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Egypt In Modern British Fiction With Special Reference To Durrell And Enright

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CONTENTS

PREFACE

The present thesis is a study in the image of Egypt in modern British fiction; it is an attempt to discover how modern British novelists have reacted to Egypt and how they have presented it in their writings. More particularly, the thesis is concerned with the cultural portrayal of Egypt and Egyptians with emphasis on the impressions and notions provided by modern British novelists who worked and lived for some years in Egypt.

An attempt has also been made to show the variety of subject matter tackled in these novels and the different literary techniques employed in delineating Egypt and its people.

An important research focus is studying whether the representation of Egypt is subjective or objective and whether the image of Egypt is an impression, a personal interpretation or an authentic, accurate reproduction of this country.

Another emerging research focus is the cultural, social and political backgrounds affecting the representation of Egypt. In the present thesis, one tries to see fiction as art in the context of relevant historical, political and biographical facts. Such an approach is, in the first place, inspired and controlled by a literary-critical sense of literature. At the same time, one should be aware of the complexities of the relation between the world of the imagination and the world of historical, political and biographical facts. The modern British novels set in Egypt throw light not only on life in this country but also on Western culture and on the authors of such fiction. Their novels in a sense mirror different facets of their age, culture, personal experience and temperament.

The thesis comprises four chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter shows the impact of Egypt on the consciousness of modern British writers and the powerful factors conditioning their reactions to this place, such as imperialism, racial heritage, Anglo-

Egyptian conflict and cultural exile.The same chapter examines the hidden facts behind the presentation of this non-British based culture. It also sheds light on how 'Orientalism' has affected the modern British novelist's approach to Egypt one way or another.

The first chapter attempts to find answers to the following questions: Out of what collective and yet particularized vision of Egypt are these novels created? What are the points of similarity between them? What imaginative pressures, what traditions and what cultural forces produce such similarities in the representation of Egypt in modern British fiction?

The second chapter is devoted to some modern British novelists - Robert Liddell, James Aldridge, Desmond Stewart, William Golding, Penelope Lively, Olivia Manning and P. H. Newby - who have dealt with Egypt as a subject or as a location for some of their novels. The object of this chapter is to arrive at a general idea of the predominant impressions and modes of the representation of Egypt in modern British fiction. It also demonstrates the extent to which these novels share in common.

The present thesis is by no means an inclusive survey of modern British fiction that tackles Egypt. The novels one has chosen to critically survey or elaborately examine seem to one most revealing as far as the major British reactions to and representations of Egypt are concerned.

In the third and fourth chapters, one narrows down one's critical study to a critical analysis of Lawrence Durrell's Alexandria Quartet and D. J. Enright's Academic Year. The two chapters examine in a more detailed way the visions of these two individual novelists of modern Egypt. One has found it necessary to deal with these two selected writers separately because the vision of each is totally different from - if not the opposite to - that of the other.

The purpose of this thesis is: first, to explore the fundamental British attitudes towards Egypt and Egyptians; second, to study how such attitudes are mirrored in modern British fiction dealing with Egypt; third, to find out whether Egypt is well- or ill- presented and fourth, to explore why Egypt has been represented as such.

CHAPTER I

FACTS BEHIND FICTION

"Domesticating the exotic from Biblical literature and the Greek and Roman classics downwards," writes P.H. Newby, "has been one of our traditional literary labours."[1] English travellers, artists and men of letters from the sixteenth century onwards have been drawn to the exotic Orient by many desires.

First, there is the desire to delineate bizarre landscapes, picturesque scenes, impressive ruins and the lands of ancient civilizations. Second, some want to portray themselves against an exotic background or to find in such a strange landscape a correlative to their emotional state. Third, they tend to depict unfamiliar scenes as a way of studying the customs, manners and beliefs of a foreign place or of shedding an indirect light upon the habits of their own. Fourth, some seek to satisfy needs which are unsatisfied in their orderly and systematic Western lives: they turn Eastward for satisfaction. Colouring all these trends is the desire to pass through new experiences, sometimes to escape from the present, through time and space, into 'other' worlds.[2]

The Orient has been popularised through the Arabian Nights which was translated early in the eighteenth century, giving rise to a large body of writing about the Orient. Since the eighteenth century, adventurers, tutors, journalists, diplomats and men of letters have poured into Egypt, an integral part of this 'exotic' Orient, for various reasons: historical, political, biblical, archaeological and cultural. It was through the French Expedition in 1798 that Egypt was brought into notice in the English mind as well as in the European mind at large.

What attracted the attention of Englishmen to Egypt was not only curiosity and

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1 P. H. Newby, "Libya and Points East," New Statesman 17 Jan. 1969: 85.

2 John Press, Rule and Energy: Trends in British Poetry Since the Second World War (London: Oxford UP, 1963) 202-03.

love of adventure but also the strategic position of this country. A good deal of the lure of Egypt for English travellers and writers in the nineteenth century lay in the fact that it provided them with an admirable illustration of the Arabian Nights. Military journals, drawings, travel-books, poems on the Nile, articles, French books translated into English - were published to satisfy public curiosity.

In an attempt to gratify the fetish for the exotic, Edward Lane published his book, Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians (1836) which portrays a panorama of modern Egyptian life. For many years after its publication writers on Egypt referred their readers to it or amply borrowed from it with or without recognizing their debt. Lane, writes Edward Said, "was an authority whose use was an imperative for anyone writing or thinking about the Orient, not just about Egypt."[1] Lawrence Durrell, for example, borrows passages verbatim from Modern Egyptians, using Lane's authority to assist him in describing unfamiliar scenes in Egypt.

In the late 1830's and afterwards Egypt attracted many famous French writers like Gustave Flaubert and other eminent English authors, such as William Makepiece Thackeray and Alexander Kinglake who recorded his impressions of his visit to the Levant in 1844 in his book Eothen, a classic of travel writing which delineates a sharp contrast between the East and the West.[2]

Egypt's history from 1850 to 1882 can be summarized in the phrase, "from

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1 Edward W. Said, Orientalism (London: Penguin, 1978) 23.

2 See Rashad Rushdy, The Lure of Egypt: For English Writers and Travellers During the Nineteenth Century, ed. Bonamy Dobrée (Cairo: Anglo-Egyptian Book shop, n.d.).

foreign borrowing to bankruptcy and occupation."[1] In 1882, an Egyptian nationalist revolt failed, the British fleet bombarded Alexandria, and Egypt was occupied by British troops and its civil service by British administrators.

With the First World War, Egypt has assumed great military importance for Britain. Till then, Britain's position in Egypt had been "anomalous."[2] For thirty years or so the British Consul-General had been the effective ruler, yet formally speaking the country had still nominally been part of the Turkish Empire. It was only with Turkey's entry into the war, on the German side, that Britain had declared Egypt a protectorate.

The British officials, remarks P. N. Furbank, did not like the place, nor - since the Denshwai incident of 1906 - were they much liked; there was "little fraternization" on their part, either with the native Egyptians or with the cosmopolitan commercial and official classes.[3]

Nevertheless, Egypt played a prominent role in the consciousness of the British writers who came at that time to work and live there - chief among whom was E. M. Forster. "The fortune of war cast Mr. Forster upon Alexandria, and Alexandria cast her spell upon him."[4] Forster's time there - as a volunteer with the Red Cross from November 1915 to January 1919 - was crucial in his development as man and writer. Alexandria at that time, remarks Laurence Brander, was "an oasis in a world conflict, a

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1 Alexander Kitroeff, "The Alexandria We Have Lost," Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora 10.1-2 (1983): 12.

2 P. N. Furbank, E. M. Forster: A Life (New York: Harcoust Brace Jovanovich, 1978) 21.

3 Furbank 21.

4 "A Vision of Alexandria," Times Literary Supplement 31 May 1923: 369.

cosmopolitan city uncommitted to anything but the joy of living in a perfect climate by a warm and tideless sea."[1] There Forster had a sexual affair with Mohammed El Adl, a tram conductor. Forster also came to know well the afterward famous Greek poet,C. P. Cavafy (1863 - 1933) and tried to forward then and later his reputation in Europe. This friendship between two exiles from totally different cultures was maintained in a correspondence which lasted till Cavafy's death. With Cavafy's help Forster could discover Alexandria.

The sojourn in Egypt also gave Forster, as Lionel Trilling has said, "a firm position on the Imperial question."[2] Forster witnessed the problems of British imperialism at first hand, whether in Egypt or in India, and with the particular intensity war provides. In 1920 a lengthy pamphlet entitled The Government of Egypt: Recommendations by a Committee of the International Section of the Labour Research Department was published with "Notes on Egypt" by Forster, in which he gave a thorough account of British exploitation and bungling (as he perceived it) in Egypt, as a prelude to the committee's recommendation that the British should withdraw as soon as possible from the country.[3]

The literary fruits of the war years Forster spent in Egypt were Alexandria: A History and a Guide (written while in Egypt but not published until 1922)[4] and the

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1 Laurence Brander, E. M. Forster: A Critical Study (London: Rupert Hart Davis, 1968) 58.

2 qtd. in Francis King, E. M. Forster and His World (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978) 63.

3 King 63.

4 E.M.Forster, Alexandria:A History and a Guide(Alexandria:Whitehead Morris,1922;Garden City: Doubleday, 1961; London: Michael Haag, 1982). All references are to Michael Haag edition with an introduction by Lawrence Durrell. Forster's "Notes" are full of quotations from The Alexandria Quartet which juxtapose the real history with a fictional one.

articles gathered into the slim volume Pharos and Pharillon (1923) in addition to a good number of other articles for The Egyptian Mail. Forster did not much care for Egypt; only Alexandria took hold of his imagination. He was impressed, as he says in his guide to the city, by "the magic and the antiquity and the complexity of the city, and determined to write about her."[1]

In Alexandria Forster approaches the city first historically and then topographically. The "History" is written in short sections, each of which is followed by references to help the reader juxtapose the present with the past. The first half of the book covers the period from the city's founding in 331 B.C. until the consolidation of British power there with the bombardment of 1882. The second half guides one down present-day streets to the ruins and remnants of Alexandria's past.

Pharos and Pharillon is a collection of the journalism about Alexandria and Egypt, covering much of the ground of Alexandria. Pharos is the famous lighthouse, one of The Seven Wonders of the ancient world, which stood in the harbour of Alexandria until about A.D. 700, when it fell into the sea. Pharillon is the smaller successor to Pharos, the square base of the building that the Arabs used as a watchtower until, in the fourteenth century, an earthquake caused it to slide into the Mediterranean. So, the book is divided into two parts: Pharos symbolizing the ancient city and Pharillon modern events and Forster's personal impressions of the modern city from cotton trading to drug addiction to the present topography of Alexandria.

The modern city depicted in "Pharillon", which is unlike its predecessor, the ancient city, "calls for no enthusiastic comment."[2] The modern city, which provided

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1 Forster, Alexandria: A History and a Guide XXI.
2 E.M. Forster, Pharos and Pharillon (1923; London:Michael Haag, 1983) 98.

little interest for him, is very lightly sketched. It is the city of the past that interests Forster. In the chapters of this book, Forster assumes the identity of the ancient lighthouse (he signed himself 'Pharos' in the Egyptian Mail where many of these articles first appeared) to shed light on the city's past. The Alexandria of his imagination, the Alexandria of his intellectual inquiry merges first in the portrait of a city assimilated through her history, then in the portrait of her poet Cavafy, who embodies both the city's past and its present, and whose poetry is to a great extent a meditation on her history.[1]

Since Forster was neither enchanted as a tourist nor impressed as a popular novelist might have been, he did not respond to Egypt imaginatively; and in compensation he withdrew, in imagination, into a vision of ancient Alexandria.[2] He viewed modern Alexandria, if not modern Egypt as a whole, as being sterile - though this vision of his may have been partly attributed to the general sterility of wartime.[3]

Forster never gave himself the chance to love Egypt or Alexandria. His standard was India, and Egypt - the "semi-East" or "pseudo-East" - struck him as "a parody" of it, "a feebler India, as flat without the sense of immensity."[4] In a letter to Syed Ross Masood, Forster's Indian friend, he expresses his antagonistic feelings for Egypt:

> I do not like Egypt much - or rather, I do not see it, for Alexandria is

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1 Judith SchereHerz, The Short Narratives of E. M. Forster (London: MacMillan, 1988) 64.

2 Furbank 44.

3 Mohamed Shaheen, "Forster's Alexandria: The Transitional Journey," E. M Forster: A Human Exploration: Centenary Essays, ed. G. K. Das and John Beer (London: MacMillan, 1979) 79.

4 Furbank 22.

cosmopolitan. But what I have seen seems vastly inferior to India, for which I am always longing in the most persistent way, and where I still hope to die. It is only at sunset that Egypt surpasses India - at all other hours it is flat, unromantic, unmysterious and godless - the soil is mud, the inhabitants of mud moving, and exasperating in the extreme: I feel as instinctively not at home among them as I feel instinctively at home among Indians.[1]

As Forster's letter to Masood shows, he found it hard to like Egypt and the Egyptians. So, in all his writings about Egypt, Forster responded subjectively and as a result negatively to the country and its "mud-moving" people.

The two World Wars took a number of English writers to Egypt which they might otherwise never have visited. Travelling fellowships, visiting lectureships, contract teaching-posts in Egyptian universities had enabled writers to visit and live in Egypt for some time.

British writers had been employed in Egyptian universities, a tradition which started with Robert Graves. In 1926 Graves was appointed Professor of English literature at the newly-founded Egyptian University in Cairo. Like Forster, Egypt failed to bring Graves under its spell. Instead of stimulating his creativity, Egypt filled him with dissatisfaction, disappointment and disillusionment. The combination of many factors turned the scale against the country. Egypt became in Graves' eyes an epitome of the bleak world around him. He saw only the dark side of Egypt. The conditions disgusted him - the strikes, students' essays, the political situation, his wife's

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1 qtd. in Furbank 22.