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Imagining Egypt: Walter Savage Landor's *Gebir*

Michael Bradshaw

When Walter Savage Landor revised his heroic poem *Gebir* for the second edition of 1803, he extended the Preface, making more fully explicit an ideological position he had merely floated in 1798: "In the moral are exhibited the folly, the injustice, and the punishment of Invasion, with the calamities which must ever attend the superfluous colonization of a peopled country" (WHEELER 1937, I, p. 474). He also added a headnote to each book; the "Argument" for the final Book VII begins: "Against colonization in peopled countries. All nature dissuades from whatever is hostile to equality" (WHEELER 1937, I, p. 48). This brief but striking claim glosses a freshly expanded passage of about forty lines, in which the narrative admonishes against the sins of expatriate adventuring, while contrastingly extolling as a noble ambition the exploration and settlement of wildernesses:

Amidst her darkest caverns most retired,
Nature calls forth her filial Elements
To close around and crush that monster *Void*. —
Fire, springing fierce from his resplendent throne,
And Water, dashing the devoted wretch
Woundless and whole, with iron-colour'd mace,
Or whirling headlong in his war-belt's fold.
Mark well the lesson, man! and spare thy kind.
Go, from their midnight darkness wake the woods,
Woo the lone forest in her last retreat —
Many still bend their beauteous heads unblest
And sigh aloud for elemental man.
Thro' palaces and porches, evil eyes
Light upon ev'n the wretched, who have fled
The house of bondage, or the house of birth:
Suspensions, murmurs, treacheries, taunts, retorts,
Attend the brighter banners that invade;
And the first horn of hunter, pale with want,
Sounds to the chase; the second to the war.

(1803 text: VII, ll. 22-40; WHEELER 1937, I, p. 49)¹

In a rather fussy passage of revision, Landor pursues both mythic expansiveness in the verse and a competing political clarity in two additional footnotes:

Those who have left their country from a sense of injustice or from
indifference, have often flourished; while those whom the mother country

¹ But unless otherwise stated, quotations from *Gebir* will be taken from the first printed edition of 1798, in Jonathan Wordsworth's facsimile reprint (1993).

has sent out with great care and expence, have utterly deceived her expectations.

(footnote to l. 8; WHEELER 1937, I, p. 48)

Here are twenty verses which were not in the first edition. They describe the equality which nature teaches, the absurdity of colonizing a country which is peopled, and the superior advantage of cultivating those which remain unoccupied.

(footnote to l. 14; WHEELER 1937, I, p. 48)

The apparent mismatch between the reforming earnestness of the poet's own views and the involuted classicism of their execution has alienated some readers. R.H. Super, for example, classes this passage as "the least effective intellectually" of openings to the books of *Gebir*, and hints broadly at a lapse into distasteful cant (SUPER 1954b, p. 44). While acknowledging that *Gebir* is a liberal, idealistic, or even revolutionary poem, many of its major commentators apparently privilege stylistic qualities in their evaluations, and investigate Landor's relative debts to Pindar, Virgil or Milton in his complex handling of genre, greatly at the expense of a detailed interpretation of the poem's political content. In the passage of verse quoted above, for example, Landor is not indicting the evils of tyranny and empire in a facile or even general way, but attempting to distinguish between various forms of human migration, positive as well as negative. "Man" is exhorted to explore and populate the globe, to resemble the elements themselves in his harnessing and shaping of the natural world. But when already-peopled lands are colonised, there will inevitably be native suspicion of the immigrant; and this is directed not only at the cynical invader, but also at the refugee or asylum-seeker: "evil eyes / Light upon ev'n the wretched, who have fled / The house of bondage, or the house of birth." The particular note of pessimism – or even incipient tragedy – in this final image does not suggest a knee-jerk Jacobinism, but a complex and uncertain politics of international and intercultural encounter.

One prudent adjustment we might make when approaching a text like this in the hope of new contexts for understanding is not to underestimate its design and structure, and this should include a serious regard for its plot in simple terms. In the case of *Gebir* there is a history of general disparagement of the poem's plot and political content almost as old as the poem itself (beginning in fact with Southey's review of 1799), in favour of attention to its allegedly "real" merits – all of them purely stylistic. This article will argue for the complexity and value of Landor's political content in *Gebir*, and seek to promote a movement away from the stylistic obsession of the poem's critical heritage, towards methods of interpretation that give the young author some credit for political and historical ideas, while also pointing to some problems in its claim to enlightenment in the representation of a purely imaginary Egypt.² The oriental theme of the poem, and its rewarding susceptibility to some aspects of postcolonial criticism argue strongly for the

² "The stylistic obsession...": A welcome exception to this tendency is a recent article on Landor by Titus Bicknell, which considers the cultural politics of Landor's controversialist championing of Latin throughout his career; see BICKNELL 1996.

continuing relevance of *Gebir* and the value that might be derived from its fuller assimilation into contemporary Romantic studies.

The first version was probably written in 1795, when Landor was just nineteen; *Gebir; a Poem in Seven Books* was printed anonymously in London in July 1798, its publication being announced in *The Monthly Magazine* for August 1798, just a few weeks before the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* in Bristol. Robert Southey's extravagantly positive review was printed in *The Critical Review* in September 1799, having the eventual effect of bringing Landor and Southey together as long-term friends. Southey cheerfully chose to overlook the poem's plot entirely, as "certainly ill chosen, and not sufficiently whole"; it was the manner and style which interested him: "every circumstance is displayed with a force and accuracy which painting cannot exceed" (quoted in WORDSWORTH 1993, p. ii). The review ran to ten pages, with as many quotations as his editor would allow. Southey continued to enthuse to his friends: "Its intelligible passages are flashes of lightning at midnight"; "There is a poem called Gebir, written by God knows whom, sold for a shilling; it has miraculous beauties"; "some of the most exquisite poetry in the language" (quoted in SUPER 1954b, p. 45). Given this level of adulation, it comes as no surprise that there is a strong connection between *Gebir* and Southey's own oriental fantasies: he later wrote in a preface to his *Poetical Works* (1838) that he came upon *Gebir* not long after commencing *Thalaba*, and it quickly exerted a positive influence on his verse (SUPER 1954b, p. 45).

In fact the poem that Southey admired has a strong narrative, albeit one strained by compression and elision in the maintenance of its austere style of verse. *Gebir* is a heroic narrative poem in blank verse, concerning quest and conquest, in which a western colonial adventure is undone by an uneasy alliance of love, treachery and the supernatural: the homiletic quality of the plot, which Landor mentions in 1803, centres on the parallel examples of a pair of brothers, who are both subdued by female characters. The action opens swiftly with Gebir the king of Gades (Spain) already on campaign to subdue Egypt and re-assert the dominion of his ancestors.³ The invading and conquering Gebir is himself conquered by his love for the queen Charoba, and conquered again and more finally by the native sorcery commanded by the nurse Dalica and her sister; he is finally put to death by Dalica's treachery, as he dons a poisoned garment at the wedding feast. The counter-instance of the king's brother Tamar and his love for a sea-nymph demonstrates a happy alternative destiny for inter-cultural intercourse, as Tamar allows himself to be transported and swept away, a pattern of positive submission. Tamar is the shepherd of the Spanish army, and first encounters the nymph when she appears to him to challenge him to a wrestling match, which he loses; it is the victor of a subsequent bout, the dauntless Gebir himself, who arrogantly bargains with the local magic and is destroyed, despite his robustness and physical prowess. Egypt then is figured as a range of feminine types, receptive and responsive in a variety of ways to the invading western male.

No great claim can be made for the historical or geographical setting of Landor's tale. The origin of *Gebir* in a romance which the author had borrowed from Rose Aylmer, is

³ Landor associates the name Gebir with Gibraltar in a footnote to the second edition; see WHEELER 1937, I, p. 2, n.).

well known.⁴ And in fact Landor himself deliberately draws early attention to his inspiring but isolated Welsh location in writing it:

Ye woody vales of Cambria! and ye hills
That hide in heaven your summits and your fame!⁵
Your ancient songs, and breezes pure, invite
Me from my noon-tide rambles, and the force
Of high example influences my lay.

I sing the fates of Gebir! how he dwelt
Among those mountain-caverns, which retain
His labours yet, vast halls, and flowing wells,
Nor have forgotten their old master's name
Though sever'd from his people...

(1798 text; WORDSWORTH 1993, I, ll. 7-16)

On the one hand, this passage comes clean about the author's relative ignorance of the setting: I was in Wales when I wrote it, after all. The unconvincing local flavour has been frequently remarked on, by Jonathan Wordsworth for example, who observes that "We get no sense of a tangible Egyptian setting, and none of Gebir's Spanishness", and instances "the crocodile / Crying" (I, ll. 65-66; WORDSWORTH 1993, p. iv). But there is also some subtlety in the way Landor makes a virtue of necessity with this disclaimer. He specifically locates this narrative of eastern empire and conquest in the western English dominion of Wales, and explores in the contours of the Welsh landscape an idea of a fugitive culture expressed in a natural rather than urbane voice. This idea is reinforced in the 1803 note quoted below, in which Landor makes the "archaeological" point that the indigenous narratives of sages and heroes have been suppressed to the point of invisibility, with stirring place-names their only remaining traces.⁶ In the following verse-paragraph Landor introduces his eponymous hero with a carefully chosen image of mountain-caverns, in which Gebir's deeds are said to be still recorded and memorialised. The deft association of images here opens the narrative with a modest claim to the enduring relevance of its major themes – empire and colonialism, expatriation and commemoration.

Gebir has sometimes been interpreted as primarily a vehicle for Landor's republican politics, attempting to lay down a mythic foundation for a successful Revolution, in the parallel tales of two linked struggles, one of which goes wrong, and one of which goes

⁴ "The History of Charoba, Queen of Egypt", in Clara Reeve's *The Progress of Romance* (1785). Landor confesses: "This Poem, the fruit of Idleness and Ignorance — for had I been a botanist or mineralogist it never had been written — was principally written in Wales. The subject was taken, or rather the shadow of the subject, from a wild and incoherent, but fanciful, Arabian Romance..." (author's Preface, 1798; WORDSWORTH 1993, p. I).

⁵ Landor's footnote in 1803: "In the first edition, it was improperly printed *name*. I believe, almost every hill in that country has its descriptive name; and it often happens that the name alone is remaining of its history, and the history is apparently that of some preternatural personage..." (WHEELER 1937, I, p. 1).

⁶ *c.f.* the account of the excavation of a buried city early in Book II, discussed below.

right. Gebir would thus stand for ambition thwarted or led astray, his destiny still locked in the cyclical futility of hereditary monarchy, while the issue of Tamar and the nymph would represent the happy descendants of democracy. As Tamar voyages over the Mediterranean with his bride, they gaze at the island of Corsica, from where the nymph prophesies a heroic descendant of theirs will emerge onto the world stage:

... there shall once arise,
From Tamar shall arise, 'tis Fate's decree,
A mortal man above all mortal praise.
(1798 text; VI, ll. 184-186)

But praise for the Corsican was qualified in the revised edition of 1803:

Bonaparte might have been so, and in the beginning of his career it was augured that he would be. But unhappily he thinks, that to produce great changes, is to perform great actions: to annihilate antient freedom and to substitute new; to give republics a monarchical government, and the provinces of monarchs a republican one; in short, to overthrow by violence all the institutions, and to tear from the heart all the social habits of men, has been the tenor of his policies to the present hour.

(Landor's note to l. 193, 1803 text; WHEELER 1937, I, p. 479)

For 1803, Landor took the decision to retain the controversial allusion to Bonaparte as "above all mortal praise", but to draw attention to the disappointment of revolutionary ideals in the notes. This familiar view of the decline of revolutionary idealism into dictatorship, shared by many disillusioned liberals at the time, also announced the existence of fairly explicit contemporary politics in the first text of *Gebir*, "reminding [...] Tory patriots", writes Elwin, "that the obscurity noticed by Southey might be a mask for treasonable subtlety." The ostentatious erudition of Landor's decision to publish a Latin version of the poem, *Gebirus* (also 1803), may have further inflamed some latent hostility, and made possible the accusation that treasonous convictions were being smuggled into print rather than declared outright. A vicious review of *Gebirus* duly appeared in *The Anti-Jacobin Review* in February 1804, which condemned its author as "a coward and a profligate" (see ELWIN 1958, pp. 97-98; SUPER 1954b, p. 69).⁷

But by this time Landor had reconsidered his position on the war, had given in fact a complete overhaul to his political outlook, when in the summer of 1802 he took the opportunity of the Peace of Amiens to visit Paris, and was perturbed to discover Napoleon to be callous and overbearing.⁸ Landor wrote much later in life,

⁷ Elwin also argues that most early readers found *Gebir* too Jacobinical, and like Lamb justified both continuing to read it and disarming it of its politics by recourse to praise of its literary beauties, praise for individual fine passages deliberately enlarged from their contexts; see ELWIN 1958, p. 68.

⁸ Landor's personal encounters with Bonaparte are detailed in R.H. Super's biography; see SUPER 1954b, pp. 63-65.

In my boyhood I was a fierce democrat and extolled the French. In a few years it was evident how incapable was that people of Liberty, and how prone to despotism. Let me never be called inconsistent if I praised the good and true, abhorring and detesting the vicious and the false.

(quoted in SUPER 1954b, p. 65)

John Forster writes that, “The intention of the poem is [...] to rebuke the ambition of conquest, however excusable its origin, and to reward the contests of peace, however at first unsuccessful” (FORSTER 1869, I, p. 81). Sidney Colvin for another readily identifies Landor’s poem with a radical pacifist cause:

The message, such as it is, of *Gebir* is mainly political and philanthropic. The tragic end of the hero and his bride is designed to point a moral against the enterprises of hatred and ambition, the happy fates of Tamar and the nymph to illustrate the reward that awaits the peaceful. The progeny whom the latter pair see in a vision celebrating the triumphs of liberty are intended to symbolize the people of revolutionary France.

(COLVIN 1881, p. 28)

The line taken by Colvin and Forster, that *Gebir* is basically an encoded polemic against the warfare of conquest, however intuitively valid, should also be complicated by a sense of the frontier politics of 1790s England, in which the potential invader and conqueror was Revolutionary France and the reforming indictment that this constituted of the reactionary British monarchy. Stern admonitions against imperial expansion do not necessarily target a complacent and reactionary British ruling class, but could be equally applicable to the republican zealot across the Channel. Landor witnessed first-hand the mobilisation of coastal militias in south Wales in response to the build-up of French troops at Brest in the winter of 1796-97, commenting on the “alarm and despondency” of the expectation of invasion (see ELWIN 1958, p. 67). Works such as Charlotte Smith’s *Beachy Head* (1807), the great poem of national and geographic frontiers in the age of revolutionary war, bear poetic witness to the sensation of imminent invasion, and provide further evidence that progressive liberal politics can seamlessly combine with very real anxieties about invasion by a foreign power. In fact Landor himself made a contribution to the literature of invasion panic: in his satire “An Address to the Fellows of Trinity College Oxford, on the Alarm of Invasion” (1800) he imagines the ludicrous hysteria as pious Anglican dons scurry around to defend their way of life from the French:⁹

Still, bred in your college, tho’ no longer in it, I
Send ye health and fraternity, fellows of Trinity!

⁹ This satirical poem was written for the volume *Poems by the Author of Gebir* (1800) but, on the advice of Walter Birch, Landor cancelled it before publication; it was first printed by Forster. See also FORSTER 1869, I, p. 191 n., and SUPER 1954b, p. 47. The remark in l. 34 about the author being a “good shot” is a comical reference to his having fired a gun in his college room to frighten a despised neighbour, the incident for which Landor was rusticated; see SUPER 1954b, pp. 18-20; FIELD 2000, pp. 27-28.

Thro' haste to salute you, the feet of my doggerel
 Like a drunken or down-hill and devil-drove hog reel.
 (WELBY and WHEELER 1936, XVI, p. 290: ll. 3-6)

Take *me* for your leader: — you have not forgot
 That your most humble servant was once a good shot:
 Tho' ye dreaded, but dreaded without rhyme or reason,
 He haply might turn his fine talents to treason.
 (ll. 33-36)

In this comic swipe at his former tutors Landor seems to cast himself rather as a jesting catalyst than the representative of any faction or other; it was presumably the open flirtation with “treason” that eventually persuaded him of the wisdom of dropping the poem. But it is also interesting that he chooses not to gloat, or to advance any overt sympathy for the national enemy. Landor’s response to the war with France was complex, shifting, and appropriately irreducible in its idiosyncrasy: a devout democrat, he nevertheless sent moneys and arms to the Spanish, and later served as volunteer against the French force in Spain in 1808;¹⁰ he greatly admired Napoleon, but he also rejoiced in the victories of Nelson; he loudly fantasised about the execution of the British royal family,¹¹ and yet retained an English landowner’s anxieties about duty and stability.

More generally, the expectation in some quarters of attempted invasion from across the Channel would seem to make problematic the straightforward formula of Gebir as colonialist patriarch and Tamar as enlightened lover, responsive and sensitive to the validity of the eastern Other: in the 1790s the reactionary British might not unreasonably see themselves as the potentially conquered and colonised, rather than an empire on the march. Landor’s characteristically mixed and changing engagement with the great political debate of his time, which can be read in some of his key revisions to *Gebir*, enables an ambivalent reading in which justice does not reside in a stable way with either party. Certainly, a detailed reading of the poem will not allow a simple dialectic between “Spain” and “Egypt”. The sophistication of *Gebir* is partly its reluctance to provide a definable partisan line on questions of war and government: it not only stands as a universalised liberal rebuke of colonial ambition, with English Tories in its sights as perhaps the prime target, but implicitly admonishes Revolutionary France’s ambitions to conquer and rule England. The obstinate ambivalence between these possibilities is pure Landor.

¹⁰ On the eve of his departure for Spain, Landor wrote with a distinctly *Gebir*-ish tone to Southey from Falmouth, again demonstrating that loyalty as he defined it applied to ideals rather than to parties: “I am going to Spain. In three days I shall have sailed. [...] I am now about to express a wish at which your gentler and more benevolent soul will shudder. May every Frenchman out of France perish! May the Spaniards not spare one ...” (quoted in SUPER 1954b, p. 85).

¹¹ As a teenage boy, already amid the general climate of invasion panic, Landor had remarked: “I wish the French would invade England and assist us in hanging George the Third between two such thieves as the Archbishops of Canterbury and York!” (1791). He was apparently chastised by his mother; see FIELD 2000, p. 7.

There may be further ambivalence in the well known passage in Book III in which Gebir is given a guided tour of the underworld in search of his ancestors. Forster argues that the various portraits of political and historical figures were easy enough to identify: George III (“what wretch / Is that with eyebrows white, and slanting brow”, ll. 185-186); William III (“Behold the giant next him”, l. 202); Charles II (“the wretch accurst, / Who sold his people to a rival king”, ll. 215-216); Charles I (“What is yon awful sight? why thus appears / That space between the purple and the crown?”, ll. 222-223). Forster goes on to observe that the associations of the guillotine (“Listen! him yonder, who, bound down supine, / Shrinks, yelling, from that sword there, engine-hung”, ll. 187-188) might provide Landor with a valuable get-out clause if challenged about portraying George III:

But I may point out, what was better understood at the date of the poem than it has been since, that the two lines immediately following were intended to turn aside the treasonable reference by raising a confusion in the reader’s mind between George the Third and Louis Seize, who so recently had perished by the guillotine...

(FORSTER 1869, I, p. 91)

And yet for De Quincy, the identification – and the political orientation of the episode – was extremely clear: the wretch with white eyebrows is “our worthy old George III”; the guillotine image should be read as an aggressive prophecy of what might become of George for his pursuit of the autocratic policies that had involved Britain in an unjust war with the Americans (see ELWIN 1958, p. 68). Landor takes the greatest licence in his poem’s contact with historical event: while Gebir discovers the hapless George Hanover among his own dead ancestors, with whose legacy he must continue to struggle, Tamar is promised Napoleon as a future descendant. But there may be seen to be constraints as well as benefits in Landor’s free use of mythic time and space, as we will see.

The publication of the two versions of *Gebir*, Landor’s imagining of Egypt, was exactly coeval with the invasion, conquest and occupation of Egypt by the French Republic. The French fleet bore down on Alexandria in June 1798 (Landor saw his poem of Egyptian conflict published the following month); after a swift, intense and troubled attempt at colonial government, Napoleon’s armies began leaving Egypt in July 1801, and were fully evacuated by September (Landor’s second edition of *Gebir* and *Gebirus* were both published in 1803). Napoleon had occupied Egypt for a brief period of about three years (1798-1801), in which time the Mameluk military was defeated, Cairo secured, and a deliberate programme of cultural imperialism implemented. Napoleon first addressed the Moslem population in an Arabic decree, claiming to be both the spiritual ally of Islam (with a record of striking against the Vatican for its hostility to Islam), and the champion of Ottoman identity;¹² he quickly surrounded himself with *divans* of local counsellors, drawn from the nobility and clergy. Napoleon himself left Cairo in August 1799; by that time his appointed successor, Kléber, planned to find a way of disengaging from Egypt without ceding strategic advantage to the British, but was assassinated in June 1800. In a

¹² The first French proclamation in Egypt is recorded, and subjected to a detailed critique for its flawed Arabic grammar as for its disingenuous orientalist propaganda by Abd al Rahman Al-Jabarti in his *Chronicle* (AL-JABARTI 1993, pp. 24-33).

strange parallel with Landor's romantic fiction, Kléber's successor as commander of French Egypt, Jacques-Abdallah Menou, had converted to Islam in order to marry an Egyptian woman. It was Menou who finally agreed terms with the British and brought the enterprise to a conclusion (see AL-JABARTI 1993, pp. 9-11). Significant contemporary documents of this encounter between nations include the *Muddat* or *Chronicle* of the occupation from June to December 1798 by the Egyptian historian Abd al Rahman Al-Jabarti, and the memoirs of Louis Antoine Fauvelet de Bourrienne, Bonaparte's private secretary. Napoleon's precipitous foundation of the Institut d'Égypte co-ordinated the work of scholars and scientists in recording, measuring and interpreting Egypt more rigorously than any previous western project. The eventual fruit of this labour, the encyclopedic *Description de l'Égypte*, was published in 23 volumes between 1809 and 1828, stimulating scholarship, textualising and appropriating Egyptian culture and history nearly three decades after the French abandoned the idea of Egypt as a permanent colony. This abortive adventure began and ended in between the first *Gebir* and Landor's close-range personal glimpses of Bonaparte in Paris during the Amiens peace in 1802. For a writer so personally interested in Bonaparte, Landor might be expected to take some account of these events in the revisions he made for his second edition. But there is no mention at all – not in the expanded verse text, nor in the now copious and digressive annotation, nor yet in the indignant riposte to critics in the “Post-Script to *Gebir*”. The complete absence of any reference to recent events in Egypt appears as a hollow and slightly disturbing silence in Landor's “Egyptian” poem, an apparently *antihistorical* strategy. Why would a poet attempt to pass off a narrative as “Egyptian” while apparently excluding any possibility of plausible Egyptian content? and what are the conditions of a political poem which so studiously divorces itself from the materiality of political event, spurning an opportunity for topical relevance? The following section will consider Landor's attempt to represent eastern conflict in an aesthetic vacuum of his own devising, with reference to two instances in the narrative – first, the building of the new Gadite city, and then the use of indigenous magic to defeat the invader.

It is a complication of the conquest theme that *Gebir* does not attempt an original subjugation of Charoba's Egypt, but the recovery and restoration of a buried city founded by his ancestors, which will both avenge the overthrow of his culture and fulfil an oath of loyalty. The underworld journey in Book III, for some readers the most bathetic section of a text which it's hard to take entirely seriously, can then be seen to be well integrated into the poem's political design: unlike Jonathan Wordsworth, who remarks, “We follow with no especial surprise as *Gebir* pointlessly visits the underworld...” (WORDSWORTH 1993, p. vi), I would argue that the deepening of *Gebir*'s mission into the dynastic past is significant. *Gebir*'s mission to subdue Charoba's Egypt is shot through with his *pietas*, in the debt of honour he must discharge to his bloodline. Similarly then, the passages which image the city's re-emergence from the archaeological strata – replete with echoing Virgilian omens of foundation, prosperity and foreboding – offer a subtly layered impression of Landor's imperial theme, in which rival cultures vie with each other for possession of the textualised land: the Spanish and the Egyptians wax and wane, successively inscribing, erasing and restoring their native ascendancy.

Some raise the painted pavement, some on wheels

Draw slow its laminous length, some intersperse
 Salt waters thro' the sordid heaps, and seize
 The flowers and figures starting fresh to view.
 Others rub hard large masses, and essay
 To polish into white what they misdeem
 The growing green of many trackless years.
 Far off at intervals, the ax resounds
 With regular stroke, and nearer home
 Dull falls the mallet with long labor fringed.
 Here, arches are discover'd, there, huge beams
 Resist the hatchet, but in fresher air,
 Soon drop away: there lies a marble, squar'd
 And smoothen'd, some high pillar for its base
 Chose it, which now lies ruin'd in the dust.
 Clearing the soil at bottom, they espy
 A crevice: they, intent on treasure, strive
 Strenuous, and groan, to move it: one exclaims
 "I hear the rusty metal grate: it moves!"
 Now, overturning it, backward they start;
 And stop again, and see a serpent pant,
 See his throat thicken, and the crisped scales
 Rise ruffled; while upon the middle fold
 He keeps his wary head and blinking eye,
 Curling more close, and crouching ere he strike.
 Go mighty men, and ruin cities, go
 And be such treasure portions to your heirs.

(II, ll. 8-34)

The foundation of Gebir's city is as much a matter of excavation as of construction. In addition to the impression of ancient pasts superimposed on each other (the labour of Gebir's men is of course about to be erased by sorcery), the passage suggests a degeneration of the imperial theme: the sacred mission of which Gebir learns in the underworld in Book III is being executed by men more interested in plundering buried treasure. The rebuke to their venality – the crouching serpent ready to strike – is hammered home with a contemptuous jibe: "Go mighty men, and ruin cities, go / And be such treasure portions to your heirs", which again pays the idea forward over succeeding generations. Landor's intellectual interest in long-range causation in this passage makes it altogether more striking that he rejects any opportunity to render the scene with received Egyptological motifs; there is no gesture in this direction, not even by way of spirited embellishment (which might be forgiven in an author of nineteen). So, there are no pyramids, no pharaohs' tombs, no hieroglyphic inscriptions, no sphinxes, no allusions to the Egyptian pantheon...

The encounter between the Egyptians and the Gadites (Spaniards) is strongly – even crudely – gendered. There are no major male Egyptian characters, nor any female Gadites. Anxiety is an important attribute of the invading male's transgression into Egypt. The

sacred space in Egypt is coded entirely feminine, and presided over by Charoba's nurse Dalica, and Dalica's sorceress sister. The following passage is an interesting example of invented rituals of a kind deemed appropriate by a western writer representing – or rather, imagining – the orient. Initially unrecognised, Dalica is challenged by her sister:

“But, Dalica, unaw'd,
 Tho' in her wither'd but still firm right-hand
 Held up with imprecations, hoarse and deep,
 Glimmer'd her brazen sickle, and inclosed
 Within it's figur'd curve the fading moon —
 Spake thus aloud. “By yon bright orb of Heaven,
 In that most sacred moment when her beam
 Guided first thither by the forked shaft,
 Strikes thro' the crevice of Arishtah's tower,”
 (V, ll. 43-51)

The only clear impression here is that the women practise some form of moon worship: in addition to this there is a generalised sense of an ancient culture being expert in astronomical measurement, and the name Arishtah, which seems to have been selected for its atmospheric sound. The state religion practised by the Egyptians has unnamed “Gods”, and makes mention of “heaven” / “Heaven”, both as a moral intensifier and apparently as an abode of the virtuous dead. This is purely the sacred feminine form of that generalised religion, and not especially pagan, nor especially subversive. As with the blandly classical city in Book II, Landor's manner of imagining Egypt seems to be to exercise very little imagination; he has strangely resisted where a more typical young writer might be expected to immerse himself in detail. And yet in plot terms Landor is pursuing a motif that is highly appropriate to the colonial / postcolonial questions that preoccupy him in *Gebir*: indigenous ritual enters the plot as the method of the western invader's undoing, the ascription of magic power functioning to release colonial anxiety, making payments of guilt and violence. A dark and destructive magic power that can be turned against the western colonist at will by an adept is a potent and widespread motif that crystallises the anxieties of transgression.¹³ At the close of this book, Landor gives the sorceress Myrthyr the full *Macbeth* treatment, detailing the various creatures whose venom she extracts as she provides Dalica with the means of Gebir's death. While Dalica has lived in the court as Charoba's nurse and grown away from the pagan practices of her matrilinear identity, her sister Myrthyr has continued to nurture the old rituals of which Dalica now has need:

... ah I fear
 The golden lamps and jewels of a court
 Deprive thine eyes of strength and purity:
 O Dalica, mine watch the waning moon,
 For ever patient in our mothers art,

¹³ The classic instance of this in the modern era is the “mummy movie”.

And rest on Heaven suspended; where the founts
 Of Wisdom rise; where sounds the wings of Power.
 (V, ll. 85-91)

Landor's treatment of these various facets of colonial encounter – the palimpsest of ruined civilisations, the oaths of duty that recede into distant generations, the challenge of the sacred feminine, the incidence of indigenous ritual and magic as expression of colonial anxiety – are all distanced both from the given visual attributes of “ancient Egypt” (in which Landor seems to have no interest), and also from the historical specificity which would have provided him with a direct link between his fictional setting of Egypt and the epitome of his ambiguous intellectual subject matter – Napoleon. In keeping the possible connection at bay throughout the progress of a seven-book poem, Landor is making a strong negative statement. Landor's negotiation of the colonial experience occurs within an abstract space shaped primarily by his classicist aesthetic and his sentimentality, two features that remained pretty constant throughout one of the longest of all literary careers. *Gebir's* investigation into the politics and morality of conquest is staged in Landor's own interior space.

Discoveries of this kind in turn make Landor's devoutly anti-colonialist text peculiarly vulnerable to Said's charge of producing the east as a theatre of the orientalist's own understandings *of* the east... an argument which Said of course reinforced in relation to the history of Napoleon's conquest of Egypt, and the documentary record of the related cultural project, the *Description de l'Égypte* (SAID 1978, pp. 81-88). In remaining determinedly withdrawn from the possibility of historical or cultural detail, Landor's poem is merely homiletic on colonial issues, standing at best as a performance of enlightened hostility to the colonial in an Egypt of the imagination. *Gebir* at once conveys all the cussedness and complexity of Landor's political vision, and also conforms to an enclosing western paradigm in narrating the feminine east's responses to male invasive power.

Curiously, it was with such a withdrawal from the materiality of history that Al-Jabarti offered the moral conclusion to his account of the French occupation. The *Chronicle* ends abruptly with a parting religious allusion, in which the historian breaks away from the street-level detail of rebellion, repression, local factionalism, and aggressive bureaucracy, shrewdly allowing all notion of conquest to be re-absorbed into the singularity of the Moslem divinity: “And judgement belongeth to God alone, / He is the One, the Conquering!” (AL-JABARTI 1993, p. 118).¹⁴

¹⁴ *c.f.* Qu'ràn XII, 40; XII, 39; XIII, 16.

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