

## IN THE LAND OF THE LOTUS EATERS: TRAVEL WRITING AND THE AMBIGUITIES OF COLONIAL REPRESENTATION IN FRENCH ALGERIA, 1830-1870

GAVIN MURRAY-MILLER

In the second edition of his travel writings published in 1874, the author and painter Eugène Fromentin believed it was necessary to apprise the reader of the incongruities between his own experiences in Algeria and the realities of the present. Despite the fact that his works documented travels to North Africa made in the 1840s and early 1850s, he maintained that ‘These books are already of another time’ (*Oeuvres* 3). Fromentin’s accounts had recorded the profound changes taking shape in Algeria as France began to colonise the Maghreb. In 1852 he had noted a single palm tree ‘hanging on’ in the midst of urbanisation: ‘Its base is cemented over, dishonouring it and yet not preventing it from dying’ (*Between Sea and Sahara* 24). With his penchant for symbolism, Fromentin presented this image as a metaphor for the effects produced by French colonisation. The changes sweeping over North Africa were ‘dishonouring’ the Muslim world of the ‘Orient’, subjecting it to a transformative process occurring so rapidly that written accounts could hardly serve as accurate representations of the present. If modernity was, as Charles Baudelaire declared, the ‘ephemeral, fugitive, [and] contingent’, then colonialism was certainly an explicit manifestation of the modern (‘The Painter of Modern Life’ 37).

Yet as Fromentin’s comments indicated, this form of modernity was not necessarily construed through the popular perceptions of progress and development that commonly wove themselves into French colonial discourse. A certain note of melancholy and even reflexive shame was evident in his conjecture that modernity implied a sense of dishonour. For Fromentin, as for other French travellers, colonisation was not only understood as a grand project that was bringing civilisation to a retrograde society; transporting French civilisation across the Mediterranean could be just as devastating as it was enlightening, with the accumulated structural and human wreckage produced by modernisation often contradicting the optimistic future heralded by colonial ideologues.

The critic and poet Théophile Gautier may have been able to depict the archetypal French imperialist in his play *La juive de Constantine*, having the lieutenant Maurice stridently declare, ‘France has placed her foot in the African soil to defeat barbarism, and before the universe, she will accomplish this noble task!’, yet this characterisation was more farcical than definitive (qtd. in Hartman 24). Through his travels in Algeria Gautier himself had become disillusioned with the pretence of French grandeur implicit in *la mission*

*civilisatrice*, noting that ‘nothing is more amusing for a man who doesn’t have any preconceived ideas about conquest or civilisation than to stroll about the Moorish streets of Algiers in the morning’ (*Voyage* 49). Sauntering along the avenues of Algiers in 1852, Fromentin claimed that he was ‘not yet able to visualise what it will be . . . [or] what it had stopped being, imagining both with difficulty’ (*Between Sea and Sahara* 82). The sense of irresolution which Fromentin experienced, consisting of a present in which both past and future were vague and ill-defined, amounted to a confession. The Orient remained, he affirmed, ‘in the making [*à faire*]’; French imperial identity constituted part of this emergent process, eliciting emotions of ambivalence and apprehension that, at times, conflicted with a discourse of ostensible French power and civilisation (*Oeuvres* 1252).

The notion of an Orient ‘in the making’ was, however, reflective of the genre of travel writing itself just as much as French encounters with the colonial milieu. Contrasting the deficiencies of colonial Algeria with a traditional and exotic Orient, French observers depicted a spiritual and pre-modern Algerian society endangered by the practices of Western imperialism. The destruction of maghrébine architecture and tradition recorded by French writers generated a sense of anxiety, but this anxiety was associated with the loss of an imagined Oriental world that remained primarily a construction of writers and journalists. In such accounts, orientalism and imperialism could prove to be antagonistic, with the Orient serving as an object that both affirmed and criticised European social and intellectual norms. Consequently, travel writing came to provide an important ideological space in which conceptions of European identity, the Orient, and otherness illuminated the tensions implicit in French colonial discourse.

Colonial discourse is neither monolithic nor contained within a finite set of texts. It consists of numerous discourses marked by internal repetitions and ‘colonising gestures’ in language (Spurr 1–2). That these discourses seek to construct a coherent representation of a non-Western world underpinned by certain cultural and ideological presumptions has been the predominant claim of post-colonial theorists since the late 1970s. Edward Said’s belief that all Western references to the east, or ‘the Orient’, are shaped through a process of discursive construction has established a broad framework for analysing a particularly ‘Western style’ of dominating, restructuring and exercising authority over the non-Western other (Viswanathan 169). Within these sets of discourses, the colonised subject is commonly described in terms of deficiency and retardation, with the West symbolising access to a superior language, culture, forms of knowledge, and technology—in essence, the promise of modernity (Phillips, ‘Lagging Behind’ 66).

Such arrogance and chauvinism has been widely addressed in critiques of colonial history, illuminating the myriad ‘ideological formations’ that rationalised Western imperial domination, whether through the dichotomy of

civilised-savage, the discourse of *la mission civilisatrice*, or prevailing notions of the White Man's Burden. As the idea of empire was developed over the course of the nineteenth century, these formations became interwoven into the basic fabric of European culture, engendering a colonial mentality that structured and shaped conceptions—whether conscious or unconscious—of both metropolitan and colonial society. The 'enterprise of empire', as Said has claimed, depended upon the idea of possessing an empire, and the elements that constructed, elaborated, and consolidate imperial practice became a facet of nineteenth-century social and cultural experience (Said 9–11).

Within this pervasive theoretical framework, travel writing has been labelled a specific form of colonial discourse, inscribing it within the grand narrative of imperial history. As Steve Clark has maintained, the genre of travel literature has persistently been 'encoded' with ideological aspects (Clark 3). Since accounts of voyages are addressed to and intended for consumption by the home culture, they generally evince a reflexive epistemology in analysing others that translates into a psychology of imperialism. The act of viewing and describing is, within this context, equated to an act of appropriation (see Pratt). Patricia Lorcin has asserted that French literature depicting the Orient during the nineteenth century by such travel writers as Théophile Gautier, Gérard de Nerval, and Eugène Fromentin commonly saw the east as a space of private fantasy or a distant object of study, reflecting personal desires based upon a sense of mystery and relying on contrived images of the colonial other that perpetuated stereotypes (Lorcin 94). Post-colonial Maghrébins have also criticised (perhaps more acerbically) the travelogues of the nineteenth century. The contemporary Algerian novelist Assia Djebar condemned Fromentin's work as a tool of imperialism in her novel *L'amour, la fantasia*, describing a surreal scene in which Fromentin offers the mutilated hand of Algeria to the author.

French encounters with Algeria in the mid-nineteenth century are, however, often problematic when addressed through certain precepts of post-colonial theory. Personal and subjective colonial experiences conveyed within travel accounts indicated that French observers did not exercise unquestionable power over physical and social space in the colony (Thompson 29–31). In their efforts to dismantle the ideological apparatus of imperialism, post-colonial theorists have often ignored subjective and individual experiences which occasionally defy accusations of appropriation and the exercising of power over the other (Musgrove 32–33). In the act of travelling, one does not necessarily appropriate the strange and the exotic; the traveller, as Homi Bhabha has claimed, encounters a space where cultural signs become open to negotiation and subjective identity is challenged as the system of signs underpinning individual identity begins to disintegrate (186–90). The traveller is consequently poised between two worlds, a feat that, according to Brian Musgrove, is 'potentially

annihilating' and results in anxiety and psychic 'disunification' as established order is replaced by confusion and angst (32, 39).

At this juncture where discourses of power fragment and give way to dysphoric sentiments associated with encountering the foreign it becomes possible to analyse and gauge the subtleties and tensions implicit in the European colonial experience. Imperial ideology was both criticised and reproduced simultaneously in French travel writing during the middle of the nineteenth century. While travels were not mechanically determined by ideology or social outlooks, they were, to use a phrase employed by Said, 'in the history' of their society, both 'shaping and being shaped by respective social experiences' (Said xxii). If it is important to examine how empires ruled and represented their rule, it is also important to examine how individuals subjectively experienced the process of imperialism to draw out a more nuanced perspective on the transformations and reflexive concerns that accompanied the Age of Empire.

French travellers during the nineteenth century were inclined to view the Orient through popular perceptions that emphasised the pre-modern and religious nature of Eastern society. Gustave Flaubert spoke of 'the old Orient, land of religions and flowering robes' during his travels in Egypt (Flaubert 73). Similarly, Fromentin noted that in Algeria one could find 'more or less the customs and practices both public and private of yesterday. It is more or less the Algiers of the Turks, only shrunken impoverished, having only the facsimile of social fabric' (*Between Sea and Sahara* 20). The French dignitary Achilles de Broglie arrived in Algeria in the late 1850s believing that the appeal of the Orient was 'the allure of memories and the luminous traces of the past' (Broglie 118). Approaching the African coast via steamboat in the summer of 1845, Gautier remarked that he was entering the 'exotic' and 'savage' Orient, a land that had preoccupied his imagination. His presumptions and expectations would, he admitted with candor, either be 'realised or dispelled [*s'écrouler*]' as he probed this virtual *terra incognita* (35–36).

Arriving in Algiers, Gautier found a 'strange life where civilisation mixes with barbarity in a proportion so picturesque' (105). This aspect of strangeness was not merely the curious exoticism of orientalist making, but rather the peculiar coupling of opposites which mingled in the streets, the architecture, and even the very life of the city. According to the religious historian Jean-Joseph François Poujoulat, a seasoned *voyageur* in North Africa, Algiers possessed an 'Arab physiognomy blended with a European physiognomy' (15). The novelist Ernest Feydeau similarly remarked on the '*physionomie hybride*' of the colonial city, describing a creature that was half Moorish and half French (49). The peculiar topography and fluid mixing of a cosmopolitan population comprised of French, Arabs, Berbers, Jews, Turks, and Europeans reflected an 'incredible mélange' that could not be easily assessed or gauged (Gautier 39).

As a colonial city, Algiers was complex and multi-faceted, capable of encompassing opposites and eluding definitive boundaries. Overlapping cultural borders had, moreover, the effect of blurring time and history. Remnants of the ancient Muslim civilisation could be glimpsed in the Arab sections of the city exhibiting a decaying landscape that defied historical sensibilities. ‘You forget history in the midst of the incongruities of the present and the ruins’, Fromentin claimed as he meandered through Algiers’ Moorish quarters (*Between Sea and Sahara* 20). This historical amnesia made it difficult for the artist to temporally orient himself in the colonial milieu. ‘The impression of the present moment repeats so exactly memories of yesterday that I am no longer distinguishing between the two’, he admitted after arriving in Algeria, leading to the recognition of a timeless present that ruptured historical and temporal assumptions (39).

Descending into the old quarters of Algiers, travellers discovered that normative conceptions of space and time became refracted and distorted, exacerbating the sense of mystification and engendering feelings of anxiety and uncertainty. Gautier referred to the narrow streets and cyclopean walls of the Casbah as a ‘*labyrinthe africain*’. ‘The streets tangle, cross, coil, and return on themselves’, he explained, ‘seeming to have no other purpose than to baffle [*dérouter*] pedestrians and travelers. The veins in the human body do not form a more complex network’ (47). Once Ernest Feydeau had departed from the ‘modern streets’ built by the French, ‘nothing resembled anything familiar’. Navigating through the network of ‘torturous streets’, he became lost, and retracing his steps forced Feydeau to rely on ‘instinct and whim’ in finding his way (32–33). Old Algiers was, in Tocqueville’s opinion, comparable to a ‘fox burrow’: ‘narrow, obscure, [and] smoky’ (63). ‘The perpendicular is rarely observed in Algerian constructions’, Gautier noted: ‘the lines blend and stagger like in a state of drunkenness, the walls shift from right to left as though they are going to come down on your back’. He found himself confused and disoriented as he wandered through the city, suffering from a sense of ‘vertigo’, which, he believed, was the unique experience of the foreigner who realises he is no longer in the world of familiar ‘habits and estimations’ (43, 37).

The cramped spaces, experiences of temporal estrangement, and dizzying spectacles that often incited a dysphoric vulnerability were contrasted with the Marine quarter that housed the colonial government where French building projects had begun to transfigure the urban landscape. Appraising the district in 1852, Fromentin observed that the French administration had managed to create ‘a little rue de Rivoli’ complete with buildings that he described as ‘Parisian imitations’. The city of Blidah to the south had been equally draped in ‘European style’. There were ‘no more shaded streets, no more cafés, [with] three-quarters of the houses destroyed, and replaced by European structures’ (*Between Sea and Sahara* 11, 81). Gautier felt bemused when staring up at the old Djenina Palace nestled in the heart of the Marine, its noble Moorish

architecture now surrounded with the ‘bourgeois banality’ of French edifices (38).

A decade after the launching of the French invasion, building projects had already begun to transform Algiers. The city existed in a state of ‘destruction and reconstruction’, Tocqueville observed in 1841. ‘Everywhere, recent ruins and edifices being raised are visible. The only noise is the constant sound of hammers’ (62). Construction only increased in the coming years as the French stabilised their influence in North Africa. By 1860, Algiers was ‘veritably diminished’, according to Feydeau, ‘. . . and the sad thing is, that the diminishing is still taking place’ (39). If Gautier was inclined to see a proportionate mix of civilisation and ‘barbarism’ in the city during his visit in 1845, fifteen years later Feydeau was certain that the scales had definitively tipped in favour of the former, and the results were not necessarily encouraging.

‘Proceeding by the principle of *table rase*’, Fromentin stated, ‘civilisation has begun by tearing down everything not in accordance with its tastes’ (*Oeuvres* 965). The street bazaars had disappeared, along with the Arabs who had once attended them; whole sections of the city existed now in name and memory alone; religious customs and cultural traditions were giving way to modern habits brought by the Europeans. ‘It is a very distressing sight’, Feydeau remarked while watching Arabs sitting in European-style cafés, ‘to publicly see them imbibing glasses of absinth and aping the manners of their vanquishers under the pretext of civilisation’ (62). If Europeans were bringing civilisation and modernity to the colonial world, the effects of this modernisation were experienced with a certain anxiety and distress as mystery dissolved into disillusion and those who attempted to resist the march of history were left behind, becoming nothing more than ruins of a previous age. It was not without a sense of melancholy that Gautier would ponder over the future of the ‘profound and mysterious Orient that civilisation must fatally invade in a very short time’ (69).

The Moors and Arabs who remained faithful to tradition were relics of a ‘past grandeur’, Feydeau contended, a ruined and ‘enervated’ people on the verge of perishing. Yet the advent of the future was not as optimistic as some would have liked to believe. Industrialisation, a process ‘falsely decorated in the name of civilisation’, was spreading over every continent of the earth, creating a material culture in which religion and mysticism no longer had a place. ‘The Orient is disappearing’, Feydeau lamented, ‘disputing the terrain step by step, but it is disappearing with its exquisite forms’. Accompanying this global transformation was a demoralising conformity as all societies adopted the same laws and beliefs, unleashing an ‘incommensurable ennui’ in which mystery and the exotic succumbed to the banal and vulgar (157–58).

Not all who expressed anxiety over the process of modernisation shared Feydeau’s bleak outlook. Gautier mourned the disappearance of the sublime Orient, but was optimistic of the coming changes modernity would bring. He

returned to Algeria in 1862 to witness the inaugural ceremony of the French-constructed Algiers-Blidah railroad. As he observed the spectacle, his thoughts became preoccupied by the extent of change that had occurred in the colony since his first visit seventeen years earlier. ‘The approaching future filled with promise is opening for French Algeria’, he affirmed (107). Fromentin was equally convinced that French influence in Algeria was pushing history forward, as modern social and economic practices emerged in the colony. No matter how painful and demoralising these processes may have appeared during the transitional period, they would ultimately restore the Orient and dispel memories of the long years of decadence and decline: ‘the future will wipe out the past. Most of all it will excuse the present, which, it should be stated without being unjust, is in need of being excused’ (*Between Sea and Sahara* 81).

Yet Fromentin could not help but feel that the economic prosperity, stability, and progress promised by European modernity was somehow demoralising Algeria in the process. ‘It is dishonoured, since it is French’, he remarked sullenly (*Oeuvres* 957). The debris and wreckage of an indigenous culture accumulating around the emergent landscape of the future was disenchanting, inspiring a sense of unease and anxiety that pervaded the colonial experience. Optimism was coupled with apprehension as observers witnessed the destruction of an entire civilisation and way of life before their eyes.

Gautier was conscious of a sense of tragedy as the old Algeria disappeared ‘under the invasion of French tastes’ (147). Comparing his travel experiences in Algeria with his preconceptions, Gautier realised that the familiar images of the Orient gleaned from theatrical performances, literature, and the canvases of salon artists were only representations, a ‘fairyland Orient’, a ‘charming phantasmagoria’ (140, 141). These representations ‘interspersed with blurry outlines’ did, however, signify definitive realities for Europeans who, arriving in a foreign land, immediately became disillusioned with what they found, leaving Gautier to ask ‘is it true that the illusion is valued more than reality? That the Orient of the opera . . . [is] superior to the real Orient . . .?’ (140). As colonialism violently transformed Algeria, that real and authentic Orient which had never been known or experienced by Europeans blinded by fantasies would ‘soon exist only in a state of memory’, losing its tangible referent and diminishing into obscurity (147). Lest all that remain be the misleading impressions and representations of the imagination, it was imperative to capture the reality of this dying world through experiential accounts and depictions. The fate of Algeria and the influences of colonialism became, in Gautier’s opinion, the justification for the modernist project of realism.

While Gautier had braced himself in 1845 to have his expectations of the Orient either verified or dispelled through direct experience, by the 1860s he still proved reluctant to modify his anticipations in the face of certain actualities. The Orient imagined by *voyageurs* like Gautier, Fromentin, and Feydeau proved elusive during the course of their North African travels. In an

effort to reconcile the imaginary with the realities of colonial Algeria, French travel writers came to assail the devastating practices of a colonialism they believed responsible for destroying the traditions and spirituality of the East. Despite expressing pathos for the *indigène* population, however, travellers continued to subscribe to the notion of a French ‘civilising mission’ in the world. Disillusionment could, as Gautier’s prescriptive musings on Algeria made evident, embody a discourse that at once appropriated space and identity and flaunted French power just as much as it aimed to preserve vestiges of the pre-colonial world and critique colonialism’s destructive and narcissistic tendencies. Although certainly ‘encoded’ with ideological presumptions, travel writing nevertheless tended to reflect an ambiguity and contention as France sought to define a colonial identity for itself in the mid-nineteenth century. In this context, French travel writing encompassed an interplay between colonial experience and colonial discourse, offering a public space where the fixity of discursive meanings began to dissolve and the ambivalence and tensions structuring colonial encounters were illuminated.

### WORKS CITED

- Baudelaire, Charles. ‘The Painter of Modern Life’. *My Heart Laid Bare and Other Prose Writings*. Trans. Norman Cameron. New York: Huskell House, 1975.
- Bhabah, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Broglié, A. de. *Une Réforme administrative en Afrique*. Paris: H. Dumineray, 1860.
- Clark, Steve, ed. *Travel Writing and Empire: Postcolonial Theory in Transit*. London: Zed Books, 1999.
- Feydeau, Ernest. *Alger: études*. Paris: Editions Bouchene, 2003.
- Flaubert, Gustave. *Flaubert in Egypt*. Ed. and trans. Francis Steegmuller. New York: Penguin, 1996.
- Fromentin, Eugène. *Oeuvres complètes*. Paris: Gallimard, 1984.
- . *Between Sea and Sahara: An Algerian Journal*. Trans. Blake Robinson. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1999.
- Gautier, Théophile. *Voyage en Algérie*. Paris: La Boîte à Documents, 1989.
- Hartman, Elwood. *Three Nineteenth-Century French Writers/Artists and the Maghreb: The Literary and Artistic Depictions of North Africa by Théophile Gautier, Eugène Fromentin, and Pierre Loti*. Tübingen: Gunter Narrverlag, 1994.
- Lorcin, Patricia M. E. *Imperial Identities: Stereotyping, Prejudice and Race in Colonial Algeria*. London: I.B. Tauris, 1995.
- Musgrove, Brian. ‘Travel and Unsettling: Freud on Vacation’. Clark 30–61.

- Phillips, John. 'Lagging Behind: Bhabah, Post-Colonial Theory and the Future'. Clark 62–79.
- Poujoulat, Jean-Joseph François. *Voyage en Algérie*. Paris: Vermot, 1861.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994.
- Spurr, David. *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993.
- Thompson, Victoria. "‘I Went Pale With Pleasure’": The Body, Sexuality, and National Identity Among French Travelers in Algiers in the Nineteenth Century'. *Algeria and France, 1800-2000: Identity, Memory, Nostalgia*. Ed. Patrica M.E. Lorcin. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Sur l'Algérie*. Paris: Flammarion, 2003.
- Viswanathan, Gauri, ed. *Power, Politics, and Culture: Interviews with Edward W. Said*. New York: Vintage, 2001.