

An Orientalist aesthetic: the prism of travel writing

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In *Orientalism*, Edward Said roundly condemns Western depictions of the East, of the imagined entity that was referred to as the ‘Orient’ as a form of manipulation, as a kind of colonialist control. One of the ‘dogmas’ of Orientalism he describes is that writers perceive ‘the Orient [as] eternal, uniform, and incapable of defining itself’ (Said: 301). Said shows how this can be seen as a form of control, as part of a colonialist pattern of domination:

Indeed, so fierce was this sense of a resistance to change, and so universal were the powers ascribed to it, that in reading the Orientalists one understands that the apocalypse to be feared was not the destruction of Western civilization but rather the destruction of the barriers that kept East and West from each other. (263).

Only by exaggerating and preserving difference could continued domination be justified. The nostalgic vision of the Orient given by the nineteenth-century French travel writer Pierre Loti has indeed been interpreted in this way, with Loti being seen as a major culprit in a neo-colonial process that delayed modernisation in developing countries. In his introduction to *Fantôme d’Orient*, the critic Nedim Gürsel, whilst appreciating the artistic merits of Loti’s writing, acknowledges that he has been seen as ‘un écrivain exotique au service du colonialisme’ (an exotic writer at the service of colonialism) through his propagation of an image of ‘un Orient immobile qu’il voulait dépourvu de toute perspective de progrès et de modernisme’ (an immobile Orient that he wanted deprived of all perspective of progress and modernisation) (Gürsel: 10-11). Whilst it is difficult to counter such attacks on Loti’s writing, it

should be noted that the dominating effect Said refers to is not a consciously desired one. Loti was indeed sincere in his admiration for other civilisations, and did not want to see a uniform westernisation of the world. It is just this kind of nuance that Said's attack deliberately ignores. As Daniel Martin Varisco puts it a 'notable feature of Said's prose is his tendency to deny, or at least trivialize, anything of value in the writing of those he opposes' (Varisco: 106). To view the work of a nineteenth-century travel writer merely through the narrow lens of the historical and social context within which he wrote, is an unwarranted denial of artistic value and originally altruistic, albeit naïve, intentions.

Loti himself explains his very personalised view of the world he describes with reference to childhood games. In *Prime Jeunesse*, which he wrote towards the end of his life in 1919, Loti stresses the importance to him of his 'Peau-d'Ane' puppet theatre, in particular underlining the emotional support it gave him in coping with the hardships his family was forced to endure following the financial scandal in which his father was implicated in 1866. To the young Julien (Loti's real name was Julien Viaud) this imaginary theatrical world was a refuge, a means by which he could shelter from harsh reality, in a world of his own creation. Faced with the threat of having to move out of the family home, he used it as a way of escaping into an imaginary space: 'Il me restait mon théâtre de Peau-d'Ane [...] je continuai de m'y adonner beaucoup pour me distraire de mes cruelles angoisses, matérialisant ainsi en des décors toujours plus habiles, mes petites rêves de magnificence, de palmiers, de palais, et de soleil' (I still had my puppet theatre and I continued to devote myself to it to distract me from my cruel anxieties, making in ever better scenery, my little dreams of magnificence, palm trees, and sunlight) (*Enfant*: 327). In *Le Roman d'un enfant* (1890) Loti also tells of how much time he devoted to painting exotic scenery for this theatre, and suggests that these scenes form the basis of his later exotic experience: 'Tous les rêves d'habitations enchantées, de luxes étranges que j'ai plus

ou moins réalisés plus tard, dans divers coins du monde, ont pris forme, pour la première fois, sur ce théâtre de Peau-d’Ane’ (All my dreams of enchanted dwellings, of strange luxuries that I basically experienced later in life, in various corners of the world, took form, for the first time, in this puppet theatre) (*Enfant* : 150). All his experiences are perceived merely as recreations of childhood dreaming, and what he sees on his travels are fundamentally reproductions of the exotic scenes he painted for his Peau-d’Ane theatre. In *Le Mariage de Loti* (1880), this is clearly explained: ‘Je ne puis te dire tout ce que j’éprouve d’impressions étranges, en retrouvant à chaque pas mes souvenirs de douze ans... Petit garçon, au foyer de famille, je songeais à l’Océanie ; à travers le voile fantastique de l’inconnu, je l’avais comprise et devinée telle que je la trouve aujourd’hui. – Tous ces sites étaient DÉJÀ VUS [...]’ (I can’t express how strange my impressions are, to find at each step my memories of twelve years-old ... A little boy at home, dreaming of Oceania; across the fantastic veil of the unknown, I knew it and guessed it just as I find it today. – All these places were DEJA VUS) (*Romans*: 152). This way of seeing the world is commented on by Alain Buisine: ‘Tahiti n’existe que pour autant qu’elle se conforme à ce que Julien en avait déjà rêvé. [...] Le présent n’a de valeur que dans sa conformité au passé, comme confirmation d’une prémonition’ (Tahiti only exists in as much as it conforms to what Julien had already dreamed. [...] The present has no value outside of its conformity with the past, as confirmation of a premonition) (*Double*: 15). Far from being unique, however, the selective observation of the Orient, in only seeing whatever conforms to preconceptions, corresponds closely with the concept of ‘textual attitude’ put forward by Said (Said: 92). As Said puts it ‘Orientalism overrode the Orient’ (96): ‘When a learned Orientalist travelled in the country of his specialisation, it was always with unshakable abstract maxims about the “civilization” he had studied; rarely were Orientalists interested in anything except proving the validity of these musty “truths”’ (52). Loti’s observations similarly conform to what he had been told or had read, and in this way he follows the classic pattern of the

Orientalist in '[*confirming*] the Orient in his readers' eyes; he neither tries nor wants to unsettle already firm convictions' (65).

Loti's descriptive style is concisely summed up by Claude Gagnière, who notes that Loti is 'doué au plus haut point du sens de l'observation' (immensely gifted with a sense of observation), and praises his ability as 'un reporter qui sait noter les couleurs, les parfums, les sons, le mouvement' (a reporter who knows how to note colour, scents, sounds, and movement), but immediately puts this in perspective:

Mais, au contraire d'un Flaubert qui cherche, grâce à un choix très étudié de mots, à donner de la réalité un portrait aussi précis que possible, Loti renonce à décrire le réel qu'il décrète fugitif et donc insaisissable à l'image du temps qui passe. Chaque paysage, chaque décor, filtré par le prisme de ses sentiments perd une partie de sa réalité et se décompose en un kaléidoscope de couleurs et d'impressions vagues. Un paysage n'est qu'une illusion et tous les continents décrits par Loti finissent par se ressembler [...] tous les voyages qu'il a faits ne sont que des voyages à l'intérieur de lui-même. (*Romans*: iv)

(But, contrary to a Flaubert who tries, thanks to a very careful choice of words, to give us as precise a portrait of reality as possible, Loti rejects a description of the real, which he deems fleeting and ultimately unattainable given the image of passing time. Every view, every interior, filtered by the prism of his emotions loses part of its reality, and disintegrates into a kaleidoscope of colours and vague impressions. His descriptions are just illusions and all continents described by Loti end up looking the same [...] all the voyages he made are only voyages into his own mind.)

It is this emotional colouring, the inclusion of his own reactions, that makes Loti's descriptions so evocative, and made his works so hugely popular.

Loti's representations of Japan in *Madame Chrysanthème* (1888) provide a perfect example of how he confirms readers' expectations, and of how his descriptions are filtered by 'le prisme de ses sentiments' (the prism of his emotions). Just as with Tahiti, what is important is the recognition of scenes that are '[déjà vus]'. A visit to a tea house conforms perfectly with what he had imagined: 'je me sens entré en plein dans ce petit monde imaginé, artificiel, que je connaissais déjà par les peintures des laques et des porcelaines. [...] Je l'avais deviné, ce Japon-là, bien longtemps avant d'y venir' (I feel I have completely entered this little artificial imagined world, the one I already knew from pictures on lacquer ware and china. [...] I had already guessed what that Japan was like, a long time before coming) (*Romans*: 662). The déjà-vu feeling this time, however, causes irritation, reflecting the importance that 'le prisme de ses sentiments' takes in shading his descriptions. Lafcadio Hearn comments on the disappointment he experiences on realising just how great a role imagination has played in distorting Loti's description of Kyoto: 'I was tremendously disappointed by my inability to discover what Loti described. He described only his own sensations: exquisite, weird, or wonderful. Loti's "Kioto [*sic*]: La Ville Sainte" has no existence. I saw the San-ju-san-gen-do, for example: I saw nothing of Loti's - only recognized what had evoked the wonderful goblinry of his imagination' (Hearn: 281). What Loti observes is first made to conform to the preconceptions formed as backdrops to his childhood Peau-d'Ane theatre, and is then further distorted by his emotional reactions.

An interesting way of appreciating the extent of the distortion of Loti's description is to compare his drawings with his written descriptions of the same scenes. Claude Farrère relates how as a young naval officer, Loti, or more precisely Julien Viaud, was used as an illustrator on his voyages by his superiors: 'Ses commandants, à chaque escale, - en ces temps où la photographie n'existait pratiquement pas, l'envoyaient sans cesse à terre, lui le premier, et parfois lui seul,

avec son bloc et ses crayons, pour prendre des croquis de tout ce qui en valait la peine...’ (His commanders, at each stop, - in the days when there was practically no photography, ceaselessly sent him ashore, first and sometimes alone, to draw with his sketch pad and pencils anything that was of note) (Farrère: 13). Viaud ‘était entré en relation avec *l’Illustration* et le *Monde Illustré* comme collaborateur occasionnel’ (Viaud had entered into a relationship with *l’Illustration* and le *Monde Illustré*’ as an occasional contributor) and sold some of these drawings to make some much needed money. Such pictures satisfied a demand for representations of exotic places but, given their initial documentary purpose, are completely different in the impression they give from Loti’s later writing. Farrère stresses this point:

Pour qui s’est imprégné de l’œuvre de l’écrivain, poète bien plus que romancier, et poète selon le formule de Musset, qui jamais ne jeta sur son papier que les mots jaillis irrésistiblement du tréfonds de lui-même [...] les dessins de Loti sont une source d’étonnements extraordinaires.

[...] je dirais que l’écriture de Loti est, par essence, subjective. Ses crayons sont au contraire rigoureusement objectifs.

Loti écrit ce qu’il sent. Mais il dessine ce qu’il voit. Rien d’autre. (48)

(For those who have immersed themselves in the work of the writer, one who is much more a of poet than a novelist, and a poet following the tradition of Musset, who never wrote anything but words wrenched from the depths of his soul [...] Loti’s drawings are a source of extraordinary surprises.

[...] I would say that Loti’s writing is, in essence, subjective. His drawings are on the contrary, strictly objective.

Loti writes what he feels. But he draws what he sees. Nothing else.)

Farrère characterises this drawing style as cold: ‘Il dessine froidement, avec une impassibilité dont nous l’aurions souvent cru incapable’ (He draws coldly, with

an impassibility of which no one would have thought him capable) (53). This difference in style is illustrated by Alain Buisine, as he compares the written commentary accompanying an illustration destined for publication in *L'Illustration* with an elaboration of the same scene in *Le Roman d'un spahi* (1881): 'Et même si certaines phrases de ces articles seront parfois reprises telles quelles dans les futurs romans pour nourrir leur exotisme, d'aucune façon l'effet Loti n'est pour l'instant actif dans la sécheresse sensitive de ces pages soumises de bout en bout à des impératifs purement documentaires et didactiques' (And even if certain phrases from these articles are used again in his future novels, to enhance their exoticism, in no way is the Loti effect present in the dryness of these pages, which are filled from end to end with purely documentary and didactic phrasing) (*Tombeau*: 111). Buisine shows the magnitude of the difference between these drawings and the writing which Loti later took up, by giving the example of the failure of an illustrated edition of *Le Mariage de Loti* in 1898. He explains the lack of success in terms of complete incompatibility: 'Pires que simplement tautologiques (redoublant la description par l'image), les illustrations sont incompatibles avec son écriture. Car la précision du dessin lotien, son désir d'objectivité, constituent nécessairement un corps étranger qui dérange les charmes de son imprécision scripturale [...]' (Worse than simple tautology (repeating a description with a picture), the illustrations are completely incompatible with his writing. Because the precision of Loti's drawings, his desire for objectivity, is necessarily foreign to and disruptive of the charming inaccuracies of his writing) (115). The difference in artistic approach between these early drawings and Loti's written descriptions is suggested by Farrère as the reason behind Loti's increasingly rare indulgence in his childhood passion for drawing as he got older. Loti did continue to draw on occasion, but mostly for use as later inspiration for his writing, as something to refresh his memory: '[il] ne dessina plus qu'en vue d'écrire plus tard ; pour que ses livres soient plus jeunes, et d'une inspiration plus fraîche' (he only drew with a view to writing later; to make his books younger, and

have fresher inspiration) (Farrère: 194). In this way Loti's drawing metamorphosed into being a means to an end: 'le dessin a cessé d'être une fin. Il n'est plus qu'un moyen' (drawing ceased to be an end in itself. It was now only a means to an end). It would be used only for his own purposes, as in published form it would have the effect of undermining his phenomenal success as a writer, spoiling the exotic atmosphere he created by the introduction of a more banal literal representation.

In the light of this conflict of artistic styles, it is interesting to look at some of the comments made by another nineteenth-century writer/artist who used both media to represent his travels in North Africa, Eugène Fromentin. Fromentin discusses the differences between these two art forms: 'il me parut intéressant de comparer dans leurs procédés deux manières de s'exprimer qui m'avaient l'air de se ressembler bien peu, contrairement à ce qu'on suppose' (I thought it would be interesting to compare the procedures for two ways of expression, which would seem to be so different, contrary to what people suppose) (Fromentin: 59). He insists that the two forms are completely different: 'Il y a des formes pour l'esprit, comme il y a des formes pour les yeux ; la langue qui parle aux yeux n'est pas celle qui parle à l'esprit. Et le livre est là, non pour répéter l'œuvre du peintre, mais pour exprimer ce qu'elle ne dit pas' (There are ways of expressing emotions, just as there are of visual impressions ; the language used for what one sees is not the same as that used to express what one feels. Books are not there to repeat the work of the painter, instead expressing what is absent from the pictures) (Fromentin: 60). In concentrating on the difference in process, Fromentin interestingly dismisses the importance of what is being represented. He is writing in 1874 about the books he wrote, *Un Été dans le Sahara and Une Année dans le Sahel*, almost twenty years earlier in 1856 and 1858, and says that their interest lies not in a now out-dated content, but in what they reveal about his way of looking at the world:

J'ajoute que, si leur unique mérite était de me faire revoir un pays qui cependant m'a charmé, et de me rappeler le pittoresque des choses, hommes et lieux, ces livres me seraient devenus à moi-même presque indifférents. [...] Le seul intérêt qu'à mes yeux il n'aient pas perdu, celui qui les rattache à ma vie présente, c'est une certaine manière de voir, de sentir et d'exprimer qui m'est personnelle et n'a pas cessé d'être la mienne. (Fromentin: 58)

(I add that if their sole merit was to help me see a country I found charming again, and to help me remember the picturesque qualities of the people and places, these books would now be almost without interest to me. [...] The only interest that they have not lost in my eyes, is something which connects them to the present, a certain way of seeing, of feeling and expressing what was and still is uniquely mine.)

Not only is the now distant and presumably changed scenery unimportant, but indeed even new journeys present no fresh interest: 'Des voyages que j'ai faits depuis lors, j'ai résolu de ne rien dire. Il m'eût fallu parler de lieux nouveaux, à peu près comme j'avais parlé des anciens. Mais à quoi bon ? Qu'importe que le spectacle change, si la manière de voir et de sentir est toujours la même ?' (Of journeys that I once made, I have resolved to say nothing. I would have had to describe new places in almost the same way as I described the old ones. But what would be the use? What does it matter if the scene changes, if the way of describing it remains the same?) (Fromentin: 63). Even new accounts of different places risk becoming repetitive. This insight could easily be used to refer to Loti's prodigious literary output. Just as Claude Farrère remarks, the 'prisme de ses sentiments' (prism of his emotions) ensures that 'tous les continents décrits par Loti finissent par se ressembler' (all the continents described by Loti end up seeming the same). What is being described is entirely secondary to how it is described, so references to accuracy or the lack of it, are relevant only in what they reveal about the artist himself.

The problem of repetition is one that is constantly faced by travel writers. Isabelle Daunais cites a letter written by Flaubert to Hippolyte Taine, in which he comments on the ‘genre voyage’, saying that it is ‘par soi-même une chose presque impossible. Pour que le volume n’eût aucune répétition, il aurait fallu vous abstenir de dire ce que vous aviez vu’ (in itself something almost impossible. To avoid repetition you would have to refrain from describing what you had seen) (Flaubert: 561). The problem of repetition within the same text is not the only problem writers must overcome. They must also deal with the fact that most of the places they write about have already been described, and perhaps in great detail, before: ‘la plupart des contrées ont été recensées, et [...] les expéditions scientifiques ont rapporté quantité de données précises, [...] des images, surtout, se sont instituées’ (most countries have been described, and [...] scientific expeditions have brought back much evidence of them, [...] and images of them have, above all, become set in stone) (Daunais: 17). Daunais is making the same point as Said when he says ‘what the Orientalist does is *confirm* the Orient in his readers’ eyes’, that ‘[à] partir du moment où tous les pays sont connus et détaillés, le voyage ne sert plus à prouver que le monde existe, mais à vérifier qu’il existe bien tel qu’il a été décrit. On n’écrit pas pour attester le voyage, on voyage pour attester les livres’ (from the moment that all countries are known and catalogued, travel no longer helps us confirm that the world exists, but instead verifies that it exists as it has been described). To avoid repetition, something must be added to the scenes observed: ‘Le réel étant connu, il s’agit à présent de l’augmenter et de le préciser, de trouver ce que ni la science ni la peinture ni la photographie ne peuvent mesurer. En fait, d’une écriture qui suit le voyage à une écriture qui le précède [...] on en arrive à une écriture qui dépasse le voyage’ (As the reality is known, it now has to be added to specifically, finding what neither science, painting, or photography can assess. In fact, from a writing which follows a journey, to writing which precedes it [...] we achieve a writing which surpasses it) (Daunais: 18). Effective travel writing, in this way, has to go beyond

just observation and the tedious repetition that this would probably involve. It is Loti's addition of his emotional reactions, and Fromentin's exploration of artistic perspective, that adds interest to what would otherwise risk becoming repetitive: 'On ne dira pas ce qui a été dit (encore qu'on finisse souvent par le répéter), on y ajoutera des variantes qui deviendront l'objet du récit' (We won't say what has already been said (even though repetition is inevitable), we will add variations which themselves will become the object of the description) (Daunais: 26). With regard to this addition of variety, Daunais makes the interesting observation that travel writers very often write retrospectively, that is on their return, or after a certain amount of time has elapsed: 'Du reste, ce n'est souvent qu'au retour que les voyageurs rédigent leurs récits. [...] Certains, comme Fromentin, y trouvent précisément l'occasion de variations' (Anyway, it is often only on their return that travelers write their accounts. [...] Some, like Fromentin, find precisely in this the opportunity to introduce variations). The importance of this is indeed stressed by Fromentin in his preface to *Un Été dans le Sahara*:

Si ces lettres avaient été écrites au jour le jour et sur les lieux, elles seraient autres ; [...] La nécessité de les écrire à distance, après des mois, après des années, sans autre ressource que la mémoire [...] m'apprit, mieux que nulle autre épreuve, quelle est la *vérité* dans les arts qui vivent de la nature, ce que celle-ci nous fournit, ce que notre sensibilité lui prête. [...] Surtout, elle me contraignit à chercher la vérité en dehors de l'exactitude, et la ressemblance en dehors de la copie conforme. L'exactitude poussée jusqu'au scrupule, une vertu capitale lorsqu'il s'agit de renseigner, d'instruire ou d'imiter, ne devenait plus qu'une qualité de second ordre [...], pour peu que la sincérité soit parfaite, qu'il s'y mêle un peu d'imagination, que le temps ait choisi les souvenirs, en un mot qu'un grain d'art s'y soit glissé. (Fromentin: 60-61)

(If these letters had been written day to day on place, they would be different;

[...] The necessity of writing them from a distance, after months or years, without any other recourse but to memory [...] has shown me, better than any other experience, what the *truth* is in arts that are born from nature, and what this gives us, and what our sensibility gives to it. [...] Above all it made me look for truth beyond accuracy, and resemblance outside of exact likeness. Accuracy pushed to the extreme, which is an essential virtue when one wants to inform, instruct, or imitate, becomes only of secondary importance [...], for perfect sincerity, we need to mix in a little imagination, allowing time to be selective with memory, in a word, to introduce a little art into our account.)

Fromentin considers the passage of time as an essential part of the process of artistic creation. Loti's writing habits were of course similar, as he used his journal entries, and occasional drawings, as tools with which to remember, and wrote often after the lapse of many months or even years. *Madame Chrysanthème*, for example, whose accuracy has been so hotly debated, was written in 1887, and describes the Japan Loti had seen in the summer of 1885. The blurring effects of this approach are obviously in large part responsible for the incompatibility noted between Loti's writing and the drawings he made on the spot as naval records. Daunais interestingly remarks that Flaubert was an exception to this practice of writing after the passage of some time. The resulting difference in accuracy is also noted by Gagnière, in the already quoted comparison with Loti's style. This difference in approach emphasises the impressionistic styles of Loti and Fromentin.

This brief look at so-called 'Orientalist' descriptions has hopefully indicated some of their complexity and shown why such writing can often still be a pleasure to read. We can appreciate the negative political effects it may have had but can still enjoy it on a purely aesthetic level. By simply saying that such images of the Orient have no merit, as they present it as 'uniform, and incapable of defining itself', Said's

accusations of manipulative generalisation are effectively only reflecting back on himself.

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