

Berrong on Loti, ed. Quella-Villéger and Vercier (2012, 2016)

Loti, Pierre. *Journal*. Edited by Alain Quella-Villéger and Bruno Vercier, Vol. III: 1887–95, Les Indes Savantes, 2012, pp. 852, ISBN 978-2-84654-294-4; Vol. IV: 1896–1902, Les Indes Savantes, 2016, pp. 732, ISBN 978-2-84654-411-5

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With these two tomes, Alain Quella-Villéger and Bruno Vercier make significant progress in publishing the complete diary of Pierre Loti (1850–1923). Though he lived another two decades after the last entries presented here, Loti ended his diary, or so he thought, in 1911. He resumed diarizing during World War I, but Quella-Villéger and Vercier have already published those years as *Soldats bleus* (1998).

At first glance the interest of these two volumes might seem to stem from the insight they provide into the transition in Loti's literary output from fiction to non-fiction. Such a distinction is far from clear, however. After the spectacular success of *Pêcheur d'Islande* in 1886, Loti continued producing texts that could be marketed as novels, among them the Japanese-set *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887), *Le Roman d'un enfant* (1890), which would have such an influence on Proust, *Fantôme d'Orient* (1892), which was something of a sequel to *Aziyadé*, *Matelot* (1893), *Ramuntcho* (1897), his tale of Basque smugglers, and *La Troisième jeunesse de Madame Prune* (1905). All those works except *Matelot* and *Ramuntcho* could also be classified as partially fictionalized autobiography since they are based on text from the diary. Three of them, *Madame Chrysanthème*, *Fantôme d'Orient*, and *Madame Prune*, also qualify as literary travelogues. In fact, *Madame Chrysanthème* was published in English as *Japan*.

Starting with *Au Maroc* (1890), however, in which Loti seemed to compete with Delacroix, he devoted ever more of his literary energies to the artistic travelogue. These two volumes contain the seeds of most of them: *Le Désert*, *Jérusalem*, and *La Galilée* (all 1895), his narrative of his travel to the Holy Land written in the wake of Ernest Renan's often beautifully poetic *La Vie de Jésus*; *Les Derniers jours de Pékin* (1902), a sometimes gruesomely detailed description of the Chinese capital after it had been pillaged (Loti's term) by European forces under the pretense of putting down the Boxer Rebellion; *L'Inde (sans les Anglais)* (1903); *Vers Ispahan* (1904); and *Un pèlerin d'Angkor* (1912), developed out of his diary entries covering a 1901 trip to the Cambodian temple city.

Much of the interest of these two volumes derives from the entries concerning these travels. They provide eye- (and nose-, and ear-) witness accounts, in some cases among the earliest Western ones we have, of distant and still-different lands written by someone who was not afraid to forsake the comforts of middle-class Western civilization in order to experience such difference.

At the same time, however, these diary entries are often themselves "literary." Loti knew that he would transform them into books, and it is clear that he was crafting what he wrote even here with an eye to future publication. Then, too, the diary text that has come down to us is not always what Loti originally penned. I explained how and why it differs from what the author first set down in my review of the first volume (*NCFS*, vol. 35, no. 3, pp. 682–83).

These diary pages afford those interested in style, Loti's in particular but late nineteenth-century French literary style in general, a chance to see how someone who admired the Goncourt brothers and Flaubert reworked his texts to produce the artistic travelogues that appeared in book form. Henry James, who honed his own texts with the same meticulous care, detected this craftsmanship in Loti's work and admired the writer's ability to disguise it: "his particular shade of the natural was surely never arrived at without much choosing and comparing [...]. But he covers his tracks, as I have hinted, consummately."

In fact, these diary volumes are more interesting with regard to the travelogues than to his more fictional output. We can see him work on *Ramuntcho* and his Protestant historical drama, *Judith Renaudin* (1898), for example, but the diary provides little comment about their creation other than to repeat how much work ("travail") they required. Given that the former was a response to Maurice Barrès's nationalism and the latter a reaction to the Oscar Wilde affair, that lack is unfortunate.

Nor does this part of his diary—again, worked over by Loti and his legitimate son Samuel at the end of the former's life—provide us with anything to settle questions about his apparent homosexual tendencies. There is much talk of time spent with handsome sailors—and now smugglers—but nothing revealing.

On the domestic front, it provides the portrait of a now-wealthy turn-of-the-century Frenchman who shuttled constantly

between several households: his ever-expanding time-travel machine—now a museum—in Rochefort, with its Japanese, Chinese, Arab, medieval, and Renaissance halls; the residence for his Basque *mère porteuse*—to call her a mistress or lover would be misleading—and their two never-legitimized sons, whom he nonetheless introduced even to his most glamorous friends, like Sarah Bernhardt and Princess Alice of Monaco; and a Basque get-away in Hendaye, which also served as a bachelor pad when his wife was not there with him.

Loti was a complicated man with a complicated life, as these volumes make clear.

Volume: 45.1-2

Year:

- 2016