HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL
INTERCONNECTIONS BETWEEN
LATIN AMERICA AND ASIA

Argentinean Literary Orientalism

From Esteban Echeverría to Roberto Arlt

Axel Gasquet

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For Nina and David, again and always

Preface to the English Edition

This study, while innovative, is not comprehensive because it is part of a larger research project. It is one of three volumes analyzing the impact and consequences of the East on Argentinean literary culture throughout slightly more than two centuries. The first two were published in Spanish in 2007 and 2015 respectively. Material collection coupled with varied textual sources led to the decision of a three-volume publication based along chronological and thematic lines. Each volume exhibits an internal coherence that responds to its authors' synchronic intonation, and a diachronic one that covers the great chapters of Argentinean culture since independence.

The project aims at an extensive intellectual and cultural history of the Eastern tradition in Argentina, with each volume having a specific focus: the first, on literary orientalism; the second, on the cultural history of orientalism; the third, on the incidence of the orientalist theme in the development of twentieth-century Argentinean culture. Such coherence provides certain elementary organizational principles for observing the diverse dialogues between Argentinean literary culture and Eastern cultures, with allowance for the widest and most indistinct boundaries. This complex interplay of Argentinean Orientalism is often contradictory or misaligned with the real East because it was not only conceived as an imaginary cultural space, but also as an intricate and problematic political, historical, and cultural body. From experience as well as contact, multifaceted discourses arise that provide evidence: no single East existed that

spanned all generations as the product of an essentialism that ran through the ages. On the contrary, it is quickly noticed that the East, as a political and cultural entity, is diverse, plural, polymorphic, and its contours and limits are always mobile and of a variable geometry. Therefore, we question ourselves about its scope and boundaries, as well as when did this or that region or country belonged to the East in a real historical and political manner and in an imaginary cultural, artistic, and literary one.

However, the fact that this is the first volume of a trilogy does not make it any less rigorous and exhaustive than the others. It may be read and discussed autonomously, regardless of other publications. Each volume seeks to harmoniously adhere to the preceding stages of the research while contributing new analytical elements in a different historical and cultural context, whether in Argentina or globally.

This study's contents have been favorably received by specialists and academic critics in Ibero-America. From its original 2007 publication, its research has filled a long-standing lacuna by detailing and examining how Orientalist discourse occupied a prominent place in the construction of an Argentinian national identity within West civilization, by combining elements of local and global interpretation. It is a modest attempt to break the hegemony of a limited vision in Ibero-American studies, which has been constrained to an everlasting dialogue between America and Europe, impervious to elements outside that exclusive relationship. This work seeks to introduce a different equation to the Argentinean and South American cultural configuration, by studying the contribution of and dialogue with Eastern cultures and peoples, in the broadest possible sense.

To accomplish our purpose, it has been necessary to modify some analytical foundations. For example, and without wanting to contradict some of the unavoidable contributions of the post-colonial approach, our vision of the East-West phenomenon tends to surpass this critical stance and is situated in another space. Indeed, we start from a different set of methodological presuppositions. To us, it does not matter to what extent the terms "Orient" or "Orientalism" are reviled in contemporary criticism. And though these critical premises are assumed in our investigation, we have had to depart from the fact that in the West, always and everywhere, then and now, average persons/readers think that they are knowledgeable when referring to the East, that is, about its reality, cultures, or religions. It is enough to follow the mass media in any South American country to notice that "this Orient" has an obvious embodiment in

Western perceptions. Of course, we critically analyze many of these views, but this does not erase the fact that an "unfair, partial, and essentialist" configuration of the East constantly permeates our political and historical reality via our cultural imaginary. As mentioned, all think that they know what the East is or, at least, they claim to have a cursory idea about it. It matters little if this vision is narrow-minded, vague, or fallacious. If we wish to erase these misconceptions, we must begin by analyzing what the East truly represents to Latin Americans, though this discourse is based on premises that we either reject because of their theoretical underpinnings, or for being founded on an ideologized historical reality.

Thus, this research is based on an analysis of sources, with the goal of always placing them within a rigorous historical context. We aim to avoid anachronisms while putting matters in their proper historical perspective. The guiding principle behind this work is to analyze how this Orientalist discourse imported from Europe was adapted to the Argentinean national reality and how it developed a new meaning within this milieu. In other words, we intend to demonstrate how Argentinean Orientalism is not merely a copy of the European model, but rather an adaptation of the Eastern discourse in a strictly local sphere that, consequently, generated a new meaning only understood in said context.

An outcome of this research was the verification of how an Orientalist discourse, so obviously foreign, would serve to set the perimeters of a civilizational project for nineteenth-century Argentines, both in historical and cultural terms. Had we wholly rejected Orientalism *in toto*—invalidated beforehand as an ideological element of colonial or post-colonial domination—, we would have been unable to identify how this Orientalist discourse underscored the configuration and emergence of a specific concept that applies to the contemporary Argentinean nation. We do not disagree with current criticism about how the ideological characteristics of European Orientalist discourse served as an instrument of domination through knowledge; on the contrary, these criticisms are accepted and expounded. It is also not our intent to merely denounce current Western Orientalism in its South American variant, but rather to determine how this discourse generates a new meaning (while still employing a distorted and prejudiced version of the East) through its local adaptation. Trends are, by definition, ephemeral, but when a subject exceeds a generation and covers an extended period, then it is fair to say that this apparent trend reveals something important: the intergenerational multiplicity of discourses around the East show the existence of a more

permanent and genuine interest in this cultural region; the explanation of this phenomenon stems from more complex and, until now, undetected reasons.

Another important aspect of our study is its global approach, which leans toward a totalization within the context in which these discourses take place. This means that, even when we occasionally analyze a specific text or author, we always function within a general knowledge of the phenomenon, in its synchronic and diachronic aspects as enclosed in Argentinean cultural history and, often, in reference to literary and cultural histories of Europe, Asia, and North Africa. Hence, this research is an eminently comparative body of work that invokes knowledge exceeding that of an Argentinean context.

Some readers perhaps will have already guessed a premise that we will now explain: this research is not exclusively focused on criticizing the inadequacy of the Orientalist imaginary as compared with the "real Orient" within Argentinean history and literary culture. Although we also discuss this point, what guides our research is an attempt to unveil the meanders of this, until recently unknown, cultural history in Argentinean literature and confirming, through an in-depth study of known sources (many until now largely dismissed) that, in their diachronic continuity, these discourses were "generators of new meaning" in the cultural context of Argentines. Our purpose has always been to observe how these discourses concretely operated within Argentinean intellectual history as generators of internal meaning for the nation. It is common knowledge that Argentina never had any imperial or expansionist aspirations beyond its borders. Therefore, the premises, which make Orientalism an ideological discourse serving to build a hegemony of Western colonial knowledge over the East, are not operative in this case (or have very little legitimacy). Argentina's objectives during the nineteenth century did not involve an imperial or neo-imperial appropriation of the East; instead, such topics were the tools that allowed Argentines to establish their national spatial epicenter, the Pampas, and its internal barbarism (identified through social subjects such as *gauchos*, or the integration/extermination of its indigenous population to make room for European immigrants). This double conceptualization of its internal barbarism coupled with its physical space largely allowed Argentina to elaborate a project for its present-day civilization that, with some modifications, endures. Our analysis uncovers the positive outcome of this project.

Without a detailed investigation, it is undoubtedly rash to generalize the lessons learned from the Argentinean case and its Orientalist influence with those experienced by other South American countries. In this regard, it is advisable for us to be prudent and to perhaps err by being excessively cautious than by being excessively naive. Each historical case follows and evolves in different contexts, thus making comparison almost impossible. Yet, we must at least point out one determining factor of the Argentinean case that may also be observed elsewhere in Ibero-America: the notions of the East conceived since independence are not homologous with European imperialist aspirations; rather, each has a local bent. An in-depth study on Orientalism in other Ibero-American countries, like this one on Argentina, is still pending.

Châtel-Guyon, France Axel Gasquet
October 2019

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PART I

Introduction

CHAPTER 1

Which East by Way of the South?

> They have discovered these and other horrendous things, but never mentioned what is wonderful about the East, as if all those who had written about it were great bastards.
>
> Umberto Eco, *Baudolino* (2000)

> We never go so far as when we know not where we are going.
>
> Oliver Cromwell

This study analyzes a seemingly marginal subject within Argentinean literature: Orientalism, the attraction for the East—its cultures and exotic influence. After the publication of *The Ruins or Meditation on the Revolutions of Empires* by Constantin-François de Volney, as well as the works of Domingo F. Sarmiento or Juan Bautista Alberdi, Eastern issues aroused aesthetic as well as political interest in Argentina. Orientalism is a constituent part in the formation of Argentinean national literature. Eastern literature arrived in the River Plate region with a European bias. During the eighteenth century, the East began to be viewed in the West as new and untamed regions that stood opposite to Eurocentric civilization. The image of the Other was created, from which one had to urgently distance oneself to affirm Europe as the continent of civilization, the pinnacle of all arts and sciences. Concurrently, the East became attractive to Westerners because of its diverse cultures. Yet, the East was difficult to characterize through a collection of epithets, whether stigmatizing or

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laudatory. It inspired all types of thinkers, artists, and adventurers. In its positive European version, the East had to conform to the picturesque as defined by Western anthropology. It is fair to say that this definition did not serve to negate, but rather to corroborate, in Europe, a negative political image of the East: all despotism is imbued with Eastern traits.

Prolegomena

The impact of travel literature on early Argentinean literature is known, but the study of incipient Orientalism in the political and literary spheres has been neglected. In that sense, Argentinean Orientalism is not simply an imitation of its European version. On the contrary, Argentinean Orientalism exhibits a strong form of regional adaptation. It became an endogenous element of the so-called South American barbarism. South America's original flaw in its political thought would have been stricken by the concept of Eastern fatality. Hence, Orientalism became an indispensable conceptual tool in any analysis of institutional deficiencies and the national political organization. Eastern thought took hold in South America by gradually being adapted. It acquired an autonomy that could be compared to the European and American models. From that moment on, the attraction and repulsion of the East would become a constant in Argentinean literature. Though always marginal and rarely perceptible, our objective here is to realize an evaluation of this persistent component in this literature. We will analyze the importance of the Eastern themes in the works of Esteban Echeverría, Alberdi, Sarmiento, Lucio V. Mansilla, Pastor S. Obligado, Eduardo F. Wilde, Leopoldo Lugones, and Roberto Arlt.

Given the breadth of Argentinean Orientalist literature, it was necessary to limit this study to works published before 1941, with our final analysis devoted to the African writings of Roberto Arlt. Until the 1920s, echoes of Eastern assimilation resonated within the ideological and cultural layout of the land. Eastern imprints, perceptible in the mood of the Independence Centennial celebrations (1910), are characterized by the political construction and appropriation of the discourse on the East, a process that has subsequently dissipated. We will try to show that, with obvious cultural ramifications, Orientalism clearly played a long-standing ideological role in the Argentinean political sphere before acquiring its autonomy and slowly achieving greater creative freedom and evocative strength.

Another fundamental trait of Argentinean Orientalism literature is that, from Sarmiento and Mansilla, testimonies of Argentinean travelers through these regions began to be published regularly. This essential change represents a decisive and qualitative leap: Orientalist readers were now travelers who rendered their testimony in writing. Obviously, this testimony did not presuppose the objectivity of their statements. Voyages to the East were by now quite common and travelers adhered to widely known travel guides that were also ideologically flawed; however, in situ presence assured travelers the chance of forming objective reconsiderations. Their European archetypes were, for the most part, derived from French writers (Volney, Chateaubriand, Hugo, Lamartine, Gautier, Nerval, Flaubert), but also from Spanish (Espronceda, Larra, Zorrilla, et al.) and English Romantic writers (Byron). It is noteworthy that a consistent objective of modern travel literature was to revisit places about which classical authors had written, while also creating a kind of referential itinerary or spiritual pilgrimage.

Before delving into an analysis of the various literary testimonies, we will study the conditions of the ideological and political impact of European Orientalism on the River Plate region. This will require a review of eighteenth-century Orientalist theses and their legacy of Enlightenment, with reference to the case of Volney and the School of Ideology, which fills the first chapter. We will also see how the Orientalist debate is presented at the end of the eighteenth century (mostly in France) by attempting to evaluate its ideological and aesthetic impact on the then young Argentinean literary figures. Afterwards, throughout eight chapters, we will introduce a chronological series of travel writers who were active for just over a century (circa 1830–1940). To these we have accorded a monographic treatment. The methodological choice for this approach was dictated by the length of the period studied. In addition, the chronological progression of the monograph allows us to better convey the slow and constant rhythm prevalent in the Orientalist discourse within Argentinean literature while observing the essential features of its evolution.

What Is Orientalism?

This field of study is so vast that, not to risk going astray, it was necessary to limit our research. Concerning Orientalism, what is the purpose of this book? To understand the scope of Orientalism in Argentinean literature, we will offer a series of clarifications that apply to the research range, to

the historical particularities unique to the River Plate region, and to the limitations of our literary corpus.

Orientalism, as a discipline, includes all that relates to Eastern cultures, religions, arts, and native languages. This wide range makes it a vague and imprecise concept to study. Its conceptual imprecision is inversely proportional to its ideological utility. At its core, Orientalism typically includes almost all "non-Occidental" cultures, that is, it presupposes a tacit knowledge of the West and implicitly places the geographical East in the realm of radical Otherness. The Orientalist subject in the West has always caused concern and can still do so to cultures south of the Mediterranean (the Maghreb), the Eastern Mediterranean (the Levant) or the Far East, but equally to that of Central Asia, the Caucasus region and, in certain cases, Eastern Europe. Furthermore, until recently, Orientalism included certain regions of Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly those with large Muslim populations (Sudan and the coastal areas along the Indian Ocean) and non-Muslim countries (Ethiopia). In these latter cases, Orientalism is devoid of any geographical notion and is reduced to a mere ethnographic bias, that is, one that lumps together those areas that are not part of the Western tradition. Thus, the term's enormous interdisciplinary approaches. Orientalism is, by its nature a facile term to employ when pointing out what is wrong with the East. In short, to Orientalists, the East represents all that is inscrutable or exotic in comparison to the West.

Our purpose here is not to examine the ideological usages of Orientalism. Edward Said, in his now classic work *Orientalism* (1978), has done that in depth. This does not mean that we do not share most of his theses as, for example, that the Orient is a political-ideological-cultural construction of the West, whose goal was to establish a symbolic form of political control and supremacy over the East. This objective was reached through European colonialism during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with its predominantly British and French variants. However, unilaterally, Said also reduces the East to Muslim Arab cultures, while neglecting the Far East and the Indian subcontinent. Our aim, however, is not to delve into the regional exclusions of the term, but to limit ourselves to the literary one. Henceforth, we will study the ideological construction of the Argentinean nation in the nineteenth century, with a special interest in the political consequences of literary Orientalism in Argentina. This study will therefore not pretend to participate in colonial/post-colonial studies.

What Is Argentinean Orientalism?

As mentioned, a multitude of historic aspects separate Argentinean Orientalist literature from its European model. The former occurred very late and, consequently, postdates the European model. Yet, within the global political context, historical considerations in both share similarities. Argentines never had colonial aspirations other than to expand domestically by vanquishing the indigenous peoples of Southern Patagonia, the Northwest, and the Central Western portion of the country. The importation and the adaptation of the Orientalist theme in the River Plate region corresponded to political motivations different from those exposed by Said in his book on European Orientalism. The fundamental dissimilarity rests on the fact that during the middle of the nineteenth century, Argentina was not a great political power, nor did it aspire to be. Basically, the distinction separating Argentina from the European colonial powers was its power disparity. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Argentina was a developing nation struggling to find a secondary status within the world's geopolitics. Even in its most affluent days, Argentina systematically constituted a region on the periphery of Capitalism, whose task consisted of furnishing raw materials and agricultural products to the principal capitalist countries, mostly those of Europe. For this reason, Argentinian Orientalism was not shaped by colonial demands, like those of Great Britain and France during the Restoration or the Second Empire. Quite the opposite, Argentinean Orientalism adapted to an internal political discourse that allowed an ideological-military operation targeting its indigenous population. The same energy that incited the European powers toward the colonization of entire regions only had domestic implications in Argentina. Indeed, the disastrous consequences of the wars against its indigenous population were no less dramatic or less savage in the Patagonian South than they were in the European colonies of North Africa and Asia. But, from a strictly political and social perspective, European colonial expansion and Argentinean anti-indigenous wars did not constitute comparable actions.

These activities were undertaken by distinctly different societies. France and Great Britain were world powers with well-defined and solid Nation-State models. They tried to reach world supremacy through economic expansion at the expense of their colonized territories, sources of raw materials that made them quite wealthy. Argentina had a different motivation: as an aspiring young nation, it rose from having been a colony

to acquiring a permanent frontier culture. Said culture assumed a very different spatial and cultural configuration than that of the European nations, one that only resembles those of other New World regions. Europeans in their countries never considered themselves colonists. Along with American, Canadians and Australians, Chileans and Argentines of the nineteenth and the early part of the twentieth century did view themselves as colonists. Here is how Homero M. Guglielmini describes it:

> Whatever the differences, the frontier "situation" is a typical element in the evolution of New World societies. All, at a given moment in their development, had to go through that phase.... The gradual conquest of the Argentinean desert unfolds as the backdrop of its history, the perpetual and recurring theme, the constant of its existence, beyond the political vicissitudes, the episodes, and the characters who dazzle us in the foreground of the stage. (Guglielmini 1972: 11)

This notion of a frontier culture served as a model for Argentinean nationality. The depiction of this frontier society in its waning days can still be appreciated in the works of William H. Hudson or Robert B. Cunninghame Graham (Hudson 1999a, b; Cunninghame Graham 1997). An understanding of the rise of this frontier mentality is essential to being able to include Orientalist depictions in written compositions: these authors' works are based on the scenography of the desert. Without a desert setting, a place characterized by barbarism, Argentinean Orientalism would have lost its importance and would have become an empty term.

Said pointed out a major detail: the Orientalist mindset, though aimed at Eastern cultures, reflects the societies where it is prevalent:

> Orientalism responded more to the culture that produced it than to its alleged subject, which was also a Western product. As such, the history of Orientalism simultaneously consists of an internal coherence and a strongly articulated set of relationships to the dominant surrounding culture. (Said 1980: 36)

This reflective characteristic of Orientalism constituted the common foundation of European and Argentinean Orientalism. More than a thorough understanding of their concrete realities, both are purely imaginary representations of the East. These say more about the cultures that produced Oriental motifs than they do about the actual object of their

studies. For this reason, over the course of the nineteenth century, Argentinean Orientalism systematically took us back to the frontier society that adopted it. (As mentioned, this so-called Orientalism was initially borrowed from the classic French works as well as those of the Spanish and English Romanticists.) However, beginning with Mansilla, the first Argentinean traveler to have reached India and the Middle East, this mere emulation parts ways with its imaginary significance. After Mansilla's journey, it was no longer possible to view the "real" desert as before. Consequently, Mansilla's later observations and evaluations of the Ranquel Indians completely differed from the clichés coined by Sarmiento, his friend and mentor.

Orientalist literature is clearly situated in the representation realm; only from this perspective can the desert around Volney's Palmyra ruins be compared to the Pampa desert as described by Echeverría. More than just displaying a knowledge of the East, both embody the representation of foreign cultures—the former inscribing them in the European West, the latter in a peripheral Western culture, that of the Argentinean frontier culture.

Since the late nineteenth century, with the advent of the Modernism, the Eastern subject distanced itself from all political requirements. This does not mean that the stereotypical clichés forged by preceding generations were not repeated, but instead, by becoming autonomous from the reference to the "real" desert, the Orientalist inspiration fundamentally embodied an expression of aesthetic freedom. This observation will be studied in detail in the chapter devoted to Lugones. The aesthetic imperative that drove Echeverría to make the Pampa desert the center of gravity of literary creativity was no longer the focus of the Modernist generation. Obviously, Modernism was also within the scope of Eastern representation, without it making any contribution to the real knowledge of these foreign cultures. The Modernist configuration exclusively adhered to this Exoticism criterion at the end of the nineteenth century.

The Argentinean Oriental Corpus

The Argentinean Orientalist literary corpus consists of texts that we consider to be literary in the broadest sense of the word, that is, these texts do not pretend to belong to those of scientific or academic works written by specialists. They are not texts whose aim was to shed new light or knowledge on the East and its cultures but, rather, they were

personal travel testimonials. Provided that they have been properly edited, we will deal with fictional literary texts as well as travel narratives, personal journals and chronicles, journalistic articles, some correspondence, etc. Among the fictional texts, there are plays, tales, novels, and poetry. The authors studied here are mostly recognized intellectuals, even if several have been largely forgotten by Argentinean literary history as, for example, Pastor S. Obligado.[1] Others are famous authors of nineteenth-century Argentina—Sarmiento, Alberdi, or Echeverría. While others, although recognized, are known only through some of their writings as, for example, Mansilla, Wilde, Lugones, and Arlt. In short, they are figures who have written about the East, but whose writings on the subject remain unknown.

Our study does not pretend to completely address all Orientalist influences in Argentinean literature. Our aim, rather, is to concentrate on one aspect of the literary culture that, though persistent, has not previously been the subject of known monographs. In attempting to draw attention to the Orientalist themes, we wanted to highlight the presence of their fundamental role in the emergence of modern Argentinean political thought as well as its notable aesthetic impact on literature. Sarmiento's conceptualization of civilization and barbarism, which permeates Argentinean culture as a persistent *leitmotiv*, would not have been possible without this national adaptation to Orientalism. In large part, it is due to European Orientalism that Alberdi's ideas could emerge along with certain of Echeverría's verses.

Other than acknowledging that a more exhaustive review of Argentinean Orientalism remains to be realized, any all-encompassing project would entail an in-depth study of the diffusion of Eastern literature and thought along with its pertinent editorial work. Such a complex and arduous undertaking far exceeds our present framework. Here, we would like to start an initial exploration into an area that, except for a few critical studies, remains largely neglected.

[1] For length reasons, we are here omitting Chapter IX of the Spanish edition [Part 3], titled "The aesthetical traditionalism of Jorge Max Rohde" (233–267). We based our decision on our belief that Rohde's work would be of less interest to an English-speaking readership. Those interested in his works should consult the Spanish edition.

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CHAPTER 2

The European Archetype and the Debate on the Eastern Question

> The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ours, is not a pretty thing when you look at it closely. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretense but an idea; an unselfish belief in that idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to…
>
> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1902)

> I live in solitude among the ruins; I will question the ancient monuments about the wisdom of times passed.
>
> Volney, *The Ruins of Palmyra* (1791)

> The wise man brings everything back to the court of reason, even to reason itself.
>
> Emmanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781)

Europe's interest in the East may be traced to classical antiquity through writers like Herodotus, Strabo, and Diodorus of Sicily. However, since the Age of Enlightenment, with the advent of Rationalism, the East became a space of imaginary representation, totally evoking a series of negative visions, as observed in the writings of Montesquieu (1689–1759), Voltaire (1694–1778), and the engineer Nicolas Boulanger

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(1722–1759): cultural decadence, despotism, religious fanaticism, ignorance, etc. (Montesquieu 1997; Voltaire 2007; Boulanger 1988). The East would ideologically function as a model that should not be imitated, one from which it was imperative to distance oneself. This perception of the East, as an area of repulsion, also connoted considerable ambiguity: on the one hand, it constituted a negative model but, on the other, it was one that demanded close examination. This ambivalent attraction stimulated the emergence of the discipline commonly known as Orientalism. Nevertheless, not everything had to be discarded within the Eastern model. The Middle East was also a sacred place where three monotheistic religions had arisen and developed, a counterbalance to the negativity associated with Orientalism. This fact would raise motivation and curiosity in Orientalist studies (App 2010). We must bear in mind the difference between motivation and curiosity concerning religious phenomena given that the inflection points between the Rationalists, who were moved by curiosity (Volney, Champollion), and the later School of Romanticism, motivated by faith and religious belief (Chateaubriand, Lamartine, Victor Hugo). This dual purpose for visiting the East prevailed throughout the nineteenth century. The Rationalists, Ideologues, and philosophers would set out for the East to either try to know it in its social and political configuration or to adopt it by means of scientific exploration. However, the Romanticists were trying to address the spiritual enigma that drove them to make the trip. Both groups had a common denominator: a search for truth. The former wished to discover the truth about natural and social laws; the latter, to shed light on the mystery of spiritual truth.

Volney and the Ideologues

The Ideologue School, heirs to the French Enlightenment, set out to replace metaphysical reflection with rigorous studies of ideas. The term "ideology" was created in 1796[1] by Destutt de Tracy (1754–1836), disciple of Condorcet (1743–1794) and Laplace (1749–1827)—they belonged to the first generation of Ideologues who were considered the

[1] In 1801, Antoine-Louis-Claude Destutt de Tracy published the volume, *Elements of Ideology*. In 1808, he was elected member of the French Academy of Letters to occupy the seat previously held by Pierre-Jean-Georges Cabanis. Tracy's successor would be François Guizot. This detail is important because Cabanis, Tracy and Guizot were to have an important intellectual impact on the River Plate region through the *Generation of 1837*.

founders of the School of Rationalism.[2] The Ideologues initially dedicated their efforts to the analysis of the mental faculties and various types of ideas. Ideas for them were neither metaphysical forms nor psychological facts. According to Tracy, ideology is the study of "knowledge." He defined it as being closely linked to general grammar and the logic that deals with the application of thought to reality (Ferrater Mora 2001: 1748).

The Ideologues lived during the tumultuous and dramatic period of the French Revolution and the subsequent establishment of Napoleon Bonaparte's Empire. They were key protagonists in the fall of the Ancient Regime, which provided a place for a new bourgeois class with its General States (*États Généreaux*). As Jean Gaulmier affirmed, this period was somewhat forsaken by literary historians "because the wealth of political, social, diplomatic, and military events almost exclusively occupied their time—to such an extent that it was to be believed that, from 1789 to 1820, French intellectual thought experienced a total eclipse between two periods of unprecedented happiness, the Enlightenment and the flamboyance of Romanticism" (Gaulmier 1980a: 9). For a long time, Ideologues were considered the lost generation of the French Revolution and the modern era. They provided an intellectual substratum without which the subsequent cultural revolution would have been impossible.

Constantin-François Chassebeuf de Boisgirais (1757–1820), who was publicly known as Volney, was one of the key personalities of this period and of this generation of Ideologues. Even though he has almost been forgotten and is rarely recognized, his intellectual influence throughout Europe and the New World is noteworthy up until the nineteenth century. A disciple of Diderot, Condorcet, Helvétius, and Holbach, he would later become a close friend of Pierre Cabanis and Thomas Jefferson. His pseudonym, Volney, was coined in recognition of the intellectual teachings that Voltaire imparted on him—Volney is an acrostic of VOLtaire + FerNEY.[3]

[2] Destutt de Tracy and the other Ideologues are usually considered part of the *Sensualist* movement in the history of philosophy; this term can no longer be adopted in designating this group of thinkers, the heirs of Rationalism during the Enlightenment.

[3] "Ferney" is the name of the village where Voltaire lived the last twenty years of his life. Currently renamed Ferney-Voltaire, it is located near the Swiss border and the city of Geneva.

Volney was born into a family of local notables in Craon, Anjou, on 3 February 1757. His father, Jacques-René Chassebeuf, practiced law in the barony of Craon. His paternal side, of peasant origin, had socially risen thanks to his great-grandfather, Royal Baliff, who became Craon's Notary. Throughout their gradual social ascension, the Chassebeuf family was able to slowly acquire various properties in Craon and its surrounding area. Volney was thus raised in a petit-bourgeois family, one that, though they lived comfortably, never forgot their peasant origins; they distrusted the aristocracy because they feared its paternalism and insolence. In the Chassebeuf family, social ascension was sought through the acquisition of a solid cultural base, while not losing contact with the rural world whence they came. After having initially begun legal studies, as the family tradition required, health issues prompted Volney to study medicine instead. While in medical school in Paris, he formed a lasting friendship with a student of his age, Pierre Cabanis, who would introduce him into the intellectual milieu of the Parisian parlors. Volney especially frequented the widow Helvétius's parlor, where he met Condorcet and Benjamin Franklin. In 1777, his friend Cabanis invited him to the parlor of the Baron Holbach, where Diderot and Naigeon were often present, and where students of medicine and philosophy rubbed shoulders. Holbach, as a result of the received acclaim of several of his books (*System of Nature* [1770], the *Social System* [1783], and the *Ethocratic or Universal Morality* [1776]), was well known within the intellectual milieu. The work of Helvétius, whom Volney never had the chance to meet because of his death in 1771, and of Baron Holbach, with whom he regularly socialized, would profoundly influence the young student's intellectual development. Volney also adopted Holbach's radical atheism that was based on natural and physical laws.

While continuing his medical studies, Volney also acquired an encyclopedic erudition. He decided to learn Hebrew and other Semitic languages to challenge the existing translations of the Bible, which he suspected of being fraught with deceit. Along with his friend Cabanis, who was equally obsessed with Hellenism, Volney began to read Herodotus, the historian of Asia Minor,[4] readings that led to his travels through the

[4] Herodotus (Halicarnassus 484–426 BCE), is considered the "father of history." He traveled to numerous countries: Egypt, Persia, Libya, Magna Graecia, and Hellas. He lived in Athens for two years where he became a close friend of Sophocles. His masterpiece is *The Histories*, composed of nine books in which he recounts the history of Persia and the

Middle East (Volney 1809).[5] Like his mentor Holbach, he believed that thought should be rooted in experience, not in the imagination because it is conducive to erroneous logic. On the condition that they remain within the limits of the measurable and verifiable, Enlightenment intellectuals, being Humanistic Rationalists, were strong interdisciplinarians who relied on geography, meteorology, agriculture, medicine, linguistics, etc. This *modus operandi* would later cause Volney to be reproached by Sainte-Beuve for having "attained his ideal in the domain of statistics" (Sainte-Beuve 1960: 160).

In 1782, at the age of twenty-five, Volney embarked for Egypt and Syria from the Port of Marseilles with his philosophical and scientific baggage. The voyage was partially financed by his inheritance. Throughout the two-year journey, Volney would take many notes, consistently keeping the same observation criteria, that is, his scientific detachment from the surrounding environment. Travelers must not identify with countries they visit. Thus, a salient element in the reading of his travel memoirs is the cold precision of his descriptions, which might be perceived as being completely devoid of emotion. From his book's inception, Volney stated that the travel literature genre belongs more to history than to literature. This Rationalist belief had already been formulated by Bernardin de Saint-Pierre when, in the appendix to his book on the exploration of Madagascar (1773), he suggested that future travelers ought to employ less fantasy and more scientific rigor in their narratives (Saint-Pierre 1833: 106–109). He was operating under the influence of Rationalism, which proposed that travel should be exclusively for scientific exploration rather than for personal pleasure. Readers should not only indulge their curiosity regarding exoticism, but they also have the obligation of acquiring knowledge through self-instruction. Volney was among the first French travelers to adhere to this new stipulation and, by so doing, he preceded Baron von Humboldt (Gasquet 1999: 22–28; 2006: 31–36).[6] Volney states that "in relation to my travels, I have tried

Greco-Persian Wars. The book is a compilation of oral and written traditions as well as on his direct observation of facts.

[5] Volney would later dedicate time to an in-depth study of Herodotus. In fact, it was in anticipation of Part II of *New Researches on Ancient History* that he would publish Parts I and III in 1813.

[6] The Naturalist Alexander Von Humboldt is the first to perfectly honor this new model of scientific voyage.

to retain the spirit that I brought to the examination of facts, that is, an impartial love of the truth" (Volney 1787: 13).

At the end of January 1783, Volney arrived in Alexandria where he remained a few weeks. Far from living up to its reputed splendor in antiquity, the city was now a seaport with barely ten thousand inhabitants. He took advantage of his sojourn by taking a short tour on the Nile Delta. From there, he departed for Cairo, where he remained for seven months, until 23 September 1783. Due to the collapse of the short-lived regime of Mameluk Ali Bey, the city was in a state of total chaos. This collapse had generated heavy bickering over the succession of power. Almost all French residents had already abandoned Cairo because of its political problems, except for Mallagon, a connoisseur of the East, who gave Volney an update of events in the region. Volney roamed around the city with the intention of becoming acquainted with its daily life and of practicing his Arabic, which he had begun to study in Paris. He would not prolong his trip to visit southern Egypt, and thus would never know ancient Thebes (Luxor, Karnak and the Valley of the Kings).

However, Volney made several daytrips to the Giza pyramids and visited Suez. Owing to the plague that was beginning to spread throughout Egypt, he hastened preparations for his visit to Syria that included an initial stopover in Jaffa and Tyr, where he witnessed the extent of the terror with which Djezzar Pacha governed. Tyr was the main French commercial stopover in the Mediterranean region. After passing through Cyprus, he finally arrived in Latakia, on the Syrian coast. From there, he departed in December 1783, for Aleppo, the grand northern city, where he spent six weeks taking short trips to the surrounding area. His next move was to Tripoli, by way of Hama in the Orontes River valley, in January 1784. After a month there, he headed to Dhour El Choueir, which overlooks Beirut and the Mediterranean Sea; in March 1784, he checked in at the Basilian convent of Mar Hanna, where he stayed eight months studying in the local library and improving his Arabic. This stay allowed him time to visit the surrounding region and to explore the high mountains of the Druze region. Next on his journey was Jerusalem, which he reached by traveling on the road to Tiberias. There he stayed for four months and, according to his writings, it gave him time to become familiar with the various quarrels among the religious orders. In the region of Gaza, he lived among a relatively powerful Bedouin tribe, the *Ouâhydât*, who at that time controlled the territory between the Mediterranean and the Dead Sea. He then set sail from

Acre, bound for Alexandria with the painter Louis-François Cassas (1756–1827) who had thoroughly documented the Palmyra ruins. Cassas even gave Volney several sketches of the Sphinx and the panoramic view of the ruins as seen from the nearby fort, Qala'at ibn Maan, built by the Arabs (Cassas 1796).[7] After having once again passed through Alexandria, Volney embarked for Marseilles, where he arrived in the middle of April 1785—he was immediately placed on a strict quarantine due to the possibility of his having been exposed to the plague in the Levant.

The episode of his return and his acquaintance with Cassas is significant because the Palmyra ruins, which the latter sketched in detail, would be the setting where Volney developed his best-known work, *The Ruins and Meditation on the Revolutions of Empires* (1791). It should be emphasized that, despite the knowledge acquired in the Middle East, he never visited the Palmyra ruins, only those at Baalbek. He adhered closely to the maps and comments made by the Englishmen, Robert Wood and James Dawkins, during a 1751 journey (Wood 1753, 1757a, b; Volney 1787: 447-*sq*.). The ancient city of Palmyra, called *Tadmor* by the Syrians ("the place of palm groves") and whose description is found on stone tablets dating from the nineteenth century BCE, was what remained of an empire that existed between Persia and Greece, an important ancient stopover on the commercial route linking Asia to the Mediterranean and whose language was Aramaic. When Emperor Hadrian visited it in 130 CE, he declared it a "free city" and Palmyra rapidly adapted to the presence of the Romans in the region. Its decline began during the reign of Queen Zenobia, when she defied Rome by declaring the city independent from Rome. However, her troops were defeated at Antioch and she was then imprisoned and taken to Rome. In 273 CE, in retaliation for a popular uprising that killed six hundred Roman archers, Emperor Aurelian destroyed Palmyra.

In June 1785, Volney returned to his native Craon and, after having sold the remaining assets from his maternal inheritance, he moved to Paris that autumn. He set up residence in Auteuil, at the home of Helvétius's widow, who offered him a room and the necessary tranquility for recording his trip's memoirs. To this end, young Volney heartily applied himself for the next eighteen months, finding himself at peace

[7] Cassas begins to publish a project (later interrupted) of 330 engravings on which 30 are barely edited. Volney oversaw the composition of the preliminary texts of the seven first fascicules.