

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Eugene Fromentin. *Between Sea and Sahara: An Algerian Journal*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999. xxvii + 197 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8214-1272-5.

Reviewed by Kathryn L. Green (Independent Scholar)

Published on H-Africa (July, 2003)

Between Sea and Sahara is the first English translation of Eugene Fromentin's classic nineteenth-century travel book, *Une annee dans le Sahel*.^[1] Fromentin's work is representative of the so-called Orientalist school of art and literature. The translator gives good notes placing Fromentin's work in context and giving the reader literary and artistic precursors and contemporaries from whom Fromentin draws or to whom he alludes in his text (pp. 195-197). Literature is, of course, best studied in the original language. This translation by Blake Robinson is careful, though there is room for dispute on some of his translations. At base, it does allow the reader to capture the feel for the phrasing of Fromentin's French.^[2]

Une annee dans le Sahel, the French work, is translated literally as "A year in the Sahel." *Between Sea and Sahara: An Algerian Journal* is the translator's title for the work, so as to avoid geographical confusion. For Fromentin's era, "Sahel" meant the fertile area south of the Mediterranean coastal plain, rather than the marginal desert edge that the word, in association with the Sahara, generally means today (p. xv).^[3]

Fromentin was an Orientalist in two artistic media: painting and literature. He was "recognized, ... by his contemporaries, as the most remarkable landscape writer of his time."^[4] This translation is a welcome addition to anglophone materials on that nineteenth-century European artistic school that, according to most, had much to do with shaping a stereotyped and often false western view of North Africa and the so-called Middle East.^[5] Valerie Orlando, in her introduction, suggests that the French had a "love affair with ready-made stereotypes" (p. xvii). In support of her comment, the "Turquerie" she discusses (so in vogue in nineteenth-century Parisian high society) replaced the eighteenth-century fad of "Chinoiserie."^[6] However, the one criticism this reviewer has of the introduction to this translation and Fromentin's place in French Orientalism is Orlando's failure to place French Orientalism in the wider European (and American) context. A reading of her introduction

might lead the unwary reader to consider the French alone in the objectification and stereotyping of the region. This critique aside, Orlando does a fine job, in a few pages, of placing Fromentin's work squarely in the imperialist effort of France in Algeria at the time: it "served the imperializing agenda" (p. xviii) and "[b]oth his Algerian travelogues ... exhibit his ambition to be part of the politically expansionist climate of the times" (pp. xx-xxi). The fine line between literature and political rhetoric concerning the newly colonized lands demonstrates the influence authors like Fromentin had on the political climate. These authors gave confidence back to the public and assured them that his unknown world would not only lead to material wealth but also recreate the French man, thus fortifying the individual and, in turn, the nation (p. xxii).

This work cannot be taken as a historical primary source for Algeria, except as a primary source of Orientalism, a school of thought and art that was essentially a school of "translation." Orientalist writers and artists saw themselves as explaining or translating the "Orient," to the European public.^[7] But, as has been frequently noted, much of their subject matter was a product of their own imagination. Fromentin's work is replete with gems of (stereotypical) wisdom, such as, "[f]or us, to live means to change; for the Arabs, to exist is to endure" (p. 28).

For those studying the sub-Saharan African diaspora in North Africa there are glimpses of black Africans in the text, though they are not always illuminating. For example, black women for their part, just like black men, are beings apart. They stride the streets briskly, with assurance; they never falter beneath their loads and walk along with the aplomb characteristic of a people who have an easy manner, fluid motions, and hearts impervious to sadness. They have a well-developed bosom, a long waist, and enormous hips: nature destined them for their double function of nursing their children and being beasts of burden. "Daytime a donkey, nighttime a woman," as a local proverb has it, that could be applied

as well to Arab women as to black. Their carriage, which includes a sort of shifting about that is hard to describe, helps throw in relief the robust opulence of their shape, as do their *haïks* bordered in white and fluttering like bridal veils about their large immodest bodies (p. 20).[8]

The text is in need of more careful editing, as there are quite a few typographical and grammatical errors.[9]

Notes

[1]. *Between Sea and Sahara*, half fiction and half travelogue, is a synthesis of material collected in three trips Fromentin made to Algeria between 1846 and 1853. See the preface (p. xiii, n. 1) and introduction (pp. xxiii-xxiv).

[2]. A comparison of translations gives the readers of this review an idea of this translator's approach. Maryanne Stevens rendered a translation of a short section of *Une année dans le Sahel* to lead her article, "Western Art and Its Encounter with the Islamic World, 1798-1914," in *The Orientalists: Delacroix to Matisse: The allure of North Africa and the Near East* (London: Royal Academy of Arts and Weidenfeld and Nicolson, and Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1984), p. 15. "The question amounts to knowing whether the Orient yields to interpretation, to what extent it is open to this and, if to interpret it is not to destroy it.... The Orient is extraordinary.... It escapes convention, it lies outside all disciplines, it transposes, it inverts everything, it overturns the harmonies with which landscape painting has for centuries functioned. I do not talk here of a fictional Orient." *Une année dans le Sahel* (1858/1981), pp. 174-175, 177. Blake Robinson's translation of the same section is as follows: "The question boils down to knowing whether the Orient lends itself to being rendered, the degree to which this is admissible, and whether to interpret it isn't to destroy it.... [T]he Orient is extraordinary.... It eludes the conventions, it's outside any discipline; it transposes, it turns everything on its head; it upsets the harmonies that landscape has lived with for centuries. I'm not speaking here of a fictitious Orient" (pp. 145, 146).

[3]. "Sahil" in Arabic means shore, and in Africa is applied to the border area of both the Sahara (a sea of sand) and the ocean or Mediterranean Sea.

[4]. Anne-Marie Christin and Richard M. Berrong, "Space and Convention in Eugene Fromentin: The Algerian Experience," *New Literary History: Im-age/Imago/Imagination*, 15:3 (Spring 1984), p. 559.

[5]. Among the foremost of these critics see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979). The literature in support of or opposing Said's views is abundant. For only one example of the continuing influence of the stereotypes created by the Orientalist school, the *Catholic Encyclopedia* article on Fromentin states, "and yet there is something naturally impressive in the beauty of the Arab life and manners, in that nomadic, feudal, warlike existence, the majestic simplicity of the desert spaces, and the immutable tranquility of the Orient." <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06309a.htm> (accessed 03 February 2003).

[6]. "In the middle of the 18th century the enthusiasm for Chinese objects affected practically every decorative art applied to interiors, furniture, tapestries, and *bibelots* and supplied artisans with fanciful motifs of scenery, human figures, pagodas, intricate lattices, and exotic birds and flowers." *Columbia Encyclopedia*, 6th ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). <http://www.bartleby.com/65/ch/chinoise.html> (accessed 31 March 2003).

[7]. For Orientalism as translation, see William R. Polk and Amin Banani, "Islam and the West," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 6 (1975), p. 131.

[8]. See also chap. 3, entitled "Mustapha d'Alger," for comments on allegedly sub-Saharan African cultural traditions in Algeria.

[9]. For example, "Political Algiers is hard to put together again for its [sic] a Turkish phantom" (p. 21); "[n]o other civilized people has gone so far it [sic] that direction" (p. 45), and "[a]bout halfway up is the ice house were they're [sic] were some Maltese who supplied snow" (p. 187).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Kathryn L. Green. Review of Fromentin, Eugene, *Between Sea and Sahara: An Algerian Journal*. H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. July, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7887>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication,

originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.