READING SHEET

Prepared by Pierre Collonges

"The Great Plunder"

Volume II – The Egyptian Campaign

A novel by Robert Casanovas

1. Key facts

Title : The Great Plunder — Historical novel in four volumes. Volume II "1798-1801 – The Egyptian Campaign"

Author : Robert Casanovas

Genre : Historical novel with a documentary and critical aim, based on real research

Edition : Definitive revised and corrected edition, legal deposit April 2026, digital and print version

ISBN : 978-2-488999-23-6

Structure : Notice, followed by four main chapters divided into twenty-eight numbered sections

Period : From May 1798 (departure from Toulon) to autumn 1801 (return to France), with a coda running up to the publication of the Description de l'Égypte (1809-1829)

Main settings : Toulon, Malta, Alexandria, Cairo, Giza, Saqqara, Dendera, Thebes, the Valley of the Kings, Aswan, Philae, Rosetta, Paris

Series : Follows Volume I ("The Birth of the System"). Part of the author's body of work on the spoliation of works of art (The Stolen Room, The Testament Was a Forgery, Pillage)

Cover : Reproduction of the Rosetta Stone set within an optical theatre, at the Musée Champollion in Vif (Isère, France), photograph of 17 July 2022 (Julien Peytard)

Associated website : www.international-restitutions.org

2. General presentation

Volume II of The Great Plunder follows the Egyptian expedition from the point of view of the savants, draughtsmen and engineers who sailed with Bonaparte. It does not narrate the military campaign for its own sake — the battles of Aboukir and Heliopolis are dealt with in a few pages, almost in the manner of a chronicle — but rather what happens in their shadow. A corps of "commissioners" and scientists describes, measures, copies, buys, removes and finally packs up ancient Egypt to carry it off to Paris. The guiding thread is a question that the novel refuses to settle in a single word. Where does scholarly collecting end, and where does plunder begin?

The Notice places the book under the sign of a fiction backed by research (see section 6). The novel moves from Alexandria to Philae, then from the Rosetta Stone to the capitulation of 1801, when the English in their turn claim what the French believed they had saved. Denon, Jomard, Fourier, Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire and a few invented or poorly documented figures, such as the interpreter Hassan or the wakil of the Giza canal Abdallah ibn Youssef, take turns in bearing this question.

3. Chapter-by-chapter summary

Chapter I — The Orient in Arms

From Toulon to Malta. On 19 May 1798, the squadron leaves Toulon. On board are Berthollet, Monge, Jomard, Fourier and Denon. Berthollet sees in the "scientific expedition" an "acquisition operation". During the crossing, aboard the Orient, Bonaparte declares that what will be taken in Egypt "has had no living owner for a long time". Berthollet replies in a low voice that this does not mean there is no owner. Malta capitulates on 12 June. Denon

prevents the Caravaggio from being taken down, but the easel paintings are carried off. From the outset, the novel lays down its rule. One takes what can be transported, and justifies it afterwards.

From Alexandria to the Nile. On 1 July, Alexandria disappoints, for it is no more than a small town of hovels. Jomard measures Pompey's Pillar and Denon draws it from three angles. Bonaparte has his proclamation to the "People of Egypt" translated into Arabic. From 6 July, the army crosses the desert, at forty degrees in the shade, before reaching the Nile. Later, at the market of Saqqara, peasants sell the soldiers statuettes and amulets. Denon buys a shabti. The interpreter Hassan translates the words of the seller, for whom this is "his ancestor's tomb". He translates the words, but not the tone.

The Battle of the Pyramids. "Soldiers, from the summit of these pyramids, forty centuries look down upon you," Bonaparte tells his soldiers on 21 July. The savants are placed in the middle of the infantry squares. Denon draws blindly from inside the square, then the pyramids with the dead in the foreground. Murad Bey withdraws and Cairo is taken on 24 July. The next morning, Jomard enters the Great Pyramid with Monge and Denon. They pass a young soldier carrying off a scarab. Jomard senses that this gesture is of the same nature as their own acquisitions. Only the degree differs.

The Battle of Aboukir. On 1 August, Nelson destroys almost the whole French fleet in Aboukir Bay. The army is now a prisoner of Egypt. On the evening of 14 August, on hearing news of the disaster, Jomard inspects the collections stored in the northern outbuildings of Hassan-Kashif's palace. There he finds twenty-three unlabelled crates, whose contents no one knows. He notes them in his personal journal and tells no one. The return has become uncertain. Geoffroy soon realises that what goes home will depend on what can travel.

The Institute of Egypt. On 22 August, Bonaparte founds the Institute of Egypt. Monge is its president. He opens the first session with these words. "We are here to understand, my friends. Not to conquer – others are very good at that. I ask you never to forget it." Jomard measures the remains of Memphis and the temple of Ptah. An old man draws in the dust how the giant statues were hauled. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire dissects fish from the Nile. In early November, Berthollet takes stock of three months of work.

The Cairo Revolt. On 21 October, Cairo rises up. The artillery bombards the rebel districts and the repression lasts three days. The savants remain barricaded in the Institute. On 24 October, Denon goes out to draw in the devastated streets. In front of a gutted shop, he thinks of the commissioners filling their lists. "The same gesture, minus the criteria and the discernment. Here it was called plundering, there collecting." Denon sees, with Hassan, two soldiers emptying a weavers' shop under the silent gaze of its owner. Monge tells Bonaparte that force will not be enough to govern. "Occupying will suffice. For what I want to do," Bonaparte replies.

The Sphinx and the Necropolises. In November, Denon leads an expedition to the Sphinx, then to Saqqara, where Jomard measures the step pyramid. Berthollet studies the resins of the mummies and the natron of the Natron Lakes. Before the mummified ibises, identical to present-day ibises, Geoffroy recalls that Cuvier sees in them proof of the fixity of species. Lamarck, on the contrary, judges three thousand years too short for any change to be seen. Berthollet concludes that neither of them will be able to prove it. "We take what we believe to be knowledge," writes Denon about a chip of granite.

The Scientific Debates. At the session of 16 November, Monge defends measurement and Fourier meaning. Bonaparte settles the matter. Both are needed. Each presents his work. Venture de Paradis, the expedition's interpreter, sets out the difference between spoken Arabic and the Arabic of the Koran. "One transmits first, by heart. The meaning comes after," Fourier concludes. "Denon will open the road," Bonaparte announces regarding Upper Egypt. In a corridor, Fourier asks Denon whether he intends to take the objects away. Denon replies that certain things must travel in order to be seen. That evening, Berthollet warns Bonaparte that the departure will be made in haste and that only what is already in the crates will leave.

Dendera. On 16 December 1798, Desaix's division leaves Beni Suef heading south. Bonaparte has given Denon a four-page list and laid down his rule. "France does not plunder. She selects, documents and preserves. Soldiers plunder." Denon reaches Dendera on 25 January 1799, and will return in May to draw the zodiac by candlelight. Jomard judges the extraction of the zodiac possible, but very lengthy ("perhaps in thirty years"). He discovers the list kept by Sergeant-Major Aubert, more than eighty lines for the lead battalion alone, and estimates at about two hundred the objects taken from this single temple, and at two thousand five hundred, "low range", those of the whole campaign. Vasseur, a mathematician of the Commission, who fills in his forms in the temple courtyard, judges the figure "accurate, or close to reality". "That is no reason," Jomard replies.

Thebes. On 27 January, the expedition camps opposite Thebes. At Karnak, Jomard realises that the axis of the temple is aligned on the sunrise at the winter solstice. Fourier confirms that his calculation is right. At Luxor, Desaix asks whether the obelisks could be taken. They weigh two hundred and thirty tonnes each and the idea is put off until later. Denon keeps for himself a gilded bronze face of Osiris, without declaring it. An old man, son and grandson of temple guardians, tells him that each time, the armies "take stones". At night, Jomard discovers Hassan's trafficking, as he takes a commission on every sale.

The Valley of the Kings. On 29 January, Jomard triangulates the Valley of the Kings. Jollois observes that by having the guides show them the tombs, with an army and notebooks, the savants speed up the plundering. In a tomb, Denon takes a papyrus of the Book of the Dead, then a second papyrus from the hands of a soldier. "Took the papyrus before the soldier," he notes. Jomard writes in his journal that the difference between collecting and plunder lies in the destination, not in the act. Before the Colossi of Memnon, the next day, he observes that only what cannot be carried off keeps its meaning.

Aswan. Between Thebes and Kom Ombo, Jollois sees a soldier tighten on his mule a sack from which a bas-relief protrudes. On 1 February, at Kom Ombo, the surgeon Bruyant recognises surgical instruments on the walls of the temple. On the morning of departure, two non-commissioned officers break open a slab of the sanctuary with a sledgehammer. Desaix summons Captain Lachèze, reminds him that nothing is to be touched without a written order, then admits that these rules are insufficient. The slab disappears as the column sets off. Jollois, for his part, copies in a neighbouring chapel a cursive inscription. On 2 February, the column reaches Aswan.

Philae. During February, Denon, accompanied by Hassan, reaches Philae by felucca. Denon could have a few blocks of the Kiosk of Trajan dismantled. He gives up the idea, not out of scruple, but because he refuses to destroy what moves him. Having left Aswan on 25 February, Denon takes nine days to reach Hermontis. Soldiers fight over a figurine and fellahs lift their barrier only in exchange for thirty-five piastres. At Hermontis, Denon buys for five piastres a fragment freshly cut from the wall. He returns to Cairo, but Bonaparte, back from Syria in mid-June, has already left the city for the coast.

The Rosetta Stone. On 15 July 1799, Lieutenant Bouchard discovers near Rosetta a stele of black granodiorite covered with three scripts. Marcel and Raige read it. The Greek text is a decree in honour of Ptolemy V. Marcel makes numerous squeezes and sends some of them to Europe. On 9 August, he compares the Greek mentions of "Ptolemy" with the cartouches and supposes that a cartouche is a proper name. "You have found the key to ancient Egypt with a text about taxes. I like that," Kléber sums up.

Negotiations, Victory and the Death of Kléber. On 18 August, Bonaparte leaves Egypt in secret with Denon, Monge and Berthollet. Kléber takes command. Jomard counts ninety-six crates, that is seventy-three official ones and twenty-three still without labels. The Convention of El-Arish, signed on 24 January 1800, provides for evacuation with the collections. But in March 1800, Admiral Keith refuses to ratify it, and Jomard recounts the crates. Thirty-three are missing and sixty-three remain. Kléber defeats the Ottomans at Heliopolis on 20 March. He is assassinated on 14 June 1800. Menou succeeds him.

Chapter III — The Time of the Savants

The Last Campaigns. Menou takes command and changes nothing in the work of the Institute. At the June session, Jomard argues for the document against the monument. He asserts that one must "substitute for the monument a document that will travel better". On 25 June 1800, an expedition sets out for Tanis and Bubastis. Geoffroy takes six cat mummies there. Jollois slips a small bronze cat sarcophagus into his satchel. In the autumn, he copies in three days a psalter that the Coptic monks had refused to sell.

The Delta and the City. The death of Desaix at Marengo, on 14 June 1800, reaches Cairo at the beginning of October. Jollois keeps the pocketknife that Desaix had lent him in December 1798 and which he never returned. In the Delta, at Sais and at Buto, there is nothing to carry off, for the blocks are in the walls of the fellahs' houses. Menou wants to steer the work towards Islamic Egypt, and a compromise is found. One November morning, Jollois sees a soldier take, in fifteen seconds, a bronze Isis from the niche of a Coptic house. All he can do is draw the empty niche.

Agriculture and Irrigation. During the winter of 1800-1801, Conté presents Egyptian irrigation techniques to the Institute. Jollois meets Abdallah ibn Youssef, in charge of the Giza canal for sixteen years, and brings back seventy-two sachets of silt. "Their soil, their statues… It is the same. We take what interests us and call it science," remarks Conté. Jollois replies that one can take silt without impoverishing a field, but that the Nile does not give back statues. Abdallah says that writing does not replace a thousand years of practice. He shows him four inscribed blocks found while clearing the canal. Jollois draws them and takes the smallest.

Time Closing In. On 8 March 1801, sixteen thousand British troops land at Aboukir. The Commission decides to duplicate everything in order to save its work. Marcel keeps a register of his purchases. Jollois has tracings made. Jomard copies out his most recent topographical measurements in nine days and Geoffroy draws his species. At the moral debate in April, Jomard distinguishes three kinds of objects, among them those taken from tombs and temples. "Those belonged to Egypt. We took them." "We shall keep them. We shall publish," concludes Jollois, and Fourier acknowledges that, without publication, nothing they have done can be justified. On 20 June, Jollois counts 2,087 drawings.

The Defeat at Cairo. On 27 June 1801, Belliard negotiates the capitulation of Cairo. The convention lets the army leave with "its arms and baggage", saying nothing of the collections. The clause that will truly threaten them, Article Sixteen, will not be signed until September at Alexandria. Fourier finds the word "baggage" vague and looks for what it does not cover. On 30 June, the merchant Suleiman al-Qabbani sells Marcel twenty-two shabtis, five scarabs and three gold amulets, which the latter enters on his personal inventory. Geoffroy threatens to burn his collections if they are seized. "They will take the originals. We, the copies. And the copies… they are the true booty," Fourier sums up. The departure takes place in mid-July, seventeen days after the convention.

The Descent to Rosetta. Thirteen thousand soldiers, among them five thousand sick or convalescent, two hundred civilians and the savants leave Cairo under the command of General Damas. On the first day, an Ottoman patrol demands the crates in the name of Egypt, and Damas sends it away. A deserter from Lyon, held in irons, confides to Geoffroy that he does not want to see what will happen with the English. On the sixth day, a sandstorm falls upon the column, and on the seventh, it meets Coptic refugees. On the eleventh day, two British officers wish to inspect the baggage, and Damas refuses. The column reaches Rosetta at the end of July, after twelve days' march, with sixty-three crates. The savants then reach Alexandria by sea.

Chapter IV — The Collapse and the Return

The Great Antiquities. On 3 September 1801, Hamilton and Clarke present themselves to take possession of the collections. Clarke counts the sixty-three crates. On 4 September, the great antiquities are entered in the register. They are the sarcophagus of Nectanebo II, a statue of the high priest of Amun, a colossal fist and stelae. The Rosetta Stone, nowhere to be found, is entered provisionally, then found that same evening among Menou's

baggage. Fourier does not contest this right. He asks only that history record that the Commission discovered these pieces. Jollois sees that Great Britain is here doing what France did in Italy. The chain is a long one.

The Collections Saved. The scientific instruments are recognised as personal property. On 9 September, when Clarke moves on Geoffroy's collections, the latter threatens to set fire to his crates. Clarke backs down. Hamilton agrees that the Commission may publish its drawings, on condition that a copy is sent to the British Museum. The minor antiquities are divided in half. The French keep a few animal mummies and one human mummy, the British the best royal or noble mummies. Marcel keeps his squeezes. Jollois keeps his drawings, and the coins remain with the savants, except for about fifteen pieces.

The Ethics of Spoliation. On 18 September, Hamilton comes to dine alone and announces that the sarcophagus of Nectanebo leaves the next day. Jollois replies that in a hundred years an Egyptian will have to go to London to see it. Geoffroy points out that it was not Egypt that invited them. Fourier asks what the British Museum would answer if Egypt one day claimed its property. "I cannot bind the next century," Hamilton replies.
On 22 September, the merchant Mahmoud al-Tawil claims eight statuettes that he says were stolen from him. Hamilton refuses to return them, and the merchant asks only that his name be noted. The record is signed that same evening.

The Farewells. The last days of September are devoted to packing. Jollois finishes the index of his 2,087 drawings and the crates are sealed on 27 September. On 31 October, the savants receive the order to embark, and Hamilton hands the safe-conducts to Jollois with these words. "And I hope you will make good use of what you are taking away." They will never see each other again. On 1 November, Jollois bids farewell to a sheikh of Alexandria, then the embarkation begins. He keeps his copper tubes in his cabin, above his berth.

The Crossing. The sea is rough for the first days. Jomard notes that the bases of the great pyramids are slightly longer from east to west than from north to south. He puts forward the idea that the builders took the measure of the earth into account. This hypothesis thrills him as much as it frightens him, for it presupposes a lost knowledge. Fourier tears up eleven openings of a preface before beginning with the Nile. The ship calls at Valletta on 10 November, where the British flag flies. France appears on 17 November.

The Return to France. On 19 November 1801, the ship anchors in the roads of Toulon, three years and six months after leaving. The Commission's crates are handled like a cargo of flour. Fourier drafts the official report and mentions the losses only in an appended note. In Paris, on 8 December, there is neither parade nor reception. On 15 December, Fourier is received by Bonaparte at the Tuileries, who makes the Description a state project. An editorial commission is appointed in February 1802, Conté becomes its commissioner general and Fourier reserves the historical preface for himself. Denon is appointed in November 1802 director-general of the Musée central des arts. About thirty members of the Commission died in Egypt.

The Work Begins. A year after their return, Jomard transcribes his surveys in his room in the rue de la Croix-Faubin. The Description de l'Égypte promises to be colossal, with 894 plates, some four hundred engravers and twenty-three volumes published from 1809 to 1829. The narrator sums up the outcome in a few words. "The statues were in London. The knowledge was in Paris." Fourier strikes out the lyrical sentences in Jollois's notices, and Jollois puts them back. They let the two tones coexist. On 31 December 1802, Jollois looks at his twenty-three copper tubes, goes out to see Orion in the street, then goes back in to resume his Karnak notice. Volume II ends on the threat of the campaigns to come. For Denon, at the Louvre, "the work was only beginning…"

4. Main characters

Dominique-Vivant Denon *(draughtsman, future director of museums)*

Central gaze of the first half of the novel. He draws the pyramids with the dead in the foreground, saves the Caravaggio from Malta and takes the papyrus from the Valley of the Kings. He leaves Egypt in August 1799 with Bonaparte.

Napoléon Bonaparte *(commander-in-chief)*

A figure both distant and decisive. He hands Denon a four-page list and formulates the "three levels" of legitimacy (see section 5). He leaves Egypt in secret on 18 August 1799.

Gaspard Monge *(mathematician)*

President of the Institute of Egypt. He defends measurement against the meaning demanded by Fourier.

Claude-Louis Berthollet *(chemist)*

Calls the expedition an "acquisition operation". Studies embalming resins, natron and chemical equilibria.

Jean-Baptiste Fourier *(mathematician)*

Voice of meaning and synthesis. Organises the systematic copying of the work and writes the preface to the Description. Dies in 1830.

Edme-François Jomard *(engineer-geographer)*

Observes, measures, calculates. Defends the cartouche hypothesis and the geodesy of monuments.

Prosper Jollois *(engineer)*

Engineer and draughtsman of the Commission. Copies, traces and, in 1801, defends his notebooks and drawings against the British.

Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire *(naturalist)*

Defender of the zoological collections. His threat to burn his specimens in front of the British is one of the high points of the novel.

Jean-Joseph Marcel *(orientalist)*

Author of the squeezes of the Rosetta Stone and of a register of 162 entries. Keeps a record when objects are seized.

Louis Desaix *(general)*

Conqueror of Upper Egypt, he leads the column southwards. Dies at Marengo.

Jean-Baptiste Kléber *(general)*

Bonaparte's successor. Is assassinated in Cairo on 14 June 1800 by Soleyman al-Halabi.

Vasseur (mathematician of the Commission)

At Dendera, he fills in his official acquisition forms in the open air, which distinguishes collecting from the soldiers' plundering. Jomard remains sceptical.

Nicolas-Jacques Conté *(engineer and inventor)*

Presents Egyptian hydraulics to the Institute. Dies in 1805.

Hassan *(interpreter)*

Interpreter from Cairo. He translates, takes a commission on sales, and sees without being able to act. Many of the novel's Egyptian words pass through him.

Abdallah ibn Youssef *(wakil of the Giza canal)*

Holder of the knowledge of irrigation, he points out that writing does not replace experience.

William Richard Hamilton and Edward Daniel Clarke *(Hamilton, British commissioner, and Clarke, antiquarian)*

They claim the great antiquities in 1801 by invoking Article 16 of the capitulation convention.

Menou *(general)*

Commander after Kléber, converted to Islam, he holds Alexandria until the capitulation of 1801.

Aubert, Mahmoud al-Tawil, Suleiman al-Qabbani, the deserter from Lyon *(invented or poorly documented figures)*

Characters whose historical anchoring is not established in the text. They serve as a voice for what the sources leave unsaid.

5. Main themes

Collecting and plunder, a difference of name and not of gesture

The whole of Volume II rests on the thought that Denon formulates during the Cairo revolt. The gesture is the same and only the name changes. The distinction claimed by Bonaparte (soldiers plunder, France selects) is taken up, discussed and tested by the facts.

The three levels of legitimacy

Bonaparte's four-page list, the savants' authorisations, then powerlessness before the soldiers form a ladder of successive justifications. What the savant believes he is saving, the general orders and the soldier carries off.

Weight decides what leaves

The novel reduces heritage choices to questions of carrying. What moves is what can be moved. Weight, more than value, determines what leaves Egypt.

The object and the information

Faced with loss, the savants multiply copies, drawings, tracings and squeezes. The second half of Volume II of the novel slides from the removal of objects to the capture of knowledge.

Local knowledge and scholarly knowledge

The French engineer learns from the wakil that writing does not replace the gesture. The novel shows the savants depending on a knowledge that they claim only to gather.

Science in the service of occupation

Institute, workshops, maps. Science is one of the instruments of the French presence. The book does not denounce it but shows that it serves.

The voiceless Egyptians

Almost always mediated by the interpreter, Egyptian speech remains rare in the novel. This silence is also a theme, since the owners of the heritage do not sit on the commissions.

The despoilers despoiled

The last chapter shows the British taking in their turn what the French had taken. The logic of the razzia does not stop at one nation.

6. The documented and the invented

The framework of events rests on attested facts, among them the battle of Aboukir, the founding of the Institute of Egypt, the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, the assassination of Kléber, the victory of Heliopolis, Article 16 of the Alexandria capitulation convention, the confrontation with Hamilton and Clarke, the threat of Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, the appointment of Denon as director of museums and the publication of the Description de l'Égypte. Characters, scenes and dialogues, by contrast, may have been imagined, as the Notice makes clear.

One area remains blurred. The twenty-three unlabelled crates, glimpsed by Jomard after Aboukir, are never cleared up and remain a mystery. The historical anchoring of the invented or poorly documented characters is indicated in section 4.

7. Key quotations

"What Bonaparte called a scientific expedition, Berthollet, in his private notes, more exactly called an acquisition operation."

"The same gesture, minus the criteria and the discernment. Here it was called plundering, there collecting."

"The distinction between collecting and plundering is a distinction of destination, not of act. We collect for Paris. They plunder for themselves. The Valley of the Kings makes no difference."

"Not value. Not historical importance. Weight."

"They will take the originals. We, the copies. And the copies… they are the true booty."

"It will not be I who answers. It will be someone else, in other circumstances. I cannot bind the next century."

"The statues were in London. The knowledge was in Paris."

8. Critical analysis

Strengths

- A clear thesis, sustained from beginning to end. The distinction between collecting and plunder is put to the test by the facts.
- Dense historical material, staged through concrete episodes (the Valley of the Kings, Rosetta, Geoffroy's threat).
- Powerful scenes, among them Malta, the night at Giza, Hamilton's dinner and the threat of the lighter.
- A measured tone. The novel exposes more than it condemns, and leaves the reader to judge.

Limitations and points to watch

- The thesis is stated by many characters, which makes it very readable but creates redundancies.
- The Syrian campaign is reduced to a few scattered sentences. The choice is understandable, but the ellipsis is abrupt.
- The Egyptians are almost always mediated by the interpreter. The device is meaningful, but it keeps them in a secondary position.
- Chapter IV is heavy with explanatory dialogues, which state the moral balance sheet more than they make it felt.
- The centre of gravity shifts from Denon to Jomard, Jollois and Fourier after August 1799 (Denon reappears only towards the end, with his appointment at the head of the museums), which weakens the balance of the second half.

9. Conclusion

Volume II of The Great Plunder is a novel of moral inventory. It follows the Egypt of the savants to show that collecting and plunder are distinguished by their destination more than by their gesture. Built around a very prominent thesis and a change of tempo in its second half, it sustains that thesis through concrete scenes and a sober style. Its last lesson is also the most troubling. What France took, the British take from her in turn, and the Egyptians, for their part, ask only that their name be noted.

STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Prepared by Pierre Collonges

"The Great Plunder"

Volume II – The Egyptian Campaign

A novel by Robert Casanovas

Methodological Introduction

This study concerns Volume II of The Great Plunder ("1798-1801 – The Egyptian Campaign"). It confines itself to this volume, and remarks about the series hold only for it. In it we read the language, the narrative construction, the figures of speech, the registers and the tone of a novel that puts its form at the service of a moral question. The lexical and syntactic analyses rest on a reading of the entire text, supplemented by a few counts whose figures, few in number, are given only as orders of magnitude. The quotations have all been checked against the text and set back in their chapter.

The novel chooses a writing of inquiry rather than effusion, made of short sentences, figures, lists and maxims. The reader is treated as a witness, not as a spectator, which explains the place given to the inventory and the document.

1. A Novel with Multiple Focal Points — the Relay of Gazes

The narrative has no single hero. Denon's gaze dominates the first half. After his departure in August 1799, Jomard, Jollois, Marcel and Fourier take over, and Denon reappears only towards the end. This change of focus allows the novel to pass from vision to measurement, then from measurement to copying.

The narrator, outside the character's consciousness, completes the character's view with what the latter does not know (the construction used for this is studied in section 5). The effect is twofold. It lends irony to the scenes and reminds us that the savants' perspective is partial.

> *"It would die on a ship."*

Chapter I, section 1 — Denon before the Caravaggio, in Malta.

2. The Inventory as Form — Figures, Measurements, Lists

The novel makes numbers a literary material. The crates go from 96 to 63, and the loss can be read in the decline. Jomard's estimate at Dendera (about 200 objects for this single temple, then 2,500 for the campaign, "low range") and Marcel's registers (162 entries) establish a tension through bookkeeping alone. The suspense is not one of plot but of reckoning.

This writing gives the reader the sense of the real weight of things, according to the law that the novel itself states. It is not value that decides what leaves, it is weight.

3. Two Registers of Language — the Official Form and the Sensory

The text alternates an administrative register (lists, forms, official records, clauses) and a sensory register (light, stone, hands, night). The first is dry and authoritative. The second offers the reader what has been lost in the official form. The contrast is a means, for it shows what procedure suppresses.

The scenes of copying, measuring and drawing are the places where the two registers touch. It is there that the language finds its greatest yield.

4. Lexical Analysis — Words, Registers and Figures

A pivot verb. "Take" is the most loaded verb of the volume. It serves everyone. Fourier "took the pen", Clarke is "charged with taking possession of the Arabic manuscripts" and Hassan "took his share along the way". The sense of seizure does not lie in the verb, which stays the same, but in the one who speaks. "Take" is the general word under which are ranged those that the novel sets against each other, plunder on one side, collect, select and extract on the other. Conté draws the conclusion before Jollois.

> *"Their soil, their statues…" he said. "It is the same. We take what interests us and call it science."*

Chapter III, section 3 — Conté, to Jollois.

Euphemism and the struggle of names. The novel shows words relaying one another to name the same gesture. The word "plunderer" almost always designates someone else, the plunderers of Antiquity ("The plunderers had already been at work"), the fellahs, the soldiers. The savants apply it to themselves only in speech or in private writing, like Denon in his journal ("what is the difference between a plunderer and a savant in a dark gallery"). Each moment has its euphemism. "Extract" is the word of the laboratory and the building site, "seize" that of Chapter IV, when the British apply a clause. Berthollet sums up this struggle ("What Bonaparte called a scientific expedition, Berthollet, in his private notes, more exactly called an acquisition operation"), where the phrase "more exactly" presents his version as a correction. The right word, "stolen", arrives only at the end, backed by the narrator ("What it had stolen – and the word was exact, whatever the justification – was in London").

From the drawing to the crate. The vocabulary traces the movement of the volume. Verbs of sight and tracing (look, draw, measure) dominate the first chapters, while the words of packing and handing over (crate, collection, register, seizure) invade the last. The lexicon of arms likewise gives way to that of experts, commissioners and procedure when the time comes to render accounts. The novel thus passes from the gaze to bookkeeping, and the vocabulary bears the trace of it before the narrative says so.

Four registers. The administrative register ("convention", "Article Sixteen", "safe-conducts", "official record", "provisionally") is dry and authoritative. It likes very broad words, such as "with arms and baggage" in the capitulation convention, general enough for each side to put into them what it wants. The monumental register is that of Bonaparte before the troops ("Soldiers, from the summit of these pyramids, forty centuries look down upon you"), where time is personified as a spectator. The familiar and ironic register is that of Monge ("We are here to understand, my friends. Not to conquer – others are very good at that.") and of Kléber, who concludes before the Rosetta Stone with a frankly colloquial "I like that". The register of the chronicle, finally, dominates the battles, with brief sentences, dates and facts. The characters are distinguished by register more than by syntax.

Precision and prudence. The core vocabulary is concrete ("crate", "hand", "stone", "notebook"), and technical terms ("granodiorite", "natron") are rare and placed where the object demands them. Quantities are most often written out in full ("a single block twenty and a half metres high, nearly three hundred tonnes"), which makes the number a word like any other and sets it in the rhythm of the sentence. Uncertainty is expressed in the vocabulary

of precision, as in Jomard's note ("order of magnitude two thousand five hundred objects. Low range. Not verifiable."). Evaluative adjectives are almost absent, and emotion comes through acts rather than epithets.

Figures of words. The novel makes little use of metaphor. When it comes, it is visual and sober, as with those fragments of bandage "strewn over the limestone floor like brown snow". It prefers plays on meaning and sound. "Monument" and "document" ("substitute for the monument a document that will travel better") almost rhyme and are opposed, for the monument is immobile and the document travels. "Column" designates the marching column, the temple column and the column of figures, which allows Costaz to turn the sheets, "his finger on the column of weights, as one reads a ledger of plunder". "Commission" passes from the learned institution to the British commissioners, and legitimacy passes with it. The chiasmus, finally, very discreet, crosses the adjectives ("Egyptian earth in French canvas sachets"), so that origin and container exchange their nationalities.

5. Syntax, Figures of Sentence and Tone — the Sentence of Savants and Soldiers

The syntax of Volume II rests on brevity, on ellipsis and on the almost complete absence of logical connectives. It produces a tone, sober, restrained, readily ironic, which is the signature of the book.

The notebook sentence. Many narrative sentences have no finite verb. They are fragments that take up the manner of the notebooks, measurement ("Seventy-five metres."), state ("A moderate current."), doubt ("Or perhaps nothing.") or decision ("Decided not to take."). The last example is a participle without a subject. The decider disappears in it, and the decision to abstain is recorded as one datum among others. The narrator and the characters thus write in the same register, that of the survey.

Accumulation and asyndeton. The longest sentences are enumerations or stackings of relative clauses. They do not subordinate, they add. The one that introduces the interpreter Venture de Paradis strings together three relative clauses, the last of which opens onto the future ("who spent his days translating for Bonaparte and his nights writing an Arabic-French dictionary that he would never finish"), and its symmetry between days and nights gives the interpreter's life the form of a condemnation. In Chapter II, a long sentence parades as simple noun phrases the objects of a market ("painted wooden shabtis, faience figurines of Horus, Isis, Anubis, scarabs of every size, stone amulets"). The comma stands in for the verb, and the list, without order or hierarchy, imitates the circulation of objects from hand to hand.

Parataxis, or the absence of "because". The French conjunction "car" ("because") does not appear once in the four chapters, and "donc" ("therefore") almost never. The logical link is read between two sentences and not in a connective. "There had been no regular mail since Aboukir. He wrote it all the same." juxtaposes the reason not to write and the fact of writing, and "all the same" does the work of a concession. "He sought them all the same. It was his way of being afraid." places the cause after the effect, without presenting itself as an explanation. The device gives the narrative the dryness of an official record and leaves the reader to conclude.

What… is that… The turn of phrase that cuts the sentence in two, with "What" or "That which" at the head and then "is that", "was that" or simply "was" to deliver the announced object, is the narrator's favourite figure. It serves above all to say what a character does not see, does not say or does not translate ("What he had not translated was the tone", "What Monge could not see from inside the square, the mounted officers saw"). The object is not named at once, it is held back, then delivered, and the form of the sentence reproduces the information that slips away. It is a device of suspense, which prepares the effect of revelation. The same turn serves for summings-up. In the coda, it sets what France kept against what she took ("What France truly kept of Egypt was a hundred and sixty-seven minds and the eight hundred and ninety-four plates they had produced").

> *"What Jomard did not say – what he had told no one since leaving Alexandria – was that the hypothesis frightened him as much as it thrilled him."*

Chapter IV, section 5 — The Crossing.

Antithesis and correction without "but". Several maxims juxtapose a negation and its contrary by a simple full stop ("It was not a ruin. It was a neighbour."). Denon's sentence in his journal ("We collect for Paris. They plunder for themselves.") rests on two sentences of the same mould, where only the complement introduced by "for" changes, in other words the destination. Its antithesis ("They took what they believed to be treasure. We take what we believe to be knowledge.") changes only the pronoun, the tense and the last noun, and the same gesture becomes its contrary through a shift of three words. The verbless sentences beginning with "Not" ("Not value. Not historical importance. Weight.") prepare the assertion by a series of refusals, and the gradation stops on a single word.

Parallelism, repetition and ellipsis. The text likes symmetrical sentences in which the verb is stated only once. "The Romans had plundered temples to build, the Arabs Roman buildings" strings the peoples together as one turns the pages of a chronology, each new subject inheriting the verb without repeating it. Repetition produces the opposite effect, an emotional tightening. Jomard searches with his eyes for the soldier who was carrying a faience cat and does not find him again, then anaphora takes over the sentence ("The man existed. The cat existed. Somewhere in that figure of two thousand five hundred"). The two sentences, identical in form, reaffirm an existence that the figure had just made abstract.

The sentence of power. The powerful speak in brief sentences and in modes of abstention. "Occupying will suffice. For what I want to do." uses a gerund as subject, which removes any agent, then leaves the real content in a relative clause without antecedent. The verb "to be able" becomes a verb of refusal. Bonaparte uses it to exonerate himself ("What the soldiers take in their packs, I cannot prevent"), and Hamilton answers Fourier in the same way ("I cannot bind the next century"). The powerlessness displayed by men of power is the syntactic form of irresponsibility. Bonaparte's distinction between France and the soldiers is likewise settled by an arithmetic of verbs, three for France and only one for the soldiers.

> *"France does not plunder. She selects, documents and preserves. Soldiers plunder."*

Chapter II, section 1 — Bonaparte, to Denon.

Punctuation and dialogue. The ellipsis points, almost all in dialogues, appear at the moment of confession ("Their soil, their statues…"). The exclamation is so rare that it stands out, and it is reserved for the savants' enthusiasm ("the same problem, my friends, the very same!"). The parenthetical clause is set off by the dash, which carries the narrator's knowledge into the character's sentence ("What he had not said – and what he would formulate years later, in his notes for the Description – was that this asymmetry"). In dialogues, the speech verb is almost always "said", and the dialogue tag often cuts the line after its first segment ("Our collections," said Geoffroy. "How do they get home?"). The subject is placed at the head then taken up by "they", as one speaks.

The rhythm of the chronicle. In action scenes, the narrative shifts to the past historic and shortens its sentences down to a countdown. "They charged at full gallop over three hundred metres. Desaix's square waited. Two hundred and fifty metres." The charge is measured in metres, like everything in this book, and the last fragment, without a verb, lets us hear the waiting of the squares better than any commentary.

A restrained tone. The narrator avoids the emotive epithet. Emotion comes through detail, the pause, the gesture. On the return to Toulon, Jollois "did not kiss the ground", and this refusal of an expected gesture conveys his state better than a sentence of feeling. When the pain is at its sharpest, it takes the form of an observation ("On the page, the figure weighed nothing. Yet it stood for two thousand five hundred objects"), where the antithesis between "weighed nothing" and "stood for" recalls the law of weight that governs the whole book.

Litotes and irony. The narrator's irony is discreet and passes through litotes and concession. After the summing-up on London and Paris, "The comfort was not slight" can be read in both directions. Hamilton's reply to Fourier is judged by two adjectives separated by a comma ("It was honest, and insufficient"), the second removing from

the first almost all its value. Denon's admission ("That is where we resemble them") uses the same device, a comparison spoken in a low voice. The tone thus remains one of measure, which suggests more than it condemns.

Maxim, closing line, refrain. The short maxim, placed at the end of a paragraph, takes the three forms of correction, antithesis and shortcut ("The statues were in London. The knowledge was in Paris."). Its regular return makes the book memorable and serves as its signature. It functions like a refrain, but verges on mannerism, as the limitations in section 11 note.

6. Writing so as Not to Forget — Notebooks, Letters, Copies

Almost every character writes. Denon keeps his journal, Jomard his notebooks, Marcel his register and Fourier his preface. The novel makes writing a response to impending loss, and copying a moral gesture as much as a technical one.

The sentence "The copies… they are the true booty" condenses this idea. It also prepares the final irony, since what was saved is what could fit in a roll.

7. The Voice of the Other, Mediated — the Interpreter and Reported Speech

The Egyptians speak almost always through Hassan or another translator. The dominant form is reported speech ("He says that…", "He says he understands"). This device is a figure, for it makes palpable that the voice of the other is not directly heard.

The most significant passage is the one where Mahmoud al-Tawil asks that his name be noted, just after being refused his statuettes. It is his son who translates, and the request goes through. It is one of the rare moments when an Egyptian voice obtains a place in the record.

> *"He says he understands. And he says, note my name all the same."*

Chapter IV, section 3 — The Ethics of Spoliation.

The slide from indirect to direct speech is the central syntactic effect of the scene. The verb "say" is repeated three times in two sentences ("He says that…", "He says he understands", "And he says, note my name all the same"), then the last clause leaves indirect speech. The imperative "note" is no longer transposed into the third person as the rule would have it, and it is not set in quotation marks either. The merchant's word crosses the mediation at the moment when the reported form was holding it at a distance. The phrase "all the same", which marks concession, says in a few words the persistence of one who has obtained nothing. The novel also names what mediation cuts away. In Chapter I, Hassan had translated the fellah's sentence exactly and "What he had not translated was the tone".

8. Matter and Gesture — Stones, Hands, Light

The novel is attentive to materials, from granodiorite to papyrus, from silt to resins and natron. Hands (those of copyists, weavers, irrigators) are a place of knowledge in it. The phrase "the hands know" establishes a bodily knowledge that institutes do not have.

Light serves as punctuation with the vigil lamps, the dawn on the Nile and the night at Giza. It marks the entrances and exits of scenes and gives the narrative room to breathe.

9. The Narrator Who Knows — Prolepses and the Register of the Chronicle

The narrator exceeds the consciousness of his characters. He announces the obelisk of the Concorde, the Cadet papyrus, the Aswan Dam, and gives the scene a historical depth. These prolepses inscribe the text in the memory of present-day restitutions, without ever naming them.

For the battles of Aboukir and Heliopolis, he changes register and adopts the tone of the chronicle, with briefer sentences, dates and facts. This change signals that military history is not the object, and that the real scene is played out elsewhere.

The tenses of the narrative are those of background and of the future. The narration is dominated by the imperfect, which holds the setting, habit and inventory, whereas the past historic, very rare, marks the brief act ("He wrote it all the same"). The tenses of prolepsis are those of the future in the past. "It would die on a ship" uses the conditional to leave the character in his present while revealing to the reader what awaits the painting. This conditional becomes more frequent in Chapter IV, where the future is concentrated (the obelisk would "be raised in the Place de la Concorde in 1836", the quarrel between Geoffroy and Cuvier). "For Denon, at the Louvre, the work was only beginning. The campaigns were about to resume" uses two imperfects, the second of which is the periphrasis "to be about to + infinitive". The restriction "only" conveys at once the brevity of what has taken place and the scale of what is coming. In the last sentence ("And with the campaigns, the collections"), there is no verb, and the simple coordination makes the collections the sequel to the campaigns.

10. Rhythm, Vigils and Overall Architecture

The sections often close on a gesture, a silence or a moment of waiting (and, towards the end, on a lamp and the constellation of Orion), and the narrative advances by stages. The rhythm oscillates between long scenes (Dendera, Hamilton's dinner) and chronicle shortcuts (the Syrian campaign), which avoids the monotony of the inventory.

The architecture is circular. The novel opens on the quay at Toulon and closes in Paris, where Jollois resumes the Karnak notice under the same Orion as above the pyramids, then the volume ends on Bonaparte and Denon. The ending remains open. "For Denon, at the Louvre, the work was only beginning. The campaigns were about to resume."

11. Stylistic Limitations

- Reported speech, a deliberate choice, keeps the Egyptian voices at a distance, and its return in the same form reduces the variety of the sentence.
- The maxim as closing line, often placed at the end of a paragraph, becomes a predictable device and verges on mannerism, for certain scenes close on a formula that the reader has already guessed.
- The lexicon of taking remains very narrow, and "take", "plunder" and "collect" come back constantly. This repetition gives the thesis its strength, but it reduces the variety of words in the face of a phenomenon that admits many other names. The novel also uses very few evaluative adjectives, which keeps the dryness but deprives the object described of its own colour.
- The ellipsis of the verb, very frequent in the characters' lines, ends up giving savants, generals and merchants the same diction, although their positions are opposed. The absence of the French "car" and "donc" likewise makes the characters' argumentation more uniform than it should be.

Conclusion

Volume II of The Great Plunder rests on a writing of inquiry that counts, measures, cites and corrects. Its first quality is the coherence between form and subject, since the inventory is at once the subject and the method. The survey of the whole text confirms this at the scale of the word and of the sentence. The lexicon revolves around an unshowy verb, “take”, and slides from the drawing towards the crate. The syntax suppresses logical links, multiplies verbless fragments and reserves the turn “What… is that…” for what escapes the characters. The maxim, frequent, serves in it as a refrain, and the book is at its best when it lets objects and silences speak.

> *“It was not Egypt that invited us.”*

Chapter IV, section 3 — Geoffroy, at Hamilton’s dinner.