In speaking of Eugène Fromentin’s painterly skill, contemporary critics consistently invoke the artist’s noble and distinguished character. Moreover, an important extrapolation follows the comment: from his elevated disposition springs his grand artistic ambition. Whatever Fromentin’s own aspirations, his critics would have him consumed with an effort to reach the generic apex of history painting. Comment by Alexandre Dumas offers a first example. Always a great admirer of Fromentin, Dumas placed the artist both morally and artistically above his colleagues when he wrote that: “among those who represent the Orient at the Salon [he is] the most true, the most refined and above all the most distinguished…to the highest degree”. Critics who saw in Fromentin such natural nobility sought to coax an elevated ambition out of his artwork. Paul Mantz commented that “M. Fromentin has always set his sights high; he seeks the elegance…of the most grand ensembles”. Again, Fromentin’s artistic identity is predicated on his personal character.

Emmanuel Mickel is apt to note in 1981 that “one of the outstanding characteristics mentioned by most who knew Fromentin well was his aristocratic bearing…his sense of good taste”. Even Barbara Wright, who so carefully extricated Fromentin’s artistic legacy from scholarly neglect, seems to agree that Fromentin had an innate disposition which was reflected in his ambition of history painting which draughtsmanship alone kept him from attaining. But this reading, though in ways compelling, may be somewhat simplistic. While Fromentin’s own commentary certainly reveals both a reverence for the grand ideals of history painting, and a lament over its increasing demise at the hands of genre painting, his grand conception would be applied
directly to the landscape, which was invariably his pursuit. The Oriental landscape had activated his imagination even while it demanded precise study in execution. It was in the desert landscape that Fromentin found the greatest impetus for renewal. It is in two painted versions of *Au Pays de la Soif*, that the tension between figure and landscape, and naturalism and imagination are most effectively resolved.

Certainly, Fromentin had an ambitious vision which he sought to reproduce on the canvas. Imagination, or the capacity of intuiting more than was visually and empirically available, was central to his conception of art. It served to differentiate artist from artisan, and sketch from polished painting. The great artist should not concern himself with burdensome detail, but rather, he must correct his lived observation into works of art which bear the stamp of his prophetic vision. Even as he was first negotiating the brush and palette in 1841, Fromentin was preoccupied with his own deficiency of imagination. He wrote: “I have no power of invention…I do not have the imagination and the fancy which are worth more than memory”. Yet memory, the artist did have, and he would cultivate this faculty as a repository of visual experience that would supplement imagination. For Fromentin, memory was “an admirable optical instrument”. He described the artistic process as follows: “in passing though the memory, truth becomes a poem, the landscape a painting. However large or beautiful reality may be…memory ends by surpassing it”.

Fromentin was not alone on this count. In his review of the 1859 salon, Charles Baudelaire derides the “cult…of nature…which is not expanded by imagination”. Notably, it was around this same time that so many critics saw Fromentin’s personal style crystallized through the liberation of imagination. Charles Clément wrote that “the light
was turned on… [Fromentin] reproduces less loyally what he sees”. From this moment, Fromentin’s critics would tirelessly inscribe imaginative symbolism into the artist’s physical and spiritual being.

During his first trip to Algeria in 1846, Fromentin’s “predominant mood was one of visual ecstasy”. He was most intrigued by the dazzling and artistically ever-evasive light of the sun. Of his travel through the Sahara desert in 1853 he wrote “I cannot stop dreaming of the light…I have no night”. The artist’s “vivacious love of the sun”, as Théophile Gautier described it, is often transmuted by his critics into an internal and imaginative light. Gautier grafts Fromentin’s preoccupation with light effects onto the artist’s body: Fromentin has “a face which is marked by an eternal stroke of sun…his eye is illuminated”.

It is perhaps no accident that Louis Gonse characterized Fromentin by the same metaphor of inner luminosity. In his 1881 biography of the artist, the critic described Fromentin’s “internal fever of the soul…[and] the constantly illuminated torch of his being”. Not only does Gonse relate this light to painterly passion or imagination, but he suggests, like Gautier, that this internal brilliance was in fact a result of the exposure to the Orient: “he seemed to have kept the incandescent reflection of the Southern Sun”. The light of the Oriental landscape had activated Fromentin’s imagination and come to define his oeuvre as much as his identity.

Yet unbridled imagination was not itself a virtue. In his Salon of 1859 Baudelaire tempers his admiration for imagination with a note that it must be possessed in equal proportion to skill: “the more one possesses imagination, the better one must possess the technique to accompany the former in its adventures”. This was Fromentin’s greatest
challenge: to balance his admitted deficiency of technical aptitude and with imaginative impulse. A consideration of the relationship between figure and landscape and its own rapport to the hierarchy of genre will prove revelatory.

When Fromentin first apprehensively began to paint, he seemed to have eyes only for the countryside. His first landscapes, such as *Olive Forest at Blidah* of 1846, are what Christine Peltre has called “scrupulously descriptive”. In the simply rendered near-monochrome landscape, tall willowy trees rise in slender silhouettes above a distant plain. Fromentin wrote of the work: “it is a precise portrait of part of the olive forest at Blidah. The forest…composed of century-old olive and ash trees, is famous in the military history of the conquest”.\(^{16}\) The tiny figures, barely visible, serve more to show scale of the personified trees than populate the landscape. Wright has noted that “Fromentin, like most landscapists in the 1840s, had used figures merely as stuffage”.\(^{17}\)

But it would soon become evident that this balance was in dire need of reweighting. Fromentin had come to the career of artist late, and he had received only limited training. Gonse commented on this formative absence: “for the drawing of the human figure, in contrast [to the landscape]…long, rigorous, and patient…study is required”. Worse, this “grammatical weakness” could not be corrected by…imagination.\(^{18}\) The artist was continuously plagued by this deficiency; he would often be reprimanded by critics for this ineptitude and his consequent subordination of the figure to the landscape. But Fromentin was determined to improve.

Notwithstanding his declared appreciation for imagination and dislike of detail, Fromentin would struggle ceaselessly to replicate verisimilitude in figure drawing. On the
eve of his second trip to Algeria in 1847, the artist consecrated himself to the improvement of the human form, which he sketched extensively on site.

His efforts did not go unrecognized. In the mid 1860s, Jules Castagnary noted this artistic evolution: “originally, he subordinated the human and beast to the landscape. In progressing…from landscapist, he passed to socialist”. Indeed, while Fromentin had managed to draw the figure out more prominently, he failed to infuse his figures with the emotional and imaginative charge he so effectively transmitted through the natural landscape. In his *Batteleurs negres dans les tribus*, for instance, the cluster of figures appears more as an undifferentiated mass than a series of personal or ethnographic portraits. A grouping of gay drummers and dancers lines the top of rocky hill. Their colourful forms seem mere accessories to the great expanse of sky and the mountainous range which frame the figures from above and below. The inability to assert human presence on the canvas smacked of genre painting, which Fromentin so abhorred and blamed for the demise of history painting. The artist bemoaned this weakness: “[my] conception is dry, inanimate, like wooden dolls. It is missing the freedom, the accent of life…I see pretty and not grand”. The resulting effect was the quick descent into anecdote, the trivial.

Fromentin wished to move beyond this cumbersome exactitude. Yet in his consideration of *La Curée*, which appeared at the Salon of 1863, Maxime Du Camp accuses Fromentin of this very error. Two men sit atop horses, arranged against the sloping line of a rocky escarpment. One rider is poised theatrically with a game bird perched atop his outstretched arm, while two other hunters tend to fallen game afoot. The postures, animals and Oriental garments are rendered in careful, almost staged, detail. Du
Camp commented on the painting: “We might reproach [Fromentin] for an occasional lack of unity in execution… His painting La Curée…indicates too much, in the manner that it is painted, what has been done after memory and what after nature; some parts, generally the detail of the clothing, copied exactly, results in a dryness of execution which contrasts the transparency of the other parts… The artist, in his desire to render nature as it is, has suddenly forgotten to render it as it is seen through his dreams and the elegant colorations of his distinguished attitudes”. Castagnary also comments on this awkwardness. The staunch realist must have known the incisive power of his slight when he wrote of Fromentin: “all this is still a little too taken up with the picturesque view…the artist searches therein for something seductive, for detail, the joujou”. In emphasizing naturalism, the very grand ideal and imaginative prowess to which the artist was so committed, was burdened with detail. Throughout the 1860s, Fromentin sought to renew his aesthetic. As he was himself experiencing a crisis of artistic identity, the art world was precariously suspended on the precipice of great change.

Paul Mantz was one of many critics to draw attention to the dwindling state of art. He wrote in 1867, not long before Fromentin would start work on Au Pays that “the modern school is abandoning more and more the great summits…it does not believe in noble visions”. Fromentin aired similar frustration with the rise of banality central to new modernism:

You frustrate me with your modernity. Certainly, one must paint of his own time…but it must be rendered with material aspects…and accessories as secondary…I was a contemplative, and I went towards the Orient, towards the grand and tranquil…[to] render the last grandeurs of a dying race.
It is not surprising, in light of such pronouncements, that Fromentin’s critics thought him prepared to convert his efforts to the history genre. Gonse wrote on this subject that “Fromentin was only a genre painter, but he would have wanted to be a history painter...he always dreamed of passing from real life and anecdote to ideal life and glory.”25 If only he had not lacked the technical ability, continues the critic, he could have reached this certain goal.

But to describe Fromentin’s oeuvre in this way is not only to deal him the greatest insult of genre painter, but also to misread his own ambition. In fact, landscape painting had gained considerable ground in the ever-loosening hierarchy of genres. Castagnary described the increasing complexity and false dichotomy which so rigidly separated landscapists from history or more generally socialist painters interested in representing humanity. It is into this newly opening space that Fromentin looked to insert himself. Baudelaire, for one, appreciated this nuanced vision “M. Fromentin is neither precisely a landscape nor a genre painter, these two categories are too restricted to contain his free and supple fancy”.26 Not a pure landscapist per se, Fromentin’s grand vision nevertheless found expression in the landscape. Charles Bigot described the vision as “manifesting by form and colour his thoughts, sentiments, and tastes; his character, his philosophy, even”.27

This grand and philosophical ideal that Fromentin sought was simply one of permanence: the artist wrote “of all the attributes proper to grandeur, the most beautiful, in my opinion, is immobility...I have only the serious taste for durable...fixed things”.28 The desert was, in many ways, a perfect manifestation of this aesthetic impulse. Fromentin described his first glimpse of the massive Sahara desert in the opening pages
of *Un été dans le Sahara*. He called it: “an indefinite plain, as far as sight could stretch…[the] Land of Thirst”.

In fact, it was in this Land of Thirst that Fromentin found the greatest natural receptacle for his imagination.

It was the physical qualities and proportions of the desert that were central to the appeal it held for the artist. A seemingly endless emptiness, the desert came to stand for a void which could be populated with the artist’s own idealized artistic conception. The large spaces afforded open plains in which to negotiate the nuance of colour in sand and sky, the actual hues of which the artist had invested much time in perfecting. In what the artist called “a huge shapeless thing, almost colourless…nothingness, void”. Fromentin would give his own shape, colour, and essence. Unlike man, the desert was a perfect embodiment of solid and unchanging nature. Stripped of every unnecessary and cumbersome detail which Fromentin had worked so hard to exorcise from his canvas, the desert was itself the grand idea that he sought. He remarks that this emptiness was the very basis of his attraction: “It is precisely this nudity which encourages me”.

The desert void also had important symbolic connotations. During his third Algerian journey, Fromentin wrote of frequent visits to a local cemetery which he also set to canvas in the 1853 painting *Enterrement Maure*. In the painting, a blazing sun soaks the tranquil scene. Mourners are grouped around a conspicuous earthy mount that draws our attention at the foreground. The related passage reads: “once the hole is made, first the corpse and then the earth was let into it. Ten minutes letter, the grave was filled in and formed no more than the raised part…” A similar theme is emerges in *Au Pays de la soif*. A hostile sun beats down upon a scorched earth, onto which members of a desert convoy have fallen, immobilized. Reddish sand swirls around the twisted bodies of the
men, who, scattered about the dunes, will surely perish here in the great void. Like the body of the deceased which is hastily swallowed by the earth, the figures of *Au Pays*, even as they die, are being covered by the desert dust which collects on their bodies. The land becomes a graveyard: the men, whose ephemeral nature is underscored by expiration in the timeless sand-scape, are rendered as immobile, and silent as the desert itself.

The figures in *Au Pays* should be noted for another aspect. Gonse had once commented of Fromentin that: “the human form, which he had always painted dressed or draped, irresistibly attracted him, and he wanted to prove to himself that he could…overcome the aptitudes which had enclosed him”. In *Au Pays*, the half-draped figures demonstrate this desire to boldly reveal parts of the physiognomy for which Fromentin had made several preparatory sketches. The change in the arrangement of the bodies is also indicative of this effort to master their form, while the desperate expressions, reveal the tormented psyche of a man facing death. In this painting, Fromentin has achieved unprecedented figural emotion, whereby even the agonized contortions of the bodies contribute to the freedom and fluidity that he had himself previously felt absent. Fromentin here asserts mastery of human form to articulate the evolved conception of the landscape that Baudelaire had described.

Accordingly, *Au Pays* marked a culmination of artistic effort. Gonse, for instance, wrote that “the intensity of effect is brought to a peak…the horrible convulsions of those tortured by thirst, the sparkle of the light which chants death”. José Martí one year earlier had in described the painting similarly: “The Country of Thirst is [Fromentin’s] masterpiece. The darkness of the sky, the gloomy clouds, the whirling sand and the parched air give a frightful expression to those unhappy souls, whose violent
contortions and desperate looks reveal the terrible anguish of thirst”. Both critics draw attention to the interaction of the figures and the landscape, the expressive and narrative power of which seem to be equal.

The undated painting, often felt to be a sketch for the 1869 work (and never publicly exhibited during the artist’s lifetime), betrays this preoccupation central to Fromentin’s painting: the heat and light seem inscribed in the surface of the painting. The languid bodies seem to melt into the landscape, the harmonious tones of which create a monochrome effect. There has been much speculation (though it is nowhere confirmed by Fromentin) that this work was based on Théodore Géricault’s *Raft of the Medusa*. In Géricault’s work, a chaotic cluster of half-draped men drift atop a wood raft, lost in the great expanse of the sea. Their expressions range from frantic to defeated. In addition to the similarities of the pyramidal composition, the paintings share the theme of death by dehydration. In fact, Fromentin did greatly admire Géricault, to whom he devotes high praise in his *The Masters of Past Time*. Here is surely more evidence for the critics who would like to see Fromentin’s noble character reproduced on the canvas as history painter. But while it was common enough for Fromentin to rework his own compositions, nowhere else does he borrow one from another artist. In the final version, Fromentin has distanced himself from this association, raising suspicion as to whether it had been intentional.

The composition in the two pieces is largely the same, but for the positions of the figures, among other nuances. The most significant alteration in the 1869 version is the colour of the sky, the explanation of which may be found in Fromentin’s likening of the Saharan landscape to that France. Fromentin’s own early landscapes of France were
described as “bare, wide plains of extraordinary luminosity”,\textsuperscript{37} the recollection of which, it is more than likely, struck the artist in his apprehension of the Sahara desert. In fact, Fromentin, appreciated those elements of the African landscape and desert which recalled his native France. Henry Houssaye quoted him on this account: “the play of the sky…over the browned plain…the ensemble of the oriental tableau pleased me precisely because of its resemblance with France”. Houssaye appends his own comment that “in Africa it was still the landscapes of France that seduced Fromentin…where the blue skies, dotted with cloud, extend over the prairie”.\textsuperscript{38}

The patent likeness was compounded by Fromentin’s disappointment with the Southern sky, as described by Gautier. Though it was promised to reveal an endless blue expanse, the African sky was often in reality a more fiery shade.\textsuperscript{39} The substitution of the blue tone is then reminiscent of the ‘correction’ Baudelaire had advised landscapists to undertake. Fromentin explained a similar process of imaginative revisitation himself. Following his experience of a sandstorm and partial blindness, he wrote “later this would make me dream, and perhaps my memory would soften the too raw colours of this tableau”.\textsuperscript{40} We might take his comment in light of the variation between the versions of \textit{Au Pays}. This reading is further supported by commentary from Charles Clément. This critic dubbed Fromentin a colourist, whose “harmony he first sought in monochromy of the canvas…from which he took a great step when he finished by finding it in the diversity and variety of colours”.\textsuperscript{41} The change of the sky from burnt orange to a grayish blue was at once a likening of the plain to that of a prior vision of France and an aesthetic impulse to soften the effects which he had at first so strived to convey accurately, through the infusion of imagination.


*Au Pays*, then, does reflect Fromentin’s interest to move away from exactitude, to abandon himself to imagination while fore fronting the human figure. Yet unlike history painting, which was premised on action and movement, *Au Pays* is in ways its antithesis: devoid of motion, sound, and human agency, the most animate aspect of the painting is the desert itself which rises and falls rhythmically consuming its inhabitants. Other than a tenuous link to Géricault’s work, there is little to suggest that this was meant as a history painting, or more surprising still, that Fromentin (his own greatest critic) could have considered himself a history painter. Clément wrote of the artist in 1877: “he is not made for drama, nor for violence either in gesture of in tone…but …he loves the light, and a light equally forceful which envelops his objects gives them their structure and value”.⁴² Even while Clément asserts Fromentin’s unsuitability to the markers of history painting, he invokes the imagination, the light, that so many others would make evidence for this very ambition. Certainly, *Au Pays* marks a culmination of the tensions between figure and landscape, imagination and reality. Wright asserts that “this image of the Land of Thirst lingered in Fromentin’s imagination”.⁴³ Indeed it did; and there is reverberated with a collection of memories which would literally colour the desert land. The painting remains firmly rooted in the landscape which in *Au Pays* is itself the seat of greatness, imagination, and the negation of detail all essential to Fromentin’s grand ideal, and befitting of his grand persona.
5 Fromentin, *Correspondence Volume 1*, 231, my trans.
6 Mickel, *Fromentin*, 33.
18 Gonse, *Peintre et écrivain*, 37, my trans.
20 Fromentin, *Correspondence Volume 1*, 609, my trans.
40 Fromentin, *Oeuvres complètes*, 76, my trans.