

READING GUIDE

“The Great Plunder — Volume II”

The Egyptian Campaign (1798-1801)

A historical novel by Robert Casanovas

1. Fact sheet

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: 3rd revised and corrected edition; legal deposit April 2026; digital and print version

ISBN : 978-2-488999-23-6

Structure: Author’s Note, then 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 of Egypt (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: Replica of the Rosetta Stone kept at the Musée Champollion in Vif (Isère), 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 scholars, draughtsmen and engineers who sailed with Bonaparte. It does not tell the story of the military campaign for its own sake — the battles are dealt with in a few pages, almost in the manner of a chronicle — but what happens in their shadow: how a body of “commissioners” and scientists describes, measures, copies, buys, removes and finally packs up ancient Egypt in order to carry it to Paris. The guiding thread is a question that the novel refuses to settle in a word: where does scholarly collecting end and where does plunder begin?

The Author’s Note places the book under the sign of a fiction grounded in research: all the works mentioned were indeed seized during the French conquests from 1794 to 1813, most of the characters existed, but some characters, scenes and dialogues are imagined. The novel thus moves from Alexandria to Philae, then from the Rosetta Stone to the capitulation of 1801, when the British in turn claim what the French thought 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 carrying 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 the “scientific expedition” as an “acquisition operation”. Off Valletta, Bonaparte declares that what will be taken in Egypt “has no living owner”. Berthollet answers 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. The novel sets out its rule from the start: one takes what can be transported, and justifies it afterwards.

From Alexandria to the Nile. On 1 July, Alexandria disappoints: it is nothing but a small town of hovels. Jomard measures Pompey's Pillar and Denon draws it from three angles. Bonaparte has his proclamation to the "Peoples of Egypt" translated into Arabic. The army then crosses the desert and does not reach the Nile until four days later. Later, at the market of Saqqara, peasants sell statuettes and amulets to the soldiers. Denon buys a shabti. The interpreter Hassan translates the seller's words: it is "the tomb of his ancestor". He translates the words, but not the tone.

The Battle of the Pyramids. On 21 July, Bonaparte calls out to his soldiers: "Forty centuries look down upon you." The scholars are placed in the middle of the infantry squares. Denon draws the battle, then the pyramids with the dead in the foreground. Murad Bey falls back and Cairo is taken on 24 July. The day after the battle, Jomard goes down into the pyramid and meets a young soldier carrying off a scarab. He understands that this act is of the same nature as the scholars' removals. 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, Denon inspects the collections stored in the palace of Hassan-Kashif. He finds twenty-three unlabelled crates there, the contents of which nobody knows. He notes them in his journal and tells no one. He also understands that the return has become uncertain. What goes home will depend on what can travel.

The Institute of Egypt. On 22 August 1798, Bonaparte founds the Institute of Egypt. Monge is its president and opens the first session: "We are here to understand, not to conquer." Jomard measures the remains of Memphis with Denon. An old man draws for him in the dust how the giant statues were hauled. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire dissects Nile fish and writes about them to Cuvier. Berthollet takes stock of five months of work.

The Cairo Revolt. On 21 October 1798, Cairo rises up. The artillery bombards the insurgent districts and the repression lasts three days. The scholars remain shut up in the Institute and carry on with their work. Denon goes out to draw in spite of the danger. He sees two soldiers empty a weaver's shop before his eyes. The narrator writes: "The army plundered as the Institute collected. The word differed. The act was kin." Monge tells Bonaparte that force will not be enough to govern. Bonaparte replies: "Occupying will be enough."

The Sphinx and the Necropolises. In November, Denon leads an expedition to the Sphinx, then to Saqqara, where Jomard measures the pyramid of Djoser. 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, considers three thousand years far too short for any change to be seen. Berthollet concludes that neither of them will be able to prove it. On a chip of granite, Denon writes: "We take what we believe to be knowledge." Then he picks up a fragment.

The Scientific Debates. At the session of 15 December, Monge defends measurement and Fourier meaning. Bonaparte settles it: both are needed. Each presents his work, and Fourier retains that "transmission precedes understanding". In a corridor, he asks Denon whether he intends to take the objects away. Denon replies that certain things must travel in order to be seen. Berthollet warns Bonaparte that the departure will be made in haste and that only what is already in the crates will leave. Bonaparte announces Upper Egypt: "Denon will open the road."

Chapter II — Up the Nile

Dendera. On 25 December 1798, Desaix's column sets off to the south. Bonaparte has given Denon a four-page list and laid down his rule: "France does not plunder. It selects, documents and preserves. Soldiers plunder." At Dendera, Denon draws the zodiac by candlelight. Captain Coutelle judges extraction possible, but very long: "perhaps in thirty years". Jomard discovers the list kept by Sergeant-Major Aubert. He estimates that nearly ten thousand objects have already been taken. Costaz judges the figure accurate. "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 correct. 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 guardian tells him that every army “takes stones”. At night, Jomard discovers Hassan’s trafficking: he takes a commission on every sale.

The Valley of the Kings. On 30 January, Jomard triangulates the Valley of the Kings. Jollois notes that the guides, by showing their tombs to the scholars, accelerate 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. He notes: “Took the papyrus before the soldier.” Jomard writes in his journal that the difference between collecting and plundering lies in the destination, not in the act. Before the Colossi of Memnon, he observes that only what cannot be carried away keeps its meaning.

Aswan. On 2 February, the column moves up towards Aswan. Jollois sees a soldier tighten on his mule a sack from which a bas-relief protrudes. On 12 February, at Kom Ombo, the surgeon Bruyant recognises surgical instruments on the walls of the temple. But two non-commissioned officers force a slab of the sanctuary with a sledgehammer. Desaix reminds them that nothing is to be touched without a written order, then admits that these rules are inadequate. The slab disappears during the night. Jollois copies an inscription of which he knows his copy will remain the only one.

Philae. On 17 February, Denon and Jollois reach Philae by felucca. Denon could legally have a few blocks of Trajan’s Kiosk dismantled. He gives up the idea, not out of scruple, but because he refuses to destroy what moves him. The return to Cairo takes seventeen days. Soldiers fight over a figurine and fellahin lift their dam only in exchange for thirty-five piastres. At Abydos, Denon buys for five piastres a fragment freshly cut from the wall. In Cairo, Bonaparte has left for Syria and does not return until June.

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. Jomard understands that the stone is a method and not an object. On 5 August, he compares the Greek mentions of “Ptolemy” with the cartouches and supposes that a cartouche is a proper name. Kléber sums it up: “You have found the key to ancient Egypt with a text about taxes.”

Negotiations, Victory and Death of Kléber. On 18 August, Bonaparte leaves Egypt in secret with Denon, Monge and Berthollet. Kléber takes command. Jomard counts ninety-six crates, twenty-three of them still without labels. The Convention of El-Arish, signed on 24 January 1800, provides for evacuation together with the collections. But in March, Admiral Keith refuses to ratify it. 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 Scholars

The Last Campaigns. Menou takes command and changes nothing in the work of the Institute. At the June session, Jomard, aged twenty-two, defends the document against the monument. He asserts that the Description will be portable where the temples are not. 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 Desert Expeditions. News of Desaix’s death at Marengo, on 14 June 1800, reaches Cairo in August. Jollois keeps the general’s pocketknife. In the Delta, at Sais and Buto, there is nothing to take away, because the blocks are in the walls of the fellahin’s houses. Menou wants to steer the work towards Islamic Egypt, and a compromise is found. One morning in March, Jollois sees a soldier take a bronze Isis from the niche of a Coptic house in fifteen seconds. 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 bags of silt. Conté remarks: “We are doing the same thing with their land as with their statues.” Jollois replies that one can take silt without impoverishing a field, but that the Nile does not give statues back. Abdallah tells him that writing is no substitute for a thousand years of practice. He shows him four inscribed blocks found while dredging the canal. Jollois draws them, then takes away the smallest.

Time Running Short. 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 all his surveys in nine days and Geoffroy draws his species. At the moral debate in April, Jomard distinguishes three kinds of objects, including those extracted from archaeological sites: “These objects belonged to Egypt. We took them.” Jollois concludes that one will publish afterwards in order to justify this taking. On 20 June, he counts 2,087 drawings.

The Fall of Cairo. On 27 June 1801, Belliard negotiates the capitulation of Cairo. One clause targets “the Arabic manuscripts, the statues and the other collections made for the Republic”. Fourier judges it deliberately vague and looks for what it does not cover. On 30 June, the merchant Suleiman al-Qabbani sells Marcel shabtis, scarabs and gold amulets, entered on his personal inventory. Geoffroy threatens to burn his collections if they are seized. Fourier sums it up: “They will take the originals. We will keep the copies.” The departure takes place on 2 July.

The March to Alexandria. On 2 July, thirteen thousand soldiers, two hundred civilians and the scholars leave Cairo. An Ottoman patrol demands the crates in the name of Egypt, and General Damas turns it away. A deserter from Lyon is flogged. He tells Geoffroy that he does not want to see what is going to happen in Alexandria. A sandstorm breaks out on 7 July, then Coptic refugees are met. On 13 July, two British officers want to inspect the baggage, and Damas refuses. On the 14th, the army reaches Alexandria with sixty-three crates.

Chapter IV — The Rout 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: the Rosetta Stone, the sarcophagus of Nectanebo II, a statue of the high priest of Amun and a colossal fist. Fourier does not contest this right. He asks only that history record that the Commission discovered these pieces. What the French reproached their soldiers for, the British reproach the French for.

The Rescued Collections. The scientific instruments are recognised as personal property. On 9 September, when Clarke moves on Geoffroy’s collections, Geoffroy 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 small antiquities and the mummies are shared half and half. Marcel keeps his squeezes. Jollois keeps his drawings, and the coins remain with the scholars, except for about fifteen pieces.

The Ethics of Spoliation. On 18 September, Hamilton comes to dine alone and announces that the sarcophagus of Nectanebo is leaving 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. Hamilton replies: “I cannot commit the next century.”

On 22 September, the merchant Mahmoud al-Tawil claims eight statuettes that he says were stolen from him. Hamilton refuses.

The Farewells. The last days of September are devoted to packing. Jollois finishes the index of his 2,087 drawings and the forty-two crates are sealed. Hamilton hands over the safe-conducts. Jollois replies: “I wish you may make good use of what you are taking away.” They will never see each other again. On 1 October, Jollois says goodbye to a sheikh of Alexandria, then embarkation begins. He keeps his copper tubes in his bunk.

The Crossing. The sea is rough for the first few days. Jomard notes that the bases of the great pyramids are slightly longer from east to west than from north to south. He concludes that the builders took the curvature 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 convoy calls at Valletta, where the British flag flies. France appears on 16 October.

The Return to France. On 18 October 1801, the convoy arrives at Toulon, three years and five months after its departure. The forty-two crates are treated like a cargo of flour. Fourier writes the official report and mentions the losses only in a footnote in the appendix. In Paris, on 28 October, there is no parade and no reception. On 10 December, Bonaparte makes the Description a state project. Fourier is its editor-in-chief and Denon its artistic director. About thirty members of the Commission have died in Egypt.

The Work Begins. A year after their return, Jomard transcribes his surveys in his cold room in the Rue de la Croix-Faubin. The Description of Egypt promises to be colossal: 894 plates, about four hundred engravings and twenty-three volumes published from 1809 to 1829. Fourier strikes out the lyrical sentences in Denon's notices, and Denon restores them. They let the two tones coexist. On 31 December 1802, Denon looks at his copper tubes and begins his notice on Karnak. The narrator concludes: "The statues were in London. The knowledge was in Paris."

4. Main characters

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

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

Napoleon Bonaparte (*commander-in-chief*)

A figure at once distant and decisive: he gives Denon a four-page list and formulates the "three levels" of legitimacy: what the Commission brings back with its forms goes to the Louvre; what the soldiers carry off in their bags, he cannot prevent; and what the scholars document in their notebooks stays in France in another form. He leaves Egypt in secret on 18 August 1799.

Gaspard Monge (*mathematician*)

President of the Institute of Egypt; 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.

Joseph Fourier (*mathematician*)

Voice of meaning and synthesis; organises the systematic copying of the work, formulates "the copies are the real spoils" and writes the preface to the Description. Dies in 1830.

Édme-François Jomard (*geographer-engineer*)

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 the notebooks against Clarke.

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 the record when the objects are seized.

Louis Desaix (*general*)

Conqueror of Upper Egypt, he gives the impetus for the expedition to the south. Dies at Marengo.

Jean-Baptiste Kléber (*general*)

Bonaparte's successor; is assassinated in Cairo on 14 June 1800 by Soleyman el-Halabi.

Costaz (*engineer*)

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

Nicolas-Jacques Conté (*engineer and inventor*)

Presents Egyptian hydraulics to the Institute and states: "We are doing the same thing with their land as with their statues." Dies in 1805.

Hassan (*interpreter*)

Interpreter in Cairo: he translates, takes a commission on sales, and sees without being able to act. Almost all the Egyptian words in the novel pass through him.

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

Keeper of irrigation knowledge, he reminds us that writing is no substitute for experience.

William Richard Hamilton and Edward Daniel Clarke (*British commissioners*)

They claim the great antiquities in 1801 and turn the French's own argument back against them.

Menou (*general*)

Commander after Kléber, a convert 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 grounding is not established in the text; they serve as voices for what the sources leave unsaid.

5. Main themes

Collecting and plunder: a difference of name, not of act

The whole novel rests on this sentence from the Cairo revolt: "The army plundered as the Institute collected. The word differed. The act was kin." 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 scholars' authorisations, then powerlessness in the face of the soldiers form a ladder of successive justifications. What the scholar believes he is saving, the general orders and the soldier carries off.

Weight decides what leaves

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

The object and the information

Faced with loss, the scholars multiply copies, drawings, tracings and squeezes: “the copies are the real spoils”. The second half 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 is no substitute for the act. The novel shows the scholars depending on a knowledge that they claim only to be gathering.

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; it shows that it serves.

The voiceless Egyptians

Almost always mediated by the interpreter, Egyptian speech is rendered by formulas such as “He says that...”. This silence is also a theme: 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. Documented and invented parts

The novel rests on attested facts: the Battle of Aboukir, the founding of the Institute of Egypt, the discovery of the Rosetta Stone by Bouchard on 15 July 1799, the assassination of Kléber, the victory of Heliopolis, clause 16 of the capitulation of Cairo, the confrontation with Hamilton and Clarke, Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire’s threat, Denon’s appointment as director of museums and the publication of the *Description of Egypt*. The dialogues, the inner thoughts and certain secondary figures are, on the other hand, imagined, as the Author’s Note specifies.

Two areas remain blurred: the historical grounding of several characters (Aubert, Mahmoud al-Tawil, Suleiman al-Qabbani, the deserter from Lyon) is not established in the text, and the twenty-three unlabelled crates, glimpsed by Denon after Aboukir, are never cleared up in this volume.

7. Narrative construction and style

- An architecture in four movements: embarkation and conquest, the ascent of the Nile, the ordeal of defeat, the return; the novel closes on an echo of its opening.
- A shifting focus: Denon carries the first half; after his departure, the viewpoint passes to Jomard, Jollois and Fourier.
- A taste for the inventory: numbers, measurements, lists of crates (96, then 63, then 42) stand in for suspense.
- Two registers: the brief chronicle for the battles, the long and sensitive scene for the discoveries and the dialogues.
- Sentence-maxims in the form of a punchline, which sum up a scene and return like refrains.
- A narrator who knows: he announces what will come (the Concorde obelisk, the Aswan dam) and gives the narrative a historical depth.

8. Notable quotations

“What Bonaparte called a scientific expedition, Berthollet called, in his private notes, an acquisition operation. The word was more exact.”

“The army plundered as the Institute collected. The word differed. The act was kin.”

“The distinction between collection and plunder 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 the value. Not the historical importance. The weight.”

“They will take the originals. We will keep the copies. The copies are the real spoils.”

“It will not be I who answer. It will be someone else, in other circumstances. I cannot commit the next century.”

“The statues were in London. The knowledge was in Paris.”

9. 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, brought to life through concrete episodes (the Valley of the Kings, Rosetta, Geoffroy’s threat).
- Powerful scenes: Malta, the night at Giza, Hamilton’s dinner, the threat of the tinderbox.
- A measured tone: the novel sets out more than it condemns, and lets the reader judge.

Limitations and points of attention

- The thesis is stated by many characters, which makes it very readable but creates redundancies.
- The Syrian campaign is reduced to two sentences: the choice is understandable, but the ellipsis is abrupt.
- The Egyptians are almost always mediated by the interpreter (“He says that...”): the device is meaningful, but it keeps them in a secondary position.
- Chapter IV is laden with explanatory dialogue, which states the moral balance sheet rather than making it felt.
- The thread of the twenty-three unlabelled crates remains open in this volume, unresolved.
- The centre of gravity shifts from Denon to Jomard, Jollois and Fourier after August 1799, which weakens the balance of the second half.

10. Conclusion

Volume II of *The Great Plunder* is a novel of the moral inventory: it follows the Egypt of the scholars to show that scholarly collecting and plunder are distinguished by their destination more than by their act. Built around a very present thesis and a change of tempo in its second half, it sustains that thesis through concrete scenes and a sober style. Its final lesson is also the most unsettling: what France took, the British take from it in their turn, and the Egyptians, for their part, ask only that their name be noted.

COMPLETE STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

THE GREAT PLUNDER — VOLUME II

A novel by Robert Casanovas

A study of the language, narrative construction and rhetorical effects

By Pierre Collonges

Keywords: inventory, relay of viewpoints, reported speech, maxim, prolepsis

Methodological introduction

This study deals with Volume II of *The Great Plunder* (“The Egyptian Campaign, 1798-1801”). It is limited to this volume: the remarks on the series apply only to it. It reads the language, the narrative construction and the rhetorical effects of a novel that puts its form at the service of a moral question. Each section rests on quoted passages, set back in their context.

The novel chooses a writing of inquiry rather than effusion: short sentences, figures, lists, 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 viewpoints

The narrative has no single hero. Denon sees first: he draws the dead before the stones, prevents the Caravaggio from being taken in Malta, takes a papyrus in the Valley of the Kings. After his departure in August 1799, it is Jomard, Jollois, Marcel and Fourier who take over. This change of focus allows the novel to move from vision to measurement, then from measurement to copying.

The device “What X did not see” opens several passages: the narrator, outside the character’s consciousness, completes his view with what he does not know. The effect is twofold: it gives the scenes irony and reminds us that the scholars’ perspective is partial.

“She 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 then to 42: the loss can be read in the decrease. Jomard’s estimate at Dendera (800, then more than 1,000 objects, then 10,000 for the campaign) and Marcel’s registers (162 entries) create tension through bookkeeping alone. The suspense is not one of plot; it is one of balance sheets.

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.

“Not the value. Not the historical importance. The weight.”

Chapter II, section 4 — Aswan.

3. Two registers of language: the administrative form and the sensory

The text alternates between an administrative register (lists, forms, official reports, 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 form. The contrast is a means: 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 achieves its greatest yield.

4. Writing so as not to forget: notebooks, letters, copies

Almost all the characters write: Denon in his letters, Jomard in his notebooks, Marcel in his register, Fourier in his preface. The novel makes writing a response to the announced loss, and copying a moral gesture as much as a technical one.

The sentence “The copies are the real spoils” condenses this idea. It also prepares the final irony: what was saved is what could fit in a roll.

“They will take the originals. We will keep the copies. The copies are the real spoils.”

Chapter III, section 5 — The Fall of Cairo.

5. The mediated voice of the other: 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: it makes palpable that the voice of the other is not heard directly.

The most significant passage is the one in which Mahmoud al-Tawil asks that his name be noted, just after his statuettes have been refused him. It is his son who translates, and the request is granted: it is the only moment when an Egyptian voice obtains the right to be written down.

“He says he understands. And he says write down my name anyway.”

Chapter IV, section 3 — The Ethics of Spoliation.

6. Matter and gesture: stones, hands, light

The novel is attentive to materials: granodiorite, papyrus, silt, resins, natron. Hands (those of copyists, weavers, irrigators) are a place of knowledge there. The formula “hands know” establishes a bodily knowledge that institutes do not have.

Light serves as punctuation: night lamps, dawn on the Nile, the night at Giza. It marks the entrances and exits of scenes and gives the narrative its breathing.

7. The maxim, the punchline and the rectification

The style favours the short maxim, often placed at the end of a paragraph. It takes the form of a rectification (“It was not coldness. It was his way of being afraid.”), of an antithesis (“They took what they believed to be treasures. We take what we believe to be knowledge.”) or of a shortcut (“The word differed. The act was kin.”).

These figures give the book its memorability and give it its signature; their regular return works like a refrain, but borders on mannerism: certain scenes close on a formula that the reader has already guessed.

"The army plundered as the Institute collected. The word differed. The act was kin."

Chapter I, section 6 — *The Cairo Revolt*.

8. The narrator who knows: prolepses and the chronicle register

The narrator exceeds the consciousness of his characters. He announces the Concorde obelisk, 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 (Aboukir, Heliopolis) and the death of Kléber, he changes register and adopts the tone of the chronicle: shorter sentences, dates, facts. This change signals that military history is not the subject, and that the real scene is played out elsewhere.

9. Rhythm, night vigils and overall architecture

The sections often close on a lamp, a night, a constellation: the narrative advances by night vigils. The rhythm oscillates between long scenes (Dendera, Hamilton's dinner) and chronicle shortcuts (the Syrian campaign, the crossing), which avoids the monotony of the inventory.

The architecture is circular: the novel opens on the quay at Toulon and closes in Paris, on Denon's notice on Karnak, with Orion as a common horizon. The ending remains open: "Denon had still not finished. The campaigns were about to resume."

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

Chapter IV, section 7 — *The Work Begins*.

10. Stylistic strengths and limitations

Strengths

- A sober writing, suited to a subject in which emphasis would be suspect.
- A form (the inventory) that makes the structure carry what the thesis states.
- Striking and memorable maxims.
- A double register (chronicle and scene) that varies the rhythm.

Limitations and points of attention

- The thesis, carried by many characters, establishes itself forcefully but ends up repeating itself.
- The punchline maxim, very frequent, tends to become predictable.
- Reported speech, a deliberate choice, keeps the Egyptian voices at a distance and remains little varied.
- The dialogues of the last chapter are often more explanatory than dramatic.

Conclusion

Volume II of *The Great Plunder* rests on a writing of inquiry: it counts, measures, quotes, rectifies. Its first quality is the coherence between form and purpose, since the inventory is at once the subject and the method. The maxim, frequent, serves as a refrain; the book is at its best when it lets objects and silences speak.

"It was not Egypt that invited us."

Chapter IV, section 3 — The closing word of Hamilton's dinner.