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Pierre Loti's Autobiographical Novel *Madame Chrysanthème* (1885): A Mirror of 'Almost Colonised' 1880s Meiji-Japan from the Late-Imperialist French Traveller

ARTICLE

Toute ma vie m'est apparue sous d'étranges couleurs; elle s'est déroulée avec ses personnages, ses situations, ses décors empruntés à tous les pays de la terre.

Bruno Vercier, *Un jeune officier pauvre* ^[1]

Julien Viaud ; c'était un petit monsieur qui, sur la fin de sa vie, se faisait photographe dans sa maison d'Hendaye, habillé à l'originale et entouré d'un bazar surchargé d'objets folkloriques (il avait au moins un goût commun avec son héros : le transvestisme).

Roland Barthes, *Le Degré Zéro de l'Écriture. Suivi de Nouveaux Essais Critiques* ^[2]

This discussion of Pierre Loti's novel *Madame Chrysanthème* ^[3] regards exoticism as a "more versatile" ^[4] concept of Orientalism, as articulated in the genre of the novel for his travel writing. The conquest of late-nineteenth-century Japan represents another form of the discovery of the New World, given that Meiji Japan, while integrating French and especially German reforms, mostly still adapted to the norms and modern standards of the English-speaking world, as has been theorised by Komori Yōichi ^[5]. Revolutionary France in late eighteenth century played a significant role in American Independence and competed not only with its ennemis héréditaires but also with the rising modern nation of Germany. France expanded its own colonial Empire in South-East Asia in the nineteenth century, and as such, its relationship with Japan is of major importance. Even within Loti's œuvre, *Madame Chrysanthème's* form and narration are highly documentary and essayistic. We could hence ask, following Hélène de Burgh ^[6], whether this disturbance of the Western gaze in Japan foreshadows the *nouveau roman* ^[7], in offering a deconstruction of the modern subjective novel, lacking an omniscient or even a sovereign homodiegetic narrator. Roland Barthes, the conceptual father of the New Novel, chose Pierre Loti's most famous title, *Aziyadé*, as an example of a 'novel without meaning', when circling around the veritable notion of 'nothing': "Donc, il se passe: rien. Ce rien, cependant, il faut le dire." ^[8] He characterized it as foreshadowing the generic innovations of

the 1960s in an essay with the same title from 1974: „L(sic)’homme n’est pas sûr. Ce vertige de l’irréel est peut-être la rançon de toutes les entreprises de démystification, en sorte qu’à la plus grande lucidité correspond souvent la plus grande irréalité.”^[9] John Sturrock turns this relocation of the plot to “take place in the reflective consciousness of the novelist”^[10], to accord the New Novel an “extent(ion) of our creative freedom without any attendant illusions”^[11]. In 19th century, Henry James also wrote about Pierre Loti and France as harbours of a mind and a nation to the audience of a world stage: We seem to be studying not simply the genius of an individual, but, in a living manifestation, that of a nation or of a conscious group becomes a great figure operating on a great scale, and the drama of its literary production... a kind of world-drama, lighted by the universal sun, with Europe and America for the public, and the arena of races, the battlefield of their inevitable contrasts and competitors, for the stage. It is not the entertainment, moreover, a particularly good bill, as they say at the theatre, when it is a question of the performances of France ?^[12]

[Accéder à l'intégralité de l'article](#)

NOTES

[1]

Un jeune officier pauvre, as quoted in: Bruno Vercier, *Pierre Loti Portraits. Les Fantaisies changeantes*, Paris: Flammarion, Série Plume Vent d’Ouestes, 2002, p.5. My translation: “My whole life appeared to me in strange colours: it took place with its personalities, its situations and its *décors* taken from all the countries of the earth.”

[2]

Roland Barthes, *Le Degré Zéro de l’Écriture. Suivi de Nouveaux Essais Critiques*, 1973 [1953], Paris: Editions du Seuil, p.171. The collection of essays is said to be the first poetic conceptualisation of the Nouveau Roman. My translation of the quotation: “Julien Viaud; he was a small man who, at the end of his life, let himself be photographed in his house in Hendaye, dressed in traditional costume and surrounded by a bazaar of folkloric objects.”

[3]

Pierre Loti, *Madame Chrysanthème*, Paris: Flammarion, 1990 [1887].

[4]

See introduction to: Jennifer Yee, *Exotic Subversions in Nineteenth-Century French Fiction*, Legenda Research Monographs in French Studies 25, Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2008.

[5]

See: Yōichi Komori, *Posutokolonialu*, Tokyo: Iwabata-shoten, 2001; Yōichi Komori, *Sōseki-ron. 21 seiki wo ikinuku tameni* (Sōseki-discourse. To survive the 21st century), Tokyo: Iwabata-shoten, 2009.

[6]

Hélène de Burgh, *Sex, Sailors and Colonies. Narratives of Ambiguity in the Works of Pierre Loti*, Bern: Peter Lang European University Publishers, 2005.

[7]

John Sturrock, *The French New Novel. Claude Simon, Michel Butor, Alain Robbe-Grillet*, London: Oxford University Press, 1969. Henry James also wrote about the New Novels as related to the literature in the United States of America at the time of Pierre Loti, in: Henry James, “New Novels (1875)”, in: *Literary Criticism*, New York: Library of



America, 1984.

[8]

Roland Barthes, "Aziyadé" in: *Le Degré Zéro de l'écriture. Nouveaux Essais Critiques*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1974, pp.170 – 187, p.173. The similarity between novel and journal, and the seeming arbitrariness and indifference of the narration is described in a way that it would also suit *Madame Chrysanthème*, see p.174: "On comprend alors la complicité qui s'établit entre ces notations infimes et le genre même du journal intime ...: n'ayant pour dessein que de dire le rien de ma vie..., le journal use de ce corps spécial dont le 'sujet' n'est que le contact de mon corps et de son enveloppe et qu'on appelle *le temps qu'il fait*. »

[9]

Roland Barthes, "Réflexions ou Sentences et Maximes", in: *Le Degré Zéro de l'écriture. Nouveaux Essais Critiques*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1974, pp.69 – 89, pp.84 – 85.

[10]

John Sturrock, *The French New Novel. Claude Simon, Michel Butor, Alain Robbe-Grillet*, London: Oxford University Press, 1969, p.19.

[11]

John Sturrock, p.41.

[12]

Henry James, "Fortnightly Review (May 1888); Essays in London and Elsewhere (1893)", in: *French Writers*, New York: Library of America, 1984, p. 483.