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The rhetoric of nostalgia: postcolonial Alexandria between uncanny memories and global geographies

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Memory, nostalgia and place are subjects of increasing scholarly interest. While invoked by cultural geographers as a 'productive force' moulding urban landscape, nostalgia often remains an unexamined, *a priori* concept. Through the exploration of different reactions to the spatialized history of postcolonial Alexandria, I consider nostalgia as a fluid, multifaceted, and performative force operating at different scales and levels: on one hand, an unconscious phenomenon in the years following Egyptian nationalization, intertwining with the uncanny and bringing to surface 'unwanted' memories; on the other, a powerful device increasingly exploited by urban developers and the state for the construction of a 'cosmopolitan memory'. While the former kind of nostalgia presents itself as an effective counterpart to the colonial 'cartographic gaze', the latter responds to the logics of cultural consumption, and constitutes a strategy adopted in an increasing number of former cosmopolitan cities seeking to negotiate a position within the global capitalist economy.

Introduction

I am thinking of Lawrence Durrell and of what he might have felt standing in this very hotel more than fifty years ago, surveying a magical, beguiling city – the 'capital of memory', as he called it, with its 'five races, five languages ... and more than five sexes'. That city no longer exists; perhaps it never did. Nor does the Alexandria I knew: the mock-reliquary of bygone splendor of colonial opulence ... The Alexandria I knew, that part-Victorian, half-decayed, vestigial nerve center of the British Empire, exists in memory alone, the way Carthage and Rome and Constantinople exist as vanished cities only.¹¹

Alexandria represents a category of former 'cosmopolitan' centres nationalized in the 1950 to 1970s. Officially obliterated for decades, their cosmopolitan component, long associated with an abhorred colonialism, is experiencing an unprecedented revival. Today, nostalgia for a utopian, transnational culture and its expressions in provincial cosmopolitanism² is becoming a powerful political tool in an increasing number of cities. Enacted by local governments, nostalgic revivals are spreading across the globe, from Istanbul to St Petersburg, from Saigon to Shanghai.



FIGURE 1 Alexandria in the 1930s. (From the author's private collection.)

Alexandria is a perfect location in which to explore the dynamics of this phenomenon. Founded by Alexander the Great, himself a self-proclaimed cosmopolitan, as his imperial capital, Alexandria is also remembered and narrated as the epitome of a more modern cosmopolitanism. The cultural archaeology of Alexandria—ancient Greco-Egyptian-Jewish, Roman, Christian, Muslim, Royal Egyptian, national Egyptian³—has entered Western geographical imagination through a selective process of ‘mythicization’ that focuses especially on its two supposedly cosmopolitan periods: the ‘ancient’ and the ‘royal’. The former was under the Ptolemies, ending when Caesar Augustus dethroned Antony and Cleopatra in 30 bc. Early Ptolemaic Alexandria was divided into ethnic districts. Intellectuals were attracted by the library,⁴ and the ancient Pharos or lighthouse, one of the seven wonders of the world, welcomed merchants and sailors from all across the world, making the city ‘a universal nurse (παντροπος),’⁵ a microcosm embodying the greater world beyond. In the early fourth century, with Christianity the state religion of the Roman empire, Alexandria was the most important centre of Coptic Christianity. With the Muslim conquest in 642 and the shift of Egypt’s capital to Cairo, Alexandria was marginalized. Sea trade declined, and in 1798 Napoleon found a small fishing town of some 7 000 souls.⁶

At the turn of the nineteenth century, Alexandria was the city of ‘five races, five languages, a dozen creeds.’⁷ A myth can generate from another myth, but to be transformed into ideology the intervention of particular historical conditions is required.⁸ In fin-de-siècle Alexandria these conditions all seemed to exist. From the early nineteenth century, Ottoman pashas had set out to modernize Egypt and stimulate trade by attracting Europeans to Alexandria. In a matter of decades the city became a thriving port, the centre of Egypt’s booming cotton industry, and soon one of the first cities in Africa, with electricity, modern infrastructures, Italianate villas, eclectic beaux-arts buildings, wide boulevards and grand squares. On the street, languages, cultures and nationalities mixed in a curious Babel: ‘Jewish speaking Greek, Armenians

speaking Italian, Syrians speaking a Franco-Arabic patois; and men in French suits, English bowlers, and Egyptian *djellababs* smoking water pipes in the café.’⁹ Though almost devoid of ancient ruins, Alexandria’s inhabitants, ‘through some strange kind of metempsychosis, felt themselves to be reliving the cosmopolitan life of the Ptolemy era’.¹⁰ By the mid-century there were some 150 000 Europeans in Alexandria, out of a population of about 600 000.

After the British occupied the country in 1882, controlling it until the 1952 revolution, Egypt’s ‘European’ city became a target of nationalist resentment. When Gamal Abdel Nasser started confiscating and nationalizing foreign businesses in 1956, French, British and Israeli troops occupied the Suez Canal. Nasser responded by expelling Jewish, British and French residents *en masse*. Today, Alexandria’s population of four million includes virtually no Europeans.¹¹

Egypt itself has of course long represented a privileged locus for postcolonial studies. For more than two centuries the country’s double identity, Pharaonic and Muslim,¹² has exercised an unparalleled lure for Western scholars and travelers. Edward Said claims that Egypt was a focal point in the Orientalist discourse:¹³ at once ‘the cradle of civilization’ and ‘the living description of the Arabian Nights’.¹⁴ Timothy Mitchell has extensively illustrated the mechanisms of power that underpinned nineteenth century Western conceptualization and rearrangement of Egypt as an exhibition for the European eye.¹⁵ He and others¹⁶ have used Egypt as both a ‘real place’ and a metaphor to *highlight* the ‘one-way affairs between a dominant Occident and a submissive Orient’.¹⁷ Though sometimes dismissed as ‘a city adulterated by Europe’ (the ‘true Orient’ beginning at Cairo¹⁸), Alexandria has been commonly narrated as a ‘gateway’ to the Orient: Napoleon’s 1798 expedition to Egypt, the paradigm of colonialist practice, landed on Alexandria’s beaches.¹⁹

A flourishing city-port dominated by a cosmopolitan European wealthy elite, nineteenth-century Alexandria constitutes an easy (and obvious) target for postcolonial critique. However, the Alexandria of Muslim (and Coptic) oppression and uneven colonial practices hidden behind the city’s Victorian façades and romantic imagery is not my subject here. Nor do I offer another essay of outraged hindsight at colonial gaze and practice. Nor is the Alexandria described here the well-defined Alexandria of Orientalist knowledge. It is rather an uncanny Alexandria, a disturbing phantom, a ghostly memory of a mythical city which may never have existed.²⁰

If Gamal Abdel Nasser’s heady mix of intense nationalism and socialist modernization emptied Alexandria of its cosmopolitan elite, four decades later President Hosni Mubarak purposely seeks to reactivate the city’s long-feared cosmopolitan memories. In seeking here to re-evaluate the ‘importance of space in shaping memory and memory in shaping space’,²¹ I explore how nostalgia can be both a powerful political weapon and an active force subverting the political as it moulds literary and material cityscapes. To this end I offer a reading of the city based on nostalgia’s double meaning. Nostalgia combines two Greek words:²² *νόστος*, ‘to return home’, and *αλγος*, ‘pain of the body’, and later ‘anything that causes pain’.²³ Svetlana Boym identifies two kinds of ‘performative nostalgia’: the *reflective* which dwells in *-algia*, the bitter-sweet pain of longing and loss, occasioned by the ‘imperfect process of

remembrance'; and the *restorative*, signalled by *nostos*: the desire to return to the original, 'to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps'.²⁴ Reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, on the patina of time and history, on uncanny silences and absences and on dreams. Restorative nostalgia, by contrast, materializes in monumental reconstructions of the past, in mega-projects, theatrical presences and financial investments. In the complex cityscape of contemporary Alexandria both kinds of nostalgia find physical expression. The former is to be found in the seedy presence of decrepit fin-de-siècle buildings, evoked in memoirs and visible for contemplation between the cement and the smog by contemporary Western travellers. The latter exists in the 'well-defined', often overwhelming landmarks designed to resurrect Alexandria's glorious past, of which the Bibliotheca Alexandrina is the best known.

After a word on sources, I discuss more fully reflective nostalgia and the uncanny as involuntary processes of remembrance, and their significance in the context of postcolonial Alexandria as disturbing counterparts of the 'colonial cartographic gaze'. I then propose the post-revolutionary diaspora as a starting point for such processes. I consider reflective nostalgia as an intimately personal and yet standardized phenomenon that finds full expression in the past decade's boom of nostalgic literature about Alexandria.

Finally, I explore the materialization of memory and the juxtaposition of different temporalities in Alexandria's contemporary built environment.²⁵ I contrast the ghostly landscape produced by reflective nostalgia with the dramatic development projects dictated by Mubarak's EU-oriented policy and enacted through restorative nostalgia. Opposing the absences of the former to the presences of the latter, I track the metamorphosis of 'unwanted memories'.

In seeking to convey Alexandrine nostalgia and capture the city's 'expressive meaning',²⁶ I suggest a literary rather than severely academic style.²⁷ Much of my text freely interweaves extended quotations from 'nostalgic writing' on Alexandria. Hares Tzalas's *Alexandrea ad Aegyptum* (1997) and Andre Aciman's *Out of Egypt* (1996) represent two paradigmatic examples of this literature. The former is a collection of eleven short stories set in early twentieth-century cosmopolitan Alexandria, the latter a personal memoir focused on the author's experience of exile. Tzalas and Aciman are representatives of Alexandria's two principal exiled communities, the Greek and the Jewish, but also of its eclectic cosmopolitanism. Of Greek-Italian and French-Italo-Syrian descent respectively, both authors left Egypt in their early age on the wave of the 1956 diaspora.

These and other contemporary writers deploy a set of rhetorical devices to capture Alexandria. The city is generally narrated in the past tense used by the exile who mourns something forever lost. While Aciman's use of the first person asserts a subjective authority, stressing the individuality of response,²⁸ Tzalas's ambiguous shifts between first and third person articulate a tension between private and collective nostalgia.²⁹ His 'naïve' style subconsciously yearns for a lost simplicity,³⁰ while it naturalizes personal experience within a supposed collective memory.³¹ In both accounts, nostalgia is transposed from the human subject to the city itself – 'the capital of memory'. Alexandria becomes a feminized and fluid quasi-presence, suspended

between present and past, reality and dream.³² Far from 'colonizing' or 'mastering' Alexandria, the (male) returning exile and the nostalgic traveller wander through its indefinite dreamscape, in search of remembered landmarks.

Nostalgia and the uncanny

The spatial working of memory and nostalgia has long attracted interest among cultural geographers.³³ In recent years, however, attention has been paid not only to conscious processes of remembrance through memorial landscape (i.e. 'restorative nostalgia') but also to those 'silences' and 'ghosts' so central to 'reflective nostalgia'.³⁴ Gelder and Jacobs have usefully applied the concept of the uncanny to postcolonialism.³⁵ They characterize the uncanny as 'being in place and being out of place *simultaneously*'.³⁶ This simultaneity is important; 'it is not simply the unfamiliar in itself which generates the anxiety of the uncanny; it is specifically the combination of the familiar and the unfamiliar – the way the one seems to inhabit the other'.³⁷ Postcolonial anxiety and the uncanny go hand in hand in those places where at the moment of decolonization 'what is "ours" is also potentially, or has even always been, already "theirs": the One may also be the Other'.³⁸ In postcolonial cities like Alexandria, nostalgia and the uncanny seem intimately connected.

A 'climatic disease' in the late seventeenth century³⁹ and a widespread psychological condition among nineteenth-century Romantics, nostalgia has always been characterized by its strong emotional attachment to place. For Boym, nostalgia is 'a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed'; it is 'a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance in one's own fantasy'; it is a juxtaposition of 'two images – of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life'.⁴⁰ Nostalgia as a feeling arises from place in two ways: from its idealized image in the geographical imagination of the individual (or of a community), but also from 'material' topographical features (like landmarks or buildings), objects and even names. In order to chart 'space on time and time on space' and hinder 'the distinction between object and subject',⁴¹ nostalgia draws by handfuls from the vast repertoire of symbols and signs which constitutes territory. Starobinski has highlighted the centrality of what he calls 'memorative signs' in the condition of nostalgia. An old song, a street name, a decaying building, a broken shutter are all fragments of the past that strike our senses and 'revive in our imagination all our former life and all the associated images with which it is connected'.⁴² These perceptible fragments or memorative signs act as synecdoches for a whole complex of images and experiences:

A 'memorative sign' is related to a partial presence which causes one to experience, with pleasure and pain, the imminence and the impossibility of complete restoration of this universe which emerges fleetingly from oblivion. Roused by the 'memorative sign', the conscience comes to be haunted by an image of the past which is at once definite and unattainable.⁴³

In a sense this is an unconscious geographical process, which works the opposite way to mapping. If mapping implies the reduction of the complex and of the unknown to

readable signs, the complex feeling of nostalgia, with all the load of images and experiences associated with it, tends to spread out from the sign. Mapping (in its actual as well as metaphorical sense) is a process that reduces the unknown 'to a visible, self-present, and docile object in space set before the eye of the subject to be mastered and managed ... to transform that which defies naming into *manageable* and exploitable objects',⁴⁴ to turn 'think' into 'thing'. Nostalgia, on the contrary, turns the thing into think; it magnifies the power of signs, to the extent that even an apparently innocuous stone, tune or picture is potentially able break the heart of a person in exile.

Privileged places of social interaction, and yet too vast to be imagined in their entirety,⁴⁵ cities are probably the most dense and complex reservoirs of memorative signs, and thus key nodes in the geography of nostalgia. Plague-stricken and bombed, moved and refounded, expanded and contracted, cities have been subjected to all the vicissitudes of real objects in the world.⁴⁶ On the other hand, they have never ceased to accumulate strata of meaning, expressed in their landscape through memorative signs, or even – no less significant – absences.⁴⁷ Since antiquity, cities have constituted arenas for concurring narratives, for the negotiation of selected (and often contested) memories and identities. The role of memorials, cemeteries, monuments and shrines, but also of street names and buildings in collective (or individual) 'memory-making', has recently aroused great interest among cultural geographers.⁴⁸ Whether consciously or unconsciously, physicality and memory, urban geography and history, memorative sign and nostalgia intertwine in complex urban 'topologies of memory'.⁴⁹ 'Buildings, sites, and landscapes, in their shape and material substance ... are more complex than a written source, although less easy to read. And the genius loci ... makes people feel that they share past experiences, as if there were a direct access to history.'⁵⁰

In his discussion of the 'architectural uncanny', Vidler identified cities and houses as privileged places for nostalgia and 'haunting'. A city, he argued, could be read as a 'memory map' or, more evocatively, as a 'memory theatre': from the Renaissance to the Second World War, cities have been commonly constructed as 'memorials of themselves'.⁵¹

Vidler's interest lies primarily in the ghostly remains of 'unwanted' memories, in the uncanny fragment that involuntarily emerges from oblivion, rather than in the planned celebration (or obliteration) of collective memory. If in some cases the demolition of a certain building or city area might represent a liberating act, a release from certain social, political or historical constraints, the 'unwanted' remains of that building or city area – be they just 'anonymous' foundations or stones – bring to the surface a past that the act of demolition sought to erase. Such 'unwanted remains' speak loud to their previous inhabitants, 'haunted' by their past; at the same time, their current occupants aware of history may often also become involuntary victims of the uncanny. Vidler defines the uncanny as:

Sinister, disturbing, suspect, strange; it would be characterized better as 'dread' than terror, deriving its force from its very inexplicability, its sense of lurking unease, rather than from any clearly defined source of fear – an uncomfortable sense of haunting, rather than a present apparition ... a fundamental insecurity brought by a 'lack of orientation', a sense of something new, foreign, hostile invading an old, familiar, customary world.⁵²

According to Freud, the uncanny is nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind, alienated through a process of repression and suddenly brought to light.⁵³ If nostalgia 'works as a double-edged sword: [as] an emotional antidote to politics, and thus [...] as the best political tool',⁵⁴ the uncanny disturbs the political. It brings to surface fragments of stories that political regimes have struggled to suppress. Just as all individuals, regardless of their gender, social class or ethnicity are vulnerable to nostalgia,⁵⁵ so does the uncanny disrupt consolidated 'scientistic' beliefs in a society governed by predictable power relations.⁵⁶ When least we expect it, the uncanny emerges and problematizes certainties; it blurs Manichean distinctions,⁵⁷ it breaks down binary visions of the world and confronts us with problems that transcend pure materialism. Just as 'ghosts produce disturbance of cultural and ideological categories we may have taken for granted',⁵⁸ nostalgia and the uncanny call for something other than a 'traditional' critical approach.

The uncanny is about estrangement and homelessness,⁵⁹ but at the same time it is deeply rooted in physical place. Where homesickness is generally associated with exile, with the mental reconstruction of place 'away from home', the uncanny suddenly pops up in pilgrimages to 'haunted physical houses'. The accounts of Alexandrian European exiles illustrate both experiences.

The experience of exile

Nostalgia, it has been maintained, 'is more than a crepuscular emotion. It takes hold when the dark of impending change is seen to be encroaching'.⁶⁰ For the European population of Alexandria this change came with the nationalization of Egypt, and reflective nostalgia with the experience of exile. In the following pages I evoke this crucial moment of rupture through the memories of some of its protagonists. It was in distant lands that Alexandria became a mental landscape, a literary topos. It was outside Egypt that Alexandrian 'romantic cosmopolitanism' was elaborated through the rhetoric of nostalgia. Davis has argued that nostalgia for 'those aspects of [the] past that were odd and different becomes a basis for deepening sentimental ties to others'.⁶¹ For the Alexandria exiles, nostalgia for their eclectic cosmopolitanism became the glue of a 'virtual imagined community';⁶² a community sharing collective nostalgia instead of territory.⁶³

'When are you going? Where to?'

Then things started to change; the war was about to break out; here people did not like fascism, there was tension in the air and problems for the Jews. Hence, the rabbi said: if you want to save your lives, you must depart. On Sunday two brothers went to their yachting club, as for the traditional regatta, and disappeared. And you know that when the Jews abandon a city it is not a good sign ... Later Nasser came, along with nationalizations and all the rest.⁶⁴

After the Second World War, Egyptians started to move into the city. Slogans like 'al-Galal', or 'British troops out, British bases must go' were daily in the air. The Arab-Israeli war followed, and the Arabs suffered a terrible defeat. Humiliated national pride poured out where it could, especially against Europeans.⁶⁵ In 1950 Egypt abrogated the 1936 treaty governing the management of the Suez Canal,⁶⁶ and a guerrilla war against the British occupation of Suez soon turned into uprisings. The 1952 military revolution ended the Egyptian monarchy and Britain evacuated the canal zone.⁶⁷

Many did not understand very well what was going on, while the elders shook their head with disapproval: the world was being turned topsy-turvy. They whispered about the developments in the cafés, sipping the traditional steaming tea, smoking passionately their *arghilè*. New words never heard before circulated from one side of the Great City to the other, along with names unknown until that moment: revolution, revolutionary assembly, democracy, soldier Naghib, Gamal Abdel Nasser, Abdel Hakim 'Amer, Anwar Sadat ... Badri [the son of the author's *bawab*] swelled by his pride: 'You will see – he said – everything will be all right. We will chase the Jewish, the Zionists away from Palestine. And foreigners also go away from our country! This is our land!'⁶⁸

For Jews and Europeans initial confusion soon turned to fear:

Everyone worried. We worried more without the sirens and the blackout [because of the war] than when we banded together in the dark, fearing the worst every evening. My parents decided not to leave my great-grandmother's apartment. Better to stay together, everyone said. Then came rumours of the expulsion of some French and British nationals, and other rumours followed of the summary nationalisation of factories, businesses, homes, bank accounts. It was said that the fate of the Jews would be no different. We worried. Even my great-grandmother began to talk of moving to France.⁶⁹

Expulsion orders soon translated into dramatic experiences. For hundreds of European Alexandrians this meant leaving their native city, abandoning homes, wealth, friends, and families – in other words, everything they had struggled to build:

He reflected for a moment. 'I have built this house out of nothing' – he pointed at the marble floor, the marble panelling along the marble staircase, where a creamy afternoon glow graced a pair of marble statues standing inside a sculptured wooden door – 'I am not about to leave it to them. This here, my friend, is where I plan to die many, many years from now.'⁷⁰

Yet, it was not only the house and the material goods. Above all, it was attachment to the homeland, topophilia, 'the affective bond between people and the place or setting'.⁷¹ If many of the European Alexandrians were resigned to leaving a beloved city, many, especially elderly people, were reluctant and resistant:

'Our turn will also come, mother,' he added. She looked at him intensely with that determined gaze, and with a tone which leaves no objections, she told him: 'I am not moving from here.' The attitude of his mother disturbed him. Now exercising pressure, now begging, her will was always done, like during the war, when despite the great bombings she refused to abandon the city. 'Well, my dear – he told her – the uncles left, so many neighbours left, Germans are about to leave the city, let's go to Isma'iliyya, where we have uncle Stamathis.' No way.⁷²

Sometimes leaving Alexandria was an agonizing personal decision; sometimes it was mass coercion, as in the case of the Armenians:

Even newspapers wrote about that. They put her photograph on the first page. *Pobeda*, a Russian white ship, was coming to pick up the Armenians who wanted to go back to their country. A Russian ship right after the war was an important happening. All the Europeans of the city talked about it. *Pobeda* was taking the first, other ships for the others would have followed. [...] That white ship impressed me. It was a modern passenger ship. When I saw it on the pictures in the newspapers, it didn't look like those grey battleships which used to crowd Alexandria during the war. On the white ship also the Armenian family living in front of us on the second floor would leave. I never paid attention to them. I only heard my mother repeating continuously: 'Everyone is leaving, even the Armenians.'⁷³

What the protagonists of this tragedy shared was the uncertainty about their future, the recurrent question 'What shall I do now?' Doubts, hard choices, a struggle with the tremendous power of topophilia dazzled the European inhabitants of the city:

'What shall I do? To leave and go to Athens? But how can I start a new life in a foreign place? For sure slowly all the Europeans will have gone from here. As one and a half centuries before a bunch of Greeks started off, so few we will remain once again. Nevertheless, this is my city: I love her and she loves me.' He could not think about living in a foreign country. Furthermore, there was also his mother. Once he told her that they had to think seriously that one day all the Europeans would abandon Alexandria. [...] How much time did he spend watching the dark waters of the eastern port? He did not even realize the time had passed. He did not even care. He felt as if he was finding himself in the middle of a huge void – alone with his doubts, with his question marks tormenting him, with his hesitations.'⁷⁴

In Alexandria, as in Cairo, the exodus was a sad and preoccupying affair. From the day the Suez war ended the Europeans thought, talked and gossiped about nothing but the future.

The telephone would ring. Had you heard the news? Michel had just gotten a visa for Venezuela, or Giselle was going to her uncle in Naples, or a brother had sent from Australia for his sister. Day after day those remaining would ask each other: 'When are you going? Where to?' Café, shop talk, family talk, business talk went on and on with the same problem, and day by day the Italian clerk or the Jewish typist or the Greek accountant disappeared. [...] The streets themselves began perceptibly to lose their European pedestrians.'⁷⁵

In Tzalas's words:

The European exodus continued, strengthened to the extent that it became a true escape. Relatives left. Friends and acquaintances left. We also left. Only the indigenous remained in Alexandria. From time to time I met some acquaintance and talked about the past years. So, for sake of curiosity, when we were not yet dominated by nostalgia, we asked: 'Did you learn anything about Lusimako?' 'He's fine. He's in Sydney. He married Maro. I remember Maro. They also have two little daughters.' 'And Stelios?' 'Who? The singer?' 'Yes, damn, the Stelios who loved singing and used to dance *klaketes*.' 'Stelios is now in Paris. He sings there. And Pavlos, Dora, Kostas, Michalis, and Faní? ... All of them scattered. They left to the edges of the earth. Alexandria remained aside, in a tiny little corner of our mind, somehow complaining that we did not think of her enough. We had not started to cry for her yet.'⁷⁶

Out of Alexandria: displacement, homesickness, nostalgia

I wanted everything to remain the same. Because this, too, is typical of people who have lost everything, including their roots or their ability to grow new ones. They may be mobile, scattered, nomadic, dislodged,

but in their jittery state of transience they are thoroughly stationary. It is precisely because you have no roots that you don't budge, that you fear change, that you'll build on anything, rather than look for land. An exile is not just someone who has lost his home; he is someone who can't find another, who can't think of another. Some no longer even know what home means. They reinvent the concept with what they've got ... they bring exile with them the way they bring it upon themselves wherever they go.⁷⁷

What drove most Europeans out of Alexandria was not so much physical hostility but 'the Egyptian realisation, which the Suez war had inspired, that Egypt must more than ever be a nation of Egyptians, in which there was no place for a privileged European minority'.⁷⁸ Many Europeans born and raised in Alexandria or in Cairo found that they were 'going home' to a country they did not even know.

Although the Greek Alexandrians' native language was Greek and that of the French Alexandrians was French, they were strangers in Athens or in Paris. They embodied the typology of the 'away-outsider', 'tied to eradication and alienation, to the lack of ties with territory typical of those living at the margins of society, emigrants, exiles'.⁷⁹ Tuan has argued that 'whenever people step outside the protective enclosure of their known world, they risk encounter with some large, threatening force that yet holds an inexplicable attraction'.⁸⁰ This might have been true for the youngsters of Alexandria at the beginning of their 'new life' out of Egypt. Yet for most of the Europeans of Alexandria the diaspora represented a tragedy. They suddenly found themselves catapulted from the centre of a beautiful, familiar hearth to the periphery of an inhospitable, unknown cosmos:

After the government seized her husband's assets in '58 and they were forced to flee the country, they arrived in France the most pitiful sight of the world: there she was, the *grande bourgeoisie* of Rue Memphis – with her grandchildren, her pianos, her tea parties – standing at Orly airport as frightened and confused as a five-year-old child.⁸¹

In leaving Alexandria, many Europeans also had to face economic problems, since their money and their properties had been confiscated by the Egyptian government. But for those who decided to remain, life was no easier. Although they did not leave, their beloved cosmopolitan city slowly abandoned them. Old friends, schoolmates, neighbours, relatives – they all left. One by one they were replaced by Egyptians, who were perceived as changing the face of Alexandria. The European 'survivors' saw the city becoming different, and cast these differences as problematic. 'Poorer and lower-middle-class Egyptians began to fill up the European places, the modern city deteriorated a little. The Europeans had insisted on European standards, but the poorer Egyptians had poorer standards.'⁸² Aleko, the protagonist of the last of Tzalas's eleven Alexandrian short stories, is one of the Greeks who decided to stay:

One year, two years and one more passed by. Almost all the Europeans left the city. Even his mother left for the journey which leaves no place for objections.⁸³

He is tormented by a recurrent nightmare: to be the last Greek of Alexandria. He dreams that he dies and there are no Greeks to celebrate his funeral, according to the

Christian rite. At the end of the dream, local Egyptians bury his body reciting Muslim prayers in Arabic.

Again and again they professed the same declaration of faith [the *basmala*], while raising his body high, above their heads, as if it were a flag in a demonstration. When the procession arrived at the column of Pompey and drew closer to the other Arab tombs, he woke up. He began to gather his things. He closed the umbrella and got ready to leave [the beach]. The daily bathe was over! Another Sunday had gone . . . He cast one more glance at the sea. For a moment his heart shuddered. He felt that a last hope had remained to him. As the last temptation, the thought that he could go beyond the sea crossed his mind . . . Yet he recalled the words of the poet⁸⁴ which had been drifting about in his mind for a long time:

*Καινούργιους τόπους δεν θα βρεις,
δεν θα βλέπεις άλλες θαλάσσες.
Η πόλις θα σε ακολουθεί. Στους δρόμους θα γυρνάς
τους ίδιους. Και στις γειτονιές θα γερνάς.
Και μες στα ίδια σπίτια αυτά θ' ασπρίζεις.
Πάντα στην πόλη αυτή θα φτάνεις. Για τα αλλού
- μη ελπίζεις -
δεν έχει πλοίο για σε, δεν έχει οδό.
Έτσι που τη ζωή σου ρήμαζες εδώ
στην κοχή τούτη την μικρή, σ' όλην την γη
την χάλασες.⁸⁵*

You will not find new places, you will not see other seas. The city will follow you. In the same old streets you will wander. And in the same old neighbourhoods, you will grow old. And in these very houses your hair will go white. You will always end up in this city. Don't hope for things elsewhere: there is no ship for you, there is no road. As you've wasted your life here, in this small corner, you've destroyed it everywhere else in the world.

It seems that the ghost of the city also followed its 'sons' scattered 'to the edges of the earth'. Far from their homeland, absorbed by the problems and the rhythms of a 'new life', the Alexandrians nevertheless kept living side by side with the memory of their city; in Aciman's words, a part of their ego 'would be forever left behind in Egypt, that part of ourselves had never left and would never take the ship'.⁸⁶

Just as 'in the emotional topography of memory, personal and historical events tend to be conflated',⁸⁷ outside of Egypt spatial and temporal boundaries collapsed. The 'simple nostalgia' of Tzalas's accounts is articulated by Aciman into a more complex form of 'interpreted nostalgia', into a continuous dialogue with the past.⁸⁸ Alexandria becomes an *inscape*, a landscape of the mind, an idea rather than a physical entity:

[During my exile in Rome] I could entertain the illusion that I was one step closer to the beach in Egypt, to my friends and my relatives, and to the entire world that I longed to recover: the smells, the heat, the cast of

light, the taste of ripe fruit, the sound of a car rolling on gravel with its engine turned off, even the sounds of the flies, of itinerant vendors, and the city's crowded squares after Sunday Mass. By a fountain on a hot day, I could let myself believe that if the sky were only clearer a luminous Alexandria would surface suddenly. [...] In Alexandria, I was homesick for the place from which I had learned to re-create Alexandria, the way that rabbis in exile were forced to reinvent their homeland on paper, only to find, perhaps, that they worshipped the paper more than the land.⁸⁹

Perhaps for the Jewish author Alexandria is even more than an idea; it is a metaphor, a mirror of his very ego, an existential issue:

Egypt itself had become a metaphor. Losing Egypt, reclaiming Egypt, or even trying to forget Egypt were no less of a metaphor than writing about Egypt was. I had invented another Egypt, a mirror Egypt, an Egypt that stood beyond time, because although it gave every indication of having been lost there was scant evidence that it ever existed; it was an Egypt 'on margin' or 'on spec', an Egypt I 'castled' with every other place I might have called home, an Egypt from the past that kept intruding on the present to remind me, among so many other things, that if I loved summoning up, and if it was not really Egypt but remembering Egypt that I loved, this was because my trouble was no longer with Egypt but with life itself.⁹⁰

The pilgrimage: 'Alexandria doesn't live here any more'

As cosmopolitan nostalgia, not only is contemporary Alexandria despoiled of its past luxury, of its balls, parties and concerts, but apparently it is not even able to attract foreign tourism. 'Alexandria's fall from grace has been slow, painful and widely recognised. In the last three decades, it has gradually lost its status as a major Mediterranean cultural and business centre, giving up the bulk of its commerce to Cairo and its tourism to the Red Sea.'⁹¹ Nevertheless, nostalgic cosmopolitans still visit it. Given the very special relation they claim to have with the city and the existential value attributed to the experience of their visit, I will call them 'pilgrims' rather than 'tourists', 'travellers' or 'visitors'. They can be divided into two main types: the romantic 'outsider',⁹² like the American writer Don Meredith, searching for Cavafy's Alexandria, visiting his house, the places where he used to go, trying to reconstruct his biography through landscape,⁹³ or the Italian journalist Montefoschi, looking for Durrell's Alexandria and its former grandeur.⁹⁴ The second kind of 'pilgrim' is the ex-Alexandrian visiting the hometown after 10, 20, even 30 years, looking for the places where he spent his childhood, like Aciman.⁹⁵ Each 'pilgrim' has constructed their own cartography of Alexandria; their mental maps are based either on past lived experiences, on their 'spatial memory' or on the narration of the city by the authors they are 'worshipping'.

There are important differences between the two types of 'pilgrim': the 'romantic outsider' usually visits Alexandria for the first time and his cartography is therefore totally imaginative; the ex-Alexandrian sees it for the second time, owning memories and images from his past. While the former is usually driven to Alexandria by curiosity and is tied to the city of his 'literary idol' by an 'intellectual' (and thus somehow detached) kind of love, the latter can boast stronger links, since direct experience of the place and 'lived topophilia' are involved. Yet, in spite of these differences, both kinds of

pilgrimage are similar rhetorically. They both end in a deep disappointment, due to the incongruity of mental maps of Alexandria and the 'real Alexandria', and to the pilgrim's subsequent realization that his own cartography of the city developed from myth. Meredith, for instance, is unable to recognize the landscape described by the Greek poet Cavafy:

The Rue Debbane [des Bains] is narrow and dim with a collection of tailor shops still open for business, their windows eerie with ghostly dress form draped in fabric. There is a hole-in-the-wall teahouse, 'The Engineers of Typewriters and Counting Machines', a dental lab, and, unsurprisingly, the Austrian consulate. Alexandria's Greek literati once gathered in the Rue Debbane at Grammata, a bookshop run by Cavafy's friend Stephen Pargas, known to acquaintances as Nikos Zelitas. There Cavafy joined Zelitas and a group of literary compatriots in the evenings. But though I prowl the street from end to end, a second and a third time, there is no sign of Grammata. Shopkeepers eye me suspiciously and shake their heads: no, no one remembers a Greek bookshop. Must be the wrong street.⁹⁶

While looking for Cavafy's house in Rue Lepsius, the American writer comes upon the Greek Church of Saint Saba, praised in one of Cavafy's poems:

Saint Saba is a disappointment. The old monastery, torn down and rebuilt in 1970, is now a clumsy, overdecorated, top-heavy structure crowded with 'Greek' columns and too many arches.⁹⁷

Eventually he arrives in the former Rue Lepsius (renamed as Share'a Sharm al-Shaykh):

This brings me to a neighbourhood food shop on a narrow alleyway with no apparent name. No one's heard of Rue Lepsius or Share'a Sharm al-Shaykh until a fat man in white nightshirt, the boss probably, heaves up from a capacious blue couch at the back of the shop, nods his massive skull, then points along the street and gestures first turn to the right. Rue Lepsius is a short, dark street of potholes, rubble, and unlit buildings. Robert Liddell, in *Cavafy: a Critical Biography*, says the rue Lepsius is 'dingy and ill-famed', while in *Slow Boats to China* Colin Young writes: 'Cavafy's street . . . is not smart or picturesque; on the contrary, it is almost a slum.' To me, rue Lepsius is no more squalid than countless other streets in Egypt – or anywhere else in the world.⁹⁸

Montefoschi's first encounter with the city is no less disappointing:

The beaches where Darley and Clea, the protagonists of the last book of Durrell's *Quartet*, used to bathe, miming the last days of Antony and Cleopatra, no longer exist: a series of squalid beach facilities, with awful plastic chairs. Behind huge condominiums: horrible grey buildings, lacking any aesthetic taste. Behind them, on the margins of the swamp, a hell of chimneys. Everywhere that perverse taste for destruction, for the irreparable injury. Where is Alexandria? Where are the Alexandrians?⁹⁹

To answer these questions, the Italian journalist takes a tour of the uncanny remains of cosmopolitan Alexandria; he explores the Alexandrian 'memory theatre', guided by Madame Donacienne, one of the few European 'survivors':

To see the relics of that world we get in the car. It is almost dark. We distinguish beneath the magnolia trees the outlines of solid gloomy villas built in the twenties and in the thirties, similar to those of the fascist hierarchs in Rome, on the Nomentana. Madame Donacienne whispers a kind of litany, while we proceed at walking pace: here there used to be the Rollos, important Spanish Jews; there the Lombardos; there the Sursocks, the two very rich Lebanese brothers who married two sisters Cassiano; there other Syro-Lebanese, the Cordachis; that is the villa of the great Bassili Assad, wood importer; there used to live the Contarellis,

Greeks in the tobacco trade . . . and the house that you see here in Rue Djabarti is mine. The pilgrimage is over. We will meet again tomorrow evening.¹⁰⁰

Even some of its former inhabitants find it hard to orient themselves in new Alexandria. Their own cartography of memory and the modern city of their 'pilgrimage' hardly coincide. Pilgrimage to their home town is difficult. Beyond the mere curiosity to see how things have changed lies an existential question. Whether remaining in the same city, or wandering around the globe, the 'ghost of Alexandria' has followed them, teasing them relentlessly:

You see, the Great City imposed on herself the duty to seek revenge on those that had forgotten her. So in the evening, as soon as I closed my eyes, she appeared in front of me; she kept walking me on her streets and through her *calli*. Her ghost inhabited my dreams.¹⁰¹

Alexandria, as Aciman wrote, 'is a metaphor' of their very being, of their uncertain and fragmented identities. Identity, it has been argued, 'refers to sameness and continuity'.¹⁰² Yet if cosmopolitan Alexandria – often the only fixed point in the exiles' lives and memories – no longer exists, then their identity suffers a dramatic crisis. This is why many of them are scared of facing it:

At that time [right after the diaspora] I was busy travelling far away. I wanted to see new civilizations, to fulfil my ardent desire to go further. Thus did thirty years pass by. Gradually Alexandria began to come to my mind more and more often. I wept for her. Those who had known her since then, those who could not resist the separation and went back, told me: 'Don't go back! Keep the image of the beautiful city you have known.' 'In the name of Jupiter, don't go back! You will see an extraneous, unrecognizable Alexandria. It will cause you pain!' I hesitated . . . I told myself they might be right. Better I kept the image of the Alexandria I knew.¹⁰³

What scares the author is the incongruity between his 'cartography of memory' and the new Alexandria 'out there'. It is the gap between imagination and reality that really disturbs exiles tormented by Alexandria's ghostly memory. Eventually Tzalas decides to go back 'on pilgrimage'. Despite inevitable changes, he can somehow still recognize 'his Alexandria':

One after the other, I recognize the buildings, each one has something to tell me: a memory from the past. Luckily for the Great City, all the old buildings are still in their place. Much has changed, has been transformed. Yet nothing has been lost.¹⁰⁴

The same happens to Aciman, who surprisingly finds in his 'pilgrimage' the Alexandria he constructed in his novels:

I had returned to fiction – or had, at least, stepped into a realm where memory and imagination traded places with the dizzying agility of an *entrechat*. [. . .] I tried to think about the meaning of my visit and about the decades I'd spent waiting for it, and I tried to decide – as though such decisions meant anything – which of the many places I'd lived in felt more real to me now that I had finally seen Egypt again. I didn't know the answer.¹⁰⁵

For Aciman, the map is truer than reality. The two converge. Memory takes shape in the city and the city embodies the memory.

Although Alexandria as perceived and experienced by outsiders and ex-insiders might be different, the two kinds of pilgrim 'walk on the map' in a very similar way.¹⁰⁶ They both look for 'memorative signs'. They both visit homes – of some famous poet in the former case, or in the latter their own former home. They both visit the places where their literary heros or they themselves used to live (streets, cafes, shops, etc.) and – what is most striking – their pilgrimages all end in a visit to a tomb (of a hero, a poet, a relative). For instance, Meredith's pilgrimage reaches its goal when the author eventually finds Cavafy's tomb:

An ornate column topped by a cross rises to one side, bearing a shield with family names of Cavafy's mother and infant sister. Cavafy's grave lies beside it, a simple slab of white marble with a cross in relief on its upper quarter. [...] acacias and palms, a gravel path, scarred peeling green paint. A gardener, wrapped in a dhoti, his scant body creased by sun and old age, fusses among the shrubbery. The brittle stalks of long-dead chrysanthemums crowd a marble vase. There's wind in the trees, and the distant clanging of a tram. [...] Beyond the cemetery walls Cavafy's Alexandria, like a sleepless night in some remembered room, drowns in the sea-smell of a dissolving morning.¹⁰⁷

Similarly, Montefoschi concludes his pilgrimage visiting the tomb of Alexander the Great, the founder of mythical cosmopolitan Alexandria:

The following morning another pilgrimage leads us to what some claim to be the true tomb of Alexander the Great. [...] It is a kind of abandoned gorge, protected by a gate off its hinges, next to the Latin Patriarchy in the Holy Land. The Macedonian-like sarcophagus of the man who pursued the dream of conquering the world now lies in a hole in the sand, surrounded by bushes. It is made up of four blocks of alabaster. It's beautiful. No one guards it. A small group of Italians visited it in 1975 and had the nice idea of leaving their names on it. Even these have not been erased by anyone. The pavement is covered by mud. This is how he finished.¹⁰⁸

Even the Jewish cemetery visited by Aciman during both his imaginary and true pilgrimages is not apparently given particular care:

The road is very dusty, as all unpaved Mediterranean roads are. Standing outside the cemetery, he taps at the gate, hears no answer, and taps again, harder. Finally, the warden grumbles behind the door and opens it. The place looks exactly as the young man remembered it: a row of trees, a gravel path, a pebbled alleyway between the graves in the serene morning silence. [...] The warden, who has gone into his hut, returns with a bucket of water to clean the marble slab. The young man pours the water meticulously, going at the task with unexpected zeal, perhaps in order to avoid asking himself why he has come here at all or what he expected to find.¹⁰⁹

Alexander's tomb is covered by mud, the tomb of Aciman's grandfather by sand. Apparently they have been forgotten for many years, until a 'pilgrim' from Italy or from England has come to worship at them. Tombs are emblematic of Alexandria, itself a great memorial to the Alexandria that once was. For Richardson, epitaphs, tombstones but also objects 'announce here what is no longer here'.¹¹⁰ The tomb witnesses the non-presence of Alexander the Great and of Aciman's grandfather; to its pilgrims, 'new Alexandria' witnesses the Alexandria 'which is no longer alive'. In this sense, they both acquire a metonymic quality, which allows the pilgrims to come in contact with a metaphysical reality: the void, death. Alexandria becomes an 'existential' issue. After all,

the face of death 'is the mirror image, the other side, of the self. And the self is what makes us human.'¹¹¹

Memories of landscape, landscape of memory . . .

Reflective nostalgia: decay, melancholy and ghosts of the past

'Landscape is often regarded as the materialization of memory, fixing social and individual histories in space.'¹¹² In this sense Alexandria offers an extraordinary example of stratification, given its multi-millennial history, with its famous cathedrals, mosques and popular monuments. Invisible landmarks such as the ancient library or the Pharos rise like ghosts beside these visible 'sites of memory'.¹¹³ Despite their physical absence they seem to be dominant features in the 'romantic' collective imagination:

Opening the windows [...] on to the port [...] in front of the purest blue sea one can once again cultivate the illusion of seeing on the left the Pharos and on the right the ancient library, with behind them the city guardian of the memory – the city that had swallowed every sign of memory, in order to keep it longer – as it probably appeared, with its soft and elegant skyline, to the Greek traders and to Durrell.¹¹⁴

Although the myth of ancient Alexandria is still powerful and evocative, what really strikes the nostalgic visitor is another kind of aura produced not so much by the real 'sites of memory' mentioned above or by ancient myths as by 'everyday features': the buildings facing the corniche, the railway station, shop windows, signs, street names, etc. Although all these places are pulsating with the typical life of Egyptian cities, an aura of decay surrounds them in nostalgic rhetoric. Although the post-diaspora Alexandrian cityscape has changed dramatically, traces of its cosmopolitan past are still 'uncannily' present, as reminders of the other, former Alexandria.

This memory of old Alexandria is to be found not only in old monochrome pictures, in Durrell's novels, or in the melancholic stories of its European 'survivors'. One can also encounter it on the street, looking at its buildings, trying to make sense of street and institution names, which as much as vernacular architectures are remarkable contributors to the symbolic character of landscape. Place names too play their part: 'To name places is to write upon the world.'¹¹⁵ Governments are aware of this; they know well that place-naming is a central part of the process of obliteration of collective memory.¹¹⁶ For this reason, when Gamal Abdel Nasser became president, one of the first actions undertaken by his government was to rename many streets and squares.¹¹⁷ Thus, as in most of the big cities of the world, in Alexandria we have Republic Square (*Midan Gumburiyya*), along with a series of streets bearing the names of Egyptian national heroes (like *Share'a Zaghloul*, once called Rue Missala). Even 'Cavafy's Rue Lepsius has been renamed Share'a Sharm al-Sheykh'.¹¹⁸ But naming can be uncanny too. Although contemporary 'Alexandria is only a pale shadow of what it once was [...] and some aspects of the old Alexandria like its ethnic diversity are probably lost for ever',¹¹⁹

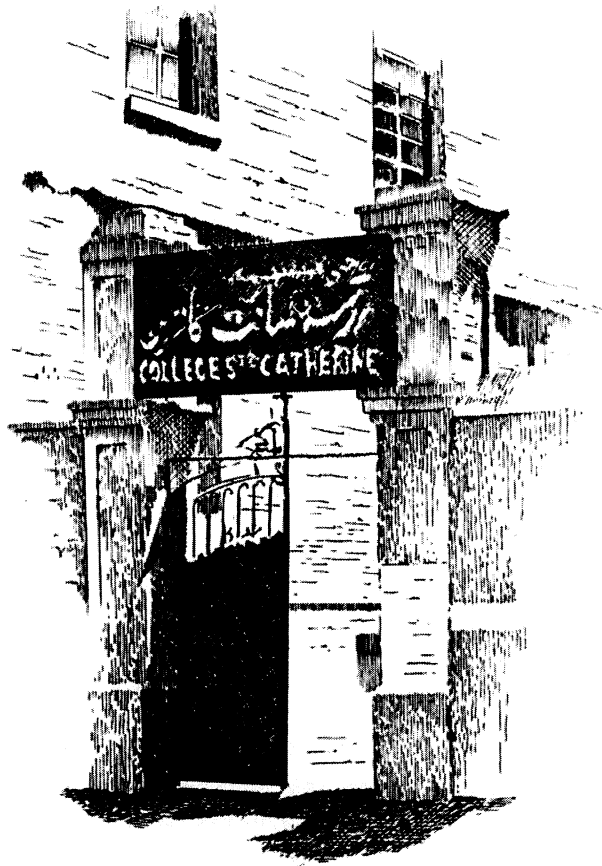


FIGURE 2 St Catherine's College (From H. Tzalas, *Alexandria ad Aegyptum: Endeke Alexandrina Diegemata* (1997), p. 119, reproduced by courtesy of Eikostou Protou Editions.)

diverse experiences are deeply engraved in the names of her districts: Greek names Bacos (Bacchus), Quartier Grec (Greek Quarter); Ptolemaic names Soter, Cleopatra; Roman/Coptic names Camp César, Sainte Catherine, San Stefano; Arab names Shatby, Sidi Bishr, Sidi Gaber; Jewish names Smouha, Menasha (Menasce); modern European names Fleming, Glymenopoulo, Lambruzo, Schultz, Stanley; and modern Egyptian names Moharram Bey, Moustafa Kamel, Rushdy, Saba Pasha.¹²⁰

The architecture of the city speaks even more explicitly to the nostalgic. Although modern Alexandria is now dominated by anonymous grey, international-style condominiums, old buildings remain, though no longer inhabited by Greek cotton traders, Armenian typographers, rich Lebanese or Jews, or Italian poets. Egyptians have long ago taken their place, leaving time to do its job:

The grieved *okelles* seem to be embarrassed because of their shameful state, because they grew even older, or maybe because they have lost some more plaster, because one can see their guts through the clearly visible injuries. Missing shutters, wide-open doors which do not close properly ...¹²¹

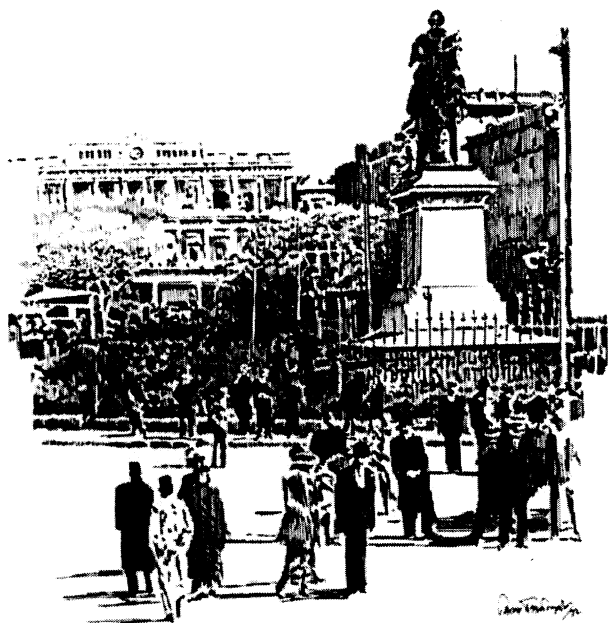


FIGURE 3 Muhammad 'Ali Square. (From H. Tzalas, *Alexandria ad Aegyptum: Endeka Alexandrina Diegemata* (1997), p. 201, reproduced by courtesy of Eikostou Protou Editions.)

In her exploration of the American ghost town of Bodie, DeLyser has demonstrated how often absences more than presences in the landscape can tell and 'reward' visitors. The power of synecdoche in landscape is such that a fragment takes on the projected meaning of the *imagined* whole.¹²² Just as tourists in Bodie 'see fragments of the town, and in their imaginations these fragmentary details speak to much more',¹²³ 'pilgrims' in Alexandria look for memorative signs, for fragments of their old cosmopolitan city in the now transformed landscape, among the huge concrete condominiums and the heavy traffic. These 'pilgrims' might be told much more by a broken glass or a missing shutter than by the whole window. Picturesque but uncanny features are powerful synecdoches. And in uncanny Alexandria one can find many such examples: for its visitors, the city as a whole is in a sense a synecdoche of what it once was.

There are still people living in Alexandria's old buildings. Yet, despite the fact that they are inhabited, their decay makes them look, in a certain sense, 'ghostly' too:

The windows of aunt Elsa's studio [where aunt Elsa used to live, twenty years before the author's pilgrimage] were unlit and the shutters down. Of course they're unlit, no one's at home, I thought to myself. They have been dead for twenty years! But then, the flat couldn't have stayed empty for so many years; surely it belonged to someone else. [...] I looked up again. The windows next to aunt Elsa's dark studio were aglow. I could see a shadow move from the kitchen to what must have been the dining area. It turned to the window, looked out for a moment, and then turned back.¹²⁴

The Egyptians that now inhabit those old buildings somehow become 'intruders', ghostly figures in the 'geographies of memory' of the 'pilgrims', now repopulated with



FIGURE 4 Back to the alley (From H. Tzalas, *Alexandrea ad Aegyptum: Endeke Alexandrina Diegemata* (1997), p. 25, reproduced by courtesy of Eikostou Protou Editions.)

elegant and well-educated European bourgeois, now with relatives, schoolmates, old friends and ex-neighbours. As already noted, the uncanny derives precisely from an intrusion into an intimate space; from 'the passage from homely to unhomely';¹²⁵ from the blurring of the borderline between reality and dream. As Vidler has demonstrated, haunted houses – even more than cities – have become metaphors for the uncanny, but also instruments 'of generalized nostalgia'.¹²⁶ The house of the exiled Alexandrian is more than a memory; it is 'a house of dreams, an oneiric house'.¹²⁷ When revisited, it still reveals familiarity to its former dweller, but it is no longer the same reassuring familiarity it evoked in her imagination. Populated by 'ghostly intruders', the house seems instead to arouse a sense of 'disturbing familiarity'; it has become 'haunted'.

The once white and shining façades of beaux-arts buildings standing out on the old pictures of Alexandria are now made gloomy and dark by the effect of smog; 'the sidewalks are broken and crumbling, the streets dark and dirty, strewn with litter and garbage, and full of potholes'.¹²⁸ Yet in its decay the city still exercises a strange power



FIGURE 5 Alexandria's ghosts (From H. Tzalas, *Alexandrea ad Aegyptum: Endeka Alexandrina Diegemata* (1997), p. 259, reproduced by courtesy of Eikostou Protou Editions.)

on its 'pilgrims', for it mysteriously disrupts the borders between past and present, projecting the visitor into a kind of oneiric dimension:

it's as if Alexandria with its decadent grandeur and crumbling edifices, the dank sea-smell of cramped spaces, the feeling that a great past has slipped quietly away and left a dissolving present, a future without promise turned these two writers [Durrell and Cavafy] inwards to mine veins of loss and decay.¹²⁹

After all, although anchoring our attention to components that we can see and touch, 'landscape allows and even encourages us to dream. [...] Landscape embraces a fundamental tension between what is, in a simplistic sense, "real" and what is fantasy.'¹³⁰

Restorative nostalgia: development projects for Alexandria

The hegemonic imagination of modern Egypt is that of the territorial state, on the Western European model,¹³¹ but yet 'filled' with strongly non-European nationalistic discourses, such as the Pharaonic and the Islamic.¹³² If the weight of the two narratives has varied over time, the nationalist 'dogma' of Egypt as an 'Arab country' has remained a constant, from Nasser to our days. The Mubarak government and those who preceded it have always tended to affirm the Islamic (or Arab, in the case of Nasser) identity of the country through a strict control on landscape. In particular, feeling that the sovereignty of the state is reified in Egyptian landscape, Mubarak has applied severe restrictions on the construction and restoration of non-Islamic worship sites, like churches – and this at the expenses of the Copt population, the largest autochthonous minority of the country.¹³³ A 'homogeneous' Islamic landscape gives the impression that 'the state is doing its job' more easily than would an 'eclectic' landscape, scattered with non-Muslim or non-Arab elements.

For the promoters of Egyptian national identity, the 'hybrid' and 'Westernizing' identity of cosmopolitan Alexandria has traditionally constituted a 'problem', rather than an advantage. In a country where 'history teachers traditionally have skipped from the collapse of the Egyptian Pharaohs to the Arab conquest in 642 AD, leaving nearly a thousand years of Greek, Roman, and Christian culture in Egypt unexplored',¹³⁴ Alexandria's cosmopolitanism had no place. After the nationalization of Egypt, the city seemed inevitably cast into shadow by 'Arab' Cairo. Its multiculturalism was to remain alive only in the literary fantasies of Western scholars, or in the minds of the thousands exiled Alexandrians scattered around the world, and of the few 'survivors' who did not leave the city. It was to survive as an uncanny presence in the memorative signs constituted by the old buildings and topographical names which escaped nationalist obliteration.¹³⁵

Yet (nationalist) discourses are not immutable, despite their claims. Even if at certain times they might seem 'waterproof', they are silently moulded by political interests and changing circumstances. Recently Alexandria has witnessed a number of projects for its revitalization; it has been the subject of an unprecedented wave of restorative nostalgia. Beside a series of interventions to improve the circulation of traffic and life in general, the Egyptian government has paid particular attention to the beautification of the city and to the promotion of its (classical and fin-de-siècle) cosmopolitan image through megaprojects, such as the reconstruction of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, a US\$190 million 'mammoth edifice'.¹³⁶

Curiously enough, the library has been described by the Egyptian (and international) press as a 'resurrecting phoenix',¹³⁷ as 'a link with the past and an opening onto the

future', as stated in the Aswan Declaration.¹³⁸ No one has talked about the construction of 'a new library', but rather about the 'resurrection of the ancient Library', taking for granted the ancient library referent, 'burnt some two thousand years ago',¹³⁹ as journalists and politicians have got used to saying with a good deal of nonchalance. It seems that all of a sudden those 'some two thousand years' have disappeared, or rather, they have invaded our present. It seems that everyone has 'naturalized' this continuity with a classical past long ignored in modern Egypt. Unlike fragmented collective memory, 'national memory' rests on a coherent and inspiring tale – on reassuring continuity.¹⁴⁰

Such an expensive project has raised criticisms and deep concern not only within extremist Islamic groups, who see the library as an 'intruding element', but also in Western public opinion.¹⁴¹ In the era of the internet and digital texts, why invest so much money in a library (which will clearly never reach the dimensions of, say, the Library of Congress in the USA) located in a Third World country in which censorship still represents a serious issue? Why build it in a city long cast into shadow by the capital? The project, with all its paradoxes, can be explained only in political terms. Through the image of Alexandria, the Mubarak government is attempting to open Egypt to Europe, and the Bibliotheca Alexandrina can be interpreted as a strategic move towards the West. A major library by the sea, 'facing North toward Europe, is part of a larger effort to open Egypt up to foreign investment, satellite television, the internet, and cellular phones'.¹⁴²

A number of projects to 'resurrect' that other 'ghost' of the city – the ancient Pharos – have also been presented during the past few years. 'There have been at least six plans afoot to rebuild the ancient lighthouse, though no one knows exactly how it looked. One plan would copy a famous engraving of the monument, adding shops on the lower floors and a revolving restaurant at the top. Another project – sponsored by the French clothing designer Pierre Cardin – involves laser projections'.¹⁴³ If reflective nostalgia lingers on 'unnoticed' memorative signs, on the 'insignificant' detail, on absences, restorative nostalgia gravitates towards the grandeur of famous collective symbols.¹⁴⁴

Yet it is not only mega-projects that seek to revive classical Alexandria. An important role is played also by minor architectural interventions, like the Greco-Roman-style station shelters and the majestic city gate, shaped like the façade of a Greek temple and carrying the name of the city in Arabic and Greek. Although they have no practical function, these interventions represent the continuation of a narrative starting at (or leading to) the Bibliotheca. These landmarks remind us that ancient Alexandria is not confined to a library or a museum. Its memory is still alive, even on the street. 'Mythic' Ptolemaic Alexandria conveys a powerful message continuously repeated by the Egyptian government and the national press: the rebirth of the city as a world node of knowledge, culture and civilization – as at its origin, under the rule of the Ptolemies. Official speeches and declarations all show some kind of Egyptian pride in the crucial role of the library and the uniqueness of its heritage. The new Bibliotheca has been completely (re)invented, since nothing has remained of its ancient predecessor (not a single drawing, nor do we know where exactly it was located). The heritage boasted of

by Egyptian government and intelligentsia is an idea, a ghost that has endured for over 2000 years.

Beside this classical-mythical narrative, even more ironically, projects for the revitalization of Alexandria have also sought to valorize the second golden age of the city. Not only has the corniche been widened, but a campaign for the 'beautification' of the surrounding area has been undertaken. It is planned that all the colonial buildings facing the promenade be restored and repainted free of charge.¹⁴⁵ Restorative nostalgia has no use for the signs of historical time – patina, ruins, etc.¹⁴⁶ According to the architect Busquets, 'today reconquering the waterfront seems a common goal for Mediterranean cities'.¹⁴⁷ If on one hand the waterfront is the face that Alexandria offers to Europe and to the world, and represents its future in terms of foreign investments, exchange and new opportunities,¹⁴⁸ on the other the very rhetoric of the waterfront is intended to project it into a nostalgic past. And there is no contradiction, since 'the past is a foreign country, and thanks to nostalgia it has now become the foreign country with the healthiest tourist trade of all'.¹⁴⁹ The dominant images inspired by maritime waterfronts are those related to ships, to the idea of departure, to 'traditional maritime commerce, and especially a new life of adventures'.¹⁵⁰ Like *fin-de-siècle* railway stations, ports are liminal spaces, related to the romantic maritime past celebrated by Cavafy and Durrell and in a way common to most of the great cosmopolitan centres of the Mediterranean, 'still living in their past'.¹⁵¹

Maybe, after all, this is what 'romantic' visitors expect and want to find in Alexandria. But paradoxically, this very restructuring, this 'over-romanticization' of the city, is actually depriving its old buildings of their 'aura', of their original charm, as in the case of the mythical Hotel Cecil and the famous Trianon Pâtisserie:

On the seafront next door stands the Hotel Cecil, an Alexandrian institution whose guests over the years have included Churchill, Noel Coward, Somerset Maugham, and Lawrence Durrell. But the Cecil's recently been bought by an international chain, and modernization has dispelled its romantic ambience suggestive of age-old intrigue and corruption. [...] Like the Cecil, the Trianon Pâtisserie, one of the poet's [Cavafy's] favorite cafés, has undergone a recent facelift and is now glitzy and expensive.¹⁵²

A similar fate has fallen Al-Salamlek, one of King Farouk's 19 private palaces, recently restored and transformed into a luxury hotel. The Salamlek Palace Hotel is intended for 'out-of-the ordinary' customers, such as 'the adventurer tourist or the culture-sophisticated tourist',¹⁵³ bored with the usual international hotels, but also with the traditional itineraries based on Pharaonic and Islamic narratives.

A number of devices and formulas has been adopted by the developers to (re)create what Gabr has named 'historical effect', or 'sense of the past': from the display of original items (such as the actual telephone used by the king) to a selection of stamps of King Farouk and national events and replicas of original black and white photos; from the use of antique-looking English and Arabic fonts to the 'royal' local customs of the staff. Yet, 'because the palace has undergone several changes over the years, only some features remain authentic'.¹⁵⁴ More frequently, old and new materials coexist, as much as antique and modern imitations. According to Gabr's survey, most of the customers

(mostly Europeans) complain or dislike this 'intrusion' of the new in the old, the mingling of 'original' and 'fake'. As Lowenthal noted,

We expect most artifacts to show signs of wear and age Because we feel that old things should look old, we may forget that they originally looked new An element of mystery and uncertainty distinguishes past from present. We expect the past not to be precise or specific, but rather to be vague and incomplete, waiting to be filled in by our own imaginations.¹⁵⁵

The logic of reconstructing instead of preserving is also apparent in all the other projects I have mentioned above, and principally in the Bibliotheca.¹⁵⁶ The criticism of the (European) guests derives from the gap between two ways of conceiving (and thus preserving) heritage. Cosgrove has made a distinction between the English word 'heritage' (rooted in the Germanic *beir*, 'the successor who receives') and its equivalent in the Romance languages (*patrimonio*, *patrimoine*, etc.). While 'patrimony's emphasis on the giver's intentions rather than the recipient's acts renders the relationship one of duty . . . and suggests a limited flexibility in dealing with the past', heritage, by contrast, 'treats the past as an active agent in the present'.¹⁵⁷ Heritage conservation policies in the Anglo-Saxon countries and in continental Europe seem to reflect this linguistic distinction. In Egypt, 'although the preservation of historical buildings has been declared the policy of the government, one should be aware of certain difficulties that may hinder serious preservation efforts. [. . .] The problem has to do with value systems that do not recognize the merit of heritage preservation'.¹⁵⁸ 'Heritage' (cultural or artistic) in Arabic is translated by the term *tiraath*, deriving from the root *w-r-th*, 'to inherit', 'to receive a bequest by testament'.¹⁵⁹ The value is not intrinsic in the thing itself, but rather on the inheritor – modern Egypt, in our case – which is therefore morally justified to act freely (changing the original, or even reconstructing it entirely). Paradoxically, in the very attempt to reconstruct a 'romantic' Alexandria and recreate a nostalgia for consumption, the aura surrounding Alexandria and its old buildings seems to vanish, as Meredith noticed. DeLyser has argued that quantity is not the only key to success in ghost towns, since 'in some towns where much remains, too much remains'.¹⁶⁰ In 'landscapes of memory' – be it a Californian ghost town or decadent Alexandria – imagination works better with decay and absences rather than with reconstructions, for 'certain remains from the past carry a *potential* evocative power – potential because their evocative power is not an inherent property of themselves; the most perfectly preserved building or document becomes evocative, indeed, 'historical', only through imagination'.¹⁶¹ Through its 'ghostly' absences and decadent presences, modern Alexandria becomes a favourite place for the picturesque sensibility of nostalgic visitors.

Conclusions

Obliteration does not mean total erasure. Nationalizations and revolutions do not leave a *tabula rasa*, but instead uncanny remains ready to surface through memorative signs (and absences) in the landscape and to produce nostalgia for a mythicized past.

Alexandria is not an isolated case, but represents a category of postcolonial cities, like Casablanca, Havana, Saigon, or Cairo itself, which since their nationalization in the 1950–1970s have seen their (European) cosmopolitanism give way to a disturbing non-presence. Recently, many former ‘world cities’¹⁶² have been trying to reinvent themselves through nostalgic revivals of legendary cosmopolitan pasts. But why revive nostalgic imperial memories in the twenty-first century? Why awaken ancient ghosts?

The answer is at once cultural, political and economic. In a globalized world, dominated by image¹⁶³ and high-speed communication networks, cities have engaged in a competition for global centrality,¹⁶⁴ even if short-lived. Their success is largely determined by their ability to create evocative but at the same time easily readable icons, which characterize them as unique. The city stands as a totalizing, almost ‘mythical’ landmark for socioeconomic and political strategies.¹⁶⁵ The built environment, Allen argues, has the potential to stabilize the urban image ‘as a whole’ and convey it via the global network.¹⁶⁶ The cities engaged in such competition (especially those like Alexandria in the capitalist semi-periphery, or even in the periphery) adopt different strategies to promote themselves through ‘icons’: from Shanghai’s mega-structures and Singapore’s technological prodigies¹⁶⁷ to the rediscovery of mythical roots or imperial cosmopolitan pasts, as in the case of ‘ancient’ and ‘royal’ Alexandria, respectively. In all cases, what is being (re)constructed is a utopia. Utopian are the titanic steel and glass structures dominating the Southeast Asian cityscapes; utopian are the Bibliotheca and the Pharos of Alexandria. But utopian are also the idealized cosmopolitanisms revived in former colonial ‘world cities’.

Through nostalgic revivals, postcolonial cities ‘claim’ their own longstanding cosmopolitan inheritance; they assert a historical continuity with a global past, and thus proclaim their own ‘right to be global’, to be ‘on the net’. No matter if the celebrated cosmopolitan past was a fruit of imperialism, and is in stark contrast with nationalistic discourses. After all, as Jacobs noted, ‘otherness is no longer a repressed negativity in the construction of the Self, but a required positivity which brings the Self close to, say, a multicultural present, or an ecological future’.¹⁶⁸ In the case of Alexandria, colonial ‘ghosts’ are not cast away, as at the moment of decolonization; they are welcomed, duly moulded and circulated on the global internet.

In Alexandria as in Casablanca or Saigon, nostalgia is not for the British or French empire. It is for a cosmopolitan ideal, for a utopian city that maybe never existed. In the past, colonial centres were conceived as places for experimentation,¹⁶⁹ as laboratories for the (Western) ‘ideal city’.¹⁷⁰ In an uncanny way, their memory often seems to have maintained this quality. The favourite period for the enactment of the rhetoric of nostalgia is the beginning of the twentieth century. It is in this not too distant past that many nostalgic films and memoirs are usually set. This period is also a target for urban revivals, inspired by a nostalgia ‘for the heroic architecture of the 1920s that claimed the ability to create a new urban world’.¹⁷¹ Covered by the patina of time, filled with ‘memorative signs’ and absences, saturated with nostalgic memories, Alexandria and other former cosmopolitan ports and world cities acquire an oneiric, almost unreal dimension, prone to both myth and postmodern pastiche. The result is a promiscuous geography in which ‘categories of self and other, here and there, past and present,

constantly solicit one another'.¹⁷² Once decadent buildings are restored, waterfronts revitalized, historic centres gentrified, the aura produced by the uncanny is lost – but not completely: cosmopolitan ghosts are cast out of the built environment, but not from the imagination of the 'pilgrim', of the prospective tourist, of the foreign investor. They have been chased from the once decrepit *okelles* to wander through the channels of global networks and geographical imaginations.¹⁷³

In this paper, through the narration of different responses to Alexandria's spatialized history, I have tried to show how different kinds of nostalgia (inter)act on both geographical imagination and physical landscape. Nostalgia is not an a priori concept confined to the realm of narrative and imagination. In Blunt's words, nostalgia is 'productive': it implies 'its embodiment and enactment in practice'.¹⁷⁴ Nostalgia is multi-faceted and changeable. Uncomfortable memories and feared ghosts can be (and are being) appropriated within the postcolonial scenario, through an often paradoxical 'rhetoric of nostalgia'; in the words of Jacobs and Gelder,

Colonial constructs not only belong to a past that is being worked against the present, but also to a past that is being nostalgically reworked and inventively adapted to the present. Just as postcolonial tendencies have always been produced by colonialism, so colonialist tendencies necessarily inhabit often optimistically designated postcolonial formations.¹⁷⁵

The Alexandria sought by the 'pilgrim' is the Alexandria of the past; and the Alexandria of the past, as revived by recent development projects, is also that of the future. Alexandria's identity is not fixed, but continuously negotiated, imagined and reimagined, shaped and reshaped. In this very tension between past and present, Egypt and Europe, imagination and reality, presence and absence, the ghost of Alexandria hardly abandons those who have known the city, those who have dreamt her, but especially 'those who have not thought her enough'.¹⁷⁶

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Notes

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- ⁷ L. Durrell, *Justine* (London, Penguins, 1956), p. 14.
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- ³⁷ *Ibid.*
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- ³⁹ See Starobinski, 'Nostalgia', pp. 88–89.
- ⁴⁰ Boym, *Future of nostalgia*, pp. xiii, xiv.
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- ⁴² Starobinski, 'Nostalgia', p. 93.
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- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.
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- ⁶⁹ A. Aciman, *Out of Egypt* (London, Harvill Press, 1996), p. 164.
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- ¹⁴¹ E.g. Stille, 'Alexandria'.
- ¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 92.
- ¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 99.
- ¹⁴⁴ Boym, p. 49.
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- ¹⁵³ H. Gabr, 'Historic revitalisation as a tool for tourist attraction: El-Salamlek Palace Hotel in Alexandria, Egypt', *Traditional dwelling and settlements: working papers* **117**, (1998), p. 25.
- ¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- ¹⁵⁵ Lowenthal, 'Landscape and memory', p. 26.
- ¹⁵⁶ The reconstruction of the library has been presented by the media as a moral issue. Going through the dozens of articles that appeared during the construction of the library, one tends to believe that the Bibliotheca had always been 'out there'; it only needed to be 'revived', to be brought back to light. The narrative and the rhetoric used in this issue would be more appropriate for the rescue of some endangered ancient remain, rather than for a total reconstruction of something we do not even know the shape of. Ironically enough, according to archaeologist Empereur, it seems that 'unfortunately, the Egyptians have no concept of salvage archaeology ... Egyptian authorities will call for excavation only when it is obvious that a major archaeological site is being damaged' (Stille, 'Alexandria', p. 99). Thus, the second-century B.C. Greek mosaic floors discovered by the French archaeologist in the site of the library during its very construction have not given to any enthusiasm in Egyptian project leaders (and executors). On the contrary, possible excavations have been seen as a potential obstacle for the construction of the new library, and 'now, ironically, the new library may be burying the ancient library once and for all' (*Ibid.*). In other words, it seems that the 'aura' produced by the myth of something that does not exist anymore (the ancient library), its only 'inherited' memory is more powerful (and worthy) than its tangible and valuable remains.
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- ¹⁶² For a definition of 'world city', see D. Clark, *Urban world/global city* (London, Routledge, 1996), p. 137; see also R. Bishop et al., 'Perpetuating cities: excepting globalization and the Southeast Asia complement', in Bishop et al., *Postcolonial urbanism*.
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