

‘Now, Voyager’: a preface on the poetics of place¹

R. B. Parkinson

Are you for magic? I am. ... I am for magic. For dream.
For love.

Patrick White, *Shepherd on the rocks*, xiv
(1994, 229)

Approaching literary landscapes

This meditation acts as a preface for the following papers, just as it welcomed the conference participants to the opening of Current Research in Egyptology XVI at Oxford in April 2015. All of those present were fully aware that they were in Oxford, but the question remained, and remains, *which* Oxford were they actually visiting? There are many possible Oxfords: the teddy-bear-infested playground of Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead revisited*; the corpse-strewn locality of Inspector Morse; the snobbish city so fatally visited by Max Beerbohm’s *Zuleika Dobson*; the alternative world of Phillip Pullman’s Lyra and Asriel; or even simply the kitsch backgrounds for the Harry Potter films. There are many alternatives to the narrowly academic ‘Oxford’ that is named on the title page of the Griffith Institute’s publications. Questions of locality are often not as simple as one might assume, and the direct experience of Oxford during CRE may have varied from, and will certainly have interacted with, the participants’ own internal imaginings and the cultural representations to which they have been exposed.

Over the past half century, academics have become increasingly aware of the extent to which landscape is a cultural construct, and many subject areas have seen the rise of

¹ My thanks are due to the conference organisers for their kind invitation and impressive effectiveness. The paper retains its character as a light-hearted, oral and non-theorised entertainment before the welcome-drinks, and references have been kept to the barest minimum accordingly. A version of this paper was delivered in Florence at the 11th International Congress of Egyptologists in August 2015. The contents derive from an ongoing project to write a new commentary on *Sinuhe*; references to Middle Kingdom compositions follow the conventions of Parkinson 2012, 331–3. In several places I cite films, since the process of creating a film from a fictional work of literature in authentic locations also embodies the interpretative dialogue between the actual and the imaginary and offers parallel dilemmas to those of the textual commentator on poetic places. I am thankful to Katherine Hunt and Simon Smith for early modern advice, to Hisham el-Leithy and Heba Ibrahim for arranging a much appreciated trip to the Wadi el-Natrun in 2012, and to my husband Tim Reid for walking through various literary landscapes with me.

landscape history (e.g. Alexander and Cooper 2013; Prieto 2013), as exemplified by scholars such as the great Oliver Rackham (1939–2015; e.g. the classic account of 1986), and even extending to such approaches as Jeremy Mynott’s *Birdscapes* (2009); in intertextual terms, these often draw on a long English tradition of prose writing about landscape (e.g. Macfarlane 2013, 13–33). In Egyptology, there has been a turn to landscape studies with GIS (Geographic Information Science) projects providing a new vision of the changing historical landscape (e.g. Bunbury and Jeffreys 2011). Archaeologists have led the way with studies of phenomena such as desert roads (e.g. Förster and Riemer 2013), but philologists also should be aware of these factors, especially given that one classic example of such a shifting literary landscape is Alexandria—the city of the Ptolemies, but also subsequently of writers such as Constantine Cavafy (1833–1933), Edward Morgan Forster (1879–1970), and Laurence Durrell (1912–1990; e.g. Haag 2004).

The significance of locations can be highly contingent and intense. The Egyptian ‘marsh’ landscape is now largely lost to us by environmental changes, but was once highly charged with value and meanings, being celebrated in both visual art and Middle Egyptian poetry such as the courtly *Pleasures of fishing and fowling* and *The sporting king* (e.g. Parkinson 2002, 226–32, 311–2). To take a more directly accessible example of a highly valorised landscape, CRE XVI took place in England in the month of April. So much has been written about the English spring landscape that the reactions of a reader of English literature are somewhat restricted if he/she lacks direct experience of what this spring involves (I think here of my father-in-law as an Australian school-boy puzzled by English literary landscapes). Here is a passage from an early 20th century novel:

The hedge was a half-painted picture which would be finished in a few days. Celandines grew on its banks, lords and ladies and primroses in the defended hollows; the wild rose-bushes, still bearing their withered hips, showed also the promise of blossom. Spring had come, clad in no classical garb, yet fairer than all springs; fairer even than she who walks through the myrtles of Tuscany with the graces before her and the zephyr behind. (Forster 1973, 266)

To understand this text in any full sense, we need not only to identify the flowers lexicographically and botanically but also to identify the allusion to Botticelli's *Primavera* (c.1482). Beyond these allusions, however, are the physical glories of the Tuscan spring, which are implicitly contrasted (ironically and anti-heroically) with the actuality of the uncertain early phases of the season in Hertfordshire. The passage creates its meaning in multiple and mixed ways—not only through a reader's awareness of the lexicography and cultural allusions, but also through his/her direct experience of the season and flowers that are mentioned. In a similar manner, how can one fully understand—or feel—the cultural weight of an Indian rainy season raga, such as *rag Megh*, without knowing a little of what the rainy season means in India? What variations and emotions that the ancient texts contained for their original readers have now been lost to us?

Topography is not only a matter of fact, and even simple toponyms can be deceptive. As a preface to the academic papers that follow, I here (playfully) suggest some ways in which travel and locality can be more ambiguously poetic than is often assumed, in line with the turn to a more embedded, visceral 'Material Philology' that has been advocated elsewhere (Parkinson 2009). I discuss a few examples which I hope will throw some indirect light on three famous Middle Kingdom poetic travellers, the eloquent peasant, Sinuhe, and the shipwrecked sailor. These 12th dynasty fictional figures travel to some 'real' locations. One of the most discussed of these is the pyramid where Sinuhe is buried in the royal enclosure of Senwosret I at el-Lisht (B 300–1). This location is demonstrably actual, since the pyramid enclosure was excavated in the early 20th century (Arnold 1992, esp. 34). Gerald Moers, however, has argued that Sinuhe's burial in one of these actual pyramids is a consciously fictionalised act, contradicting known or expected reality for the original audiences (2001, 42–4, 79–105; see Parkinson 2009, 244–5). Sinuhe's fictional burial in an actual place provides the poem with an impossibly happy ending—a courtier buried as a royal prince—

and its unlikeliness is integral to its role as an ending. The meaning is arguably created by the dialogue between the actual and the imaginary, and the later textual history of the poem may in part embody this tension (as suggested by Parkinson 2009, 185). One can speculate whether the unknown author(s) of the poem had ever visited the actual pyramid complex, or cited it only from viewing it from nearby Itj-tawi or from repute? It is of course impossible to know and probably irrelevant; it seems that the Theban scribe of the 12th dynasty manuscript of the poem was probably less concerned with factual precisions than with reading impressionistically (Parkinson 2009, 113–9). The same may also be true of the poem's representation of foreign localities such as Retjenu. Although this is a location attested in contemporaneous 'historical' inscriptions, it remains uncertain how the original audiences were intended to assess the poem's account of the Bronze Age Levant (e.g. Hinson 2014). They may have recognised the account as referring to a historical reality, albeit ideologically reshaped, but the representation could also have been more complex, mediated, subtle, and fuzzy than modern historians might wish (e.g. Parkinson 2002, 87–91).

English and Italian places

I outline three cases from comparatively recent English literature, partly because they are familiar to me at first hand. With modern works it is comparatively easy to document the context and the author's intentions, and so they can serve as a reminder of the possibilities of complexity that we should envisage for ancient texts if we are to produce a methodologically plausible analysis. However, I also intend it as a reminder that Egyptology can look outside its own specialism, despite our increasing insistence on our own professionalism and scientificity.

First is an actual place that is transfigured by emotional resonance in literature. In E. M. Forster's *Howards End* of 1910, there are several journeys to a house that 'carries as great

a structural load of values as any house in fiction' (Stallybrass in Forster 1973, vii). This semi-mystical place is modelled on the Forster's childhood home, Rooksnest, on the outskirts of Stevenage (fig. 1).

Insert IMAGE 1 here.

Figure 1. Rooksnest/Howards End in 2013. © R. B. Parkinson

It is a surprisingly normal red-brick dwelling, and is still a family home, although the landscape is increasingly threatened by urbanisation (Ashby 1991; photograph: 1991, 17; Friends of the Forster Country 2015)—so much so the Merchant Ivory film of 1992 had to use another location in Rotherfield Peppard, Oxfordshire, in order to evoke the unspoiled landscape of 'the house and the tree that leans over it' (Forster 1973, 311).² A visit to the actual house and garden in Stevenage reveals how precise the physical correspondences between the original and the fictionalised house are. The author's emphasis on certain aspects of the building (such as the small rooms) make immediate sense, and the atmosphere is palpable to a visiting reader: here Leonard Bast fell, here Mrs Wilcox walked with her wisp of hay. But who among future readers would realise that the symbolic house was an actual building without knowing the context? Who among future archaeologists would feel any of the intense significance of the actual building without knowing the fictional text? Fact and fiction are hopelessly interwoven here, and literary emotion effects an apotheosis of topography.

Second is an example of the complicated tricks texts that can work on readers; again, I cite Forster, but this time *A room with a view*, published in 1908. The novel's Italian locations are (on the whole) accurately mentioned and are easy to chart with the notes by

² The surrounding landscape now has electricity pylons, and the tree has been felled, apparently in the interwar years (noted by Stallybrass in Forster 1973, viii), although the historian Margaret Ashby had the impression from the house's then owner, Elizabeth Poston, that the tree became unsafe and had to be felled only after Poston was the sole owner, i.e. in the 1960s (Ashby 1991, 17; pers. comm. 2014). On the Merchant Ivory film, see e.g. Pym 1995, 91–2.

Oliver Stallybrass in the Abinger edition of the novel (1977). The Florentine sights mentioned in this novel of social comedy were familiar to many of the intended readers, and presumably had to be cited realistically in order to create a sense of familiarity and recognition. The famous hillside near Fiesole in chapter 6 (Forster 1977, 58–68) appears to have been actual, and can still be located as being off the Fiesole road to Settignano, slightly above the Castello di Vincigliata, although the ‘bare’ hillside of the 1908 novel is now cultivated with olives (Stallybrass note to p. 64: Forster 1977, 230). This hill and the valley below are the (characteristically authentic) locations in the Merchant Ivory film of 1987, shot partly on the estate of the Villa Maiano (Merchant 1994, 16–9). Forster’s fictional characters visited the hillside because, as the Rev. Cuthbert Eager says:

‘The view thence of Florence is most beautiful—far better than the hackneyed view of Fiesole. It is the view that Alessio Baldovinetti is fond of introducing into his pictures. That man had a decided feeling for landscape. Decidedly. But who looks at it to-day? Ah, the world is too much for us’. (1977, 49–50)

Indeed it is. The painter is real—he is Alesso/Alessio Baldovinetti (1425–1499)—but his surviving paintings apparently lack any such views (Stallybrass note to p. 64: Forster 1977, 230), although the view of Florence from the actual hillside is indeed ‘most beautiful’ (fig. 2).

Insert IMAGE 2 here.

Figure 2. The actual view of the city in 2013 from the hillside near Fiesole visited in chapter 6. © R. B. Parkinson.

This discrepancy is just possibly a mistake by the author for Benozzo Gozzoli (as suggested by Harold Acton; see Stallybrass note to p. 64: Forster 1977, 230), or a conscious ‘wilful’ confusion (Stallybrass note to p. 64: Forster 1977, 230). It is, however, arguably more complex, since another view existed in an earlier draft of the novel, where a pretentious young man says that he has visited ‘one of those hills beyond Bagno a Ripoli, and to my astonishment I had the very view of the Arno valley that Alesio [sic] Baldovinetti introduces

into his pictures' (Forster 1977a, 31).³ Later in the same conversation, the young man remarks that 'the view occurs in the undoubted Alesio [sic] in the Annunziata' (1977a, 32), which refers to the actual view of a city in a valley in Baldovinetti's nativity fresco of 1460–1462 in the Chiostrino dei Voti in SS. Annunziata in Florence (fig. 3).⁴ In the published novel, the author has moved an actual hill with the actual view across the valley to a new (and actual) location in Fiesole, but has also transposed Baldovinetti's painted view to a new location in which it is no longer recognisable and no longer actual.

Insert IMAGE 3 here.

Figure 3. 'The undoubted Alesio in the Annunziata' with a damaged view of a city in a valley to the left. © R. B. Parkinson]

The surviving drafts and sketches of this novel document a transformation within the text's composition, and the author apparently retained his original (actual) view of the city for its metaphorical meaning, even though its literal accuracy became irrelevant as the text evolved, producing a discrepancy that was of course very appropriate for a novel about travellers' pretensions. Such subtleties and complexities are not necessarily phenomena that are restricted to modern literature.

Third is an example of how modern readers can be deceived by fictionality:

'Shakespeare Cliff' near Dover. This toponym features on the Ordnance Survey, and was in place by at least the early 19th century (as in a print after Samuel Owen, 'Shakespeare Cliff Dover' of 1816: Tate 2015). The name derives from the scenes in the (fictional) *Tragedy of King Lear*, where the doomed king's enemies and allies gather at Dover to face a French rescue mission. The blinded Gloucester wants to be taken to a specific 'Cliffe, whose high and bending head: / Lookes fearfully in the confined Deepe' ([Folio text] IV.i l. 67–8). This

³ In this draft of the novel, there were multiple excursions: the characters apparently intended to visit Bagno a Ripoli (Forster 1977a, 55), and an excursion to Fiesole was intended to feature in a planned but unwritten episode (Forster 1977a, 4).

⁴ The implications of this are un-noted by Stallybrass. The actual fresco is badly damaged, which perhaps accounts for the subsequent comment 'And a fright it is' (Forster 1977a, 32).

could very well be referring to an actual cliff near Dover. His son then tells him that he has taken him to the cliff edge, and he famously describes the cliff to his father ([Folio text] IV.v l. 11–24), so as to trick him into believing that he is throwing himself off the top of ‘this Chalkie Bourne’ ([Folio text] IV.v l. 57); in this way the blinded Gloucester’s suicide attempt is rendered harmless. For the original audiences, the vividly described cliff was part of a flat stage, although the scene significantly—and painfully—plays with the ambiguities of early modern stage conventions (e.g. Kott 1967, 112–6; Nuttall 2001, 98–100). The described cliff is confirmed in the play to be fictional and non-existent; nevertheless, imagination has worked not only on Gloucester but also on modern audiences—not so as to evoke a sense of deeply felt agony, but so that they have identified this improvised cliff from the fictionalising description and named it on maps. An ambivalent emotionally charged fictional evocation of a cliff has become an unequivocally actual locality (fig. 4).

Insert IMAGE 4 here.

Figure 4. ‘Shakespeare Cliff’ looking towards Dover port in 2011. © R. B. Parkinson

Two Middle Kingdom journeys

A close ancient parallel to the modern reception of Shakespeare’s Dover cliff is the ‘island of the ka’ in *The shipwrecked sailor*. In this fictional expedition report about an exotic locale ‘in a far land, unknown to mankind’ (l. 148), a paradisaic island is inhabited by a divine serpent and will vanish (l. 154–5). Gerald Averay Wainwright proposed that the island could be identified with the barren, serpent-less Zeberged or St John’s Island, described by Strabo and Pliny, off the shore from the ancient port of Berenike in the stormy Foul Bay (Wainwright 1946). Ancient accounts of an actual island, once infested with serpents, in the Red Sea could conceivably have fed into the poem in some way, like the list of actual exotic imports that are mentioned as the produce of the fantastic island (l. 162–5). It seems difficult, however, to

identify the poetic and actual islands directly, given that the island of St John is (rather awkwardly) still there, contradicting the serpent's prophecy that 'you will never see this island again, which will have become water' (l. 154–5; see, however, Allen 2015, 42). The fictional report does feature actual islands in the opening verses, where the narrator says that they have passed the cataract island of Biggah and have just moored at home, presumably at Elephantine (l. 9–11). This ambivalent complex relationship with actuality should not surprise us: there is stylish wordplay with the word *ḥnw* as the 'interior' of the island, the distant 'Residence', and 'home' (e.g. in l. 172–5), producing a dialogue of places in a shifting world that destabilises the audience's sense of location. The interplay between the actual and the imaginary is an integral part of the poem, in which even a remote fantastic island becomes uncomfortably familiar, since the loss and grief experienced there gradually suggest that it is a metaphor for the audience's own cosmos (e.g. Parkinson 2002, 188–9). As often, instead of dealing with a binary opposition of fact and fiction, readers find themselves inhabiting the uneasy ground of what Ahdaf Soueif would call the *mezzaterra* (2004). Imaginative literature rarely offers a simple 'altogether elsewhere' (in W. H. Auden's phrase from 'The Fall of Rome': 1991, 333). Where exactly, for example, is Sinuhe's 'real' life located: in Upper Retjenu or at home in Itj-tawi? At the end of that poem, external geography is less important than subjective closeness to the king, and the physical location is meaningless compared to a psychological sense of belonging:

Whether I am at home,
whether I am in this place—
it is you who veils this horizon of mine. (B1 232–3)

Sinuhe's flight to the Levant has been much discussed (e.g. Goedicke 1957; Hinson 2012). Traditionally, the emphasis has been on an assumed referential topographical reality; I focus instead on the process of experiencing the poem. The journey is precisely narrated both in terms of motivation and topography by the fugitive narrator, and this level of detail

(whether real or imagined) has various effects on the audience. It creates a sense of an actual lived event; it also increases, through contrast, the audience's sense that the moment of panic that caused this carefully executed flight is beyond rationalisation. In a similar manner, the irrational panic itself is described in precise medical-like terminology, as Hans-Werner Fischer-Elfert has noted (2013). The narration of the journey is arguably patterned on multiple levels: that of real geography that embeds the narrative in a known world, but also that of the psychological state of the fictional hero. He moves in a manner intended to conceal his flight through a sequence of locations whose significant names suggest that they are intended to evoke more than physical locality alone. The itinerary is thus perhaps simultaneously outer and inner, real and metaphorical, actual and imaginary, and it is hard to disentangle these various aspects, partly due to our fragmentary knowledge, but also due to the complex nature of the narration itself.

The stanza of his flight across the Nile valley reads, in the version preserved in 12th dynasty Berlin papyrus (B 5–13; fig. 5),

Insert IMAGE 5 here.

Figure 5. P. Berlin P 3022, with the narration of Sinuhe's flight (B 1–18). © Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin; photographer: Lisa Baylis, The British Museum]

*jrt=j-⁶šmt m-hnty
n-k³=(j)-spr r-hnw-⁷pn hmt.n=j-hpr-h³cyt
n-d⁴d=j-cnh r-s³=f
⁸nmj.n=j-m³tj m-h³w-nht
⁹sm³.n=j m-jw-snfrw
wrš.n=j <jm> m-c⁴d n-¹⁰sh
hd.n=j wn-hrw
hp.n=j-s(j) c⁴h^c ¹¹m-r³-w^ct=(j)
tr.n=f-wj snd.n=f
hpr.n-¹²tr n-msyt
s³h.n=j r-dmj n¹³-[ng]w*

I made ⁶my way southwards.

(I) did not plan to reach this ⁷Residence, expecting strife would happen;

I did not think to live after him (the dead king).

⁸I crossed Maaty in the region of the Sycomore.

⁹I came to the Island of Sneferu.
I passed a day <there> on the edge of ¹⁰a field.
When it was day again, I made an early start.
I met a man standing ¹¹in (my) way.
He saluted me, and was afraid.
When it was ¹²supper-time,
I had arrived at ¹³[Wild]-bull Harbour.

The first place name, Maaty (B 8), is highly resonant, and with this toponym, the poet signals that this flight is potentially symbolic (there is no reason to take the word as *šwtj*, designating the pyramids at Giza, as Goedicke 1957, 82–4). From the determinative showing a body of water (Sign N47), Maaty could be a pool, similar to ‘lake of Truth (*š n-m³t*)’ in *The eloquent peasant* B1 85–6. That is an obviously metaphorical pool, but it also alludes to an apparently actual sacred lake in the temple at Herakleopolis, called Maat (*m³t*), suggesting an interplay of the metaphorical and the actual (Parkinson 2012, 70–1). The scribe of the 12th dynasty manuscript of *Sinuhe* added a man determinative (Sign A1) to the toponym, perhaps by confusion with *m³ty* ‘just man’, which suggests that he was fully aware of the symbolic overtones as he copied. Was such a meaningfully named place an actual body of water, and how was the audience meant to react to it? Attempts to locate Maaty in known topography have reached various conclusions. There is later evidence for a place or settlement in the neighbourhood of Giza named *m³ty* or *m³t* (Zivie 1976, 239–40 [NE 92]; 301; Gomaà 1987, 57, n. 10–1) and perhaps even a canal (Gomaà 1987, 57, n. 12). Sedimental evidence shows that in the Middle Kingdom there were two branches of the Nile in the valley north of Memphis, suggesting to Judith Bunbury and David Jeffreys that ‘Maaty’ here could designate the shallow fordable western branch, located close to the modern Bahr Libeini, which *Sinuhe* must have negotiated before crossing the main branch in B 13–4 (Bunbury and Jeffreys 2011, 69–71). This is highly plausible, but not fully verifiable, and Maaty could also have been a smaller stretch of water or a pool. Regardless of these uncertainties, I wonder how far any actual location mattered to the original audiences beyond the resonance of the name. Any full

topographical data was not necessarily accessible to all the poem's original audiences as it had been to the poem's creator(s): even assuming Maaty was a real place, would an audience in Elephantine have recognised it as such or been able to locate it very precisely?

A consideration of the experience of reading these verses suggests that the now unverifiable exact location of Maaty is not entirely essential in itself for any reading, ancient or modern. The poet immediately elaborates the toponym with the clarifying phrase 'in the region of the Sycomore'. Surviving evidence suggests that this sycomore was an actual and well-known place (see discussion of Gomaà 1987, 57–8; Baum 1988, 25, n. 29 on related toponyms). The 12th dynasty scribe's house determinative (Sign O1) in B 8 suggests that he was thinking of a building—i.e. a sanctuary of a sacred tree—and not just a prominent *ficus sycomorus*, such as was referred to as a landmark by 19th century visitors to the west bank at Luxor (e.g. Wilkinson 1943, II, 134). At Giza there was a cult of Hathor, 'the Lady of the Sycomore' (e.g. Leitz 2002, IV, 79–81), and the description of the sphinx on the 26th dynasty 'Inventory Stela' of Kheops' daughter at Giza mentions the 'mound of the Sycomore (*jʿt-nht*)' being struck by lightning (l. 5: Jansen-Winkel 2014, 765). In the mid-20th century, Selim Hassan even noted a sycomore 'of immense age, still flourishing a little to the south of the sphinx' (1949, 226), which may be visible in an aerial photograph showing 'the Pyramids of Gizeh near Cairo from an altitude of approx. 600m, 21 February 1904' by Eduard Spelterini (Harpers 2013). This phrase describing Maaty as being near the well-known sycomore at Giza might have indicated to the audience which part of the extensive Nile branch Sinuhe crossed, or it might have indicated the location of a little-known (or even fictional) place, which would otherwise have been unknown to them (as is perhaps the case with the similarly qualified toponym 'Estate of Fefi' in *The eloquent peasant* B1 17–8, e.g. Parkinson 2012, 36–7). The fact that the Sycomore was an actual place does not negate its literary resonance or its emotional impact on the audience. These verses describe more than physical movement: in

terms of the audience's experiential reality, the evocative toponym Maaty leads into the equally evocative 'sycomore', the tree that gives the protagonist his name 'Sycomore's son'. This name is both intensely meaningful in characterising the fictional protagonist and is also an actual, historically attested personal name of the period (e.g. P. UCL 32163 l. 19: Collier and Quirke 2004, 110–1), so it too is in a sense simultaneously imaginary and actual. This pairing of two resonant place-names creates a sense of an Egyptian who is abandoning his true cultural identity: Sinuhe flees past locations that evoke Truth and his own identity.

The next named location, the 'Island of Sneferu' (B 9), is almost certainly not a fictional place, since the same phrase is attested as an official toponym among the personified estates on the north wall of the mastaba of the 5th dynasty official Seshemnefer III at Saqqara (Junker 1938, 209, pl. 4; PM I², 154 [4]), without any indication of its location (Zibelius 1978, 32–3; Gomaà 1987, 58–9; I see no reason to take the 'Island of Sneferu' as a colloquial term, as Hinson 2012, 66–8). The name indicates that it is a *gezira* in the river valley, and also associates it with Sneferu's funerary complex at Dahshur, although it need not point to it being located there. Regardless of whether anyone in the 12th dynasty would have known where the agricultural estate had been or still was, the name evokes a king with positive overtones in other Middle Egyptian poems (e.g. Parkinson 2002, 182–5; 194–5), suggesting that another good is being abandoned. The resonant association with the good old king does not negate any possible actuality—like Rooksnest and Howards End, the different aspects interact to create meaning and are not mutually exclusive. The various locations create an impression of a precise and emotionally charged itinerary in which Sinuhe, having come down from the desert close to Giza, crosses to a *gezira*, abandoning his identity and home. Through specific and in part actual verifiable details, topography is fused with meaning and emotion.

After hiding as much as possible and with only partial success (B 9–11), Sinuhe finally arrives at dusk to ‘*dmj n-ngʒw*’ (B 12–3; on the significance of nightfall here, see e.g. Parkinson 2002, 154–5). This phrase could be the name of an inhabited settlement named ‘Wild-bull Harbour’ (either actual or imaginary), or ‘a wild-bull harbour’ designating an uninhabited area of the riving bank used for crossing *ngʒw*-cattle (Goedicke 1957, 80), which would have been suitable for a fugitive to attempt to cross the Nile unnoticed in the evening. The 12th dynasty B-scribe opted for a town determinative (Sign O49), suggesting that he understood it as a toponym, ‘Wild-bull Harbour’, while the 13th dynasty R-scribe omitted any determinative, suggesting that he understood the phrase as ‘a wild-bull harbour’ (see Gomaà 1987, 59–60), although this omission may have been affected by a line break just after the phrase (at the end of R 37). The choice of phrase is thematically appropriate, given that the poem later includes imagery of bulls (e.g. *ngʒw* in B 120). There may even be an allusion to the locality as ‘an abandoned harbour’ (Green 1984, 27–8); although this is unlikely to be the primary meaning, given the orthography, it does add to the sense of alienation in this stanza. These dilemmas for the reader indicate the extent to which interpretation is inherently contingent, and these are not due to just modern ignorance: the ancient scribes felt them too, and perhaps even the poets.

Regardless of whether the cattle quay was a specific and actual locality that the audience was expected to recognise, it is now not locatable. Once again, the audience can deduce enough about the location from the words of the text and they need not refer to any external known topographical reality to understand the passage. The word ‘harbour’ indicates that Sinuhe has reached the Nile, and the following verses narrate how he passes ‘east of the quarry, [above the Lady] of the Red Mountain’ (B 14–5), referring to the well-known actual ‘Red Mountain’, still known in Arabic as Gebel Ahmar (see e.g. Klemm and Klemm 2008, 216–9), east of modern Cairo. This location is presented to the audience in such a way that it

is associated with its 'Lady', Hathor, the hero's patroness, who is also evoked by the Sycomore (e.g. Zivie 1978, 151). Once again, the sequence of locations implies that Sinuhe is moving secretly, passing beside the mountain's quarries (B 14–5) and avoiding the populated agricultural land of the valley, as he abandons his home. It is consistently presented as an emotionally charged landscape.

The subsequent verses will pose further interpretative dilemmas for modern readers: presumably the 'Walls of the Ruler' (B 17) and 'Petén' (B 20) were actual locations, but we lack any conclusive historical or archaeological confirmation (e.g. Gomaà 1987, 129–30), and doubts have been raised about the real-world referentiality of the former (Stauder 2013, 340–2). There is, ironically, no escape from indeterminacy or uncertainty for us as well as for Sinuhe.

Readers in the landscape

How then do we travel as modern scholars through these poetic locations, and how do we deal with this dilemma in pragmatic terms? Modern readers cannot access fully the psycho-geography of ancient Egypt, but by gathering up surviving parallels, we can intuit some of the rules of the game, gaining a sense of what the range of different attestations of a toponym might imply, regardless of whether it is actual or imaginary. In this way we can try to reconstruct the resonances of a location, such as 'the Sycomore', drawing on the cultural significance of this sanctuary, its actual environment, and the tree in general (e.g. Baum 1988, 18–87). A consideration of the experiential reality of reading avoids any exclusive focus on the problematic binary dichotomy of 'actual' versus 'imaginary'. When a place in a poem is demonstrably an actual one, however, this academic strategy is not the only option. If we ourselves set foot in the reality of the known places wherever we can—as with Rooksnest, Fiesole, or Dover—we can perhaps get a better grasp of their possible meanings and

resonances in a text. In an academic study on *The eloquent peasant*, it is easy to note from maps that the Wadi el-Natron is remote, and that the location characterises the peasant who comes from there as a marginal figure (e.g. Parkinson 2012, 24–5). There is no philological or scientific need to visit the Wadi in order to understand this, but if one does visit it, the matter seems clearer—not only its relative remoteness, but also the sheer strangeness of its landscape that sets it apart from the rest of Egypt (fig. 6).

Insert IMAGE 6 Here.

Figure 6. Salt and reeds in the Wadi el-Natron in 2012. © R. B. Parkinson

On location, one can feel with immediacy something of the resonance that the place could have had in the minds of the ancient poet and his audiences (Parkinson 2012, xi). As Marguerite Yourcenar noted in *En pèlerin et en étranger*,

le déplacement dans le temps n'est souvent jamais mieux obtenu que par le déplacement dans l'espace . . . qui descend les escaliers souterrains de Mycènes plonge au puits des siècles. (1991, 532)

On a purely personal note, I must admit that I am very happy to have gathered reeds and salt in the Wadi as I did in 2012 (Parkinson 2012, xi), just as I am to have walked through the landscapes of Fiesole, Dover, and Rooksnest. My own memories of a disrupted journey back to Cairo from the Wadi with Tim Reid and Heba Ibrahim add to these personal resonances as I now (re-)read the ancient poem: our group of three modern fellow-travellers was not delayed by a villainous Nemtinakht armed with sheets, but by a puncture from which we were rescued by two young farmers and their tractor (fig. 7). These memories shape my reactions to the ancient toponym.

Insert IMAGE 7 Here.

Figure 7. A disrupted journey from the Wadi el-Natron to Egypt in 2012. © R. B. Parkinson.

All of this is irrelevant to philological science, and the memories only concern the feelings of an individual person reading the poem. But that is arguably what the experiential reality of a poem is all about.

Such direct experience can provide us with a ‘touch of the real’ (e.g. Greenblatt and Gallagher 2000, 20–48) that can allow us to sense a little of how places might have shaped the reactions of a poem’s original audiences. In these poems, the peasant’s wadi or the sailor’s mention of Biggah were—and still are—not simply toponyms, as they might well be in another less imaginative type of text such as an Onomasticon, whether the 13th dynasty Ramesseum Onomasticon or a modern academic commentary (Gardiner 1947, II, 1–2* [A 314], III, pl. 2–2a [R 183]). Instead, these were place-names that had a visceral emotional impact through their cultural resonances, which we as modern readers should attempt in part to reconstruct and feel. Even when a toponym is simply an illustrative image, such as Dante’s comparison of the frozen giants in the final circle of hell with the towered town of Montereccione (*Inferno* XXXI, 40–1: Singleton 1989, I, 328–9; II, 567, pl. 7), it is not generic, but a specific particular place chosen to create a particular reaction. A toponym in a poetic text is never ‘only the name’, to use a phrase from Edward Thomas’s famous poem about ‘Adlestrop’ in Oxfordshire (l. 8: 1981, 24–5). Outer geography shapes and is shaped by the inner world, and the travels that were experienced by ancient authors and readers inevitably move between these spheres—alarming, confusingly, wonderfully.

I conclude by making two further general observations. Any actual visit to a place in Egypt reminds us that, whether interior or external, these places were living landscapes for the poems’ original audiences, just as the landscape is now. It has been easy for academics to forget this immediacy, and to overlook what Philippe Derchain termed ‘une Egypte qui n’est pas dans les livres savants’ (1996, [1]). Direct experience of a physical environment can bring us a little closer to the experiential reality of even a distant, fictional poem. From this, I

would suggest that in some ways the real issue of travel for modern Egyptologists is how we can travel ourselves, in terms of both imagination and actuality, beyond our own (often highly restrictive) institutional and intellectual frames. Such a journey will perhaps take us like the shipwrecked sailor to a place that we cannot entirely define, as we try to find a strategy with which to imagine the experiences of an ancient culture. What else (in some sense) are these Middle Kingdom poems but *vade mecums*, urging their audiences onwards to imagine experiences elsewhere? Such aspirations are of course ultimately impossible, but we should not be deterred from undertaking intellectual journeys just because they are difficult, endless, or impossible. Rather, as Walt Whitman exhorted us in the short poem of 1891–1892 (2008, 379) that gave me my title:

The untold want, by life and land ne'er granted,
Now, Voyager, sail thou forth, to seek and find.

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