

# Performing Cairo: Orientalism and the city of the Arabian Nights

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‘Cities and narratives have at least one thing in common: they are both desire-producing machines.... These two trajectories can be said to cross when the object of desire becomes, precisely, desire for the narrativized city, for its fictional images.’

Christopher Prendergast: *Paris and the nineteenth century*

## Introduction

This essay is about the ways in which the city of Cairo was ‘narrativized’ – or, more prosaically, ordered as a story – by European and American travellers and tourists during the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> These were, of course, neither the only people nor the only terms through which the city was made intelligible. There were other imaginative geographies in play, and these were neither self-enclosed nor self-sufficient constructions. It is certainly not part of my purpose to privilege these narratives, therefore, which were fictions in the original sense of *fictio*: ‘something made’. But for this very reason they had a substantial reality. What visitors ‘made’ of Cairo (or any other city) was rendered not only through their accounts but also through their actions, and we need to know much more about these spatial stories and how they worked. For, as Michel de Certeau has

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<sup>1</sup> The distinction between ‘tourist’ and ‘traveller’ reappears in European and American cultures of travel throughout the nineteenth century, but this class-laden terminology conceals important identities between the two figures: see James Buzard, *The Beaten Track: European tourism, literature and the ways to “Culture” 1800-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). In this essay I use ‘tourist’ as a generic signifier to mark anyone travelling primarily under the sign of pleasure. It was this that puzzled most inhabitants of Egypt for much of the century; Arab cultures of travel understood the movement of pilgrims, ambassadors and envoys, merchants, soldiers and sailors, slaves and forced labourers, but the cognitive accommodation of tourists was much more difficult.

reminded us, ‘every story is a travel story’ – what he calls a ‘spatial practice’ - whose narrations at once produce ‘geographies of actions’ and drift into ‘the commonplaces of an order’.<sup>2</sup>

My focus here is on the stories that made up the *Thousand and One Nights* or the *Arabian Nights Entertainments*. As Robert Irwin notes, these stories were narrated ‘for the most part by people in the cities about people in the cities for people in the cities’, but in the course of the nineteenth century the *mythos* of the *Nights* was inscribed in one city in particular: Cairo.<sup>3</sup> This was more than a genealogical claim. For not only were the *Nights* supposed to have been staged in medieval Cairo; *they were also held to capture the essence of the city in the nineteenth century*. Many actors were involved in the staging of Cairo as the city of the Arabian Nights, but here I consider one of the central players in this Orientalist repertory theatre – not only actor but also director and stage-manager - the British Orientalist Edward William Lane.

In 1819 Lane, then just eighteen years of age, abandoned plans to study at Cambridge and moved to London to work with his older brother, an accomplished engraver and lithographer. In 1820 Belzoni’s published account of his ‘operations and recent discoveries in Egypt and Nubia’ excited considerable public interest, and the following year an exhibition of the artefacts he had brought back to England opened at the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly and attracted large crowds. Caught up in the whirlwind of Egyptomania, Lane began to read about Egypt and to learn Arabic. When he contracted a chronic respiratory disease that ruled out any hope of a career in the fume-filled workshops of the engraving industry, he decided to travel to the land that had completely captured his imagination. This is no exaggeration: Lane’s desire to know Egypt was intense. In September 1825, as he approached the port of Alexandria for the first time, he said that he ‘felt like an Eastern bridegroom, about to lift up the veil of his bride, and to see for the first time, the features which were to charm, or disappoint, or disgust

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<sup>2</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The practice of everyday life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) pp. 115-116.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Irwin, *The Arabian Nights: a Companion* (London: Allen Lane, 1994) p. 121.

him.’<sup>4</sup> This first visit lasted for three years. Lane rented a house in Cairo, staying there on and off for fifteen months or so, and made two long voyages up the Nile into Nubia. All the while he made extensive notes and sketches that provided the basis for his *Description of Egypt*, a master-work which none the less remained unpublished during his lifetime.<sup>5</sup>

Lane’s second visit took place between 1833 and 1835, and he used his renewed residence in Cairo to compose his celebrated account of the *Manners and customs of the Modern Egyptians*, which was published in two volumes in 1836.<sup>6</sup> It was in the preface to that book that Lane first recorded his admiration for the *Arabian Nights*:

‘There is one work ... which presents most admirable pictures of the manners and customs of the Arabs, and particularly those of the Egyptians; it is “*The Thousand and One Nights; or Arabian Nights’ Entertainments*”. If the English reader had possessed a close translation of it with sufficient illustrative notes, I might almost have spared myself the labour of the present undertaking.’<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Edward William Lane, ‘Draft of Description of Egypt’, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford: MS. Eng. Misc. d. 234, ff. 5-5v. For Lane’s biography, see Leila Ahmed, *Edward William Lane: a study of his life and works and of British ideas of the Middle East in the nineteenth century* (London: Longman, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> Some of Lane’s notes and drafts were incorporated into his sister’s account of her residence in Cairo with him during his third visit to Egypt: Sophia Poole, *The Englishwoman in Egypt: Letters from Cairo* (London: Charles Knight, 1844; reprinted, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2003). Part of Lane’s original manuscript of the ‘Description’, revised by his nephew, was published as Edward William Lane, *Cairo fifty years ago* (London: John Murray, 1896). But a complete edition was only published very recently: Edward William Lane, *Description of Egypt* (ed. Jason Thompson) (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2000). Lane’s title was deliberate. Although he admired what he called ‘the great French work’, the *Description de l’Égypte* produced by the *savants* who had accompanied the French army of occupation, Lane also considered it ‘extremely inaccurate’. Even so, when John Murray agreed to publish the work – an agreement the house never honoured – Lane was persuaded to change the title to ‘Notes and views in Egypt and Nubia’. See Jason Thompson, ‘Edward William Lane’s “Description of Egypt”’, *Int. Jnl. Middle East Studies* 28 (1996) pp. 565-583.

<sup>6</sup> Edward W. Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians written in Egypt during the years 1833-1835* (London: Charles Knight, 1836); the book went through numerous printings and four editions before its fifth, definitive edition was published by John Murray in 1860. All my references are to the most recent reprint of this edition (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2003). Lane’s third and final period of residence in Egypt was between 1842-49, which he devoted to gathering materials for his *Arabic-English Lexicon* (published 1863-93).

<sup>7</sup> Lane, *Modern Egyptians op. cit.*, p. xxiv (note).

In fact, Lane referred to the *Arabian Nights* throughout *Modern Egyptians* and repeatedly declared his confidence in its ‘faithful pictures’. He completed his own translation of the stories two years later. This was originally published in serial form between 1838 and 1840 – the episodic structure of the *Nights* made the stories ideal for serialization - and then in three bound volumes between 1839 and 1841. In order to understand Lane’s pivotal role in staging Cairo as the city of the *Arabian Nights* it is necessary to understand the relations between these two central texts.

### Choreographies of Cairo

Despite its general title, *Modern Egyptians* focused on Cairo, which Lane saw as the epitome of what he called ‘the Arab city’:

‘In every point of view, *Masr* (or Cairo) must be regarded as the first Arab city of our age; and the manners and customs of its inhabitants are particularly interesting.... There is no other place in which we can obtain so complete a knowledge of the most civilised classes of the Arabs.’<sup>8</sup>

In this book Lane made Cairo visible as not so much a *produced space* of topographies, streets and buildings as a *performed space* of costumes, gestures and movements. This is so important that I need to take time to establish the distinction. In his draft of the *Description of Egypt* Lane had provided a map of Cairo based on the map produced by the French army of occupation, and he had included detailed sketches and annotated views of particular districts, and descriptions of individual buildings.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, *Modern Egyptians* contained no map; it provided only the briefest of physical descriptions of the city – and that as mere ‘introduction’ not as a chapter - and only a handful of its 130 illustrations showed mosques, streets

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>9</sup> Lane, *Description op. cit.*, pp. 71-97 and Figure 14; the map was included in a second draft of the manuscript but was not referred to in the final draft.

or houses, none of which was identified by name or location.<sup>10</sup> In their place, Lane offered exquisitely detailed renderings – in word and image – of costume and ornamentation, of bodily postures and sequences of movement. He began by describing the sumptuary distinctions between different social orders, and then immediately set these costumed figures in motion. Lane provided elaborate renditions of ritual ablutions and sequential ‘postures of prayer’ (Figure 1). He furnished detailed accounts of modes of salutation, eating and bathing, in which he paid close attention to the precise placing and movement of the body; he described modes of physical punishment through the dispositions of the body, and the different postures adopted for playing different musical instruments.<sup>11</sup> Lane followed groups of people as they moved through the city in circumcision parades, bridal processions, religious celebrations and funerals, and at every step he recorded the order of precedence, pace, accoutrements and ritual ejaculations (Figure 2).<sup>12</sup> When Lane described the public shows put on by dancers, ‘serpent-charmers and performers of legerdemain’, jugglers, rope-dancers, farce-players and story-tellers, he drew elaborate word-pictures of their gestures, sleights-of-hand and bodily movements.<sup>13</sup>

Even when Lane addressed the realm of fantasy, superstition and mysticism, his accounts of spirits - *ginn*, *efreets*, and *ghools* - and holy men (*welees*) were acutely physical. He described how the *ginn* were supposed to inhabit ‘rivers, ruined houses, wells, baths, ovens, and even the latrina.’ According to Lane’s informants, these spirits flew across the landscape ‘in a whirlwind of sand or dust’, and they could assume the shapes of cats, dogs ‘and other brute animals’. If they were disturbed, they perched on the roofs of houses and threw stones onto the streets below. Some *welees* wandered the city ‘perfectly naked’, Lane noted, eating ‘a mixture of chopped straw and broken glass, and attract[ing] observation by a variety of absurd

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<sup>10</sup> Stanley Lane-Poole noted as a ‘singular omission’ that ‘although the larger part of the “Modern Egyptians” refers to the inhabitants of the capital, where Lane spent many years, the book contains no description of Cairo itself’: Lane, *Cairo fifty years ago op. cit.*, p. v.

<sup>11</sup> Lane, *Modern Egyptians op. cit.*, pp. 61, 68-71, 76-79, 84-90, 122-3, 142-51, 199-202, 337-43, 356-68.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 58-9, 157-74, 511-528.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 377-393.

actions’, while others subjected themselves to ‘austerities’ and even physical abuse. ‘At the present time there is living in Cairo a *welee* who has placed an iron collar round his neck, and chained himself to a wall of his chamber,’ Lane reported, ‘and it is said that he has been in this state more than thirty years.’ One of the most holy of these men, the *Kutb*, was supposed to be able to transport himself in an instant from Mecca to Cairo; one of his favoured stations was the gate of Bab Zuweyla, where believers would drive nails into the door to cure a headache or wedge extracted teeth into a crevice to prevent tooth-ache. Lane recorded in meticulous detail attempts to ward off ‘the Evil Eye’ by burning alum and feeding its fetishised shape to a black dog, for example, or by dissolving passages from the Koran in water and drinking the liquid. Among other practices, Lane described attempts to cure ophthalmia by removing dried mud from one bank of the Nile to the other, or by washing in water from the trough at Rumayla where the bodies of decapitated criminals were cleansed.<sup>14</sup>

Lane’s descriptions amounted to an intensely physical *anatomy* of the day-to-day practices of ordinary Egyptians. For the most part these details were conveyed through sets of exacting stage directions, but on occasion Lane sought to draw the reader into the *mise-en-scène*.

One episode that was often remarked by his readers involved Lane’s attendance at a performance by ‘the Magician’. Lane had been instructed to prepare a concoction of frankincense and coriander seed, and he describes in his customary detail how the Magician placed this in a chafing dish and set it alight; how written invocations were cast into the flames; and how the Magician then drew a ‘magic square’ on the palm of a young boy – which Lane reproduces in his text - and poured ink into the centre of the square to create a ‘magic mirror’ through which the boy was supposed to be able to peer into ‘the invisible world.’ The Magician now asks Lane if he ‘wished the boy to see any person who was absent or dead.’ Lane calls for Lord Nelson, ‘of whom the boy had evidently never heard’, and is astonished to hear the boy describe him as indeed he would appear in a mirror: ‘a man, dressed in a black suit of European clothes; the man has lost his left arm.’

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 394-9, 401-3, 415-25.

The boy's description is 'faultless', and Lane's next request is met with similar success. The boy represents each subsequent figure 'as appearing less distinct than the preceding one, as if his sight were gradually becoming dim.' By the end of the performance, Lane confesses that he is 'completely puzzled', 'unable to discover any clue by which to penetrate the mystery.' There can be no doubt about Lane's fascination; his prose shifts from anatomy to narrative, a movement that simultaneously mirrors his own involvement and draws the reader into the vortex with him. Even when Lane struggles to recover his analytical voice, he picks through a series of possible explanations only to discard each of them in turn. And yet his unease is also palpable: aware of his momentary loss of perspective, Lane hopes that his reader 'will not allow the above account to induce in his mind any degree of scepticism with respect to other portions of this work.' In a later edition Lane adds a footnote to report that he has since witnessed two further performances 'which were absolute failures'. It is as though, having teetered on the perimeter of enchantment, Lane is relieved finally to revert to his own space of modern reason.<sup>15</sup>

A second incident is even more telling. Lane has already described the different orders of dervishes (religious fraternities) and subjected their costumes and devotional exercises to his usual impassionate dissection.<sup>16</sup> In a later passage, however, he conducts the reader to one of their ritual performances. Lane's narrative begins with him in Turkish dress, making his way to the mosque of al-Hosayn, 'the most sacred of all the mosques in Cairo'. It is early afternoon, and as he moves through the crowded streets he is accosted by a succession of dancing-girls, water-carriers and children clamouring for alms. At the mosque he leaves his shoes at the door and threads his way barefoot into its vast interior. There is a confusion of noises, men and women calling to each other, and children crying. Some of the youngest had urinated on the floor, and since it was impracticable to perform the usual ablutions, it is not many minutes before Lane's feet are 'almost

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 268-275. That reversion was completed by the account Lane furnished for this sister's book of letters from Cairo, where he attributed the magician's 'successes' to leading questions put to him by his interlocutor and claimed that he had been 'deceived': Poole, *Englishwoman op. cit.*, vol. II, pp. 163-70.

<sup>16</sup> Lane, *Modern Egyptians op. cit.*, pp. 240-6.

black, with the dust upon which I had trodden, and with that from other persons' feet which had trodden upon mine.' 'The heat too was very oppressive,' he continues, 'like that of a vapour-bath, but more heavy.' The physical sensations that Lane evokes – the noise, the dust, the crush of the crowd, the soaring humidity – transport him to the edge of sensuality, and his passage into the heart (and heat) of the festival is laced with a barely contained *frisson* of desire:

'It is commonly said, by the people of Cairo, that no man goes to the mosque of the Hasaneyn on the day of 'Ashorà but for the sake of the women; that is, to be jostled among them; and this jostling he may indeed enjoy to the utmost of his desire, as I experienced in this pressing forward to witness the principal ceremonies which contribute with the sanctity of the day to attract such swarms of people.... I was so compressed in the midst of four women, that, for some minutes, I could not move in any direction; and was pressed so hard against one young woman, face to face, that, but for her veil, our cheeks had been almost in contact: from her panting, it seemed that the situation was not quite easy to her; though a smile, expressed at the same time by her large black eyes, showed that it was amusing: she could not, however, bear it long; for soon she cried out, "My eye! Do not squeeze me so violently."' <sup>17</sup>

Lane forces his way through the throng until he reaches the place where the dervishes are to perform their *zīkr*. 'But in getting thither,' he notes, 'I had almost lost my sword, and the hanging sleeves of my jacket; some person's dress had caught the guard of the sword, and had nearly drawn the blade from the scabbard before I could get hold of the hilt. Like all around me, I was in a profuse perspiration.' Before the *zīkr* can begin, the dervishes drive back the crowd to clear a space. 'But as no stick was raised at me,' Lane explains, 'I did not retire so far as I ought to have done; and before I was aware of what the [dervishes] were about to do, forty of them with extended arms and joined hands, had formed a large ring in which I found myself enclosed.' Lane now breaks the circle and passes 'outside the ring', and as he does so he immediately regains his customary, detached position from which he describes the performance in his standard analytical style: but not before he has evoked an acutely physical, sensual space which he has both

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 430-1.

literally and figuratively penetrated and through which he has permitted the reader a glimpse of the event from the inside.<sup>18</sup>

These summary observations permit two general conclusions. First, all the way through *Modern Egyptians* - in all of Lane's accounts of bodies in motion, of the materiality of everyday beliefs, of the physicality of public festivals - his descriptions are embedded in particular places. But rather than enumerate these as so many sites in a general topography *he evokes them through the practices that take place within them*. The overall effect of *Modern Egyptians* is thus to stage Cairo as an immense, intricate choreography - corporeal, fantastic and seductive: as I have tried to show in the preceding paragraphs - whose spaces are continuously and elaborately *performed*.<sup>19</sup>

Ostensibly, of course, the performances are those of Lane's 'modern Egyptians'. But, secondly, it is important not to lose sight of Lane's *own* practices and engagements, and in particular the way in which his desire for the Orient draws him into the *mise-en-scène* so that *he too is performing the spaces of the city*. He not only records the corporeality and physicality of the 'manners and customs' he observes in motion around him, but he also registers his immersion in them through his *own* body. Even as he struggles to turn the city into an object of knowledge, to maintain his distance and to

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp. 432. Similar movements between inside and outside, between participation and observation, recur throughout Lane's accounts of public festivals.

<sup>19</sup> Here there is a close parallel between Lane and the French novelist Gérard de Nerval, whose fictionalized account of his own *Voyage en Orient* between January and May 1843 transforms Cairo into a theatre: see Camille Aubaude, *Le voyage en Égypte de Gérard de Nerval* (Paris: Éd. Kimé, 1997) p. 11. More specifically, Nerval renders the space of Cairo not primarily 'as a landscape to be reproduced [in his text] but as a place of actions and movements': Isabelle Daunais, *L'art de la mesure, ou l'invention de l'espace dans les récits d'Orient (XIXe siècle)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 1996) p. 166. The parallel is not altogether accidental. Nerval consulted Lane's *Modern Egyptians* in Paris, made a rough-and-ready translation of the English text on his return, and relied on several of Lane's descriptions for his own composition (which was first published in serial form between 1844 and 1847): see Jean-Marie Carré, *Voyageurs et écrivains français en Égypte* (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1956) pp. 34-36; Aubaude, Nerval *op. cit.*, pp. 49, 56.

impose his own discipline of detail, Cairo nonetheless appears in Lane's text as a space in which corporeality, fantasy and desire collide.<sup>20</sup>

Many travellers took Lane's *Modern Egyptians* to Egypt with them, and it became a *vade mecum* for European and American tourists for the rest of the century and beyond. The first edition was sold out in a fortnight; 6,500 copies of the second edition were sold in short order. It was on virtually every list of books travellers were recommended to read, and travel-writers and guidebooks routinely parroted Lane's observations and pirated his illustrations. 'I have taken the greater part of these observations from Mr Lane's invaluable work,' Warburton confessed, 'the highest authority.' Others were reduced to awed silence. 'So perfect an account of the Arabian population of Cairo is to be found in Mr Lane's *Modern Egypt[ians]*,' wrote Robert Curzon, 'that there is little left to say on that subject.' Still others regretted that Lane was not accompanying them in person. To Curtis the cries of the street-sellers were 'Babel jargon'; but 'had erudite Mr Lane accompanied us, Mr Lane, the Eastern Englishman, who has given us so many golden glimpses into the silence and mystery of Oriental life', then 'we should have understood those cries.'<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> For this tripartite way of characterizing 'performed' space I am indebted to Gillian Rose, 'Performing space', in Doreen Massey, John Allen and Philip Sarre (eds), *Human geography today* (Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 1999) pp. 247-259. In describing *Modern Egyptians* in these spatializing terms I depart from Said, *Orientalism op. cit.*, pp. 159-164, who emphasises the temporality of Lane's narrative as it traces the life cycle of the ordinary Egyptian from birth through marriage to death. I don't, of course, deny this temporalizing arc; Lane himself recognised that he had followed the Egyptian 'from the period of infancy to the tomb': *Modern Egyptians op. cit.*, p. 528. But I do think that Lane's other, unambiguously *spatial* story had a greater impact on Orientalist cultures of travel. I should also note that Said sees an 'unyielding bridle of discipline and detachment' enforcing a 'cold distance from Egyptian life' in Lane's narrative, and (partly in consequence) claims that Lane repressed his own sexual desire. This reading has met with astringent criticism from John Rodenbeck, 'Edward Said and Edward William Lane', in Paul Starkey, Janet Starkey (eds) *Travellers in Egypt* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1998) pp. 233-43. As I hope to have made clear, I think it more accurate to read Lane as oscillating *between* detachment and desire. And it is this very oscillation – with all its precarious openings for the disruption of routine scriptings and established cultures of travel – that marks the sense of performance I invoke here as distinctively different from conventional accounts of tourism as (rote) performance.

<sup>21</sup> Warburton, *Crescent and cross op. cit.*, p. 59n; Robert Curzon, *Visits to monasteries in the Levant* (London: John Murray, 1849) p. 99; Curtis, *Nile notes op. cit.*, p. 4.

Later guidebooks did not so much supplant as proliferate the rumour of Cairo offered by *Modern Egyptians*. Murray's *Handbook* (to take only the most prominent example) detailed a series of architectural sights – the Pyramids, the tombs of the Caliphs and the Mamelukes, the principal mosques, the palace and gardens at Shubra, and the Citadel – and most tourists seem to have dutifully followed its exacting instructions. But Murray also emphasized the 'Oriental character' of Cairo that would inevitably recall 'the impressions [the traveller] received on reading the *Arabian Nights*', and drew his own readers' attention to 'the accurate work of Mr Lane' in rendering 'the mode of living' in this singularly interesting city.<sup>22</sup> It was this side of Cairo that increasingly claimed the attention of tourists. Many of them shared Lane's taste for the corporeal, which often turned into a predilection for the grotesque and the bizarre: visits to the bodies exhibited in the slave-market, the Lunatic Asylum and the hospital were *de rigueur* until the 1840s. Most remained at a greater remove, however, content to rehearse Lane's sketches in the clause-laden sentences they composed for their journals, and effortlessly transposing the 'moving panoramic displays of human beings' in the streets and bazaars into a parade of different ethnographic 'types' across the pages of their notebooks.<sup>23</sup>

Emboldened by Lane's example, there was little that they considered properly concealed from their gaze. Middle-class distinctions between the public and private, commonplace in Europe, literally had no place in their appropriations of Cairo. They desperately wanted to know – to know by *seeing* – what went on behind the closed doors and the latticed balconies of the houses they passed. 'Domestic manners and customs, the interiors of houses, and the common habits of the higher classes in everyday life among the Orientals have an unspeakable interest to Europeans,' Smith explained, which 'is undoubtedly heightened in no inconsiderable degree by the reserve

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<sup>22</sup> *Handbook for travellers to Egypt* (London: John Murray, 1858) pp. 125-6. I follow the convention of describing the Handbook as 'Murray', but as I have explained above, the author of these early editions was J.G. Wilkinson. In addition to noticing Lane's writings, he also praised the drawings of Pascal Coste, Robert Hay, John Frederick Lewis and David Roberts: *loc. cit.*, p. 126.

<sup>23</sup> Smith, *Pilgrimage op. cit.*, p. 65.

with which they have thought fit to envelop their home life.’<sup>24</sup> Inquisitive tourists set aside not only their own proprieties about the private sphere but also the still more elaborately gendered visual codes through which the spaces of the *hara* and the household were regulated in an Islamic city. While men had to accept that access to the harem was denied to them, that did nothing to stop speculation (quite the reverse); and many thought nothing of straying from the well-defined tourist routes into local neighbourhoods where they found, like Bayle St John, that ‘in retired places it is sometimes not too discreet to push too far into the labyrinth of gloomy blind alleys formed by these quarters’:

‘I was once, in my prowlings about in search of the picturesque, shut in by the porter, who walked off with the key. Energetic expostulation procured us an exit at last, without any disagreeable consequence, except the delay; but we were very nearly mobbed by a crowd of women returning from the market, whom we found collected outside.’<sup>25</sup>

St John was seemingly quite oblivious of the visual codes that his casual sightseeing had transgressed.

Tourists had no hesitation in entering the mosques to observe (on occasion even to draw) Cairenes at prayer. In the early decades of the nineteenth century foreigners were obliged to wear Turkish dress to gain admission, and as late as 1842 Lane’s sister managed to visit the mosque of al-Hosayn, one of the most sacred in the city, through just such an imposture.<sup>26</sup> In 1849 Nightingale found that gaining entrance to those where admission was less restricted was still a performance: ‘You must have a *firman* [written permission], and a Pacha’s janissary [escort], and pistols, and whips, and I don’t know what to visit them.’ But to be able to watch the observances was an invaluable experience. Nightingale repeatedly described

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<sup>24</sup> Smith, *Attractions op. cit.*, p. 72.

<sup>25</sup> St John, *Village life op. cit.*, pp. 118-9. He was repeating a discovery he had made in Alexandria in 1846, when his ‘peeping into all sorts of places, and adventuring up narrow lanes’ met with ‘the great astonishment and disgust of the natives.’ ‘In going down some streets,’ he confessed, ‘there is a cross fire of spitting from every door after I have passed’: idem, *Two years residence, op. cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>26</sup> Poole, *Englishwoman op. cit.*, vol. I, pp. 156-65.

Islam as a ‘sensual’ religion, by which she seems to have had in mind the way in which a faith without the icons and images that were so central to Christianity was literally embodied in the postures and dispositions assumed by its adherents. For this very reason she doubted that Europeans would ever be able to grasp its ‘mixture of sensuous enthusiasm and purity of idea’, and wandered through the vast, silent spaces of the mosques to watch the ‘prostrate men with their faces to the ground.’ ‘It is the religion of the *Arabian Nights*,’ she declared, ‘the most dreamy, the most fantastic, the most airy and yet sensuous religion.’ Later she visited the al-Azhar mosque, the primary seat of Islamic learning in Egypt. Its outer court was ‘crowded with people, sitting, standing, praying, talking’; beyond, in the portico, she found circles of men ‘intently listening, or writing, or learning by heart’ from the Koran. ‘That was the most Oriental sight I ever saw,’ she told her family, ‘those lecturing *ulama*, those silent circles sitting on the ground: no need of desks or benches; each had his little plate to write on upon his knee, his ink-horn in his girdle, each sat cross-legged on the mat.’<sup>27</sup>

It would be possible to follow more tourists through Cairo, peering with them over Lane’s shoulder as they gazed at sight after sight – wedding processions, funerals, festivals, and more – but the point is surely clear enough. As Lane’s imaginative geography was repeated with variations from text to text, so a repertoire gradually emerged whose iterations simultaneously conjured and confirmed Cairo as a performed space: a city of bodies in motion. The Countess Hahn-Hahn was not alone in finding that ‘the busy throng of men in the streets, stunning the ear and dazzling the eye, [is] yet altogether so essential a part of the whole scene, that you find no attraction in the more quiet and unfrequented parts of the city.’ Martineau confessed that ‘the mere spectacle of the streets’ became ‘more bewitching every day.’ Clot Bey thought that it was precisely the singular motion of ‘the gaily coloured crowd’ between its flights of houses, along the streets that snaked through them and beneath the minarets that towered above them, that made Cairo ‘a real city of the *Thousand and One Nights*.’ And Moritz Busch was quite explicit. ‘To many,’ he wrote, ‘the life and bustle of the

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<sup>27</sup> Nightingale, *Letters op. cit.*, pp. 188-199.

streets of the city will be more interesting than the city itself, reminding them of the “Arabian tales”.<sup>28</sup>

### Spaces of fantasy

All of this laid the foundation for the figuration of Cairo as the city of the *Arabian Nights*. The nucleus of the *Nights* - in Arabic, *Alf Layla wa-Layla*, or *The Thousand and One Nights* - appeared in Arabic in the ninth century. But the tales have multiple origins, Indian and Persian as well as Arabic, and they were far from stable in either their oral or their textual forms. The European reception of the tales was itself highly mediated: ‘Because the *Nights* was textually uncertain, fragmentary, contradictory, and, probably most of all, Arabic, Europeans treated it with a freedom unconstrained by post-medieval perceptions of textual rights.’<sup>29</sup> Some of the individual stories contained within the *Nights* were known to Europeans – at least in outline – as early as the fifteenth century, but they were first translated as a corpus by Antoine Galland, whose *Mille et une nuits: contes Arabes* was published in twelve volumes between 1704 and 1717. Galland’s edition was loosely based on a fourteenth-century manuscript version of the tales that he had bought in Istanbul, but he also incorporated an extraordinarily diverse range of other sources, oral as well as written. His was an artistic reworking, in which he both excised from and elaborated on his originals. In doing so, Galland enhanced the magical tonalities of the tales, but his preface also drew attention to the ethnographic insights they offered into the manners and customs of their subjects, and he added glosses

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<sup>28</sup> Hahn-Hahn, *Letters op. cit.*, vol. III, p. 45; Martineau, *Eastern life op. cit.*, p. 244; Clot Bey, *Aperçu op. cit.*, pp. 284-5; Moritz Busch, *Guide for travellers in Egypt* (London: Trübner, 1858) pp. 44-5.

<sup>29</sup> Eva Sallis, *Sheherazade through the looking glass: the metamorphosis of the Thousand and One Nights* (Richmond UK: Curzon Press, 1999) p. 44. See also Sandra Nadaff, *Arabesque: narrative structure and the aesthetics of repetition in the 1001 Nights* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991) pp. 3-4, who notes that the *Nights* ‘has no fixed or privileged textual identity’ and that its genealogy speaks ‘both of the difficult metamorphosis from oral to written text and, perhaps even more eloquently, of the forced translation from East to West.’

to the text to explain cultural usages that would be unfamiliar to his French audience.<sup>30</sup>

This double emphasis on the fantastic and the factual was retained when Galland's early volumes were translated into English as *The Arabian Nights Entertainments* between 1706 and 1708. This anonymous Grub Street version captured the imagination of its audience too; already in its third edition by 1715, it was reprinted many times and spawned a fashion for 'Oriental tales' that endured well into the nineteenth century. In 1811 Jonathan Scott produced a more literary but still immensely popular English translation; he had intended to translate directly from the Arabic, but in the event produced what was, for the most part, a new translation of Galland. These adaptations were all celebrated for their fantasy, but the *Nights* also continued to be advertised as a text

'where the customs of the Orientals and the ceremonies of their religion were better traced than in the tales of the travellers.... All Orientals, Persians, Tartars and Indians ... appear just as they are from sovereigns to people of the lowest condition. *Thus the reader will have the pleasure of seeing them and hearing them without taking the trouble of travelling to see them in their own countries.*'<sup>31</sup>

By the close of the eighteenth century, and certainly by the early nineteenth century, cultivated European audiences appear to have accepted that the tales were authentic and that it was possible to derive a virtual experience of 'the Orient' at large through reading the *Arabian Nights*.

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<sup>30</sup> The base manuscript that Galland used was the earliest extant manuscript of any size; it is usually attributed to the Syrian series of texts: Sallis, Sheherazade *op. cit.*, pp. 29-33. Galland also relied on Hanna Diab, a Christian Arab from Aleppo, who dictated additional stories to him from memory. It was Galland who incorporated the stories of Sinbad into the *Nights*, which originally formed a separate Persian cycle of tales. It was also Galland who introduced European audiences to Aladdin and Ali Baba: neither of these stories appears in any Arabic manuscript before Galland composed his version. See Rida Hawari, 'Antoine Galland's translation of the *Arabian Nights*', *Revue de la littérature comparée* 54 (1980) pp. 154-64; Irwin, *Arabian Nights op. cit.*, pp. 15-18. By 1793 Galland's version was already in its 18th edition, and it remained popular with French audiences until the very end of the nineteenth century, when a new – and controversial – translation appeared by Joseph Charles Mardrus (1899-1904).

<sup>31</sup> Fatma Moussau-Mahmoud, 'English travellers and the Arabian Nights', in Peter Caracciolo (ed.), *The Arabian Nights in English literature: studies in the reception of The Thousand and One Nights into English culture* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1988) pp. 95-110; quotation from p. 95.

When Lane offered his own translation from the Arabic in the late 1830s, he argued that Galland had ‘excessively perverted’ the specificity of the original, and sacrificed what he took to be its most remarkable quality, namely ‘its minute accuracy with respect to those peculiarities which distinguish the Arabs from every other nation, not only of the West, but also of the East.’ ‘Deceived by the vague nature of Galland’s version,’ he complained, ‘travellers in Persia, Turkey and India have often fancied that the *Arabian Tales* describe the particular manners of the natives of the countries.’ Lane was adamant that they did not. ‘It is in Arabian countries,’ he insisted, ‘and especially in Egypt, that we see the people, the dresses and the buildings which [they] describe.’ Even when the tales made direct reference to Baghdad or Damascus, Lane claimed that their real locus was Cairo. ‘Cairo is the city in which Arabian manners now exist in the most refined state,’ he declared, ‘and such I believe to have been the case when the present work was composed.’<sup>32</sup> In his own translation, Lane declared that ‘all the complete copies (printed and manuscript) of which I have any knowledge describe Cairo far more minutely and accurately than any other place.’<sup>33</sup> Although there were several regional variants of the *Nights*, Lane’s edition was primarily based on an Egyptian manuscript that had been published by Muhammad ‘Ali’s state printing press at Bulaq in 1835 and which provided a specifically Cairene version of them.<sup>34</sup> Lane emphasized the embeddedness of his source text in Cairo, and went out of his way to enhance those connections in two, mutually reinforcing ways.

In the first place, Lane traded on his own experience – his ethnographic presence – to trump Galland’s bookish knowledge and to

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<sup>32</sup> Edward Stanley Poole (ed.), *The Thousand and One Nights: the Arabian Nights’ Entertainments* (trans. Edward William Lane) (London: Chatto and Windus, 1883) vol. I, pp. ix-x. This revised edition was prepared by Lane’s nephew; Lane’s original translation was issued in serial form between 1838 and 1840 – the episodic structure of the *Nights* made the stories ideal for serialization – and then in three bound volumes between 1839 and 1841.

<sup>33</sup> Poole (ed.), *Thousand and One Nights op. cit.*, vol. III, p. 680.

<sup>34</sup> It did so by excluding ‘much of the material from the Syrian and Iraqi recensions’: Geoffrey Roper, ‘Texts from nineteenth-century Egypt: the role of E.W. Lane’, in Starkey and Starkey (eds), *Travellers op. cit.*, pp. 244-54; quotation from p. 247.

confirm the locus of the *Nights*. The root of the Frenchman's inadequacy, according to Lane, was that that 'his acquaintance with Arab manners and customs was insufficient to preserve him always from errors of the grossest description.' The implication was clear. Lane derived his authority from his extended visits to Egypt:

'I consider myself possessed of the chief qualifications for the proper accomplishment of my present undertaking, from my having lived several years in Cairo, associating almost exclusively with Arabs, speaking their language, conforming to their general habits with the most scrupulous exactitude, and [being] received into their society on terms of perfect equality.'<sup>35</sup>

In the second place, no doubt influenced by his experience in his brother's workshop, Lane was keenly aware of the power of the visual, and he was particularly concerned to ensure the fidelity of the engravings that accompanied his translation.

'[T]o insure their accuracy, to the utmost of my ability, I have supplied the artist with modern dresses, and with other requisite materials. Thus he has been enabled to make his designs agree more nearly with the costumes &c. of the times which the tales generally illustrate.'<sup>36</sup>

Providing his artist William Harvey with 'modern dresses' – contemporary Egyptian costume – served to set 'the times which the tales generally illustrate' in a perpetual present, and this setting was enhanced by the attention Lane paid to the scenography itself. Through his friend Robert Hay, he secured access for Harvey to 'a very accurate and very beautiful collection of drawings of a great number of the finest specimens of Arabian

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<sup>35</sup> Poole (ed.), *Thousand and One Nights op. cit.*, pp. ix-x.

<sup>36</sup> Poole (ed.), *Thousand and One Nights op. cit.*, vol. I, p. xxi.

architecture in and around Cairo executed by M. Pascal Coste.’<sup>37</sup> In places he identified the precise location of the building shown in the illustration (Figure 3).

Lane furnished the text with copious ‘illustrative notes’, whose ethnographic and lexicographic weight was more than sufficient for most readers. These drew on the empirical observations he had made for *Modern Egyptians*, and so they embedded the tales still more firmly in contemporary Egypt and give them still more solidity and substance. But even more important, these annotations enforced a strategically vital distinction between observer and observed. In the original, the individual tales were framed by the story of Sheherazade artfully telling a different tale each night to forestall her death at the hands of her husband. But in his own presentation of the *Nights* Lane effectively removed Sheherazade to the margins and substituted his own narrative commentary as the master-frame. His annotated scaffolding constructed a vantage point where his readers could perch and from which the text itself became ‘a means for talking to Europeans about the people who made and heard the tales.’<sup>38</sup> This was a profoundly colonizing gesture. Reading the text became not merely an entertainment but an occasion to observe ‘the other’: in fact, to constitute the other *as* other. As one critic remarks,

‘Lane’s notes appear more and more oppressive as one reads on; no arbitrary detail is left hermetic – each is pinned down, like an ill-fated butterfly, by Lane’s imperturbable attestations. Repeatedly, the course of the narrative is stayed to accommodate Lane’s parallel and dictatorial

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<sup>37</sup> Poole (ed.), *Thousand and One Nights op. cit.*, vol. I, p. xxi. Many of Coste’s drawings were completed as studies for his aborted design of the Mosque of Mohammad ’Ali. Coste had sold his drawings to Hay shortly before he left Egypt, on the understanding that they would be published in England, but the project came to nothing (despite Lane’s offer to supervise the engraving): see Michael Darby, *The Islamic perspective: an aspect of British architecture and design in the nineteenth century* (London: Leighton House Gallery, 1983) p. 31; Volait, ‘Les monuments de l’architecture arabe’ *op. cit.*, pp. 114-5. Seventy of the plates were finally published in France as Pascal Coste, *Architecture Arabe ou Monuments du Kaire* (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1839).

<sup>38</sup> Sallis, *Sheherazade op. cit.*, pp. 51-3, 72.

[commentary]; the text for him is pretext, the translation a mere vessel for his counterpart deliberations.’<sup>39</sup>

Neither did Lane leave the original untouched. His translation was an expurgated version, to the evident relief of his nephew. “‘*Arabian Nights*’ is not a prurient book,’ Poole insisted, ‘but in the original it often frankly describes things we do not talk about, and it was inevitable that it must be carefully cleansed of such details if it were to be placed in everyone’s hands.’<sup>40</sup> Lane’s edition sanitized the imaginative geography of Cairo – his was a version of the *Arabian Nights* suitable for the English middle-class drawing room – but this was plainly part of its popular appeal. In erasing the coarse and the carnivalesque, which seem to have been precisely what captivated its Cairene audience, Lane domesticated the *Nights* for his own domestic audience.<sup>41</sup>

The impression that these stories provided the reader with access to contemporary Cairo depended upon the close connections that Lane established between *Modern Egyptians* and the *Arabian Nights*.<sup>42</sup> His nephew rehearsed Lane’s sense of the connective imperative between the

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<sup>39</sup> Rana Kabbani, *Imperial fictions: Europe’s myths of Orient* (London: Pandora, 1994) p. 44.

<sup>40</sup> Poole (ed.), *Thousand and One Nights op. cit.*, vol. I, p. xxii.

<sup>41</sup> It was not until the closing decades of the nineteenth century that unexpurgated translations were provided by John Payne (1882-4) and Richard Burton (1885-6). Burton called Lane ‘the Mrs Grundy of Egypt’ for his prudishness; in turn, Stanley Lane-Poole described Burton’s edition of the *Nights* as a ‘remarkable performance’ that revealed his ‘profound acquaintance with the vocabulary and customs of the Muslims’ but also – he did not need to add the ‘unfortunately’ – with ‘their most secret and, it must be added, most disgusting habits.’ Burton’s translation was privately published, however, and had a much more limited circulation than Lane’s. Still more to the point, Burton declared his admiration for Lane’s scholarly apparatus – its ‘cargo of Moslem learning was most valuable to the student’ – and he provided his own recondite notes too, which he saw as ‘supplementing’ Lane’s: all of which speaks to the substantial ‘reality-effect’ produced by Lane’s translation. Moving in the opposite direction to Payne and Burton, there were also many selections and abridgements of the *Nights* published for younger readers: see Brian Anderson, ‘Sheherazade in the nursery’, in Caracciolo (ed.), *Arabian Nights op. cit.*, pp. 81-94. The continued presence of the *Arabian Nights* in the middle-class nursery meant that many travellers recalled its imagery from their childhood, and this must have contributed in no small measure to the haughty infantilization of Egyptians (‘like children’) that characterized so much Victorian travel-writing.

<sup>42</sup> Lane’s readers were well aware of the connections. ‘All this is well documented in Mr Lane’s *Book of the Modern Egyptians*’, wrote one American aficionado, ‘and pictured in his fine edition of the *Illustrated Arabian Nights*’: ‘An American’, *Journal of a voyage up the Nile* (Buffalo: Phinney, 1851) p. 21.

two when he described the *Arabian Nights* as an ‘indispensable supplement’ to *Modern Egyptians*. And he also captured the conflation of fantasy and fidelity achieved by this rhetoric of supplementarity when he introduced a new edition of Lane’s translation of the tales. ‘The fashion of travelling in the East,’ he wrote, ‘has not a little added to the desire for a standard and annotated edition of a work, unique in those lands of genii and adventure, in its remarkable portrayal of Eastern character, life, and when closely translated, idiom.’ The sutures holding Poole’s sentence together are instructive: ‘a land of genii’ captured in a ‘remarkable portrayal’ of the manners and customs of modern Egyptians. As Lane said himself of the *Arabian Nights*: ‘Its chief *value* consists in the fullness and fidelity with which it describes the character, manners and customs of the Arabs, though its *enchantment* is doubtless mainly owing to other qualities.’<sup>43</sup>

It was not only English and American readers who were under its spell. Although Ampère thought Lane too severe towards Galland, he had high praise both for Lane’s translation – ‘the first correct version’ – and for the illustrations that accompanied it which ‘reproduced very faithfully a costume, a group, a street corner, such as one encounters with every step one takes in Cairo.’<sup>44</sup> The *Arabian Nights* were invoked over and over again in an interpretative spiral where, following Lane’s lead, Cairo was identified as the setting for the tales, their imagery was used to validate the continued ‘authenticity’ of daily life in the city, and the city was thereby confirmed as the setting for the tales.<sup>45</sup> The citationary structure sustained by repetition from one text to another anticipated, organised and verified the scene. Thus Warburton enthused at his approach to Cairo because it was thronged with ‘a masquerading-looking crowd’ that contained ‘all the *dramatis personae* of

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<sup>43</sup> Poole (ed.), *Thousand and One Nights op. cit.*, vol. I, pp. xviii; vol. III, p. 686 (original emphases).

<sup>44</sup> Ampère, *Voyage op. cit.*, p. 183.

<sup>45</sup> One commentator suggests that not only did it become ‘part of the task of the travellers to verify the authenticity of the *Nights* and relate them to what they saw’ but ‘*their experiences were quoted in new editions of the Nights*’: Fatma Moussau-Mahmoud, ‘English travellers and the Arabian Nights’, in Peter Caracciolo (ed.), *The Arabian Nights in English literature: studies in the reception of the Thousand and One Nights into English culture* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1988) pp. 95-110; quotations at pp. 95, 97 (my emphasis).

the *Arabian Nights*’; Hahn-Hahn delighted in the way in which the city ‘continually reminds us of scenes in the *Thousand and One Nights*’; and Bartlett marvelled at the way in which the city of Saladin and the *Arabian Nights*, ‘creations which once so fanciful and visionary, seem[ed] to kindle into life as we gaze upon every object that surrounds us.’<sup>46</sup> In a passage whose imagery was repeated time and time again, Curtis wrote that he saw on the Bulaq road ‘all the pageantry of Oriental romance quietly donkeying in to Cairo.’

‘It was a fair festal evening. The whole world was masquerading, and so well that it seemed reality.

‘Abon Hassan sat at the city gate, and I saw Haroun Al-Rashid quietly coming up in the disguise of a Moussoul merchant. I could not but wink at Abon, for I knew him so long ago in the *Arabian Nights*. But he rather stared than saluted, as friends may, in a masquerade. There was Sinbad the porter too, hurrying to Sinbad the sailor. I turned and watched his form fade in the twilight, yet I doubt if he reached Bagdad in time for the eighth history.’<sup>47</sup>

Descriptions like these could be multiplied endlessly: and they were. Tourists filled page after page of their journals with the stock characters of the *Nights*, and Curtis’s account became so hackneyed that it was satirized later in the century.<sup>48</sup> But I don’t think that these figurations ought to be

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<sup>46</sup> Warburton, *Crescent and cross op. cit.*, p. 31; Hahn-Hahn, *Letters op. cit.*, vol. III, p. 43; Bartlett, *Nile boat op. cit.*, p. 46.

<sup>47</sup> Curtis, *Nile notes op. cit.*, pp. 2-3. Haroun al-Rashid was caliph of Baghdad between 788 and 809.

<sup>48</sup> The humorist Moberly Bell repeated Curtis’s description to his travelling companion, Georges Montbard, as though it were his own:

‘The words sounded familiar to him. “There’s something like that in an American book,” he said. “Good heavens! You’ve read it then! Why, I sat up all last night learning pages on purpose to please you; and there’s lots more of it...”’

C.F.M. Moberly Bell, *From Pharaoh to Fella* (London: Wells Gardner, Darton, 1888) pp. 14-15. The primary object of Bell’s satire was all those tourists who repeated these familiar descriptions to one another, or diligently passed them off in their notebooks as their own; but in making his jest Bell also testified to the extraordinary tenacity of these borrowings from one text to another, which is the point I seek to sharpen here.

dismissed as mere whimsy, as literary flourishes and embellishments. For the ‘reality-effect’ of Cairo as the city of the *Arabian Nights* was achieved by something more than reading the city *through* the text of the *Arabian Nights*; it was also achieved by reading the city *as* the text of the *Arabian Nights*. Cairo was to be turned into a book written by insiders, and for this very reason it was widely supposed to give its readers access to an everyday world – at once ordinary and extraordinary – that would otherwise have remained hidden from view. As Lane-Poole explained,

‘The *Nights* were written for the people, for the audience who gathered in the coffee-shops to listen to the professional reciter, for the large uneducated middle class of Cairo. This is what constitutes their special merit in the eyes of the student of medieval Egypt. The doings of kings and emirs we learn from the detailed pages of Makrizy and many other scholarly writers: it is from the *Thousand and One Nights* that we gain our insight into the life of the people – a life divided from that of the great by a gulf over which the Oriental historian rarely leaps.’<sup>49</sup>

And yet, at the same time, the ability to *read* this book was made the prerogative of the outsider. In *Modern Egyptians* Lane had noted that public recitations of the tales were rare in Cairo because written copies were scarce: ‘When a complete copy of “The Thousand and One Nights” is found, the price demanded for it is too great for a reciter to have it in his power to pay.’<sup>50</sup> Readers of Lane’s translation were thus privileged to hold the text in their hands. More than this, however, Lane turned reading the tales into a form of sightseeing by his forceful reversal of their structure. For Arab audiences the material world that the *Nights* described was mere background to the narrative, incidental to its main purpose, but Lane’s textual scaffolding manoeuvred this to the foreground so that it became an end in itself: what Sallis calls ‘an object of the voyeur’s voyage.’<sup>51</sup> To call this voyeurism is not, I think, to overstate the case. In the original framing, Sheherazade’s

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<sup>49</sup> Lane-Poole, *Story of Cairo op. cit.*, p. 262. Al-Maqrizi (1364-1442) was an Arab historian whose *Khittat*, written between 1415 and 1424, provides a brilliant illumination of medieval Cairo: see Raymond, *Cairo op. cit.*, pp. 148-164.

<sup>50</sup> Lane, *Modern Egyptians op. cit.*, p. 415.

<sup>51</sup> Sallis, *Sheherazade op. cit.*, pp. 11-12.

story-telling is a stratagem. In spinning out her stories night after night she tricks her husband into postponing her death, and in this sense she outwits, even deceives her male audience. But in substituting his *own* annotated narrative as the master-frame, Lane reasserted a power that was at once Orientalist *and* masculinist: through his persistent, probing commentary ‘the Orient’ was to be made transparent, its secrets laid bare and its deceptions revealed.

By these means, the power to read – to *make* Cairo make sense – was conferred upon the observer: upon the reader as traveller and, conversely, upon the traveller as reader. Under Lane’s tutelage, with him as cicerone, the *Nights* made it possible to peer into the lifeworlds of ordinary people, to turn their domestic lives and their material culture into exhibits, and thereby to glimpse the marvellous in the mundane. While Lane succeeded in reaffirming the virtuality of the *Nights* that had been claimed for Galland’s original translation – triumphantly redeeming the possibility of ‘visiting’ Cairo by reading the text – his canonical achievement was to ensure that the mobilization of this imaginative geography, the proliferation of its rumour of Cairo, was active, practical and thoroughly *reciprocal*. Pückler-Muskau put this very well when he described how he ‘roamed for many hours about the streets of the interminable city, and it always seemed to me as if I were reading the “*Arabian Nights*”; or, rather, as if their gay scenes were placed in living pictures before me.’<sup>52</sup> If to read the *Nights* was to wander the streets of Cairo, then in Ampère’s view ‘to wander the streets of Cairo was to re-read the *Thousand and One Nights*.’<sup>53</sup> Curtis thought it perfectly impossible to concoct an account of Cairo ‘without a dash of the *Arabian Nights*’ precisely because it was impossible to confine the ‘poetry’ of what he called ‘that airy arabesque’ within the covers of a book. The characters of the *Nights*, he wrote, continually ‘step forward into the prose of experience.’ Poetry was thus turned into prose, the marvellous into the mundane: or, as he

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<sup>52</sup> Pückler-Muskau, *Egypt under Mehemet Ali op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 143.

<sup>53</sup> Ampère, *Voyage op. cit.*, p. 182.

put it in artful elision, the conjunction between the *Arabian Nights* and Cairo meant that, in this city at least, ‘the romance of travel is real.’<sup>54</sup>

### Spacings

By these various means, the space of the text and the space of the city were constantly being folded into one another. In doing so it was not only space but also time that was pleated. While he was in Cairo in 1843, Gérard de Nerval wrote to his father that he ‘wanted to see each place only after having made myself sufficiently aware of it from books *and memories*.’<sup>55</sup> ‘Memories’; yet this was his first visit to Cairo. Those ‘memories’ derived, in large measure, from reading the *Arabian Nights*, and it has been suggested that the *Nights* came between Nerval and the city to such an extent that Cairo lost its presence: that in his *Voyage en Orient* ‘the subject’s inauguration into the field of desire always passes through the “defiles” of signifiers that are purely textual.’<sup>56</sup> Maybe so; but Lane’s writings opened up an altogether different passage, in which Cairo was made vividly and magically *present* in the constant performance of folds *between* city and text.

It was through the movements of travellers in these folds between city and text that Cairo was ‘re-cognized’ as a *lieu de mémoire*. I say ‘text’ but, as I have emphasized, these images of Cairo were derived from both words and the illustrations that accompanied them: this was a thoroughly *graphical* imagination in both senses of the term. One visitor expressed

‘... the strong feeling that we were living in the midst of scenes so familiar to us in childhood from that favourite book, the *Arabian Nights Entertainments*, but never realised till now.... [N]one of us probably imagined how graphic were those descriptions, how true to the life many of the details therein recorded. But now, as we rode among the bazaars of Cairo, and watched the habits and manners of the people, it is wonderful

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<sup>54</sup> Curtis, Nile notes *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>55</sup> Nerval, Oeuvres *op. cit.*, p. 925 (my emphasis); letter dated 18 March 1843.

<sup>56</sup> Ali Behdad, *Belated travelers: Orientalism in the age of colonial dissolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994) pp. 26-7. Daunais, *L’art de la mesure op. cit.*, p. 172 makes a similar claim: ‘Nerval does not have before him dream *and* reality but their mutual effacement one by the other.’

how that old, highly-prized volume, the delight of our childhood, was always recurring to our thoughts.’<sup>57</sup>

Another explained that his wife, busy obtaining the stores for their voyage up the Nile in 1869, spent her time ‘riding donkey-back about the crowded streets, and recognising everywhere the scenes she had lived amongst, both in the letterpress and illustrations of her *Arabian Nights*.’<sup>58</sup> These repeated acts of re-cognition transposed medieval Cairo into the modern, activating the flow of its everyday practices within a continuous historical present.

These recollection-images need to be located within a culture of travel – not confined within the pages of a book or the shelves of a library – because it was through such dispersed, open locations that their rumours of Cairo entered into the *performance* of the city. They were not only reproduced through the iterations of citationary structures, those constant borrowings from one text to another, and neither were their performative capacities ceded to the inhabitants of the city alone. Just as Lane’s rendering of Cairo was accomplished through his own performances, so too did the staging of Cairo as a space of fantasy within this Orientalist culture of travel depend, centrally, upon *tourists*’ performances – ‘readings’ of the city – that were at once textual-visual practices *and* so many activations of ‘bodily knowledge’.<sup>59</sup>

Indeed, tourists not only shared Lane’s interest in the body; their *own* performances were profoundly corporeal. The ways in which they made their way around the city and comported themselves when seeing the ‘sights’ turned on a series of bodily protocols that provided the physical grid within which their visual practices took place (and, for that matter, took *possession* of place). ‘Donkey riding is universal,’ Taylor remarked, and ‘no one thinks of going beyond the Frank quarter on foot.’ Careering through the streets on these ‘long-eared cabs’, the tourist gaze was acutely physical. ‘There is no

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<sup>57</sup> A.C. Smith, *The attractions of the Nile and its banks* (London: John Murray, 1868) vol. I, p. 50.

<sup>58</sup> Eden, Nile *op. cit.*, p. 52.

<sup>59</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, ‘Bodily knowledge’, in his *Pascalian meditations* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000) pp. 128-63.

use in attempting to guide the donkey,' Taylor advised, 'for he won't be guided. The driver shouts behind; and you are dashed at full speed into a confusion of other donkeys, camels, horses, carts, water-carriers and footmen.' The whirlwind of people and animals, buildings and bazaars meant that it was only possible to 'judge the rapidity of your progress,' so Mrs Damer said, 'by seeing how fast you lose sight of succeeding objects.' Tourists were thus 'borne onward by the irresistible stream, through the labyrinths of bazaars, in which everything appears like a confused dream', and through these spaces-in-motion – *through* them in every sense of the word – Cairo was visualized as a vivid, flickering, 'flitting phantasmagoria', its viewers continuously presented with 'the ever-shifting scenes of [a] living kaleidoscope' that seemed to open out before them 'at every turn.'<sup>60</sup>

This was a gaze that engaged all the senses – it was a *haptic* not a purely optical appropriation of the city – and for this very reason it was shot through with anxiety: it was not always easy to secure the detachment that opticality could confer upon the viewer. Emma Roberts recalled how, 'mounted upon donkeys, we pushed our way through a dense throng, thrusting aside loaded camels, which scarcely allowed us room to pass, and coming into the closest contact with all sorts of people.' Disconcerted, she confessed that 'the perusal of Mr Lane's book had given me a very vivid idea of the interior of the city, [but] *I was scarcely prepared to mingle thus intimately with its busy multitude.*'<sup>61</sup> Within this culture of travel it was necessary to be able to gaze upon other (extraordinary) bodies while protecting one's own person from closer encounters.<sup>62</sup> When Busch recommended that tourists observe the 'great masquerade' of the streets

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<sup>60</sup> Taylor, *Journey op. cit.*, pp. 37-8; Damer, *Diary op. cit.*, vol II, p. 146; Clayton, *Letters op. cit.*, p. 104; Bartlett, *Nile boat op. cit.*, p. 55; Smith, *Attractions op. cit.*, pp. 46-7.

<sup>61</sup> Roberts, *Notes op. cit.*, p. 116 (my emphasis).

<sup>62</sup> That said, some travellers were undoubtedly tantalized by the prospect of transgression, which was one of the constitutive tropes of Orientalism: see, for example, Joseph Boone, 'Vacation cruises, or the homoerotics of Orientalism', *Proc. Mod. Lang. Assoc.* 118 (1995) pp. 89-107. But here too Europeans and Americans reserved to themselves the right to enter and leave their fantasized space of erotic possibility at will: their will. Flaubert's encounters in Cairo and the Nile valley in the winter of 1849-50 are the most well-known, but these sexualizations became more pervasive (and more public) towards the end of the nineteenth century.

from a hotel window, therefore, he was enunciating a general rule. To see Cairo as a magic theatre, to bring off such a fantastic staging of the city, it was necessary for travellers to be *in* but not *of* the masquerade, to maintain a strategic distance between their own bodies and those of the inhabitants: all the while observing, recognizing, and judging. Shephard's was 'the central point from which the show could best be seen by an outside observer,' recalled the American consul; gazing out over the gaily-coloured crowd parading round the Azbakiyya, its guests 'had an "Arabian Nights" Entertainment" improvised for them always, without care and without cost': and, he might have added, without contact.<sup>63</sup> Paine was also delighted that her hotel faced the Azbakiyya, 'a situation that furnished its inmates with endless amusement.'

'It stood upon the principal new street, facing the large public gardens, so that ... there was always passing beneath our windows some picturesque group or festive scene that kept us ever on the alert.

'We were desirous of losing none of the peculiarities of the country, and the startling sound of the cracking whip, giving notice of the approach of some display, allowed us no repose.'<sup>64</sup>

In this way, moving between the view from the window or the terrace and the encounter in the street and the bazaar, Europeans and Americans arrogated to themselves the characteristically, I would say *crucially* Orientalist power to enter and leave the space of their fantasy, the spectral theatre, 'the Orient' itself, at will. When Nerval enumerated what he called 'places of refuge from Oriental life' – the hotels around the Azbakiyya, the

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<sup>63</sup> Busch, *Guide op. cit.*, p. 45; Edwin de Léon, *Thirty years of my life on three continents* (London: Ward and Downey, 1890) pp. 157, 162. Léon was recalling Shephard's in 1856. There were, of course, limits to this *cordon sanitaire* even in hotels. Miesse, *Journey op. cit.*, p. 102 confessed that he 'did not notice on the first day that with the exception of the first steward and the cooks, the whole array of servants in our hotel were natives. There were a great many of them – and their numbers made up for the deficiencies occasioned by their laziness and other unfitness for such a place.... The host told me that, besides boarding, these native servants get no remuneration for their services.' But few tourists commented on hotel servants, even in these pejorative terms, and in contradistinction to the dragoman and crew of the *dahabeah* who were hired for the Nile voyage, they remained anonymous and invisible in most European and American travel writings.

<sup>64</sup> Paine, *Tent and harem op. cit.*, pp. 88-9.

Frank theatre, Castignol's pharmacy, and the post-office where he collected his mail and heard European news – and wrote to his father that these constituted 'almost Europe in an entire quarter of the city', he was mapping a vital choreography of containment.<sup>65</sup> In much the same way, one can sense William Thackeray's bemused pleasure at 'finding England here in a French hotel [the Hotel d'Orient] kept by an Italian at the city of Grand Cairo in Africa', and hear Norman Macleod's evident relief on his return from sight-seeing to find that 'once in the hotel, we are again in Europe.'<sup>66</sup>

The 'virtual' order of Lane's *Arabian Nights* - the *va-et-vient* between note and text, between commentary and narrative, between reason and fantasy - was thus replicated in a 'physical' ordering of Cairo put in place by the performance of an endlessly repeated movement between 'the same' and 'the other', between the hotel and the street:

<i>text</i>	<i>narrative</i>	<i>fantasy</i>	<i>other</i>	<i>street</i>	<i>city</i>
<i>note</i>	<i>commentary</i>	<i>reason</i>	<i>same</i>	<i>hotel</i>	<i>text</i>

If there was nothing outside this text, it was not a text bounded by margins and boards. The folds between city-text and text-city activated not only a *graphical* imagination, therefore, but also a *geo*-graphical imagination in which an Orientalist Cairo was continuously, elaborately performed as a series of *spacings*. Lane did not, of course, invent these distinctions or the orderings that were (re)produced through them. But, as I hope to have shown, he was instrumental in orchestrating their performance in – and *of* - Cairo.

<sup>65</sup> Nerval, *Voyage op. cit.*, pp. 170-1; Nerval, *Oeuvres op. cit.*, p. 931; letter dated 2 May 1843.

<sup>66</sup> Thackeray, *Notes op. cit.*, p. 132; Norman Macleod, *Eastward* (London and New York: Strahan, 1866) p. 27. There were differences between tourists from different countries, but what is striking about all these observations is their common appeal to Europe. As Nerval, *Voyage op. cit.*, p. 299 remarked, when travelling in Egypt 'each European becomes a *Frank* to every other, that is to say, a fellow-countryman; so far from home, the atlas map of our tiny Europe loses its clear-cut distinctions.' He did, however, exclude one nation from his plenary geography: the Englishman, he said, 'stays on his own island.' And in Cairo Nerval made a point of staying at Domergue's 'French hotel' rather than Waghorn's 'English hotel': (p. 158).