The Politics of Inscription and Transgression in Pierre Loti's *Au Maroc*

Dr.Selma Mokrani Barkaoui
Department of English
Badji Mokhtar-Annaba University

Abstract

Morocco and its Imperial Fez, considered by most historians and travellers the Maghreb's most prestigious depository of Islamic civilization, has inspired Pierre Loti with a sense of the impenetrable, the infinitely mysterious and spiritual. To him, Fez is "la vieille ville étrange, ""la ville… qui paraît si maussade et si noire," which adamantly remains beyond the frame of representation. Loti, whose journeying typology ultimately ends in return, tries to grapple with the difficulty of imagining the Other and with the impossibility of a sensitive understanding and cultural deciphering of the local codes and customs. This study attempts to locate Loti's ***Au Maroc*** *(1890) within the discursive configuration of inscription and transgression as a politics of representation.*

Most of Loti scholarship places him within the trend of exoticism and Orientalism, focusing on his travel writings to outlandish places in South America, the Pacific, Tahiti, Indochina, Japan, and East Asia throughout the 1870s and 1880s.[1] Works such as *Aziyadé* (1879), *Le Mariage de Loti* (1880), *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887), *Jérusalem* (1895), and *Les Désenchantées* (1906) have been at the centre of the naturally Eurocentric orientation of critical studies about Loti. This French mariner-turned-writer has also more recently been viewed as both a "racist" and an

Résumé

Le Maroc et son Fez Impérial, considérés par la plupart des historiens et voyageurs comme le dépôt le plus prestigieux de la civilisation Islamique au Maghreb, ont inspiré Pierre Loti avec un sens de l'impénétrable, l'infiniment mystérieux et spirituel. Selon lui, Fez est « la vieille ville étrange », « la ville… qui paraît si maussade et si noire, » qui se situe obstinément au-delà du cadre de la représentation. Loti, dont la typologie voyageuse aboutit inévitablement au retour, essaie de s'agripper avec la difficulté d'imaginer l'Autre et avec l'impossibilité d'une compréhension sensible et d'un déchiffrement culturel des codes et des coutumes locales. Cette étude tente de localiser ***Au Maroc*** *(1890) de Pierre Loti dans une configuration discursive d'inscription et de transgression.*

"imperialist" whose work promotes detrimental visions of the "Other." His oeuvre has been perceived not only as the typical illustration of Orientalism, but also as a residuum of colonial apologetics.[2] However, little has been written on his travel writing about North Africa, namely, Morocco's Fez.[3] The present analysis focuses on *Au Maroc* (1890) which documents Loti's diplomatic mission to Morocco, with specific reference to his remarkable account of his visit to the imperial city of Fez. It analyses a process totally overlooked by Loti critics, namely, his compositional counterpoising of the representational gap through inscription and transgression.

At his first encounter with Fez, Loti realizes that his compositional self-assurance stumbles over the forbiddingness of a millennial city whose immutability rises in sharp contrast with his own "nomadism" as a traveller-writer. Soon, his foreignness comes into relief more than ever before, and his attempts at representation and cultural interpretation are almost completely compromised by the forbidden, sanctified, and intimate spaces to which he is denied access. Loti resorts to epithets of agedness as colonial strategies of negation and as tropes that outline local life as firmly anchored and as historically entrenched. By so doing, he strongly heightens his own alienation vis-à-vis the situational configuration of the negotiated space. In this essay I explore Loti's compositional counterbalancing of the representational void through his strategies of inscription and transgression. I also explore his fictionalization and thematisation of space, his construction of a facade of connoisseurship to exonerate himself from colonial complicity, his reverting to the picturesque and the exotic, and his tactical claims for authenticity, all as part of his compensatory strategies for the unrepresentable totality.

Travel and travel literature have always been historically linked to the work of empire. John Mackenzie insists that all world empires were by nature "not only empires of war, of economic exploitation, of settlement and of cultural diffusion" but were also to a greater extent "empires of travel" (19). Michel Foucault's work on the role of the production of knowledge and its relation to power has been of tremendous significance to scholars like Edward Said, Mary Louise Pratt, Sara Mills, Peter Hulme, Homi Bhabha, Rana Kabbani, Gayatari Spivak, and J.B. Harley who studied the ways in which travel writing corroborates colonial and imperial projects and codifies other cultures and peoples according to western standards. They all consider travel

writing as a process of inscription and appropriation, and, perforce, as an instrument of imperialism and colonialism.[4]

Sara Mills, for example, confirms the claim that the introduction of colonial discourse as a valid area of research in the 1970s made travel writing "worthy of academic study" (2). Brian Musgrove, in turn, notes the concurrence of the rise of critical interest in travel writing with the rise of postcolonial theory and explains how travel is presently viewed "as a sub-story of the grand narrative of imperialism" and as "the key operation, in language and fact, that makes the colonial adventure possible" (32). Thus, travel writing has become so central to postcolonial studies that currently "it is virtually impossible to consider [it] outside the frame of postcolonialism" (Musgrove 32). In postcolonial terms, therefore, travel writing has been studied as a collection of textual practices that contribute to the general colonial discourse which exposes what Mary Louise Pratt calls an "imperial stylistics" (199), and makes of its texts "machines of othering" (Manzurul Islam 123).

No feasible examination of Pierre Loti's *Au Maroc* can exclude the momentous issues of ideology and colonialism. This text abounds in what Edward Said calls "the ingredients making for a politics of interpretation" *(Orientalism* 7). Loti deploys strategies of negation to justify future colonial presence, to bifurcate races and cultures along Orientalist lines, and to reaffirm the supremacy of the Western self. His accounts particularly illustrate the sameness of the discourse of negation, emanating from what Pratt labels "the hegemonic reflex" (15). His common vocabulary, stock notions,[5] and rhetorical baggage all contribute to the instantiation of epithets of negation, strongly confirming Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan's theory that travel writing is "suspiciously conformist" (5).

Loti travelled to Fez as *"historiographe*" with Jules Patenôtre, the French Minister in Tangier, between March and April of 1889. The latter was commissioned for a diplomatic mission to Moulay Hassan IV. Loti journeyed in a caravan with the members of the embassy, escorted by local Caids (chiefs) and cavaliers, camping by rivers and springs. He preferred to take solitary lodgings in Fez El-Bali, the oldest quarter of Fez, relinquishing the protected residence prepared for the embassy. Loti's project was to mingle with the people and to obtain firsthand impressions on local life—a project that would prove fruitless.

Loti's travelling style colludes with French colonialism on the one hand, and, on the other, paradoxically illustrates the synthesis of the processes of composition and colonialism. In addition to his apologetic colonial rhetoric, he enlists to Michel Butor's assertion that travellers "travel in order to write... because, for them, travel is writing" (83). Loti was encouraged by Patenôtre's assurance about the literary and creative potential of the journey. Patenôtre had written to Loti of the prospect:

> J'ai pensé que l'idée de visiter, dans les conditions exceptionnellement favorables, un des rares pays qui ne soient pas encore entamés par la civilisation occidentale aurait peut-être quelque attrait pour vous et que vous pourriez y puiser la matière d'un livre original" (qtd. in Hartman 60).

Loti excludes political motives from the purpose of his visit in his preface of the book. Yet, by his mere positive response to the Minister's invitation, he willingly embraces the concomitant empowerment to construe the French empire as a textual act through the narration of exotic, outlandish, and therefore, tempting stories.

Loti's discourse in the book is marked by a dissuasive, yet encouraging tone that testifies to his own bewilderment. His persistent remarks about "la vieillesse croulante, la vieillesse morte, qui est l'impression dominante causée par les choses" *(Au Maroc* 132) to designate Fez point to his belief that new blood needs to be injected through a colonial syringe in order to rejuvenate its falling condition. For Loti, even the Caids and cavaliers encountered on his way, otherwise vigorous and spirited, are but "mummies" in their fatigued poise and surfeited attitude (42).

What renders Loti's descriptions of Fez so standardized is in fact his colonial *arrière-pensée* which differentiates him from other relatively "neutral" travellers to Morocco.[6] The unvarying vocabularies in his accounts are manifest in his use of negating qualifiers. Loti's descriptions of different places in this city as "sombre," "sinistre," and as having a "vétusté caduque" (63), as well as his recurring use of the word "croulante" throughout his account, further provide evidence for his perplexity which is yet far from deterring. His statement that "la vieille ville fanatique et sombre se baigne dans l'or de tout ce soleil ; étalée à mes pieds sur une série de

vallons et de collines,… a pris un aspect d'inaltérable et radieuse paix…" (173)[7] stages his secret desire for inclusion:

> Et jamais n'a été plus brusque ni plus complète l'impression de dépaysement, de changement de moi-même en un autre personnage d'un monde différent et d'une époque antérieure (135).

This is indeed more than just a feeling of alienation in front of strangeness. It points to Loti's obsessive wish to infringe upon the other's identity, and to embody and contain it. Peter J. Turberfield explores Loti's transgressive behavior as represented by his constant vestmental disguise, which he calls "cross-cultural transvestism." Turberfield conceives of it as a kind of "fetishism" which "veils difference whilst simultaneously exaggerating it" ("Clothing as Fetish…" 180).

Loti was an ambitious mariner whose visit to Morocco had beyond doubt an exploration-for-annexation horizon.[8] It is possible to argue that he was chosen for this mission partly because he carried a mythic colouring from Christopher Columbus. There are instances when his rhetoric of discovery and his deployment of the motif of *terra nullius* overshadow his "picturesque" bent. An unmistakably inviting tone is sensed in his interjection: "c'est l'étonnement d'arriver dans des espaces vides et des ruines" (128), and in his rather covetous exclamation about the fertility of Moroccan lands: "Quel grenier d'abondance ce Maroc pourrait devenir!" (55). Such declarations posit Morocco as a vacant land waiting to be appropriated and subjugated.

In addition to this alluring rhetoric, Loti uses the trope of traveler-as-pilgrim to confer a kind of solemnity on his mission. William H. Sherman explains how "the language of pilgrimage persisted long after the practice began to wane" and how "it not only provided a model for religious travellers but helped to accommodate the worldly goals of secular travellers" (24). One of such secular goals being exploration for potential penetration, it is possible to argue that Loti fits in this frame of pilgrimage when he figures himself as a pilgrim-traveller, impatient to reach his sacred destination and to attain the goal of his assignment. Approaching Fez, he reveals that

> …nous sommes soutenus par l'espérance d'être demain en vue de la ville sainte, comme ces croisés ou ces pèlerins d'autrefois, auxquels on promettait, après bien

> des jours et des nuits de marche, qu'ils allaient enfin voir la Mecque ou Jérusalem (106-7).

In addition to the pilgrimatic dimension, Loti's itinerary resuscitates the primeval myth of male exploration. It is commonly known that his manubial Rochefort residence is a domiciled memorial of imperial plunder. Its collection of art objects, ransacked and pillaged from far-flung territories, figures as a reaffirmation of the myth of male exploration and as a contribution to the museumification of *l'Ailleurs.* In Fez, he was relentlessly "à la recherche de vieilles tentures et de vieilles armes" (245), and was extremely proud of the "long fusil garni d'argent" and the "grand sabre damasquiné d'or" offered him by the Sultan (iii).

Despite the fact that Loti had exonerated himself from political motives and shielded himself from colonial charges with elaborate, artistic, and painterly appreciations of Fazi marvels, he quite involuntarily sidetracks from his pledge. His comments on the Sultan's infantry, for example, demonstrate a kind of jealous appropriation of Morocco and express a cultivated rivalry with regard to other potential predators. To his great disappointment, the soldiers have been equipped by an English ex-colonel in the fashion of Indian Sepoys (124). On another occasion, he even prophesies that the unadvised "jeunesse dorée de Fez" will soon witness "l'écroulement du vieux Moghreb" (172).[9]

Other guises of appropriation are manifest in Loti's idiom of Exoticism which is defined by Holland and Huggan as the instrument of the "process of retrieval, a means by which 'otherness' of the foreign world can be assimilated, and its threatening difference defused by taking on a familiar cast" (5). Loti's desire to gain access to sanctified and forbidden places, notably Al Qaraouiyin, and his lengthy meditation of its artistic incorporeality which gives it "quelque chose d'austèrement pur, d'immatériel, de *religieux* (233), are vivid illustrations of the canon of Exoticism. His ecstasy and enchantment in the presence of the mystery and forbidding nobility of this particular edifice is due to the titillation of "toutes ces choses défendues" (233). He is so emotionally involved that he involuntarily lingers by the doors of the mosque, hopelessly extending his sight towards its withdrawn interiors. He is even interpellated by the different manifestations of spirituality in this extremely mystic

sanctuary and would willingly prostrate by the side of the praying men.

Loti came to realize that Fez is accessible only by its public life, its bazaars and open-air workshops. Its domestic, unvoiced, and brooding life is unwelcoming to foreign gazes and its topography stubbornly resists painless infringement. Its singular maze-like design, dead ends, closely fortified doors, winding and blind passages, and, most notably, its precipiced geography, all contribute to the creation of an abyss of representation. There are instances when he fails to find words to describe Fez's dense spectacle. This kind of stoppage leads him to resort to what Chloe Chard calls "hyperboles of the Unrepresentable" (84) or "hyperboles of indescribability" (85) and to "seeking out forms of language sufficiently intensified to match the drama of the topography" (84). Loti conveys a benumbing inexpressibility when he helplessly exclaims: "Oh ! l'ensoleillement, et l'immobilité, et le mystère, et le charme de tout cela, comment le dire? " (216), or when he comments on the "tranquilité sereine qui n'est pas exprimable" (111).

Fez resists to be delimited in a totalitarian idiom of representation also because it reserves for itself the secrets of its interior life. Doors as motifs of discovery and sighting preoccupy Loti's imagination. He shows great admiration for the exquisite doors even in the most desolate places: "Oh! Ces portes arabes, variant à l'infini leurs dessins mystérieux, —comment dire le charme qu'il y a pour moi dans leur seul aspect" (249-50).

The fascination with doors that would not unlock brings to mind the idea of access to the harem which constitutes one of the many illustrations of the logic of incursion, boosting the travel writer's subject position in the colonial context. Objecting to Loti's *Veiled Women,* E.M. Forster addresses the advantage of women travellers in their exclusive access to the private world of the harem. To him, the dispensation would be ideal if these women happen to be novelists, affirming that only "a woman novelist may one day tell us what does happen in the Harem…. But she must be a novelist, not a journalist or a missionary" (268).

Loti is well aware of the limitation of being a male visitor in the context of a longstanding conservative culture. To counteract this restraint, he resorts to a narrative of concealment in his preface to *Au Maroc* in order to justify the gaps of representation in his account of

the hidden facets of Fazi life. He claims that he possesses more knowledge about the harems than he is ready to give. His reservation, he explains, springs from his apprehension about the potential "clabauderies" of some "imbeciles." In deterrence of impending charges of superficiality, he declares that he has deliberately avoided mentioning "Les details intimes que des circonstances particulières m'ont révélés" (i).

Loti's narrative of concealment augurs an imaginary surrogate for facts which recalls Hayden White's view that travel narratives are "fictions of factual representations."[10] Despite the fact that the multidirectional spatiality of travel is most liable to be antinarrative, travel possesses an undeniable narrative potential by virtue of its inherent temporal and spatial structures that provoke narration. Along this line, James Duncan and Derek Gregory argue that "All geographies are imaginative geographies," that is, "fabrications of 'something made,'" and that "our access to the world is always made through particular technologies of representation" (5). Evidently, travel writing is in many ways a form of witness-writing because of its consistent engagement with the notions of "spectatorship" and the "gaze." The traveller is him/herself essentially an eye-witness, a spectator, beholder, onlooker, and sightseer. Further, the inherent chronotopicity of travel accounts strongly relates to the process of proof with its stipulation for evidence—a quality that presupposes that travel accounts should be an exemplary execution of veracity.

Yet, Loti's fantastic account of the terrace promenaders, perceived from the roof of his El-Bali home, sounds more like a desperate struggle against the frustrating scantiness of first-hand material regarding harems in Fez. In order to circumvent the embarrassing absence of direct observation, he overstretchingly seeks compensatory strategies to supplant the void of representation. By so doing, he becomes, to use Holland and Huggan's words, a "raconteur among raconteurs" (13). Ultimately, Loti engages in "imaginative geography," a practice Said attributes to travel writers who enact a "poetic process" that renders the "vacant" and "anonymous" intelligible *(Orientalism* 55).

Loti undertakes an episodic unravelling of the roof women and builds a narrative structure through a suspense/surprise network, conditioned by their gradual and aleatory appearance. He tries to convince his readers that, despite the significant distance, he is still

capable of beholding the "belles promeneuses aériennes" (174) and of giving minute details about their apparels, adornments, and headdresses. He even engages in fictionalization about one of the promenaders who was a "méchante" and "révoltée" with "des allures de bête captive" (212). He speculates that she must be the source of the shrill cries that had cut the stillness of the previous night because of the beating-up she had received from the master of the house (210-14). Moreover, one might also ask the question why Loti insists on calling one of the terrace newcomers a "recrue" (213) at a time when she might have simply been the daughter or niece of his "riche voisin"!

Loti's flippant description of the terrace strollers on his last night in Fez is an illustration of how experiential repertories[11] come to the rescue of sketchy accounts to redeem them from lack of verisimilitude:

> Toutes les négresses esclaves sont là, à leurs postes, figures noires et souriantes, coiffées en mouchoirs clairs, blancs ou roses. Et aussi toutes mes belles voisines à haute hantouze, accoudées, étendues ou fièrement droites, très gracieuses de pose et très éclatantes de couleur, avec leurs larges ceintures cartonnées, leurs longues manches tombantes, et tout ce qui flotte derrière elles, de foulards d'or et de cheveux dénoués (252).

This is what Harold Bloom would call "a plagiaristic stance" (xxv) in the sense that Loti, "hantouze" apart, is here reproducing in words the Orientalist painting of Eugène Delacroix, "Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement," with all its colours and poses. Having captured the stasis of this tableau, Loti refrains from elaboration, abandoning the contrived description by diverting it towards the more aural call for prayer and the more visual snows of the Atlas.

Loti engaged in the texting and framing of Fez within a colonial framework, deploying a set of strained protocols of representation, isolating and accentuating some of its facets at the expense of others. Inscription and transgression fell short of neutralizing his representational quandary. Although he came to the imperial metropolis on behalf of a self-assured colonial power, he was unsettled, almost intoxicated, by the mysticism of Fez, the distillery of

Arab art and refinement. His deep estrangement was intensified by his incapacity to fathom the depths of both its past and present. Loti's"ville sainte" inflicted a tension between his travel as a political and cultural practice of movement, and his narrative as a faithful scripting of foreignness. In many ways, Fez confined him to an all-surface representation.

Notes

[1] *Au Maroc* provoked responses which vary from diatribe to panegyric. Abdeljlil Lahjomri considers it a précis of contempt against the Arab race and a gratuitous compilation of mediocre exoticism, while Denise Brahimi defends the work as Loti's solid equation between "arabité" and art. For more on this, see Alain Quella-Villéger, *La politique méditerranéenne de la France, 1870-1923: un témoin, Pierre Loti* (Paris : L'harmattan) 1991, 36.

[2] These epithets are used by Tzvetan Todorov in his *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought,* trans. Caroline Porter (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993), 322.

[3] See mainly Lahjomri, Abdeljlil. *L'image du Maroc dans la littéature Française (de Loti à Montherlant), Etudes et Documents* (Algiers: société nationale d'édition et de diffusion (SNED), 1973). See also his *A Vrai Lire : Chroniques* (Rabat : Editions Marsam, 2007).

[4] It was Edward Said who launched the argument that travel writing was pivotal to the work of empire in his *Orientalism*.. He explained how travellers like Richard Burton and Gustave Flaubert contributed to the machinery of imperialism, and, by extension, Orientalism. A host of other postcolonial critics carried Said's argument further. See for example Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York, Routledge, 1992), David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1996), Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism.* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), Steve Clark, ed. *Travel Writing and Empire: Postcolonial Theory in Transit* (London & New York: Zed Books, 1999), and Ali Behdad, *Belated Travellers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* (Durham: Duke U.P, 1994). Said devotes a brief, but insightful study of Loti's travel accounts, notably those set in Turkey.

[5]Suzanne Lafont has presented an impressive analysis of clichés in Loti's writings. See her *Suprêmes Clichés de Loti* (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 1993).

[6]For a useful survey on travellers to Morocco whose purposes are limited to reportage, tourism, adventure, and the picturesque, see Natacha Potier's *Dix-sept regards sur le Maroc* (Casablanca: Editions Eddif, 2006). Potier addresses Bonjean, Brasillach, Chevrillon, Colette, De Amicis, Delacroix, Farrere, Dumas Père, Le Glay, Harris, Montherlant, Morand, Orieux, and les Frères Tharaud. Potier also includes Loti but does not address the colonial implications of his trip.

[7]It is inevitable to speculate on Loti's reportage mission to Morocco as an exploratory mission to pave for French entrance. For this argument, see Abdeljlil Lahjomri and C. Wesley Bird who have pointed to Loti's complicity with French colonialism.

[8]Peter J. Turberfield makes an illuminating remark on Loti's final apostrophe to Morocco to remain unchanged as "an implied political statement in itself." Turberfield explains that Loti is "contradicting the claims he made in the preface to be only interested in the beauty of what he describes, and presenting the vision he gives of Morocco as an ideal that should be preserved." See his *Pierre Loti and the theatricality of Desire* (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2008), 119.

[9]See White's "Fictions of Factual Representation," *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978.

[10]See Mieke Bal, *Narratology : Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1997) ; Michel Chaillou, "La mer, la route, la poussière," in *Pour une littérature voyageuse*, edited by Alain Borer, Nicolas Bouvier, et al (Bruxelles: Éditions Complexe, 1992), 57–81; Jacques Chupeau, "Les récits de voyages aux lisières du roman," *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France* 3.4 (1977): 536–553 ; and Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1984).

[11]Travel texts often depend on the stimulation of an experiential stock of what has already been written and read and thus become ideal grounds for intertextuality. According to Cognitive narratologist David Herman, all narrative is able to activate a set of "experiential repertories" which facilitates the deployment of data retrieved from past experiences. See his "Scripts, Sequences, and Stories: Elements of Postclassical Narratology." *PMLA* 112.5 (October 1997): 1046-1059, p. 1046. In a similar vein, Isabelle Daunais argues that "On n'écrit pas pour attester le voyage, on voyage pour attester les livres." See her *L'art de mesure ou l'invention de l'espace dans les récits d'orient (XIX*^{eme} *siècle* (Paris & Montréal : Presses universitaires de Vincennes, 1996), 17.

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