.

¹² Ibidem, p. 184.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 177.

¹⁴ C.I.541 to Louis Bouilhet, 1.12.1849.

¹⁵ VE.166-167.

¹⁶ VE.167.

Bourgeoisie, Flaubert was following his migratory instincts. Would the warm and sunlit Orient dispel the chilling physical and spiritual fog of the North?

Travelling with Maxime Du Camp, principal critic of *La Tentation de saint Antoine*, together with Louis Bouilhet, disbelief and self-doubt gnawed his confidence throughout the voyage. Often apologising for what he believes to be the worthlessness of his letters, he frequently doubts his ability to produce anything of any real worth. But against the obscurity into which the work and the writer seemed to have been cast, a clarity of growing self-knowledge and perception insinuated itself, via travel *per se*, and through the visual absorption of the spatial and generic qualities of the Orient. In a letter to his mother written soon after his arrival in Cairo, Flaubert insists that the Orient has surpassed his expectations: 'j'ai trouvé dessiné nettement ce qui pour moi était brumeux. Le fait a fait place au pressentiment, si bien que c'est souvent comme si je retrouvais tout à coup de vieux rêves oubliés'.¹⁷

His reaction to and absorption of the Orient was based on three major elements: the evidence of the Ancient world, Orientalism brought to life, and the reality of contemporary Egypt. Flaubert's response to the ruins of the past dynasties - sometimes little more than debris - is ambivalent. They often disappoint or bore him. The qualities that impress him lie in their ability to provoke fear or awe, in their transformation in the changing light, or simply the shadow of a bird in flight: in short, their affinity with the living. But Derek Gregory ascribes his declared boredom not to the effect of the ruins themselves, but to 'their incorporation within the increasingly elaborate textual apparatus of Orientalism and, in particular, within the discourses of archaeology and tourism that policed their appropriation'.¹⁸ Certainly the sense of having to accomplish the conventional tourist's quota of sites, of always having to fit into a mould - that of Young Man, Traveller, Artist, Son or Citizen - depressed him.¹⁹ He developed techniques to avoid Du Camp's endless photographic sessions, although his print of the Sphinx forced his admiration. On the other hand, his experience of the Sphinx and the Pyramids were amongst the most powerful of the voyage, remaining etched into his consciousness and sensibilities, while his notes occasionally provide precise details worthy of an archaeologist. At El-Kab in Upper Egypt, paintings in a grotto of rustic life charmed him, for having escaped from 'la rigidité impitoyable de l'art égyptien'.²⁰

Flaubert's reaction to 'living' Orientalism was a mixture of an ironic acknowledgement of the visual clichés which abounded, his own attempts to avoid them, and a naïve pleasure at being himself a 'living' Orientalist. His frequent use of reification was an indication of the strictures which the remembered text and image imposed on his imagination; in a reversal of the Proustian metaphor which

¹⁷ C.I.562 to his Mother, 05.01.1850.

¹⁸ Derek Gregory. 'Between the book and the lamp: imaginative geographies of Egypt, 1849-50.' *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* (1995), pp. 29-57.

¹⁹ VE.328.

²⁰ VE.359-60.

opens a path to the unknown, Flaubert's similes lead back to the familiar. Dripping children emerge from the cataract like gleaming bronze statues flowing with water in a fountain,²¹ and a typical village scene recalls an engraving, a scene of the Orient in a book.²² Yet these cinematic 'stills' are often followed by statements of hard reality: in the first case the teeth and muscularity of the Nubians are contrasted to those of the Arabs, while immediately following the arrested life of the last example, a child with rickets drags himself along in the dust. In his illustrations of the oppositional contrasts of the Elsewhere before his eyes, he uses referents drawn from familiar territories: bleached bones in the surface of the earth resemble a galantine cut in half,²³ fretted wooden roofs remind him of a chinese umbrella handle (doubtless the vogue in Paris).²⁴ At Abu Simbel the sharp regular cry of bats recall the sound of a church clock in the Norman countryside in summer, when everyone is working in the fields around three o'clock in the afternoon; yet the same incident flows into a dreamy reflection on King Mycerinus driving round Lake Moeris in a chariot in the evening, confessing to a priest his love for his own daughter, at the time of harvest when the buffaloes return.²⁵ For Adrienne Tooke, this fragment is 'a poetic synthesis of the themes of what will be Flaubert's major novels';²⁶ I would add that it embodies the subtle interwoven temporalities he found in contemporary Egypt of Ancient and Modern, allowing the perception that for Flaubert the distance between his major works is less than it appears on the surface - that between his European and his Oriental novels there is a common thread.

One of the most touching and surreal images of Flaubert's consciousness of the juxtaposition of East and West, of the imagined Orient and the increasing elements of a recognisable Modernity, is prompted by his hotel in Cairo, where the French proprietor has framed Gavarni lithographs torn from the Parisian satirical journal *Charivari*: 'Quand les sheiks du Sinaï viennent pour traiter avec les voyageurs, le vêtement du désert frôle sur le mur tout ce que la civilisation envoie ici de plus quintessencié comme parisianisme. [...] Les lorettes, étudiants du quartier latin, et bourgeois de Daumier restent immobiles devant le nègre qui va vider les pots de chambre'.²⁷ The Parisians in the lithographs are as alive as the servant: it is an extraordinary illustration of the intermingling of reality and fantasy which Flaubert revelled in throughout his voyage. The name of the proprietor, incidentally, was Bouvaret, and twenty years later Flaubert was to claim this as the origin of 'Bovary'.²⁸

²¹ VE.301.

²² VE.303.

²³ VE.259.

²⁴ VE.535-6.

²⁵ VE.326-7.

²⁶ Adrienne Tooke. 'Flaubert: Views of the Orient'. In *Eastern Voyages, Western Visions*, ed. Margaret Topping. (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2004), p. 178.

²⁷ VE.194.

²⁸ C.III.175 to H. Cornu, [20.03.1870]. VE.193, note 120, explains this connection; de Biasi, however, dismisses here any connection with *Bouvard et Pécuchet*.

Finally, there is Flaubert's response to the realities of contemporary Egyptian life: this was the shock of the new, of the unimagined, of the onset of a crucial personal re-orientation. While Nature, landscape, sky and desert are 'familiar', like a *déjà vu*, the towns and inhabitants - '*choses de l'humanité*'²⁹ - astonish him. The grotesque, something that had held immense significance for Flaubert since his early childhood, is a completely unexpected yet essential element of Oriental existence.³⁰ He recognises it in the cast of overworked traditional French comic Oriental characters - the thrashed slave, the surly trafficker in women, the swindling merchant - who in Egypt seem genuine and fresh;³¹ it was in the proximity of beauty and putrescence, of violence and passivity, and in the absurdity of his beloved camels. '*Cet étrange animal qui sautille comme un dindon, et balance son col comme un cygne*',³² embodied for Flaubert the qualities of the Orient, not only the classic imagery and the grotesque, but also the random quality of everyday life, poking their heads into the shops in the bazaars. They often have a heroic, mythological quality: caught in a fierce sandstorm in the desert, a caravan of men and camels pass Flaubert silently, like phantoms in clouds; the camels sway like boats, seemingly supported high above the earth, as if they had sunk into clouds up to their necks.³³ For Flaubert this was a hallucinatory experience of oppositional emotions: shivers of fear and admiration ran down his spine while he was aware of an unprecedented joy.

The form of this travel writing was not only forced on him by circumstance, but was one which was soon deliberately developed to encapsulate and reflect the essence of his shifting, splintered, kaleidoscopic, continuing visual experience, and the divided nature of Oriental - particularly Egyptian - life. 'Gestures' between the suspension of time which is the instant and its evanescence, the notes express a fragmented reality, which will expand into Flaubert's development of his personal 'realism'. Unlike Du Camp's skilful but sterile photographs, which freeze an instant, Flaubert's 'instants' are always in movement. There is tension here, just as there is in sequential text and in life itself: it concerns the connection between ambivalence and proximity of instant and duration, of the ephemeral quality of 'happenings', encounters, and natural phenomena, all set against both ancient and continuing history. While these notes are, so to speak, contained in the margins of his future novels, Flaubert decided never to publish them; they were for himself alone, becoming part of his personal 'documentation' for future works.

Form and idea are already inextricably linked. Describing the contrasts of what he encompasses in one sweeping gaze, he 'arranges' the components of a scene in vertical layers, allowing space between the disparate elements, between

²⁹ C.I.680 to Louis Bouilhet, 2 September 1850.

³⁰ C.I.538 to Louis Bouilhet, 1.12.1849.

³¹ C.I.539 to Louis Bouilhet, 1.12.1849.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ VE.407-8.

the Orientalist 'image reçue' and the often brutal fact of real existence. These layers of actuality - indications of quintessentially flaubertian observation - create depth in a way that will be developed and perfected in his future novels. There are numerous references to the pleasures or dilemmas a painter would have when attempting to reproduce the quality of the Oriental light and colours, as if they would be better suited to the task than Flaubert; that what is called for is the pictorial rather than the textual image. Yet this tension exacts prose passages of intense visionary beauty. Having transported the shimmering incandescence of the Red Sea into a letter to Louis Bouilhet, he empathises with the inevitability of a painter's self-doubt and recognition of the potential falsity of attempts to reproduce the truth of such a reality.³⁴ For Said, the Oriental genre tableau as exemplified by Delacroix 'carried representation into visual expression and a life of its own':³⁵ this is surely what Flaubert was striving towards, and so often achieves, in his writing on the voyage. Yet one of the major problems that will dog his composition of *Madame Bovary* surfaces at this time: the poverty of language, which prompts a self-mocking cry of despair; having tried to reflect the brilliant pattern of stars using the image of a diamond necklace, he realises the 'triste misère du langage! Comparer des étoiles à des diamants!'.³⁶

Flaubert rejoices in the light that was so crucial to him: 'Je me pénètre de soleil, de lumière'.³⁷ To paraphrase de Biasi, like the huge desert sky it is 'vécu et subi. [...] C'est, à l'état brut, le milieu qui enveloppe, pénètre et transforme le corps et la subjectivité'.³⁸ From sunrise to sunset, liquifying into the surface of things, bleaching black - a black rock resembles a Nubian in a white tunic - until, amidst the silence of the desert, it assumes 'une transparence noire',³⁹ so opposed to the impermeable sepia of Du Camp's photos. It is clearly a continuing voluptuousness for Flaubert. Yet the darker side is never excluded: the oppressive silence, the melancholy, an intensely personal sense of distance and loss. In Egypt, the potency of the country has 'quelque chose d'immense et d'impitoyable au milieu duquel vous êtes perdu'.⁴⁰ A ruin which reeks of fever conjures up images of the mediaeval Orient, of men dying there in a morass of boredom, instantly recognisable to Flaubert: 'Il fait un grand silence - personne - personne - je suis seul - deux oiseaux de proie planent sur ma tête - j'entends de l'autre côté du Nil dans le désert la voix d'un homme appeler quelqu'un'⁴¹ - this is Flaubert's voice in the wilderness, and these are the textual planes of reality.

His notes, then, are minimalist and elliptical. But it is clear from his ability to 'flesh them out' on his return, that through his optic lens he 'captured'

³⁴ C.I.637 to Louis Bouilhet, 2 June 1850.

³⁵ Op. cit., p. 118.

³⁶ VE.374.

³⁷ C.I.562 to his mother, 5 January 1850.

³⁸ Introduction. VE.66.

³⁹ VE.319-20.

⁴⁰ VE.182.

⁴¹ VE.329.

everything he saw as if on a photographic plate, while ironically Du Camp's 'instrument de précision'⁴² seemed unable to revive his experiences in the same way.⁴³ Once the early blinding impact of the reality of Egypt had passed, he chose 'être œil tout bonnement',⁴⁴ and was thus able to stand 'outside' his vision, and be an impartial witness. The extraordinarily non-judgemental quality of Flaubert's testimony heralds his future authorial impersonality, and allows him to be largely exempt from Edward Said's celebrated charge of an innate superiority directed at almost all other 19th century European Orientalists.⁴⁵ It is from Damascus that Flaubert writes to Louis Bouilhet: 'à prendre les choses impartialement, il y a eu peu de choses de plus fertiles. *L'ineptie consiste à vouloir conclure*'⁴⁶ - a dictum that will be repeated and practised throughout his life.

The sense of revelation that accompanied his experience of contemporary Egypt, the fusion of illusion and reality, tied his changing perceptions to the Oriental space, forcing a re-assessment of his subtext. It is to a letter written to Louise Colet in 1853 that we owe a clear definition of this shift in sensibility. Separating himself from the crowd - and perhaps also from his own earlier perceptions - by a careful use of pronouns, Flaubert declares: 'On a compris jusqu'à présent l'Orient comme quelque chose de miroitant, de hurlant, de passionné, de heurté. On n'y a vu que des bayadères et des sabres recourbés, le fanatisme, la volupté, etc. En un mot, on en reste encore à Byron. Moi, je l'ai senti différemment; ce que j'aime au contraire dans l'Orient, c'est cette grandeur qui s'ignore, et cette *harmonie de choses disparates*. [...] Je veux qu'il y ait une amertume à tout, un éternel coup de sifflet au milieu de nos triomphes, et que la désolation même soit dans l'enthousiasme'.⁴⁷ He recalls the cemetery at Jaffa, where he smelt simultaneously the scent of lemon trees and that of corpses: 'le cimetière défoncé laissait voir les squelettes à demi pourris, tandis que les arbustes verts balançaient au-dessus de nos têtes leurs fruits dorés. Ne sens-tu pas combien cette poésie est complète, et que c'est la grande synthèse? Tous les appétits de l'imagination et de la pensée y sont assouvis à la fois: elle ne laisse rien derrière elle.'⁴⁸ The startling antithesis represents for him 'l'Orient vrai et, partant, poétique'.⁴⁹ The poetry of this 'grande synthèse', his recognition of the harmony which is produced by the force of oppositional stimuli, shares the same principles as Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal* and *Le Spleen de Paris*. It denies any possibility of the application of the flaubertian pejorative adjective 'po-hê-tique': lyricism is tempered by its context. This passage, written nearly three years after

⁴² Maxime Du Camp, *Souvenirs littéraires* (Paris: Aubier, 1994 [1882], p. 286.

⁴³ See Flaubert's letter to Louise Colet re Du Camp's *Le Nil*: 'Les détails qu'il a le mieux vus, et les plus caractéristiques dans la nature, il les oublie'. C.II.448, 7 October 1853.

⁴⁴ C.I.602 to Louis Bouilhet, 13.03.1850.

⁴⁵ Edward Said. *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995 [1978]), p. 54.

⁴⁶ C.I.679 to Louis Bouilhet, 2.09.1850.

⁴⁷ C.II.283 to Louise Colet, 27 March 1853.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 283-4.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 283.

the event, seems to me to be crucial to the understanding both of Flaubert's reaction to and absorption of the 'actual' Orient, and to his contemporary redefining of aesthetic and stylistic principles.

While the history of the Egyptian civilisation was accepted by the Orientalists, contemporary Egypt was perceived as debased. Although he regretted the intrusive Western influences which polluted the 'picturesque', Flaubert recognised the extraordinary modernity of the incongruities of daily life. Experiencing what he perceives to be an authentic, as opposed to a romanticised, Elsewhere, allows him to perceive the 'harmonie de choses disparates' present in the modernity of his own country. He finds the dialectical solution to the dissonance at the heart of the Orient⁵⁰ and crucially, I believe, of his own creative imagination, which had been stumbling on the corrosive stupidity of French bourgeois society.

While he acknowledges and indeed enjoys living Orientalism, Flaubert's expressions of the clarities and obscurities indigenous to the Orient spring from his observation of reality: 'Mon genre d'observation est surtout moral. Je n'aurais jamais soupçonné ce côté au Voyage. Le côté psychologique, humain, comique y est abondant.'⁵¹ Like 'day' and 'night', the boundaries of Flaubert's linked experience and expression of the Orient encompass opposition, exclusion, and inclusion.

⁵⁰ Guy Barthélemy. 'Excès et barbarie dans l'écriture de l'Orient flaubertien', in *Mélanges offerts à Pierre Barbéris*. Textes réunis par Gérard Gengembre, Jean Goldzink (Fontenay/Saint Cloud : E.N.S.Éditions, 1995), pp. 13-31.

⁵¹ C.I.707 to Louis Bouilhet, 14 November 1850.