

# Introduction: Reframing Exoticism in European Literature

CLAUDIA DELLACASA AND HANNAH McINTYRE

DURHAM UNIVERSITY AND UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Sono affascinato da tutto questo che non conosco, [...] da questo cerchio di segni che evocano segreti che voglio capire.

— TIZIANO TERZANI<sup>1</sup>

[S]ome notion of literature and indeed all culture as hybrid [...] this strikes me as *the* essential idea for the revolutionary realities today.

— EDWARD SAID<sup>2</sup>

When editing the previous issue of *Working Papers in the Humanities*, that investigated ‘The Sacred in the Secular in European Literature’, we had to remark on the hegemonic centrality of Christianity in the yet noticeably diverse approaches adopted and themes discussed. We investigated European literature’s confrontation with a superior dimension, and we realized the extent to which that vertical line of conversation was (pre)occupied by a dominant interlocutor: the Christian God. In order to integrate that analysis, the present issue was conceived with another dimension in mind, somewhat complementary to the previous one: the horizontal dialogue that European poets, novelists, playwrights and artists have conducted with Oriental ‘others’. The contributions composing this fourteenth number thus examine European perceptions of the exotic as a means to question these very standpoints’ positions.

The term ‘exotic’ derives from the Latin *exoticus*, and before that from the Greek ἑξωτικός. The Greek adverb ἔξω, meaning ‘outside’, remains in the Latin preposition *ex*, indicating a movement *from* somewhere. Already this brief etymological analysis should draw our attention to an often-underestimated detail: the ‘exotic’ suggests a movement *from* the outside, whereas it has usually inspired approaches that, starting from an alleged centrality, move *to* an object of analysis whose agency has long been considered (or treated) as almost absent.

<sup>1</sup> Tiziano Terzani, *In Asia* (Milan: Tascabili degli Editori Associati, 2016), p. 12. ‘I am enraptured by all these things that I don’t know, [...] by this circle of signs evoking secrets that I am eager to understand’, our translation.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 384.

In fact, to talk about a horizontal level of cultural exchange, while symbolic of an encounter that brings together distant dwellers of the Earth's surface, actually brackets an element of verticality that exoticism has long betrayed, and that cannot be overlooked. We are talking about the hierarchy according to which, as in Said's view, 'Orientalism depends for its strategy on [a] flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand'.<sup>3</sup>

Said's *Orientalism* (1978) unavoidably underpins the analysis in this volume, despite our propensity to refer to the broader and all-encompassing category of 'exoticism', which allows our focus to expand beyond the Near East. Being aware of our own position within the Western academic discourse, and therefore of our plausible internalization of many attitudes of the related cultural hegemony,<sup>4</sup> we would like to challenge our own viewpoint by recovering some of Said's questions, and by posing some others to his own. For instance, how might recent developments in world literature, comparative, and postcolonial theory enhance Orientalism as it was analysed in the late '70s? To what extent has exoticism — if not exoticisms — changed over time and in different national contexts, according to mutating historical conditions and in light of globalization? In what ways have narrative, philosophy, and ideology engaged with these shifting parameters of exoticism?

Taking Spivak's advice about jettisoning labels in favour of specificities, our issue is going to take into account singular and diverse modes of that heterogeneous phenomenon that is the encounter of Western authors with Eastern cultures.<sup>5</sup> We hope that this edition of *Working Papers in the Humanities* acts as a hub where many subject positions can meet and engender fruitful dialogues. In this imaginary assembly, German theatre can face Chinese proletariat, French Parnassian poetry can look for a Persian counterpart, and a nomadic dissident French author can lend his words to Palestinian revolution. Identities, if they ever existed univocally, are here convincingly considered in their dialogical forms, in their being always 'co-identities' which necessitate alterity in their own construction. Such 'co-identities' must acknowledge this very need in order to create a harmonic coexistence of diverse agents on the cultural, social, economic and politic field.

Our authors respond to this urge to clarify the mutuality of cultural — and particularly literary — discourses. Indeed, misconceptions, misunderstandings and misinterpretations have long occupied not only creative, but also critical

<sup>3</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> We refer here, as Said does (*Ibid.*, p. 25), to Gramsci's deft statement about the need to be aware of every analysis' personal dimension: 'The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is "knowing thyself" as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory' (Antonio Gramsci, *The Prison Notebooks: Selections*, trans. and ed. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. 324).

<sup>5</sup> See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Questions of Multi-Culturalism', in *The Post-Colonial Critic: interviews, strategies, dialogues*, ed. by Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 59–66 (p. 59).

productions whenever a dialogue with the ‘exotic’ has come into play. Trying to be sympathetic with artists, a Veil of Maya of sorts might even be understandable when it comes to the representation of a distant other, with it functioning as a limit that encourages imagination. There is a pertinent verse by the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi that refers precisely to the sense of loss that a progressive enlargement of our knowledge of the world inevitably entails: ‘Ahi ahi, ma conosciuto il mondo | Non cresce, anzi si scema’.<sup>6</sup> It is possible — and perhaps honest — to admit that poetry needs a margin of the unknown, when it comes to otherness, in order to preserve an inspirational naivety. What has to be fully overcome, on the other hand, is a lack of understanding of different identities’ encounters from a critical point of view. It is with this aim in mind that this issue came into being: it is thus our hope to offer an insight into the various new research questions currently being pursued in the long-standing debate on ‘exoticism’.

\* \* \* \* \*

[Genet] seeks a liminality that keeps him estranged from a patriotic kinship he staunchly rejects, such that his personal feeling of non-belonging only intensifies the alterity of the Palestinians he tries to evoke without commodification, superiority, or exoticizing invention. — JOANNE BRUETON

Joanne Brueton (University of London in Paris) examines the writings of Jean Genet during his residence in the Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan in the 1970s and 1980s. Her focus reveals an author who is aware of the power of Western myths about the ‘Orient’ when writing for that audience. In his portrayal of the Palestinians, Genet seeks to evade clichéd traps whilst also exploiting the existence of such misconceptions. In this article entitled ‘Genet’s Palestinian Folklore’ Brueton is careful not to elide the potential pitfalls of a Western interlocutor acting as spokesperson for a marginalized people. Her analysis places an emphasis on the interventions of Palestinian leaders, as well as Edward Said himself, on Genet’s writing, upending the traditional dichotomy of power in exoticist narratives. Moreover, this article pinpoints the uneasy shifting paradigms of writing on the Middle East amidst an immediate and complex political reality, where Genet eschews the familiar overblown fetishization of the region for a depiction rooted in domestic quotidian detail. Brueton goes on to offer a thoughtful reading of Genet’s use of medieval and classical epic tropes and referents from the Western canon, whereby the fedayeen are both lionized by their association with these mythologies, and the artifice of Genet’s imagined Palestine is revealed.

\* \* \* \* \*

<sup>6</sup> Giacomo Leopardi, ‘Ad Angelo Mai’, in *Canti*, ed. by Mario Fubini (Turin: Loescher, 1968), pp. 50–60 (p. 56). ‘Alas, the world when once known doesn’t expand: | it shrinks’, ‘To Angelo Mai’, in *Canti*, trans. by Jonathan Galassi (London: Penguin, 2010), pp. 28–41 (p. 35).

The 'Fronten' of today is comprised not of Occident and Orient, but of foreign and Chinese managerial classes [...] against the 'chaotischen Massen'. — LUCY BYFORD

Lucy Byford (University of Edinburgh), in her essay entitled 'Beyond Asiatic Despotism: The Stagecraft of Erwin Piscator's Adaptation of *Tai Yang erwacht* (1931)', takes as her starting point the analysis of an apparent paradox: the encounter between exotification as a mystifying approach to the 'other' and socialist epic theatre's programmatic objectivity. The case study in question deals with the representation of the awakening of class consciousness in a factory worker during the nationalist Kuomintang party's taking of power: a play set in 1927 Shanghai, directed by epic dramatist Piscator in collaboration with socialist writer Friedrich Wolf and former Dadaist designer John Heartfield. Byford carefully discusses concepts such as 'sinologism' or 'yellowface' to frame Western idiosyncratic relations with China. In particular, she examines fluctuating Marxist interest towards Chinese revolutionary potential, an interest that was at its peak during the second and third decades of the twentieth century. *Tai Yang erwacht's* epic elements — such as a prologue opening on the back-stage, meta-performative and pedagogical moments — contribute to underline, discuss and possibly deconstruct, tropes pertaining to class, gender and ethnicity in the Chinese revolutionary context. The play also stages Chinese language and ideograms, thus facing one of the most critical points of any sinologized discourse: Western misinterpretation or misconception of Chinese modes of expression. Piscator and Wolf, while aiming to address revolutionary China as an instrumental example for action in Germany, do not fail to represent it in its autonomous characteristics. China is othered, yet the act of othering is renegotiated into a dialectical exchange that links the Chinese revolution with the class war in Germany. Piscator's stagecraft thus questions Marxist racial bias and orientalized vision of history, at the same time offering a multifaceted and creative alternative to them.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rhaïs's presentation as a Muslim 'évadée de harem' is a response to a colonial blind spot, to the logic of orientalism whereby a woman writer from North Africa could hardly be seen as anything else than an imperial stereotype. — EDWIGE CRUCIFIX

In her contribution to this volume, entitled 'An Orientalist Masquerade: The Self-Exoticizing Gaze in the Works of Elissa Rhaïs', Edwige Crucifix (Brown University) examines the hybrid identity of the Jewish French-Algerian writer Elissa Rhaïs. Via her disguising penname, Rhaïs purported to be the first Algerian-Muslim woman to write her own memoirs, recounting her escape from a harem no less in the best-selling *Saâda la Marocaine* (1919). The subsequent exposure of her deception has discounted Rhaïs's credibility, marring her as an agent of French colonialist exoticization of the Maghreb. However, Crucifix

reassesses this position, highlighting the uneasy assimilation of the Algerian Jewish population into the colonizing French culture. Expanding her analysis beyond *Saâda la Marocaine* to evidence the breadth of Algerian women's realities present in Rhaïs's wider fiction, Crucifix examines the historical reality of the hybridity of Algerian identities in the early twentieth century, and the ways in which women educated within the imperialist system may begin to internalize exoticist narratives of their own lives. Drawing attention to the conscious performativity of this genre of colonial narrative, Crucifix also raises important questions about the expectations of truth in such texts. This interpretation is pertinent to the '(re)-framing' approach of this volume, whereby Rhaïs's disguise speaks more to the inability of the French to countenance a more nuanced Algeria. Rhaïs, on the contrary, is able to exploit her lived experience of both cultures and tell the French what it is they want to hear, in addition to revealing more nuanced truths about Algerian identities.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Comedias fronterizas* take the frontier location as an intercultural space of exchange and interaction, in which people construct identity in interaction with other cultural groups. — REBECCA DE SOUZA

With the article by Rebecca De Souza (University of Oxford) we move into a Spanish context, analysing three *comedias* by Lope de Vega depicting the lives of Medieval Muslim Andalusis. While the debate about the latter's representation in early modern literature has mainly followed a Manichean division between maurophilia and maurophobia, only addressing aristocratic and Counter-Reformation contexts, De Souza investigates Lope's *comedias* as more intersectional case studies. Muslims features there in their contingent and evolving religio-cultural identity, based on their long-term presence in the Iberian Peninsula and on their unavoidable interaction with Christians. De Souza thus proposes the compelling taxonomy of *comedias fronterizas*, referring to Lope's representation of intercultural interaction, frontier setting, and the construction of identities on the basis of exchanges between cultural groups over the entirety of the Middle Ages. Identities' belonging to the surface level of costume and language in Lope's play aims to highlight the artificial and constructed nature of society as a whole. Since religio-cultural identities can be performed aesthetically, their arbitrary nature is unmasked. The designation of Andalusi thus supersedes and undermines the solidity of taxonomies such as *Cristiano* and *Moro*: differences among practices, rituals and languages of Christianity and Islam are de-emphasized, to give relevance to internal conflicts contextually. Lope's *comedias*, by representing the reality of Muslims in Iberia during the Middle Ages and their multifarious relationships with Christians, thus advocate more fluid, adaptable and adoptable religio-cultural identities than the ones that exoticism has usually rested upon.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lahor's overt aim was to familiarize Al-Ghazali, but this was in reality a means to an end: that of exoticizing himself. — JULIA CATERINA HARTLEY

Julia Caterina Hartley (University of Warwick) investigates a peculiar example of convergence towards, rather than divergence from, the Orient. In her article, entitled 'Identifying with the Orient: Exoticism and Similarity in Jean Lahor's *Quatrains d'Al-Ghazali*', Hartley presents Parnassian poet Jean Lahor's attempt to assume the poetic voice of the Islamic theologian Al-Ghazali, and to stress similarities between the latter's life and thoughts and his own. Lahor foregrounds his choice to compose poems in the form of Persian quatrains, ultimately vindicating his existential closeness to Al-Ghazali. By doing so, he seems to subvert Said's view of the Orient as a diametrical opposite to the Occident. Nevertheless, as Hartley convincingly argues, Lahor draws on Al-Ghazali's intellectual and spiritual autobiography in a selective, at times even distorting way. The French poet misrepresents the Persian theologian's religious faith, creating a narrative in which he seems to have abandoned Islam in favour of syncretism. Lahor also intervenes on the poetic form, by shifting from the original Persian to French rhyme structures. Lahor's intellectual operation thus falls into a particular mode of Orientalism, where the other is only praised in terms of his similarities, and where differences are erased in view of an ethnocentric approach. Hartley identifies in this mechanism, too deliberate to be naive, a means by which Lahor aims to exoticize himself (his very name included) and to suffuse his French verses with the originality that only an Oriental origin was supposed to possess.

\* \* \* \* \*

Brueton notes at the opening of her article the 'necessity' of exoticism to the French collective imagination, quoting Victor Segalen, whose comments mark some of the earliest critical theory engaged within this volume. The enduring truth of his argument is borne out by the predominance of French in the following articles, albeit with the hallmark of great cultural and historical diversity, encompassing eleventh-century Iran (as appropriated by *fin de siècle* France), 1920s Algeria, and 1970s Palestine. Importantly these contexts offer portrayals of exoticist narrative both within and without the formalized structure of political colonialism, reflecting the pervasiveness of French cultural intervention in different periods and circumstances.

In the works of Byford and De Souza the characterization of the 'exotic' in the German and Spanish languages respectively are shown to be likewise influenced by those nations' histories. Byford's article exposes a Germany dealing with the political spectre of Communism, where the 'Otherness' of Chinese culture is both negated by the shared experiences of the working classes in both locations, and engaged as a distancing tool for the German audience. Similarly, De Souza's article challenges the presumed dichotomy of 'self' and 'other' inherent to most exoticist rhetoric by examining the multicultural

history of Spain, calling into question the very validity of figuring the Spanish Muslim population of the middle ages as 'exotic'. It is unsurprising that the articles compiled here concern languages of considerable stature and power in Western Europe, given the uneven power structures which give rise to exoticist thought. It is worth noting, however, the lasting remnants of such structural power within the British academy, which doubtless continue to influence the balance of modern language departments.

Across these diverse threads, we hope that each reader will draw illuminating comparisons and contrasts. The perception of time is one such thread which has been well established in scholarship on exoticism, and merits some examination here. Throughout the articles in this volume the distance, or indeed lack thereof, between 'self' and 'other', between the 'here' and 'there' inherent to exoticism can also be figured in relation to time. Here Segalen is once again insightful, positing that 'L'exotisme n'est pas seulement donné dans l'espace, mais également en fonction du temps'.<sup>7</sup> In practice, this temporal distance, whether literal or figurative, often plays out in the clichéd dynamic of an exoticized distant culture depicted in terms of simplistic nostalgia, in contrast to the complex and nuanced present of the Western perspective. Robert Young has taken up this idea more recently, arguing that 'implicit to the idea of "the other" is a distinction between the modern (the same) and the residue that is non-modern (the other)'.<sup>8</sup>

This relationship is pertinent to Brueton's analysis, as she navigates the conflict between an immediate, grounded, present, and a mythologized past in Genet's Palestine. However, the distinction is not as polarized as Young suggests, in part due to Genet's self-conscious awareness of his own privileged position, and also due to the political immediacy of the unfolding crisis at hand. This political immediacy is also a factor in Byford's article, where the contemporaneous setting in industrial Shanghai disrupts the traditional exoticist model of a non-modern 'other'.

Contrastingly, Hartley and Crucifix offer a more typical model of this temporal distance. This is true quite literally in the former, as Lahor recalls via his identification with Al-Ghazali a past whose complexities he cannot begin to realize. In the latter, although Rhais's work is set contemporaneously in the early twentieth century, the evocation of the harem recalls the frequently crude use of this motif as shorthand for the supposedly primitive, or non-modern, world of the 'Orient', which as a literary practice is embedded into the French establishment.

This question of time highlights the extent to which the discussion of exoticism centres upon varying degrees of proximity and distance. Without

<sup>7</sup> Victor Segalen, 'Essai sur l'exotisme', in *Oeuvres Complètes*, Vol. 1 (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1995), pp. 745–82 (p. 749). 'Exoticism is not only given in space, but also in terms of time'.

<sup>8</sup> Robert J. C. Young, 'Postcolonial Remains', *New Literary History*, 43. 1, (Baltimore: Winter, 2012), 19–42 (p. 36).

exception, the articles in this volume offer analyses of complex cultural interchanges which cannot be neatly expressed via the polarizing structure of 'self' and 'other'. Instead, the recurrent theme which emerges is one of hybridity, as embraced by Said in the quotation from his influential later work *Culture and Imperialism* which appears at the beginning of this introduction. Some forty years after the publication of *Orientalism*, if 'exoticism' is to continue to offer compelling avenues of analysis, it will be via a nuanced understanding of the myriad identities which exist between 'self' and 'other', as Robert Young argues:

Othering is what the postcolonial should be trying to deconstruct, but the tendency to use the concept remains: the often-posed question of how 'we' (implicitly the majority or dominant group) can know 'the other', who remains implicitly unknowable and unapproachable, [...] is simply the product of having made the discriminatory conceptual distinction in the first place.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, we suggest Young's argument for the 'deconstruction of othering' as a lens through which to consider the following articles. As a venue for the publication of work by early career researchers and postgraduate students, we anticipate that the ideas presented here will go on to provide the basis for further research and debate, and in some small part to contribute to the continuing evolution of our understanding of exoticism.

<sup>9</sup> Young, 'Postcolonial Remains', p. 37.



# Genet's Palestinian Folklore

JOANNE BRUETON

UNIVERSITY OF LONDON IN PARIS

*Abstract.* Jean Genet's political and personal allegiance to the Palestinians has often been interpreted as a putative exoticism, born out of a homoerotic fetishization of Arab alterity. This essay probes such criticisms to suggest instead that Genet's Palestinian poetics deconstruct orientalist tropes by subversively over-exaggerating them. In bearing witness to the Palestinian revolution, or in trying to pay homage to the massacres at Sabra and Chatila in 1982, Genet can never adopt an authorial position of confederation. His voice is mired in the privileges of resource, readership, and mobility facilitated by Western hegemony, which stands anathema to the democracy of his political project. In order to gesture to the reality of the Palestinians, without reification or evangelization, I argue that Genet subversively borrows the language of fairy-tale, folklore, epic, and mythology long associated with nineteenth-century French exoticism, to draw attention to the ultimate artifice of his portrayal. He invites us to glean the authenticity of an Arab world beyond the clutches of the European author, repurposing exoticist legends and formerly lurid colonial representations to transform them into revolutionary fable. In his overly aestheticized portrayals, I argue that Genet does not immobilize the fedayeen in the flat planes of a one-sided image, but disguises them in the layers of such folkloric make-believe that he makes a spectacle of the orientalist fantasy itself.

\* \* \* \* \*

Exotisme en littérature française. Très fécond. Nécessaire, car les Français n'inventent pas. — VICTOR SEGALEN<sup>1</sup>

On 20 October 1970, a Parisian delegate from the Palestinian Liberation Organization invited French dissident Jean Genet (1910–86) to visit the refugee camps in Jordan, where he stayed intermittently until his death. That this notoriously nomadic writer made his home with those without one, bears a poetic coherence that is marred by the political context of the gesture. During an interview in 1974 with Moroccan novelist and acolyte, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Genet concedes that it was his dogged, anti-imperialist vendetta against the

<sup>1</sup> Victor Segalen, 'Notes sur l'exotisme', *Mercur de France*, 323 (March 1955), p. 594. 'Exoticism in French literature. Very rich. Necessary because the French do not invent', *Essay on exoticism: An aesthetics of diversity*, trans. by Yaël Rachel Schlick (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 38.

West that initially steered him towards the Palestinians as ‘non seulement les plus défavorisés, mais [...] ceux qui cristallisent au plus haut point la haine de l’Occident’.<sup>2</sup> He runs the risk of fetishizing the Palestinians as subaltern wanderers, reducing them to props in a diatribe against Western values of colonial, capitalist dominance. Meanwhile, he also benefits from the privilege and scope granted by the hegemony of Western discursive modes.

As the self-questioning leitmotif of ‘que suis-je venu faire ici?’<sup>3</sup> pulses throughout his memoir on Palestine, *Un captif amoureux*, Genet finds himself caught in a hypocritical bind: born in the metropole of an empire ‘si vaste qu’il ceinturerait le globe’ while attempting to pay homage to Palestinians divested of ‘leurs terres, leurs maisons, leurs lits’.<sup>4</sup> The physical appropriation of territory is imagined here like a Russian doll, with each layer of national, domestic, and personal space consecutively removed. To extend the metaphor, the figure nested inside the bed would be the Palestinians themselves, and so if Genet is to conserve rather than conquer the identities he describes, he must reverse the symbolic appropriation of exoticist attitudes that co-opt the Arab world ‘according to colonial knowledge and lore’.<sup>5</sup>

Speaking as a Palestinian, Edward Said has vouched for Genet’s anti-orientalist inclinations by reading his entry into the Arab space ‘not as an investigator of exoticism’,<sup>6</sup> but as ‘a vital act of [...] solidarity, his willing enraptured identification with other identities whose existence involves a strenuously contested struggle’.<sup>7</sup> Identification never becomes assimilative in Genet’s imagination, and when writing about Palestine, he barricades himself behind ‘une lisière [...] épargné [par ...] ma non-appartenance à une nation, une action où je ne me confondis jamais’.<sup>8</sup> He seeks a liminality that keeps him estranged from a patriotic kinship he staunchly rejects, such that his personal feeling of non-belonging only intensifies the alterity of the Palestinians he tries to evoke without commodification, superiority, or exoticizing invention.

In this article, I analyse how Genet’s precarious authorial posture towards Palestine uses the orientalist inclination towards fantasy, imagination and folklore against itself. In his often overly aestheticized portrayals, he nods to an exotic legacy in which a mythical Arabia served Europe as its figurative muse, only to stress the intrinsic artifice of this representation. His political

<sup>2</sup> Jean Genet, *L’Ennemi déclaré* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 370. ‘[T]oward those who crystallized to the highest degree the hatred of the West’, *The Declared Enemy*, trans. by Jeff Fort (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 331.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Genet, *Un captif amoureux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), p. 278. ‘[W]hat am I doing here?’, *Prisoner of love*, trans. by Barbara Bray (New York: New York Review of Books, 2003), p. 235.

<sup>4</sup> Genet, *Un captif amoureux*, p. 19. ‘[T]hat circled the globe’, ‘their houses, their lands, and even their beds’, *Prisoner of love*, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 136.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>8</sup> Genet, *Un captif amoureux*, p. 125. ‘[A] boundary [...] safe [because] I didn’t belong to, never really identified with, their nation or movement’, *Prisoner of love*, p. 105.

responsibility is not to rewrite the myths of 'un monde arabe conventionnel: *Les Mille et Une nuits!*',<sup>9</sup> not to impose a putative truth, but to stress the fallacy of his Palestinian images to safeguard their reality beyond the page.

In a scene in *Un captif amoureux* that dramatizes the politics of his poetics, Genet recounts his first encounter with Yasser Arafat, the erstwhile chairman of the PLO:

Abou Omar m'avait renseigné sur mon rôle ici: 'votre fonction sera très difficile: vous ne ferez rien'. J'avais compris; être là, écouter, me taire, regarder, approuver ou sembler n'avoir pas compris; avec les feddayin être le vieux, avec les Palestiniens celui qui vient du nord.<sup>10</sup>

Arafat entreats Genet to muzzle the autonomy of his voice and role-play a caricature of the impotent outsider to manipulate the false hegemony of a North-South dialectic in which his narrative might be read. The verbs insist on Genet's performed inaction: he is to be seen and not heard; to acknowledge his role as compliant bystander, rather than agent. Twice repeating the term 'compris', Genet toys with its homonymy to insist he understands that his discourse must neither comprise, nor totalize. Arafat casts Genet as the powerless old man who serves as foil to the virile fedayeen; his elderly presence metonymically mapped onto an aged Global North that no longer has a place in Palestine. Indeed, in a gleeful reversal of orientalist norms, Genet recounts in a 1983 interview that it was Arafat's signature that granted him permission to move around the camps, the authority of the Arabic word trumping and ratifying the European's.<sup>11</sup>

Genet designates his brooding guard, Moubarak, as his unlikely source of editorial advice:

[t]u as une petite chance d'être lu, mais trouve-la dans l'urgence et la rapidité de tes phrases. Je te propose une image. Un enfant débile doit prendre de l'huile de foie de morue. Il vide le flacon en souriant car la voix de sa mère le charme. Pour elle, il avale cuillerée sur cuillerée de l'huile abominable. Les lecteurs te suivront si tu deviens leur mère. Parle d'une voix douce et inexorable.<sup>12</sup>

He tinges the scene with a droll irony: Genet the orphan brought up by the French social services is recast in Palestine as a mother helping her puerile French readership swallow the bitter chronicles of the East. Yet, underneath,

<sup>9</sup> Jean Genet, 'Les Palestiniens', in *Genet à Chatila* (Arles: Solin, 1992), pp. 87–151 (p. 121). '[A] conventional Arabic world [found in] *A Thousand and One Nights*', my translation.

<sup>10</sup> Genet, *Un captif amoureux*, p. 208. 'Abu Omar had told me what my role was to be here. "Your job will be a difficult one: don't do anything". I'd understood this to mean I was to be there, listen but say nothing, look on, agree or seem not to understand. With the fedayeen I was to play the old codger; with the Palestinians someone from the north', *Prisoner of love*, p. 174.

<sup>11</sup> Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré*, p. 277.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209. 'You've only got a faint chance of being read — if your style is urgent and swift. I'll give you a simile. A puny child is supposed to take cod-liver oil. The sound of his mother's voice can make him smile and swallow spoonful after spoonful of the horrible stuff — empty the whole bottle. If you become their mother your readers will go along with you. Speak in a voice that's sweet but inexorable', *The Declared Enemy*, p. 175.

there is a subtle political recalibration at play. Within this *mise en scène*, Genet has Moubarak draw on an allegorical image in which a resistant party must be distracted and mollified to absorb content that is hard to digest. Europe is imagined as the petulant child who must imbibe a dose of Middle Eastern politics. They can have none of the sugar-coating of the nineteenth-century French romanticists, who invent an Orient just to offer succour to a Europe they find putrid and parched.<sup>13</sup> Rather, Moubarak advises that Genet find another way of persuading a Western audience to listen to his tales of the Palestinian rebels: narrating the stories about the fedayeen through a soothing, yet pointed lullaby; or recounting a revolutionary bed-time story.

Shifting from an intra to extra-diegetic narrative, Genet steps back from Moubarak's counsel; evangelizing to a French readership in the interest of doing them good is anathema to his crusade against the West. Even Éric Marty's controversial analysis of the late Genet warns against ascribing a moralizing content to his pro-Palestinian texts, his trenchant rejection of Genet as 'celui qui purge le lecteur, et le monde par la même occasion, de ses mauvaises pensées',<sup>14</sup> offering a just reading of Genet's purposefully non-prescriptive ethical position. In Palestine, Genet is more disciple than teacher, more son than patriarch.<sup>15</sup>

Critics who take umbrage at Genet's Palestinian relations, vilifying his 'racial fetishism', 'sexual tourism', and 'colonial erotics' as the 'foundation of his contestatory political engagement',<sup>16</sup> presuppose a stable position of white, narrative dominance that this article challenges. I argue instead that Genet grafts his signature aesthetic of *trucage*, of narrative dissimulation and artistic sham, onto a Palestinian context precisely to reject the tyranny of such objectification. In narrating the Palestinian revolution, Genet seeks a poetics that testifies to a reality that he can only articulate obliquely, in the interstices between his words. The opening pages invite us to read through and around his diaphanous prose to get to 'la translucidité et le blanc [qui] ont une réalité plus

<sup>13</sup> See Victor Hugo's 'Preface' to *Les Orientales*, in *Œuvres Complètes V: Odes et Ballades. Les Orientales* (Paris: Alexander Houssiaux, 1857), p. 211, when he perceives 'le statu quo européen' as 'déjà vermoulu et lézardé'. '[T]he European status quo [...] already worm-eaten and cracked'.

<sup>14</sup> Éric Marty, *Jean Genet post-scriptum* (Paris: Editions Verdier, 2006), p. 11. Marty polemically disavows readers' volition to read *Un captif amoureux* as an emancipatory text, stating that it 'betrays emancipation itself because of an ontology of domination'.

<sup>15</sup> Genet experiences an ethical awakening in the Palestinian camps, stating that 'je changeai en ce sens que mes relations changèrent, parce que chaque relation était différente', *Genet à Chatila* (Paris: Solin, 1992), p. 98. 'I changed in the sense that my relations changed, because each relation was different', my translation. Said also claims that 'there is no indication that he aspired to a special position, like some benevolent White Father', *On Late Style*, p. 137.

<sup>16</sup> Kadji Amin, *Disturbing attachments* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), pp. 82–84. Said exonerates Genet's love of Arabs as his reason for entering into political coalition, while Ivan Jablonka argues that because 'il a loué la charge érotique de la révolte et la beauté des combattants [...] on ne sait plus si le soutien de Genet est d'ordre politique ou sexuel', *Les vérités inavouables de Jean Genet* (Paris: Seuil, 2004), p. 18. '[H]e praised the erotic charge of the revolt and the beauty of the fighters [...] we no longer know if Genet's support is political or sexual', my translation.

forte que les signes qui les défigurent'.<sup>17</sup> It seems that only the anti-figurative, only the erasure of representational realism, will grant us access to an elsewhere Genet strives not to reify. His strategy is not to stay mute as Arafat suggests, but to document his experience with the Palestinians by steeping his representation in a poetics of artifice. If he perceives his words as staining reality, then they must exaggerate their illusory theatricality to show that they are anything but real.

Yet, the border between Arabic reality and legend plagues Genet. In an interview in 1983, he insists on the materiality of the Palestinians whose 'poids' and 'vérité des gestes' defy the fantastic clichés and imaginative geography of the Arab world.

Quand je suis parti de Paris, j'étais encore sous l'influence d'un Orient littéraire. Même si on en parlait dans les journaux, on en parlait encore littérairement [...] j'ai vu un peuple dont chaque membre accomplissait des gestes d'une pesanteur, d'un poids réel. Il y avait un poids de réalité de réel. Tous les pays arabes donnaient des paquets de cigarettes. Aucune cigarette n'était allumée et n'était fumée négligemment. Une cigarette avait son sens. Un seau d'eau pris par une femme arabe à la fontaine avait son sens.<sup>18</sup>

Genet's double polyptoton — *pesanteur*, *poids* and *réalité*, *réel* — emphasizes the poetic construction of his vision of Palestine. He lends the Palestinians solidity, form, movement; eager to actualize what has been fossilized in the flat-planes of an anti-empirical, exotic imaginary. The seemingly arbitrary cigarette is an important detail. Like Victor Segalen's volition to strip the term exotic 'de tous ses oripeaux: le palmier et le chameau; casque de colonial; peaux noires et soleil jaune',<sup>19</sup> so Genet's fascination with the Arabic world comes from removing the magic carpets to confront a familiar modernity. The cigarette is a well-known Genetian motif, its smoke made iconic in *Un chant d'amour* as the sign of an illicit desire that transgresses the borders imposed by a dominant power. When transposed onto Palestine, perhaps Genet theatricalizes the poise and purpose of each cigarette in an imagined act of resistance against the imprisonment of stock images 'qui montrent une Palestine en armes et décharnée'.<sup>20</sup>

Genet's Palestine is not the image sold to the West of an atrophied assailant, but a vital body that inhales, imbibes, elicits thirst and, hence, survives. Clearly, Genet fetishizes this domestic reality: partly because its

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 11. '[T]he translucency and the whiteness contain more reality than the signs that mar them', p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré*, p. 275. 'When I had left Paris I was still under the influence of a literary Orient. Even if it was spoken of in the newspapers, it was in a literary way [...] I saw a people who performed gestures with a real weightiness, a real weight. There was a weight of reality, of the real. All the Arab countries gave out packs of cigarettes. No cigarette was lit or smoked negligently. A cigarette had its sense. A water bucket taken to a fountain by an Arab woman had its sense', *The Declared Enemy*, p. 238.

<sup>19</sup> Victor Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1978), p. 22. '[O]f all its cheap finery: palm tree and camel; tropical helmet; black skins and yellow sun', *Essay on Exoticism*, p. 18.

<sup>20</sup> Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré*, p. 89. '[S]howing a Palestine armed and fierce', *The Declared Enemy*, p. 71.

ordinariness transgresses exoticism; partly because the most prosaic of objects — a cigarette packet, a water fountain, a bucket — are so stylized in his vision that he can describe reality without ever claiming to have any real access to it. As Clare Finburgh argues, this is a *réel* forged in ‘the dissemination of appearance, the perpetuation of iconography with which [...] Genet creates a poetic representation of the Palestinians, and concurrently highlights this representation as illusion.’<sup>21</sup> Genet may try to expose the codes that disrupt the orientalist fantasy, but like the cigarette which ‘avait son sens’, he never attempts to codify an ontological meaning beyond the visible.

Genet thus mines, rather than maligns, the influence of a literary Orient. It actually provides the ideal setting for him to reveal the fragile artifice behind its myths. In the camps at Ajloun, Jordan between 1970 and 1971, he muses on how the fedayeen might reclaim the legends behind their identity:

[c]orps et visages sont offerts à qui sait lire. On croit comprendre qu'ils ont voulu cette dureté afin de créer ce nuage qui flotte sur le monde arabe, de déchirer les mythologiques qu'on y a peintes. C'est la révolte. [...] Parlant de ce nuage, je n'évoque rien d'autre que ce qui demeure en chacun après l'étude ou la lecture simple du Coran où, pour mieux se dissimuler, tous les feddayin sont allés prendre leurs noms de guerre.<sup>22</sup>

In a subversive play of orientalist tropes, Genet turns the bodies of the fedayeen into texts that become legible only to those who can recognize the illusion of the characters they are playing. The fedayeen tear down the mythologies of the West by constructing a new smokescreen: an impenetrable mask behind which their real self remains untouched. Such a conscious play of illusions is at the heart of their revolt as Genet imagines a form of self-protection afforded by the characterizations of pseudonyms found in a different fiction: the Quran. New layers of textual lore replace the stories invented and imposed by a European imaginary; the cloud of orientalist mystery is reappropriated as a hermetic site of Palestinian meaning that rejects a Western reading.

Obscurity is ensured by the legend that inspires these *noms de guerre*, whose weight of tradition ‘fait douter de l'homme qui en fut peut-être l'origine’.<sup>23</sup> As the real is lost to the imagination, identities are dispersed in a complex web of untotizable imitation and play-acting. Genet turns legend into theatre and offers up this mimicry of identity as a perverse way for the Palestinians to protect themselves against further colonization. In the wake of ‘la blessure

<sup>21</sup> Clare Finburgh, ‘Jean Genet and the Poetics of Palestinian Politics’, *French Studies*, 56.4 (October 2002), pp. 495–509 (p. 498).

<sup>22</sup> Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré*, p. 177. ‘Bodies and faces are given to those who can read. One might think that they willed this hardness so as to create the cloud that surrounds the Arab world, and to tear apart the mythologies that have been depicted on it. It's a form of revolt [...] In speaking of this cloud, I am evoking nothing other than what remains within everyone after studying or simply reading the Qur'an, in which all the fedayeen looked for a *nom de guerre*, the better to conceal themselves’, *The Declared Enemy*, p. 152.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

coloniale',<sup>24</sup> Genet figures the Palestinians caught in the iterative performance of bloated theatricality: '[a]fin de combler le vide les boursouflures ne sont pas seulement dans l'imprécation ou le geste, mais dans l'extravagance des héros racontés'.<sup>25</sup> Just as Judith Butler reads gender as 'an imitation without an origin', a parody of the very notion of an original,<sup>26</sup> so Genet safeguards the fedayeen by locating their identity in the iterative performance of an epic heroism that has no solid foundation. Through mythology, the fedayeen escape reification.

Here, Genet calls Orientalism's bluff. He subtly bends what Said believes an orientalist attitude shares with magic and mythology as 'the self-containing, self-reinforcing character of a closed system, in which objects are what they are *because* they are what they are, for once, for all time',<sup>27</sup> to imagine the Palestinians exploiting such hermeticism and using legend as a political strategy against a brutal appropriation of their reality. Curiously, Genet floods his Palestinian texts with reference to Eurocentric epics. He compares the patriotic death of the fedayeen in *Quatre heures à Chatila* with 'le choix [...] d'Achille dans l'*Illiade*'.<sup>28</sup> He draws on the medieval Spanish tale of El Cid and the Greek myth of Antigone as allegories for the details that are erased or passed on across generations.<sup>29</sup> He transposes the Homeric dilemma of whether to 'mourir en un temps bref, ou chanter pour l'éternité?'<sup>30</sup> onto the choice of Palestinian youths deciding whether to go to war. Moreover, he states that since classical antiquity, it is never the event, but its poetic memorialization that lasts:

la gloire des héros doit peu à l'immensité des conquêtes, tout à la réussite des hommages; l'*Illiade* plus que la guerre d'Agamemnon; les stèles chaldéennes que les armées de Ninive; la colonne Trajane; *La chanson de Roland*; les peintures murales de l'Armada; la colonne Vendôme, toutes les images de guerres furent exécutées après les batailles grâce aux butins à la vigueur des artistes.<sup>31</sup>

In part, such comparisons allow Genet to put the Palestinian revolution on the literary map, making space for its actors by creating a transnational kinship with mythological giants. Mainly, however, they serve to legitimize the intrinsic artifice of all commemoration.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. '[T]he "colonial wound"', *The Declared Enemy*, p. 153.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 178. 'As a way to fill the emptiness, the bombast is found not only in curses and gestures but in the extravagance of the heroism that is recounted', *The Declared Enemy*, p. 153.

<sup>26</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 138. Also see Elizabeth Stephens, *Queer Writing: Homoeroticism in Jean Genet's Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 121.

<sup>27</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 70.

<sup>28</sup> Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré*, p. 264. 'Achille's choice in the *Iliad*', *The Declared Enemy*, p. 228.

<sup>29</sup> Genet, *Un captif amoureux*, p. 320.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 174. 'Which is better, a quick death or to sing forever?', *Prisoner of Love*, p. 146.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 14. 'The *Iliad* counts for more than Agamemnon's war; the steles of the Chaldes far more than the armies of Nineveh. Trajan's Column, *La Chanson de Roland*, the murals depicting the Armada, the Vendome column — all the images of wars have been created after the battles themselves thanks to the looting or energy of the artists', *Prisoner of Love*, p. 8.

Instead of idolizing the fedayeen as immortal heroes in a European narrative, he summons his Western readers' canonical knowledge of *The Iliad*, *La Chanson de Roland*, *El Cid*, *Antigone* to drive home the fabrication of his account. Because these epics are accepted as fictions, they help Genet neutralize any hint of orientalism by accentuating the fallacy of his testimony. What Genet admires in the *Iliad* is precisely its poetic license, not its referent: he ascribes beauty to its status as poetry, rather than as sacrament or historic truth.<sup>32</sup> Imagining the fedayeen as Homer does Achilles, Genet assumes an ambitious, yet humble task. He exposes what François Regnault reads as 'le dilemme homérique [...] qu'écrire n'a aucun rapport avec agir',<sup>33</sup> to craft an ersatz reality that is visibly no more than words. Genet's Palestinian sagas pay homage to a literary legacy that is lucid about the demarcation between the symbolic and the real. In a chiasmus that shifts what territory belongs to him, Genet notes about *Quatre heures à Chatila* that 'l'espèce de petit récit que j'ai fait [...] je l'ai fait avec des mots qui sont les miens pour parler d'une réalité qui n'était pas la mienne'.<sup>34</sup> In a tale made only of signs, Genet breaks the illusion that any reality could ever lurk behind a blind orientalist fantasia.

Thus, while Genet may claim that 'aucune technique du récit ne dira ce que furent les six mois passés par les feddayin dans les montagnes de Jerash et d'Ajloun en Jordanie',<sup>35</sup> arguably the only genre appropriate for such ineffability, such disbelief, is the language of make-believe. Genet riffs on the grammar of fable at the end of *Quatre heures à Chatila*, claiming 'je dois avoir vécu la période jordanienne comme une féerie', 'cette féerie à contenu révolutionnaire', 'des Européens et des Arabes d'Afrique du Nord m'ont parlé du sortilège', 'toute cette équipée aurait dû porter en sous-titre "Songe d'une nuit d'été"'.<sup>36</sup> The anaphora of fairy-tale helps remove Genet from any lazy cultural identification with the Palestinians, denying a myopic inclination to cast them in his own image. Instead, he apes the mystery, romance and chimerical landscapes of the French exotic tradition to travel to an elsewhere that has all the cues of Said's invented Orient:<sup>37</sup> witchcraft, hearsay, dream, even the modal verbs defy fact.

In a political twist, perhaps Genet is harnessing what Segalen critiques in the epigraph — the tendency of French literature to pastiche fable and rewrite

<sup>32</sup> Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré*, p. 145 ; p. 161.

<sup>33</sup> François Regnault, 'Le choix d'Homère', in *Genet à Chatila* (Arles: Solin, 1992), pp. 173–76 (p. 176).

<sup>34</sup> Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré*, p. 278. 'This little story I told [...] I told it with words that are mine. But in order to speak of a reality that was not mine', *The Declared Enemy*, p. 240.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243. '[n]o narrative technique can ever say what they were like, the six months [...] that the fedayeen spent in the mountains of Jeraash and Ajloun, in Jordan', *The Declared Enemy*, p. 208.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 264. '[I] experienced the Jordanian period as if it were a charmed adventure'; 'this fairy tale with revolutionary content'; 'Europeans and North African Arabs have spoken to me of the spell that kept them there'; 'the whole venture should have had the subtitle "A Midsummer Night's Dream"', *The Declared Enemy*, p. 228.

<sup>37</sup> See Bernard Poirot-Delpech, 'Un captif amoureux de Jean Genet: le théâtre des opérations', *Le Monde*, 6 June 1986, p. 1; p. 19. Poirot-Delpech argues that Genet figures Palestine in same exoticist vein as Gide, Malraux, Loti, which Edward J. Hughes evaluates in *Writing marginality in Modern French literature* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001), p. 155.



old stories rather than imagine new modes of representation — to reframe that exoticism. By drawing attention to his authorial mythology, he tempts us to look harder at the topography of a Palestinian reality beyond his page and uses his lexis of *féerie* to make our ignorance all the more poignant. He reminds us that ‘si quelque lecteur a vu une carte géographique de la Palestine et de la Jordanie, il sait que le terrain n’est pas une feuille de papier’.<sup>38</sup> Genet’s folkloric ploy is to unveil the palimpsest onto which stories of the East are written, daring us to see the paper as the cover that homogenizes the contours of a real Middle East. His readers can no longer hide behind the veil of his literary imaginary, protected by what he fears for the Black Panthers as the palatable ‘forme d’un folklore très rassurant pour la nation dominatrice’.<sup>39</sup> We must look to another parchment, to the map itself, for a glimpse into reality; and therein lies Genet’s most fantastic invention yet:

[s]’il me fallait figurer le Palestinien [...] je ne pourrais pas le faire sauf à inventer sorte de figure toujours mobile, inquiète et certaine, volontaire, interrogative et sûre de soi, fragile mais passant entre les gouttes comme l’aiguille de la boussole indiquant toujours le Nord, afin qu’elle-même — l’aiguille — ou que lui-même — le Palestinien — ne soit jamais le Nord.<sup>40</sup>

Stripped of all exoticist finery, Genet portrays the Palestinian as an ephemeral, defiant energy that resolutely refuses to be contained by any image. Their material reality is located in such figurative resistance: no form can pin down a figure who oscillates between contradictions; no language can essentialize or identify them through cliché. In Genet’s gossamer portrait, the Palestinians have weight precisely because they mutate, revolt, adapt, question, stand firm; features that render them invisible in an institutional context and dehumanized in a political one. However, being made un-real as a nation is recast in Genet’s fantasy as the source of the Palestinians’ greatest power: their way to disavow the hegemony of a Global North and follow the internal compass of irrepressible, revolutionary struggle.

<sup>38</sup> Genet, *L’Ennemi déclaré*, p. 264. ‘Any reader who has seen a map of Palestine and Jordan knows that the terrain is not a sheet of paper’, *The Declared Enemy*, p. 228.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75. ‘[F]olklore that is very reassuring to the dominant nation’, *The Declared Enemy*, p. 59.

<sup>40</sup> Notes from 1970, collated in Elisabeth Boyer and Jean-Pierre Boyer, *Genet* (Paris: Éditions Farrago, 2006), p. 300. ‘[I]f I had to figure the Palestinian [...] I would only be able to by inventing a figure that was always mobile, anxious yet certain, wilful, questioning and confident, fragile but weathering the storm like the needle on a compass that always points North, so that neither the needle nor the Palestinian could ever be North’, my translation.

# Beyond Asiatic Despotism: The Stagecraft of Erwin Piscator's Adaptation of *Tai Yang erwacht* (1931)

LUCY BYFORD

UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

*Abstract.* While exotification hinges on the imagined or fantastical in order to dominate or 'other' its subject, objectivity was upheld as a guiding principle by practitioners of socialist epic theatre in their ambitions to broadcast historical materialist truth. Both Erwin Piscator's stagecraft for the 1931 premiere of Friedrich Wolf's *Tai Yang erwacht* at Berlin's Wallner-Theater, and its stage scenery by former Dadaist, John Heartfield, sought to foster a sense of proletarian, transcultural identity. Heartfield produced protest banners displaying slogans in German and Chinese script, framing parallels between imperial oppression in both countries, messaging reinforced with film projections. In tracing the progression of the female protagonist from factory worker to communist rebel, this collaborative piece successfully bypassed many tropes of 'the Orient' that otherwise saturated Weimar entertainment culture. This paper therefore asks: as postcolonial theory increasingly eschews notions of universal commonality for a more nuanced understanding of pluralities and intersections of identity, how may we critically assess the case study of *Tai Yang erwacht* today?

\* \* \* \* \*

*Tai Yang erwacht* (*Tai Yang awakes*) depicts the awakening of class consciousness in a textile factory worker, Tai. The play is set in Shanghai in 1927, the year of the Shanghai massacre, a purge of the Communist Party of China by factions in the nationalist Kuomintang government under Chiang Kai-shek.<sup>1</sup> Erwin Piscator's (1893–1966) last production before he left for Moscow following his sixth bankruptcy, the play featured performances from the 'Junge Volksbühne' collective and the 'Roten Tänzer' dance troupe.<sup>2</sup> It premiered in Berlin's dilapidated Wallner-Theater in 1931 during a period of economic and political

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Wolf and Henning Müller, *Wer war Wolf?: Friedrich Wolf (1888–1953) in Selbstzeugnissen, Bilddokumenten und Erinnerungen* (Cologne: Röderberg-Verlag, 1988), p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Untitled commentary by Sergei Tretyakov in *Erwin Piscator: Political theatre, 1920–1966. A photographic exhibition from the German Democratic Republic*, ed. by Ludwig Hoffmann, trans. by Margaret Vallance (London: Hayward Gallery, 1971), p. 37. 'Young People's Theatre', 'Red Dancers'. Translations are author's own unless otherwise stated. The Roten Tänzer choreography was devised by Jean (Hans) Weidt (1904–88).

freefall in Germany. *Tai Yang erwacht* presents a collaboration between some of the most significant figures in leftist German theatre at the time. The play's director, Piscator, was the first to develop epic theatre before Bertolt Brecht adopted and further adapted the genre. The script was penned by prominent socialist writer, Friedrich Wolf (1888–1953), and its innovative set design was executed by former Dadaist, John Heartfield (1891–1968). Yet the play has received scant attention in the literature on Piscator, and is discussed at length in no more than a handful of contemporary reviews, mostly in the German Communist Party (KPD) press.<sup>3</sup> This lack of recent critical analysis is particularly surprising, as applying a lens of intersectional postcolonialism reveals a staged narrative that, while far from immune to orientalised discourse, nonetheless sought to directly interrogate constructs of race against a sensitively observed backdrop of capitalist imperialism. In addressing how these issues intersect with the epic theatre format's treatment of character, gender, language and space, this discussion draws from wide-ranging source material beyond the published script, such as the accompanying programme, photographs, theatre reviews, and relevant correspondence.

### **Marxist thought and the case of China: an avant-garde response to stirs of revolution**

Sinologists rightly highlight the limits of a postcolonial framework in any examination of Sino-Western relations, given that the country was never formally colonized. In response to this quandary, literary scholar Ming Dong Gu deploys the term 'sinologism' to signal a diversion from Edward Said's notion of 'orientalism', first formulated in 1978.<sup>4</sup> Even before Britain enforced the trade relations on the country that led to the Opium wars (1839–42, 1856–60), the very autonomy of the Chinese civilization kindled Western anxieties of the Other, most archetypally in Hegel's characterization of the Chinese empire as 'the realm of theocratic despotism' in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (delivered 1822–30, posthumously published by Eduard Gans in 1837).<sup>5</sup> Hegel's view that China existed in a state of despotic petrification was further perpetuated by his follower, Karl Marx, who described the country, in its economic isolationism, as 'a mummy carefully preserved in a hermetically sealed coffin'.<sup>6</sup> Marx and Engels developed the notion of an 'Asiatic mode of

<sup>3</sup> See Ludwig Hoffmann and Klaus Pfützner, *Theater der Kollektive: Proletarisch-revolutionäres Berufstheater in Deutschland 1928–1933: Stücke, Dokumente, Studien* (Berlin: Henschelverlag Kunst und Gesellschaft, 1980), 1, pp. 248–50.

<sup>4</sup> Ming Dong Gu, *Sinologism: An Alternative to Orientalism and Postcolonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 2. See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Georg W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. by J. Sibree, (New York: Cosimo Books, 2007), p. 112.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Marx, *Marx on China, 1853–1860: Articles from The New York Daily Tribune* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1951), p. 4, cited in Donald M. Lowe, *The Function of "China" in Marx, Lenin and Mao* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), p. 19.

production' to elucidate this perceived state of entrenched feudalism prevalent in Asia.<sup>7</sup>

Practitioners of epic theatre sought broadly to uphold Marxist thought, emphasizing material conditions over the emotionalism of the dramatic self as a means of developing class-critical sensibilities in their audience. Wolf wrote *Tai Yang erwacht* as an epic theatre *Gegenstück* to Alfred Henschke's 'bourgeois' *Der Kreidekreis* (*The Chalk Circle*) (1925), itself based on the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) epic by Li Qianfu.<sup>8</sup> In the context of epic theatre, the intertextual protagonist of *Der Kreidekreis*, Hai Tang, is refigured in Wolf's script as Tai Yang, a metonym for the Chinese proletariat. Despite the international left's ardent engagement with Marxist thought, seismic shifts in the Chinese political landscape, such as the fall of the millennia-old imperial system in 1912 and the May the Fourth Movement of 1919, prompted a reappraisal of China's revolutionary potential. There was a prevailing sense that, if China could catalyze a communist revolution, a global process could feasibly follow.

### Unmasking capitalist imperialism: yellowface and data on stage

It was this context that informed Piscator's suggestion to include a prologue commencing with the actors changing into costume before dressing room tables and mirrors on stage (Fig. 1). The audience watched as the cast applied stage makeup and costume to fashion a synthetic Chinese ethnicity, daubing yellowface get ups onto, in the words of Piscator, 'europäischen Gesichtern'.<sup>9</sup> According to scholar Krystyn R. Moon, 'yellowface', a term derived from 'blackface', is designed to codify an imagined inferiority of the Chinese body, perpetuating stereotypes around peoples of East Asian descent through a permutation of racialized costume, makeup and acting.<sup>10</sup>

*Tai Yang erwacht* presents a chimeric engagement with the category of yellowface, at once spotlighting, and even ritualizing, the act of applying the stage makeup, whilst also ultimately deconstructing the actors' ethnic guise. To develop this theatrical frame and interlace epic elements into the drama, Wolf suggested that the actors continue to step in and out of character throughout the play, during the interval, and outside the theatre.<sup>11</sup> Whilst the male cast members shatter the stage's illusory qualities in this manner, the women actors change silently behind a screen during the prologue, with the unfortunate effect of reconfiguring a Western male gaze directed at a female 'Other'. The silence of lead actress Constanze Menz during this staged preamble did little to reflect

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> John Willett, *Brecht in Context: Comparative Approaches* (London and New York: Methuen, 1984), p. 91. '[C]ounterwork'.

<sup>9</sup> Erwin Piscator, 7 October 1930, in Hoffmann, *Theater der Kollektive*, p. 234. '[E]uropean faces'.

<sup>10</sup> Krystyn R. Moon, *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music & Performance, 1850s-1920s* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2004), p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Wolf, 7 October 1930, in Hoffmann, *Theater der Kollektive*, p. 237.



FIG. 1. Lotte Jacobi, Untitled (Prologue of *Tai Yang erwacht*), 1931. Akademie der Künste Archiv, Berlin. Reproduced with the kind permission from the University of New Hampshire, Lotte Jacobi Papers (1898-2000) dept.

her significant contribution to the script, as it was Menz who arranged for the relevant research materials to be sent to Wolf via a professor from the Chinese institute in Berlin.<sup>12</sup>

The marginalized position of the women in the prologue, perhaps a result of Piscator's intervention, similarly failed to reflect Wolf's own feminist views. By 1931, Wolf, who was both a writer and a qualified doctor, had established a reputation as an advocate for women's rights and health. The 1930 film adaptation of his play *Cyankali* (1929), based on the draconian abortion clause §218 in the Weimar penal code, provoked such controversy that it was banned in southern Germany, leading to Wolf's temporary incarceration.<sup>13</sup> In *Tai Yang erwacht*, the playwright's representation of China's 'base' as a female proletariat of factory weavers is significant in feminist and postcolonial terms, as it was indigenous handicraft industries, such as the predominantly female craft of silk weaving, which were all but wiped out by abrupt industrialization.<sup>14</sup> Based on accounts from academic sources on workers' conditions in China, Wolf

<sup>12</sup> Wolf, cited in Michael Kienzle and Dirk Mende, *Ausstellungsreihe: Friedrich Wolf, die Jahre in Stuttgart 1927-1933* (Stuttgart: Eigenverlag, 1983), p. 81.

<sup>13</sup> Wolf and Müller, *Wer war Wolf?*, pp. 110-11.

<sup>14</sup> Lowe, *China*, p. 21.

depicted how the weavers — the ‘spiders of Shanghai’ — hid their still-nursing infants under the machines, sedating them with an opium tonic to elude the admonitions of their superior.<sup>15</sup>

Geopolitical concerns discussed during the prologue were designed to heighten the pathos of this episode. Not yet fully in character, male players conversed at the dressing tables on domestic politics and the Nazis. When the actor playing the communist Wan (Potrow in earlier scripts) broaches the topic of revolutionary unrest in China, the figures on stage begin to progressively adopt their respective characters.<sup>16</sup> Vocalizing questions and concerns germane to their staged identities produces a subtle gradation of characterization, diminishing the presence of performative yellowface in the form of exaggerated and racialized mimicry. Equally, however, one of Piscator’s most fundamental edits to Wolf’s original script was his recommendation that the German text should nod to the tonality of the Chinese language by adopting a ‘kürzere Ausdrucksform’, the precise effect of which would have been contingent on the actors’ delivery of the script.<sup>17</sup> The published version of the prologue also sees the actors discuss the average Chinese wage, priming the audience for the play’s phantasmagoria of statistics on workers’ conditions, pedagogical elements integral to epic theatre’s portrayal of materialist history.

Vertical format banners bearing raw data — ‘Fisch und Fleisch machen nur 3% der chinesischen Ernährung aus’ — vehemently informed the dramatic action by visually overwhelming the stage (Fig. 2).<sup>18</sup> Piscator intended for the banners to lend the play a ‘Demonstrationscharakter’, an impression relayed in Brecht’s account of Heartfield’s banners in his *Kleines Organon für das Theater (Short Organum for Theatre)* (1948): ‘reversible flags [...] mark changes in the political situation of which the persons on the stage were sometimes unaware’.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, in a review published in the KPD organ, *Die Rote Fahne (The Red Flag)*, critic Alfred Durus wrote, ‘die Dekorationen [...] verringern den Gegensatz zwischen Bühne und Wirklichkeit auf ein Mindestmaß’, recalling the intention of their designers to overcome, at least in part, imagined constructs of Chinese culture.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup> See 39:39 — 40:20, *Shanghai Document*, dir. by Yakov Bliokh (Soyuzkino, 1928) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h7GfjKvxq4>> [accessed 2 February 2019]. Friedrich Wolf, *Dramen: Die Matrosen von Cattaro, Tai Yang erwacht, Die Jungens von Mons, Professor Mamlock, Laurencia*, Gesammelte Werke (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1960), pp. 115–16.

<sup>16</sup> Piscator, 7 October 1930, in Hoffmann, *Theater der Kollektive*, p. 234.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233. ‘[S]horter form of expression’.

<sup>18</sup> Erwin Piscator, *The Political Theatre*, trans. by Hugh Rorrison (Berlin: Albert Schulz Verlag, 1929; repr. London: Eyre Methuen, 1980), p. 343. ‘Fish and meat make up only 3% of the Chinese diet’.

<sup>19</sup> Piscator, 7 October 1930, in Hoffmann, *Theater der Kollektive*, p. 235. ‘[D]emonstrative character’. Bertolt Brecht, *A Short Organum for the Theatre* (1948), cited in Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. by John Willett (Berlin: Albert Schulz Verlag, 1964; repr. London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 203.

<sup>20</sup> Alfred Durus, ‘Bühnendekoration von Heartfield’, *Die Rote Fahne*, 22 January 1931, cited in Wieland Herzfelde, *John Heartfield, Leben und Werk: dargestellt von seinem Bruder, Wieland Herzfelde* (Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1971), p. 331. ‘[T]he props... minimise the contradiction between stage and reality’.



FIG. 2. Lotte Jacobi, Untitled (stage scenery, *Tai Yang erwacht*), 1931. Akademie der Künste Archiv, Berlin. Reproduced with the kind permission from the University of New Hampshire, Lotte Jacobi Papers (1898-2000) dept.

One of Said's critiques of the field of Oriental studies was the discipline's ascription of scientific truth to exclusively Western thought.<sup>21</sup> While the looming statistics on stage do partially replicate these associations, the script itself inserts episodes clearly designed to ridicule imperialism's pretensions at domination through its social-scientific analysis of foreign cultures. For example, a representative from the British Red Cross, Miss Lund, steps into the role of an anthropologist by taking notes in Tai's family home, purportedly unable to contain her delight at the quaint poverty of the lodgings, 'Man muß das Volk von allen Seiten kennenlernen! Ich liebe sehr das Volk in seiner Einfachkeit und Poesie.'<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the British Red Cross is framed in the plot as an agent of capitalist imperialism, seeking to tacitly further British imperial vested interests in this new primary industry in Shanghai while touting a public face of philanthropy. It is when textile agent Ixman is discussing tactical cooperation with the Red Cross to the factory director that he surreptitiously refutes Orientalism's primary dichotomy, observing that the 'Fronten' of

<sup>21</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 46.

<sup>22</sup> Wolf, *Dramen*, p. 110. 'One has to get to know the people from all angles! How I love them, in their simplicity and poetry.'

today are comprised not of Occident and Orient, but of foreign and Chinese managerial classes, such as themselves, against the 'chaotischen Massen'.<sup>23</sup>

### Linguistic autonomy and the 'plasticization' of materialist history

Beyond debunking tropes and exposing microaggressions, one of the play's most foundational challenges to prevailing notions of Orientalism was its staging of the Chinese language. At the end of the prologue, the actors crowd round 'the philosopher', Hung Ming, as he delivers a condensed retelling of materialist Chinese history. He illustrates his short lecture with an ideogram drawn on his dressing table mirror. The mirror comprises of a spotlight which projects the Chinese character onto a screen behind the dressing tables, transforming the stage into a magnification of Hung Ming's mirror. He explains that the ideogram stands for the 'Tsching-Sin-System' established by 'Wang-Tsin' in 2700 BC, a Saturnalian era during which land was neither bought nor sold, but was instead evenly and justly distributed in a taxation system, leading to unrivalled stability and prosperity.<sup>24</sup> The verbal assertion that a system with strong parallels to Communism had a successful historical precedent in China, followed by the presentation of its own ideogram, strengthened the play's call to socialism by grounding socialist ideals in the realm of the plausible.

Western misinterpretations surrounding Chinese script inform a large part of sinologized discourse. The Western avant-garde was by no means exempt from these misconceptions, as is exemplified by Ezra Pound's 'Essay on the Chinese Written Character' (1919) and his *ABC of Reading* (1934). According to the American poet, as Chinese script is primarily pictographic, it operates referentially, citing the physical — as opposed to metaphysical — world, causing it to manifest in a proliferation of similes and metaphors.<sup>25</sup> However, as Gu explains in his essay on the subject, ideograms, also known as ideographs, are not directly pictographic, but derive their form from the interpretation of 'salient features' of a concept.<sup>26</sup> These prevalent features are then abstracted and formed into an 'constructed likeness' via a 'maximum economy of representation'.<sup>27</sup> Correspondingly, Hung Ming demonstrates how the 'Wortschild' for the 'Tsching-Sin-System' stands for an interpretation of the salient feature of the epoch's economic model, quoting the 'Schema der Landeinteilung', in which eight square units were assigned to each family.<sup>28</sup> Lines of particular significance, such as a description of the 'Tsching-Sin-

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 132. '[B]attle fronts', 'chaotic masses'.

<sup>24</sup> 'Vorspiel des Piscator-Kollektivs' (the Piscator Collective's Prologue) repr. in Hoffmann, *Theater der Kollektive*, pp. 239–45 (p. 240). Written by Wolf with edits from Piscator.

<sup>25</sup> Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1951), pp. 21–22.

<sup>26</sup> Ming Dong Gu, 'Reconceptualizing the Linguistic Divide: Chinese and Western Theories of the Written Sign', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 37 (2000), 101–24 (p. 104).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> 'Vorspiel', in Hoffmann, *Theater der Kollektive*, p. 242. '[W]ritten sign', 'pattern of land distribution'.



System, are performed in German and Mandarin, providing an auditory counterpart to the Chinese script.

Piscator and Wolf were fairly explicit about their agenda to 'provide an example for action in Germany' rather than furthering awareness of worker exploitation in China.<sup>29</sup> Their Germano-centric agenda cannot, however, account for the decision to integrate Chinese language elements. In both vocalized and textual form, the original language remains intact onstage to striking effect, while the translations twinned with these Chinese concepts or slogans impede any fetishizing of their aesthetic formalism.

Said aligns persistent tropes of the Orient's muteness with the imposition of 'feminine' and 'supine' qualities, noting the enforced power dynamic when an oriental voice is unable to speak for itself and must be 'articulated' by the 'learned authority of a philologist'.<sup>30</sup> As opposed to communicating muteness, the presence of the Chinese language here concedes its own untranslatability. Its prominent position proffers an admission that linguistic renderings of reality are inescapably bound to culture, setting up an autonomous realm of meaning impervious to colonization in response.

This quality of untranslatability was also compounded by Heartfield's stage set design. Banners bearing Chinese characters hung from the gallery alongside those with German slogans, highlighting parallels between the legacies of German and Chinese imperial oppression, and transforming the theatre into a communist meeting hall (Fig. 2). Russian writer Sergei Tretyakov wrote in 1936 that the written word is 'unentbehrlich' in Heartfield's work, a mantra that may be extended to his avid interest in Chinese script.<sup>31</sup> Heartfield repeatedly incorporated Chinese characters into his design work: for example, in a cover of the German translation of Tretyakov's *Roar, China!* published by the Malik Verlag in 1932.<sup>32</sup> In foregrounding the original Chinese language, Heartfield's scenery and Piscator's stagecraft anticipated a turn in translation studies typified by the work of George Steiner, who was among the first to question whether 'the transference of semantic energies between mutually distinct and reciprocally incomprehending [sic] tongues is always feasible'.<sup>33</sup>

The filmic elements of *Tai Yang erwacht* presented another strategy of immersive staging, incorporating similarly direct references to China. Film projections were deployed sparingly, reserved for scenes such as the 'workers' scene', showing women at mechanical silk looms, and the 'shooting scene'.<sup>34</sup> They projected footage from Soviet director Yakov Bliokh's film *Shanghai*

<sup>29</sup> Piscator, *Political Theatre*, p. 343.

<sup>30</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 138.

<sup>31</sup> Sergei Tretyakov, *John Heartfield: Eine Monographie* (Moscow: Ogis, 1936), cited in Herzfelde, *Heartfield, Leben und Werk*, p. 337. '[I]ndispensable'.

<sup>32</sup> Sergei Tretyakov, *Den Shi Chua. Ein junger Chinese erzählt sein Leben. Bio-Interview*, trans. by A. Kurella (Berlin: Malik Verlag, 1932).

<sup>33</sup> George Steiner, 'On an Exact Art (Again)', *The Kenyon Review*, New Series, 4.2 (1982), 8–21 (p. 9).

<sup>34</sup> See 41:16 – 41:37 and 48:24 – 48:34, Bliokh, *Shanghai Document*.

*Document* (1928), a work censored in Germany during the run of *Tai Yang erwacht* at the Wallner-Theater.<sup>35</sup> Piscator planted an actor in the audience who was to accuse the play's creators of fabricating the action shown on stage. In direct response to this outburst, excerpts from Bliokh's film were then projected onto the *Roten Tänzer*, whose choreographed bodies re-formed into a succession of demonstrators flooding the stage.<sup>36</sup> The line of protesters held blank banners, forming a live projection screen for the film, generating the effect of a double exposure of the play's revolutionary content. Scholar Christopher Innes interprets the use of intermedia here as a reinforcement of the truth value of the narrative action.<sup>37</sup>

Rather than linking the film's mimetic value to authenticity, the *Verfremdungseffekt* or, in Piscatorian terms, the 'direct confrontation' caused by the new medium on stage may perhaps be more aptly described as a reaffirmation of the artifice of the stage action.<sup>38</sup> Through introducing the second medium of film, Piscator rewards his audience for questioning the truth value of the stage action alone, moving towards epic theatre's aim of fostering the critical thought needed to engender 'awakenings' of class consciousness in audience members. In the epic theatre context of competing pools of information, present in the form of the statistics, the Chinese language, and the narrative drama, the projected film acts as another mode of translation in the play's medley of linguistic and representational schema.

Responding to the illegibility of the script on many of the banners he crafted, Heartfield produced a textual piece for the programme entitled *Die Dekorationen sprechen (The Decorations Speak)*. Stacked between his poem's two columns, the phrase 'Long live Soviet China!' descends vertically alongside its translation into Chinese characters, establishing a clear visual correlation with the vertical format banners on stage. In the verse proper, written in the style of a playscript with different speaking parts, the stage scenery communicates with the protagonist in a predominately uppercase script. The poem follows a principle outlined in Piscator's text, 'Objective Acting': in epic theatre, the 'prop [...] is no longer mere support, but is a plastic detail of full human utterance'.<sup>39</sup>

Drawing on motifs of automata from the artist's earlier work with the Berlin Dadaists from c. 1918–21, anthropomorphized walls decry the suffering they have witnessed, streets proclaim their disenfranchisement, and factory machines go on strike with the demonstrators. The piece reaches its apotheosis at a fork in the road. Tai must choose between 'EINE MORSCHE WACKLIGE

<sup>35</sup> 'Die Zensurmaschine arbeitet. Filmszenen in "Tai Yang" verboten', *Berlin am Morgen*, 20 January 1931, cited in Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture 1931–1941* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 52.

<sup>36</sup> Christopher Innes, *Erwin Piscator's Political Theatre: The Development of Modern German Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 112.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199. The Brechtian term *Verfremdungseffekt*, originally translated as 'alienation effect' by John Willett in 1964, is now frequently translated as 'distancing effect'.

<sup>39</sup> Piscator, 'Objective Acting', in Hoffmann, *Political theatre, 1920–1966*, p. 59–65 (p. 59).

BRUECKE RECHTS' and a 'FESTER STEG LINKS'.<sup>40</sup> While the treacherous bridge to the right promises to guide her to 'ruhiger Arbeit', the strong bridge to the left condemns the 'Wucher und Galgen' of the workday, drawing the poem to a close with the lines, 'EIN WEG NUR IST OFFEN! [...] VORAN MEINEN WEG!'<sup>41</sup> Heartfield's imagery alludes to two bamboo walkways on either side of the Wallner-Theater stage, analogizing these bridges from stage right and stage left as opposing ends of the political spectrum, envisioned as a binary of oppression and emancipation. The verse also alludes to an exchange in scene eight, where Wan portrays Tai's suppression as a thick, consuming 'Stumpf' from which the communist rebels offer to retrieve her by extending a hand to pull her up onto a 'harte, steinige Straße'.<sup>42</sup>

Like the layers of translation created by the overlay of theatre and film, the leitmotif of pathways displayed through different media — in the play's dialogue, in the stage set, and in Heartfield's textual piece — provides a spatial reconceptualization of temporality in materialist history. As one anonymous review in the party press stated, 'Noch nie hat ein revolutionärer Regisseur die materialistische Dialektik der Geschichte szenisch so plastisch geformt'.<sup>43</sup> Yet this is not deterministic materialist history in a teleological sense, caught on a single track in an ever-resolving dialectic towards Communism. Rather, materialist history is written in *Tai Yang erwacht* as a miscellany of indeterminate crossroads. By staging revolutionary activity in China, where labour had barely separated from the mode of production but was already prey to capitalist exploitation by domestic and international agents, the script undermined the Hegelian notion of China's inertia, instead holding it up to Europe as a model for revolutionary progress. The resulting play then not only overwrote Marx's Asiatic mode of production with its focus on revolutionary China, but it also provided a revised model of materialist history as a series of unpredictable junctures.

### Conclusion: remoulding Asiatic despotism into intercultural exchange

To conclude, the narrative's focus on the oppressed demographic of female weavers in Shanghai does not preclude its othering of China, whose class struggle is deemed of interest first and foremost through its importance to Germany. Yet this collaboration between three prominent avant-garde members of the KPD birthed a work that renegotiated the act of othering into a dialectical exchange. Driven by the prospect of stirring revolution in Germany, *Tai Yang erwacht*

<sup>40</sup> John Heartfield, 'Die Dekorationen sprechen', in Hoffmann, *Theater der Kollektive*, p. 247. '[A] RAMSHACKLE, SHAKY BRIDGE TO THE RIGHT', 'STEADFAST GANGPLANK TO THE LEFT'.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. '[Q]uiet work', 'usury and gallows', 'ONLY ONE PATH IS OPEN! ... FORWARDS ON MY PATH!'.

<sup>42</sup> Wolf, *Dramen*, p. 161. '[B]og', 'hard, stony street'.

<sup>43</sup> Anon., *Rote Fahne*, 17 January 1931, cited and translated in Innes, *Modern German Drama*, p. 117. 'Never before has a revolutionary director given such a plastic scenic form to the materialistic dialectic of history', my translation.

undertook an earnest examination of cultural relativity and intersectionality. Revolutionary communist uprisings in China necessitated a radical departure from traditional Marxist ideas, granting Piscator and his peers the space to reimagine historical materialism, leading them, in the words of reviewer Otto Bikha, to 'link dialectically the Chinese revolution and the class war in Germany'.<sup>44</sup> Piscator's resultant 'plasticization' of Wolf's script harnessed three central strategies: the deconstruction of yellowface; the privileging of materialist data over essentialized racial identity; and the preservation of the autonomy of Chinese language elements. The stagecraft's tripartite challenge to orientalist precepts affirms a thesis in Heartfield's introduction to his poem, 'Die Dekoration bringt nicht nur Atmosphäre, sondern auch den Inhalt des Dramas'.<sup>45</sup>

Far from exhibiting a dogmatic adherence to Marxist doctrine, *Tai Yang erwacht* in fact addresses weaknesses of Marx's historical materialism, rooted in racial bias at the heart of the theory's derivative Hegelianism. Piscator's stagecraft was therefore also 'plastic' in its adaptability and openness to historical events as they unfolded in real terms. Embodying Wolf's aspiration to present the theatre 'nicht als Illusion [...] sondern als Praxis', the original 1931 production of *Tai Yang erwacht* was most significant in the ways that it diverged from Marx's orientalized vision of history.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Otto Bikha, 'Revolutionsonnyi teatr Germanii', *Internatsional'naiia literatura*, 7 (1932), p. 110, cited in Clark, *Moscow*, p. 51.

<sup>45</sup> Heartfield in Hoffmann, *Theater der Kollektive*, p. 246. 'The decorations summon not only the drama's atmosphere, but also its content'. Heartfield's emphasis.

<sup>46</sup> Wolf, 7 October 1930, in Hoffmann, *Theater der Kollektive*, p. 237. '...[N]ot as illusion ... but as praxis'.

# An Orientalist Masquerade: The Self-Exoticizing Gaze in the Works of Elissa Rhaïis

EDWIGE CRUCIFIX

BROWN UNIVERSITY

*Abstract.* An author of popular exotic novels, Elissa Rhaïis was a Jewish Algerian woman who set out to ‘narrate [her] country in the French language’ in the 1920s. Celebrated by her contemporaries for the authenticity of her exotic depictions from the inside, Rhaïis’s literary debut was nevertheless done under an enticing and problematic disguise since she was presented as a Muslim woman having escaped from a harem. To many scholars, Rhaïis is therefore somewhat of a phony oriental, whose deceptive presentation was nothing less than a ‘masquerade’ employed to sell conventional exoticism. Considering the complex historical position of Algerian Jews, this paper argues that Rhaïis’s authorial persona should be understood less as a commercial lie and more as the result of an impossibility for the colonized subject to situate herself, to be seen accurately, in France’s imperial culture, due both to her gender and to her ethnicity. As a result, this paper proposes to consider Rhaïis’s reflective treatment of the exotic gaze as a self-designating gesture, pointing at its own playfulness and artificiality, as can be seen in her novels *Le Mariage de Hanifa* (1926) and *Le Sein blanc* (1928). The exotic ‘masquerade’ is rather a resounding *larvatus prodeo*, which implicitly questions the validity of orientalist dichotomies.

\* \* \* \* \*

The year 1919 saw the publication of a seemingly unexceptional novel: *Saâda la Marocaine*, a book similar to countless other exotic narratives released at the height of France’s colonial power. The book, however, provoked quite a stir in the Parisian world of letters. The novel was introduced as the first ever written in French by an Arab woman and, what is more, by an Arab woman who had escaped from a harem, thereby providing an unprecedented account of female life in the mysterious Orient. The commercial success of *Saâda la Marocaine* launched Elissa Rhaïis’s career, with an oeuvre generally focused on the intimate lives of North African women. Celebrated by her contemporaries for the authenticity of her descriptions ‘de l’intérieur’,<sup>1</sup> Rhaïis was credited for breathing new life into orientalist literature by developing ‘une nouvelle forme

<sup>1</sup> Alfred de Tarde, ‘L’Islam Littéraire’, *France-Maroc*, 4 (1920), 81–84 (p. 82). ‘[F]rom within’. All translations from French are my own.

d'exotisme' attributed explicitly to her identity and background.<sup>2</sup> As an insider, Rhaïs, 'une de ces femmes si longtemps et si durement claustrées par l'islam' was thought to finally reveal the Orient to Westerners who had only seen it 'au travers d'un faux orientalisme littéraire'.<sup>3</sup>

The peculiarities of Rhaïs's literary project and writing style have long ceased to impress critics, due to the dwindling appeal of exotic narratives and, more significantly, to a reassessment of Rhaïs's colonial identity. Contrary to the harem story propagated by her publisher, which suggested that she was a Muslim Arab woman, Elissa Rhaïs was in fact the pen-name of an Algerian Jew, whose literary debut relied on an enticing and problematic disguise. To many scholars, Rhaïs is therefore something of a phony oriental, whose deceptive presentation was nothing less than a 'masquerade',<sup>4</sup> or an 'imposture'<sup>5</sup> employed to sell conventional exoticism.

Rhaïs's authorial persona, however, should be understood as the result of the double impossibility for the colonized subject to situate herself and to be situated in France's imperial culture. Rhaïs's presentation as a Muslim 'évadée de harem'<sup>6</sup> is a response to a colonial blind spot, to the logic of orientalism whereby a woman writer from North Africa could hardly be seen as anything else than an imperial stereotype. And it is, I argue, this very impossibility that is at the core of her fiction.

Rhaïs's exoticism, rather than simply conforming to commercial demand, is in fact often turned back upon itself, revealing such colonial blind spots through an experimentation with the visual dynamics of orientalism. In particular, Rhaïs's reflective treatment of the exotic gaze, often conflating gazer and object of the gaze, blurs the orientalist dichotomy — between East and West, between self and other — on which it is expected to rely. The self-exoticization of Rhaïs's novels can thus be read as an attempt to articulate the impossible positionality of colonial subjects like herself and even, as a *mise en abyme* of her own biographical predicament. Pointing at its own playfulness and artificiality in a self-designating gesture, the exotic 'masquerade' is rather a resounding *larvatus prodeo*, a designation of the orientalist mask itself, which invites the contemporary reader to question the imperial identity categories on which it relies.

<sup>2</sup> Firmin Roz, 'Une nouvelle forme d'exotisme, Mme Elissa Rhaïs', *Revue bleue*, 11 (1920), 342–44 (p. 344).

<sup>3</sup> Louis Jalabert, 'Une romancière algérienne, Mme Elissa Rhaïs', *Etudes*, 58.167 (1921), 314–19 (p. 315). '[O]ne of these women so lengthily and so harshly cloistered by Islam'. '[T]hrough a fake literary orientalism'.

<sup>4</sup> Emily Apter, 'Ethnographic Travesties: Colonial Realism, French Feminism and the Case of Elissa Rhaïs', in *After colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements*, ed. by Gyan Prakash (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995) and 'Ethnographic Travesties, Alibis of Gender and Nation in the Case of Elissa Rhaïs', in *Continental Drift: From National Characters to Virtual Subjects* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Mireille Rosello, 'Elissa Rhaïs: Scandals, Impostures, Who Owns the Story?', *Research in African Literatures*, 37 (2006), 1–15.

<sup>6</sup> Jalabert, 'Une romancière algérienne, Mme Elissa Rhaïs', p. 511.

### The Performance of Authenticity

The most commonly accepted account of Rhaïs's life, told by Jean Déjeux,<sup>7</sup> is this: Elissa Rhaïs was born Rosine Boumendil<sup>8</sup> on 12 December 1876 in Blida to an Algerian Jewish family of modest means. She attended communal school until she was twelve and received no further education. She married twice: first to Moïse Amar, a rabbi with whom she had three children, then to Mardochée/Maurice Chemouil, a rich merchant with whom she moved to a more affluent neighborhood of Algiers. It is there, in her 'Villa des Fleurs' where she held a literary salon, that she took the pseudonym 'Rhaïs', supposedly a declension of رئيس (Arabic for master, leader, or chief). At this time, she gained the admiration and support of Louis Bertrand, who helped her publish her first story in the prestigious *Revue des Deux Mondes*.<sup>9</sup> She moved to Paris with his assistance, accompanied by her children and Raoul-Robert Tabet, a nephew she introduced as her son, and signed a five-year contract with the editorial house Plon.

Plon was responsible for crafting her sensationalist literary debut as a Muslim woman who had escaped from a harem, a story first told in the communiqué accompanying *Saâda la Marocaine*.<sup>10</sup> For Plon, Rhaïs's success depended primarily on a performance of authority, what Patricia Lorcin calls the writer's 'authenticity', which had to conform to metropolitan expectations and desires.<sup>11</sup> Although it does not seem that Rhaïs herself ever explicitly reiterated the harem story, she did nothing to correct it. Her preface to *Le Café Chantant* (1920) provides one of the rare depictions of herself in the first person as a 'pauvre petite Orientale, le cœur étroit d'angoisse' moved by nothing else than 'l'ardent désir de conter en langue française [son] pays'.<sup>12</sup>

In spite of Plon's fabrication of her authorial persona, Déjeux believes that it is highly unlikely that anyone in Algeria or any of her circles in France would have believed the harem story: Rhaïs is mentioned by André Spire in his panorama of Jewish literature<sup>13</sup> and Déjeux even quotes a passage of a 1930 novel, where a Muslim character rages against a woman that stands unmistakably for Rhaïs: 'une vieille juive, ancienne femme de rabbin, qui se fait passer pour une arabe

<sup>7</sup> Jean Déjeux, 'Elissa Rhaïs, conteuse algérienne (1876–1940)', *Revue de l'Occident Musulman et de la Méditerranée*, 37 (1984), 47–79. For a more detailed though more partial biography of Rhaïs, see Joseph Boumendil, *Elissa, ou Le mystère d'une écriture* (Paris: Séguier, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> The copies I have found of her birth and death certificates read 'Baumendil'.

<sup>9</sup> Louis Bertrand was a major literary figure of colonial Algeria and was even admitted to the *Académie Française* in 1925.

<sup>10</sup> See Déjeux, *Femmes d'Algérie: légendes, traditions, histoire, littérature* (Paris: Boîte à documents, 1987).

<sup>11</sup> Patricia Lorcin, 'Manipulating Elissa: the uses and abuses of Elissa Rhaïs and her works', *The Journal of North African Studies*, 1 (2012), 903–22.

<sup>12</sup> Elissa Rhaïs, 'Preface', in *Le Café-chantant. Kerkeb. Noblesse arabe* (Paris: Plon-Nourrit, 1920). '[P]oor little Oriental, [her] heart beset by fear having nothing to her name but the ardent desire to narrate [her] country in the French language'.

<sup>13</sup> André Spire, 'Un conteur judéo-arabe d'Afrique du Nord, Éliassa Rhaïs', *Illustration juive*, 9 (1919), 20–22.

et raconte d'une manière fausse des histoires sur notre race et nos traditions'.<sup>14</sup> By the end of the 1920s, it appears that the mask had fallen and that Rhaïs, revealed for who she really was, lost her authenticated, exotic appeal, becoming a 'literary has-been'.<sup>15</sup>

The Rhaïs case, however, was far from closed. The revelations made public by the time of her death were themselves called into question when in 1982 Paul Tabet published his own version of the imposture in *Elissa Rhaïs*, presented as a 'récit authentique' but intermittently subtitled a 'roman'.<sup>16</sup> In his book, Tabet argued that it was actually his own father, Raoul-Robert Tabet, the nephew that Rosine introduced as her son and her suspected much younger lover, who authored Rhaïs's oeuvre. While deviating from the consensus on Rhaïs's identity, Tabet's story, which he argued was based on a confession of his dying father, rekindled some of the lies propagated by Plon. Indeed, Tabet presented Rosine (renamed Leïla), as the daughter of a Jewish mother and a Muslim father and reiterated the harem story. Following Tabet's allegations, it seemed that a new mask had fallen only for the old one to be put back into place.

Because of its easily disproved facts, Tabet's thesis was discredited by scholars as a 'piètre scandale'.<sup>17</sup> The affair nevertheless resuscitated debates around Rhaïs's authenticity and confirmed two things: first, that the identity beyond her authorial persona remains crucial in the way readers and scholars apprehend her work, and second, that we are still unable to look past the mask to do so. Questioning who she was seems unavoidably mired in accusations about who she pretended to be and, as a result, any attempt to authenticate Rhaïs has the effect of pointing to her shortcomings rather than asserting her legitimacy. Because of the mask she was wearing, she is doubly guilty of misrepresenting Arab women in general and her own people, thoroughly inauthentically.<sup>18</sup> This self-defeating process of authentication even forced other scholars to discard concerns with her identity altogether, contending that such polemics in fact 'brouillent l'accès à l'écrit plus qu'elles ne l'éclairent'.<sup>19</sup>

As can be sensed from our sustained obsession with it, it is the mask itself that is perhaps the most revealing about Rhaïs, her career and her novels. Indeed, the reiterated disguise of her identity brings into focus what Albert

<sup>14</sup> Lucienne Favre, *Orientale 1930* (Paris: Grasset, 1930), p. 12. '[A]n old Jew, who used to be married to a rabbi, who pretends to be an Arab and tells false stories about our race and our traditions'.

<sup>15</sup> Lorcin, 'Manipulating Elissa', p. 903.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Tabet, *Elissa Rhaïs* (Paris: Grasset, 1982). Paul Tabet, *Elissa Rhaïs: Roman* (Paris: Grasset, 1982). Paul Tabet, *Elissa Rhaïs* (Paris: Grasset, 1993).

<sup>17</sup> Denise Brahim, 'Lire Elissa Rhaïs', in *Actes. Congrès mondial des littératures de langue française. Negro-africaine, nord-africaine et québécoise en méditerranée: Lieu de rencontre de l'art poétique*, ed. by J. Leiner, G. Toso-Rodinis and M. El Houssi (1983), p. 471.

<sup>18</sup> In an early article published in Hebrew by Abraham Elmaleh, the author suggests that Rhaïs was not well-liked in Algerian Jewish circles, both for having lied about her identity and for her negative comments about this community. Abraham Elmaleh, 'L'écrivain contemporain Elissa Rhaïs, sa vie et son oeuvre littéraire', *Mahberet*, 97.100 (1964), 26–32.

<sup>19</sup> Marie Virolle, 'Elissa Rhaïs ou l'imposture rééditée', *Algérie Littérature Action*, 3 (1996), 243–44 (p. 244). '[B]lur the access to writing rather than clarify it'.



Memmi called the ‘pénible et constante ambiguïté’ of those hybridized by colonialism — and that of North African Jews in particular.<sup>20</sup> Part of the colonial strategy of the French in North Africa consisted in identifying and distinguishing local populations into various groups, based on more or less contradicting criteria (including language, religion, way of life, history, etc.), often with an utter disregard for their intersections and porosity.<sup>21</sup> In spite of its scientific pretenses, this ethnographic labeling enterprise was mostly the result of a ‘divide and conquer’ colonial policy. Jews, considered to be the most likely candidates to assimilation, were identified as a distinct group and incorporated into the fabric of the imperial state.

The infamous *Décret Crémieux*, signed six years before Rhais’s birth, officially granted Algerian Jews the status of French citizens, distinguishing them from other autochthonous populations and effectively ‘exiling’ them from their land and history.<sup>22</sup> Thus, Rhais belonged neither among the *indigènes*, a word that came to designate Algerian Muslims in the colonial context, nor among the class of French settlers, who named themselves ‘Algerians’ on purely geographical grounds. As an Algerian woman who had accessed education and publication through French institutions, communication channels and language, she found herself in a thoroughly ambiguous position within the socio-cultural structures of the Empire — ‘une espèce de métis de la colonisation’, as Memmi described himself.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, as a writer, Rhais had circulated in both the *Algérianiste* circle and the Parisian world of letters while not strictly belonging to either.<sup>24</sup> Her descriptions ‘de l’intérieur’ were in fact only possible at the price of remaining, in actuality, an outsider: superficially assimilated by the Empire but actually never accepted by it.

Scholars attending to Rhais’s ethnicity have convincingly explained the ‘Muslim masquerade’ as a response to raging anti-semitism in France and Algeria<sup>25</sup> or normalized it by noting the proximity between Muslim and Jewish populations in Blida, suggesting that ‘she was only partially straying from her authentic roots’.<sup>26</sup> However correct, these observations betray our enduring inability to understand the masquerade outside of an imperial framework, as if there were indeed an ‘authentic’ identity to uncover. They fail to account for the artificiality of ethnic distinctions and thereby, for the impossibility of

<sup>20</sup> Albert Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé précédé de Portrait du colonisateur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), p. 40.

<sup>21</sup> For a succinct overview of this process, see Ann Thompson, ‘La classification raciale de l’Afrique du Nord au début du XIXe siècle’, *Cahiers d’Études Africaines*, 129 (1993) 19–36.

<sup>22</sup> See Benjamin Stora, *Les Trois Exils Juifs d’Algérie* (Paris: Stock, 2006).

<sup>23</sup> Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé*, p. 19.

<sup>24</sup> The *Algérianiste* movement was a self-designated group of intellectuals from the Algerian settler society formed during the 1920s and brought together by a series of literary and political commitments. While supportive of the colonial enterprise, the *Algérianistes* were also advocating for autonomy from the metropolis.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Siblot, ‘Décoloniser l’imaginaire’, *Révolution*, 119 (1982).

<sup>26</sup> Lorcin, ‘Manipulating Elissa’, p. 906.

hybridized colonial subjects to situate themselves. By seeing the mask as a lie (even a necessary or a 'partial' one), as a voluntary deception rather than as a product of colonial policies, we fail to see just how much it corresponded to Rhaïs's colonial experience — and maybe to that of many other colonized individuals. Rhaïs's mask, far from being an imposture, embodies a colonial reality which betrays the social limitations put upon her and forced her to perform a pre-established role in order to be made visible in colonial France.

### The Mask of Self-Exoticism

While much of Rhaïs's work depicts Maghrebi Jewish communities (see *La Fille des Pachas*, *Les Juifs*, *Le Sein Blanc*), the ambiguity of colonial identity is actually embodied in her novels by a vast gallery of female characters, belonging to diverse communities while not properly fitting into any. The central topic of her novels, then, is neither an apolitical 'affrontement de désirs passionnels'<sup>27</sup> nor simply 'l'extraordinaire tabou qui sépare les Juifs et les Musulmans dans l'Algérie coloniale',<sup>28</sup> but rather the inadequacy of these women within their communities, their disturbing — and generally tragic — hybridity, often explicitly a result of French colonialism.

One of the most striking examples is the eponymous protagonist of *Le Mariage de Hanifa*, a novel set during the First World War recounting the demise of three women enamored of the same man. As a child, Hanifa is forced to attend French school, to help with her father's business. Hanifa fears this episode will make her lose her femininity and cultural identity, exclaiming: 'Apprendre à lire et à écrire, moi? Comment? Je ne suis pas un garçon. [...] Nous ne sommes pas des étrangers, des mangeurs de porc, ou des Turcs!'<sup>29</sup> While Hanifa's passage through the French school is an opportunity for Rhaïs to celebrate the glory of France and express her support for the French education system, it also allows her to depict the petty racism of the French children who mock Hanifa for her speech, for her clothes and even for the style of her imagination. The butt of every joke, Hanifa takes her revenge (a revenge that seems to play into the hands of imperialism) by becoming the best of her class and showing her peers what it means to be a subject of the Republic.

In spite of this exemplary colonial debut (one that mimics Plon's introduction of Rhaïs), Hanifa never fully crosses over, and her cousin Saïd, whom she hopes to marry, is in fact seduced by her hybridity, as she is at the same time

<sup>27</sup> Déjeux, 'Elissa Rhaïs, conteuse algérienne', p. 55. '[C]onflict of passionate desires'.

<sup>28</sup> Denise Brahimi, *Femmes arabes et soeurs musulmanes* (Paris: Tierce, 1984), p. 40. '[T]he extraordinary taboo that separates Jews and Muslims in colonial Algeria'.

<sup>29</sup> Elissa Rhaïs, *Le Mariage de Hanifa* (Paris: Plon, 1926), p. 10. 'Learn to read and write, me? How so? I am not a boy. [...] We are not foreigners, pork eaters, nor Turks'. The mention of Turkey refers to the Kemalist reforms granting women the right to vote in the 1930s, which Rhaïs herself was not favorable to.

‘Mauresque’ and ‘européenne’, themselves vague descriptors.<sup>30</sup> Assimilation is thus revealed as essentially fraught: a process that can never be completed and, in fact, necessarily implies a symbolic movement of return. While Hanifa never forgets her French education, she eventually goes back to live with her traditional aunt’s family and becomes ‘la jeune fille arabe parfaite’.<sup>31</sup> France has left on her an invisible layer that can neither change her (much less save her) nor even hide her true identity. A recurring motif in Rhaï’s work, this French disguise — a mask that does not hide — is even credited as the central focus of her oeuvre when she describes her literary ambitions:

J’ai essayé dans mes œuvres [...] d’expliquer le complexe caractère oriental [...] Ils viennent s’instruire à Paris, ces hommes, ils portent alors avec aisance le smoking, dansent parfaitement, deviennent en apparence des Occidentaux. Mais leur âme ne change pas [...] Ils reprennent avec leurs vêtements habituelles leur mentalité véritable et intacte.<sup>32</sup>

Cultural assimilation, identified as a process (‘deviennent’) remains nothing more than an ‘appearance’.

Whereas so much of the period’s colonial literature is obsessed with revealing the hidden intimacy of Muslim women, or, to use the cliché of the time, ‘lifting the veil’ — a trend that goes from orientalist literature and colonial rhetoric to visual art — there is no veil to begin with in Rhaï’s fiction. On the contrary, the deceiving garments are Hanifa’s school uniform or the pashas’ ‘dinner jacket’. They are revealed as fantasies imposed on the subject by her contact with colonial France. Rather than unveiling, Frenchness covers up and therefore paradoxically reveals the ‘true and intact mentality’ of the colonial subject.

For many of her characters, the transparent layer of Frenchness carried by the hybrid colonial subject, a garment that covers without hiding, is in fact suspect or even dangerous. This is precisely what Lalla Nefissa, Hanifa’s beautiful rival, points out when shaming her for having revealed her face to Saïd, implying that she has tricked him into loving her. Saïd’s attraction to Hanifa, Nefissa implies, is meaningless because, by revealing herself, she has appeared masked in orientalist exoticism. Being ‘made visible’ to Saïd through a foreign mediation, Hanifa has been eroticized unduly. In a novel filled with disfigurements (Saïd loses an eye in France during WWI and a Spanish police officer is heavily mutilated by the bandits that killed Hanifa’s parents), Hanifa’s invisible but revealing Frenchness, although it makes her more desirable in the eyes of Saïd, also marks her as threatening in her own female community. Rhaï’s supposed belief in what Roy called the ‘illusion coloniale’<sup>33</sup> might not be so naïve, since

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 193.

<sup>32</sup> Huguette Champy, ‘Elissa Rhaï’, *La Française*, 18 February (1928). ‘In my works, I tried to explain the complex oriental character [...] They come to Paris, these men, where they wear a dinner jacket with ease, dance perfectly, become in appearance Westerners. But their soul does not change [...] They go back to their true and intact mentality as they do to their clothes’.

<sup>33</sup> Jules Roy, ‘Le mythe d’une Algérie heureuse’, *Le Monde* (4–6 June 1982).

the illusion always announces itself through the theatrical *larvatus prodeo* of Rhaïs's orientalism, and ultimately punishes those who embrace it. Hanifa, after all, is murdered by her two rivals on the eve of her wedding day.

In the act of writing as in the novels themselves, the female Orient — both familiar and exotic — becomes a stage where the author displays the foreign mediation of her own gaze and where it is precisely this mediation that is exoticizing. Instead of a movement from the outside to the inside, Rhaïs's orientalism practices a voyeurism from within, particularly striking in a passage of *Le Sein Blanc*, one of her later novels. In this scene, Henri S., a Jewish Algerian educated in Paris and dressed in European fashion, is visiting Morocco with his lover Rachel, a married woman he has seduced. The lovers have been invited by Sid Jamaï, a deposed Moroccan prince, to visit his apartments. Sid Jamaï then presents them with a telescope engraved with the phrase '*Made in England*'<sup>34</sup> through which they can admire the entire city of Fez:

à travers la lentille puissante, un spectacle nombreux, chaotique, s'offrit à sa vue amusée. Entre le fouillis de constructions, il découvrit l'oued Fass, roulant sur des cailloux gris. Quelques moutons broutant une herbe rare; des teinturiers rinçaient leurs laines. [...] Il faisait basculer l'appareil, son regard revenait vers la ville [...]. A côté de mesures minables, il apercevait des intérieurs féeriques: cours à piliers de marbre, luxe des mosaïques, blanches terrasses sur lesquelles des femmes assises, demi-nues, dans un rayon de soleil séchaient leur corps enduit de pâte épilatoire. Il voyait des maisons de joie où des orchestres faisaient danser des femmes, les seins frémissants, le ventre rebondi [...] Et Henri se demandait: 'Comment donc, sur la ville farouche, Sid El Jamaï peut-il impunément user de cet appareil profaneur?'<sup>35</sup>

Culminating in Henri's moralizing judgments, the whole scene is improbably exotic, moving from broad geographical views to extremely minute details in a dizzying alternation between wide angles and close-ups, open spaces and the intimacy of private apartments. More than a scientific object, the English telescope becomes a voyeuristic kaleidoscope, an instrument of exotic eroticization, a 'profaning device' that prompts the viewer to rely on his sensuous imagination, more than on his senses. The seemingly ethnographic compulsion of this passage never *focuses* on the vignettes that it assembles. In fact, at the end of the passage, the spectacle of the city only serves to bring Henri

<sup>34</sup> Elissa Rhaïs, *Le Sein Blanc* (Paris: L'Archipel, 1996), p. 108. In English in the original.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 108–09. '[T]hrough the powerful lens, a varied, chaotic spectacle was offered to his amused eye. Through the jumbled buildings, he caught sight of the Fez river, gushing over grey rocks. A few sheep grazing the scanty grass; dye workers rinsing their wool [...] He tipped the device and his gaze went back to the city... Next to miserable hovels, he discovered fairytale interiors: courtyard with marble pillars, luxurious mosaics, white terraces upon which seated women, half-naked, were letting their bodies, covered in depilatory wax, dry in a ray of sun. He could see brothels where women were dancing to the sound of orchestras, with shivering breasts and rounded bellies... And Henri asked himself: "How can Sid El Jamaï, with all impunity, make use of this profaning device on this fierce city?"'

back to focus on the telescope. The profanation then does not lie in the act of spying itself but rather in spying on one's own people, and therefore on oneself, through the objectifying mediation of the other.

By staging — and often explicitly problematizing — the exoticizing gaze, Rhais's novels point to their own facticity. As Henri steps back to look at the telescope, so does the reader peer back at the page and ponder about the mediating object between his hands. Rhais's self-reflexive exoticism serves to highlight the fragility of the orientalist relation and the ambiguous identity and position of her characters. Dramatically revealed, the exotic visual impulse in turn sheds light upon the otherwise invisible reality of colonial life and, rather than pretending to unmask its cross-cultural dwellers, points more forcefully to their painful positionality. By conflating the two sides of the orientalist relation, self-exoticization points to the limitation of the assimilationist lie. Both imposed by colonial contingencies and claimed, the mask — be it a dinner jacket or Rhais's own reimagined lineage — allows the colonial subject to be seen while condemning her to be seen inaccurately.

# Undermining Exoticism: The Memory of al-Andalus and Fluid Identities in Lope de Vega's *Comedias Fronterizas*

REBECCA DE SOUZA

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Early modern Spanish literature set before the fall of Granada (1492) that features characters from medieval al-Andalus has thus far been considered to be either idealized and thus 'maurophile' or exoticist and thus 'maurophobe'. This article instead proposes a reconsideration of the true extent of 'exoticism' in early modern medievalist literature by offering a new reading of three of Lope de Vega's *comedias* that feature Andalusí characters. *El cordobés valeroso*, *Pedro Carbonero* (1603), *El bastardo Mudarra* (1612) and *El remedio en la desdicha* (1620) all depict religio-cultural identity as contingent and move beyond aristocratic maurophilia in portraying broad panoramas of Andalusí society. These history plays subvert extant politicized readings of early modern literature featuring Muslim characters, in their ambivalence and scepticism towards the capacity of religio-cultural identity to define self and other, precisely because of the reality of Muslims on the Iberian Peninsula in the Middle Ages.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lope de Vega's (1562–1635) renowned and prolific output includes over five hundred plays or *comedias*. Those that feature Muslims from medieval al-Andalus, though numerous, have been relatively neglected in scholarship versus the rest of the playwright's oeuvre. Lope was not alone in depicting the lives of medieval Muslim Andalusis: early modern Spanish poetry, novels and theatre had frequent recourse to Iberia's medieval and multicultural past as subject matter, from the anonymous novella *Historia del Abencerraje y la hermosa Jarifa* (1565) to the *romancero morisco nuevo* pioneered by Lope himself amongst others.

Scholarship continues to debate the way in which medieval Muslims are portrayed in early modern literature. On the one hand, some consider these texts *en masse* to be 'maurophile', offering a peaceful rewriting of history after the

prohibition of the practice of Islam in Spain from 1500 and, later, the expulsion of the *moriscos* — descendants of Muslim Andalusis converted to Christianity — in 1609. Maurophilia connotes both the aesthetic appropriation of Moorish material culture in the early modern period as well as the concomitant literary genre that positively portrays Muslims, privileging ‘aristocratic cultural compatibility over the suspicion of religious difference’.<sup>1</sup>

Barbara Fuchs locates maurophilia in the sixteenth-century Counter-Reformation context where there arose a tension between acknowledging Andalusí culture as part of national history and constructing a homogeneous, Catholic image for the nation.<sup>2</sup> For Luce López-Baralt maurophile literature was potentially political, ‘a phenomenon of artistic and human double-talk on an immense scale’ given it revindicated Spain’s Islamic past during a time of increased hostility towards *moriscos*.<sup>3</sup> Others such as Christina Lee reject the categorization and suggest that the same literature portrays Muslims as ‘depraved, unscrupulous, and fundamentally unredeemable’ because early modern texts ‘always underline the cultural difference of the Moor’.<sup>4</sup> Israel Burshatin suggests that the ‘benign maurophilia’ claimed for the genre is a pernicious form of Orientalism, marked by ‘superficially flattering depictions’ of Muslims.<sup>5</sup>

This article uses Lope’s historical *comedias* to demonstrate the limited utility of both approaches to medievalist early modern literature. Firstly, the literature usually described as either maurophile or maurophobe is not thoroughly intersectional: both are largely used to connote literature that depicts aristocratic Andalusis and not literary depictions of broader societal panoramas of medieval Iberia, which are in fact offered up by *comedias*. Secondly, both only operate effectively in one context: that of early modern Counter-Reformation Spain. As critical lenses, they decode medievalist texts solely using their compositional context, rather than considering them diachronically with medieval Iberia in mind. Alongside maurophilia and maurophobia, Orientalism is a similarly unhelpful way in which to conceptualize Lope’s portrayal of Muslim Andalusis. Edward Said’s canonical work overlooks the Iberian Peninsula and has a ‘monolithic and monologic’ view of the Middle Ages:<sup>6</sup> its application to Spain presupposes a perception of Muslims as exotic, overlooking their presence as citizens on the Iberian Peninsula for hundreds of years.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Fuchs, *Maurophilia and the Construction of Early Modern Spain* (Philadelphia: UPenn Press, 2009), p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Luce López-Baralt, *Islam in Spanish Literature*, trans. by Andrew Hurley (Leiden: Brill, 1992), p. 250.

<sup>4</sup> Christina Lee, *The Anxiety of Sameness in Early Modern Spain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), p. 184; p. 187.

<sup>5</sup> Israel Burshatin, ‘Playing the Moor: Parody and Performance in Lope de Vega’s *El primer Fajardo*’, *PMLA*, 107 (1992), 566–81 (p. 566).

<sup>6</sup> Sharon Kinoshita, ‘Deprovincializing the Middle Ages’, in *The Worlding Project: Doing Cultural Studies in the Era of Globalization*, ed. by Rob Wilson and Christopher Leigh Connery (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2007), p. 80.

<sup>7</sup> See Julian Weiss, ‘El postcolonialismo medieval: líneas y pautas en la investigación de un problema

This article instead proposes to reconsider the true extent of ‘exoticism’ in early modern medievalist literature by offering a new reading of three of Lope’s *comedias* featuring Andalus. *El cordobés valeroso*, *Pedro Carbonero* (1603) (CV), *El bastardo Mudarra* (1612) (BM) and *El remedio en la desdicha* (1620) (RD) all depict religio-cultural identity as contingent and move beyond aristocratic maurophilia in portraying broad panoramas of Andalus society. Though officialized discourse such as legislature imposed hard borders between faith groups, the *comedias* in question depict something that can be deemed closer to real world experience and perception of the Iberian Middle Ages, where official policy did not always dictate social relations. Their intercultural frontier setting means that they respond ambivalently not just to Muslim Andalus identity, but to religio-cultural identity as a marker of difference, undermining exoticism in the process. Precedent for a fluidity of religio-cultural identity in the medieval period is found in literature depicting Andalus-Castilian interaction, notably the epic, in which Andalus are constituent members of collective, fluid power structures.<sup>8</sup>

The inadequacy of extant theoretical frameworks thus results from a failure to take into account the multiple temporal contexts at work in these plays, namely the medieval and early modern periods. Instead we ought to read Lope’s medievalist *comedias* in light of what Florencia Calvo calls ‘pluritemporalidad’: when texts engage with the past and thus create multiple layers of meaning.<sup>9</sup> The *comedias* invoke medieval relationships between Christian-Castilians and Muslim-Andalus, which were predicated upon both peaceful coexistence and conflict as well as cross-cultural military and interpersonal alliances.<sup>10</sup> In addition to reconsidering the *pluritemporalidad* of these *comedias*, I build

histórico’, in *Literatura Medieval y Renacentista en España: Líneas y Pautas*, ed. by Natalia Fernández Rodríguez and María Fernández Ferreiro (Salamanca: SEMYR, 2012), pp. 177–200. Weiss outlines the deficiencies of Orientalism for Iberia and notes how Said later published essays on al-Andalus to fill this blatant lacuna in his work yet fell into the trap of ascribing to it an idealized model of coexistence.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, the *Poema de mio Cid* (c. 1207) and *Siete infantes de Lara* legend (1274).

<sup>9</sup> Florencia Calvo, ‘Diálogos con el teatro clásico español. Texto, escena y teoría’, in *III Congreso Internacional de Literatura y Cultura Españolas Contemporáneas* (La Plata: Universidad Nacional de La Plata, 2014), p. 2. ‘Pluritemporality’. All subsequent translations are my own.

<sup>10</sup> While the coexistence of Christianity, Islam and Judaism in medieval Iberia is often referred to as ‘convivencia’, the term idealizes and generalizes religious tolerance over a long period. See Maya Soifer, ‘Beyond Convivencia: Critical Reflections on the Historiography of Interfaith Relations in Christian Spain’, *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies*, 1 (2009), 19–35. Soifer departs from the dichotomy of ‘tolerance’ and ‘persecution’ and reassesses the complexity of religio-cultural interaction throughout the Iberian Middle Ages. See also David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). Nirenberg demonstrates how violence and exclusion do not preclude peaceful coexistence. Cross-cultural alliances were moreover common in the Iberian Middle Ages, the most famous example being the real — and later legendary — Cid, Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar, a mercenary soldier who fought for both Christian and Andalus kings. See Joseph O’Callaghan, *A History of Medieval Spain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 205. Finally, medieval legislature was often contradictory and ambiguous in its attempt to delineate borders between groups; for example, Alfonso X’s *Siete Partidas* focuses on Christian conversion to Islam rather than the restrictions relevant to Muslims living in Castile. See Peter Linehan, *Spain 1157–1300: A Partible Inheritance* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), p. 95.



upon Carrasco Urgoiti's call for the recategorization of these plays which to a seventeenth-century audience were known as *comedias de moros*, though this genre presupposes conflict with Christians.<sup>11</sup> Carrasco proposes an additional genre, the *comedia morisca*, which idealizes the 'noble Moor'.<sup>12</sup> Yet the anachronistic imposition of either *comedia de moros* or *morisca* still constitutes a polarized and unnecessarily conclusive judgment on the portrayal of Muslim characters and their interaction with Christians. Instead it is more helpful to consider any and all of Lope's *comedias* that depict medieval Andalus interacting with Castilians as *comedias fronterizas*: a new taxonomy I propose, predicated upon intercultural interaction, border-crossing and exchange that spans the entirety of the Middle Ages. *Comedias fronterizas* take the frontier location as an intercultural space of exchange and interaction, in which people construct identity in interaction with other cultural groups.<sup>13</sup>

It is under this umbrella term that I consider *CV*, *BM* and *RD*. *CV* tells of Pedro Carbonero, a *fronterizo* soldier who earns his living crossing the border to Granada capturing Muslims and freeing imprisoned Christians aided by his multiple alliances with a variety of Granadan Muslims from the lower classes to nobles. *BM* takes its plot from the medieval epic legend *Los siete infantes de Lara*. It tells of the death of seven noble Castilians in battle with an Andalusí army in the late tenth century, orchestrated by their uncle Ruy Velázquez who is in alliance with the Muslim ruler Almanzor, and it is ultimately avenged by their half-Andalusí half-brother Mudarra. Finally, *RD*, like *CV*, is set in fifteenth-century Granada and is partially based on the novella *Historia del Abencerraje*. The Abencerrajes were a noble Granadan family who were executed by the king following a treacherous and deceptive plot by competing nobles. The surviving Abencerraje, Abindarráez, courts Jarifa in the play, and a parallel plot depicts another Christian *fronterizo* Rodrigo Narváez who pursues an obstructed relationship with Alara, a Muslim woman.

All three depict religio-cultural identity as contingent and evolving, and thus overturn the polarized notions of maurophilia and maurophobia or anachronistic Orientalism. Religio-cultural identity is adaptable and adoptable at the level of costume, appearance and language. This also extends to linguistic identity markers, as characters variously characterize themselves and others as *cristiano*, *moro* or the more culturally-ambiguous *andaluz*. Secondly, they depict unwavering Christian-Muslim alliances or relationships, the development of which serves to undermine the mutual perception of difference predicated upon religio-cultural identity. In the three plays religio-cultural identity functions at the surface level of costume and language, both of which can be adopted and performed by anyone. This has been gestured to in scholarship but

<sup>11</sup> María Carrasco Urgoiti, 'La frontera en la comedia de Lope de Vega', in *Actas del Congreso la Frontera Oriental Nazarí como Sujeto Histórico (S. XIII-XVI)*, ed. by Pedro Segura Artero (Almería: Instituto de Estudios Almerienses, 1997), pp. 489–99 (p. 489).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 492.

<sup>13</sup> See Antony Pym, *Negotiating the Frontier: Translators and Intercultures in Hispanic History* (Manchester: St. Jerome, 2000), pp. 4–5.

not elaborated: José Montesinos finds in *CV* ‘la asimilación de lo musulmán a lo español, la inclusión de lo exótico en el mundo normal de la comedia’.<sup>14</sup> Thomas Case notes that in *RD* ‘there is a balance between Christian and Moor not equalled elsewhere in Lope’s dramas’.<sup>15</sup> I reframe Case’s idea of ‘balance’ as the questioning and undermining of the solidity of religio-cultural identity as an essential determiner of difference, building upon Jonathan Thacker’s idea that *comedias* ‘[unveil] a knowledge of the importance of role-play to society; society’s artificial, constructed nature’.<sup>16</sup>

Relatively few details are usually given in *comedia* manuscripts regarding costume, so it is pertinent that the three plays in question detail costume changes based on religio-cultural identity. *CV*, *BM* and *RD* feature Christian and/or Muslim characters wearing the other culture’s dress and functioning within that milieu — indeed in *CV* the plot pivots on dress and disguise — which exposes the arbitrary nature of religio-cultural identity as it can be performed aesthetically. This idea builds upon Fuchs’ work on Cervantes’ characters who in performing another gender or religion ‘challenge the attempt to identify and categorize “proper” Spanish subjects’ and thereby question essentialized categories.<sup>17</sup> Yet Lope distinctively engages diachronically with medieval al-Andalus: while Cervantes evokes the homogenizing Counter-Reformation context of early modern Spain, Lope depicts a period in which to interact with Muslim Andalusí society was not subversive or exotic; his ‘cultural cross-dressing’ is an early modern reflection of medieval frontier life.

In *CV* Pedro’s work as a *fronterizo* is made possible through disguise: ‘él va en hábito africano’.<sup>18</sup> Pedro reveals his capacity to fashion his own identity when he first meets his love interest Rosela in captivity who asks ‘¿Sois cristiano o moro?’ to which he responds ‘Soy quien solo tu bien pretende’.<sup>19</sup> His disguise is effective and grants him audiences with Granadan nobles and royalty where he plays the role of ‘el moro extranjero’.<sup>20</sup> Pedro’s men and Rosela also adopt Andalusí clothing to move in and out of Granada. Rosela begins Act II in Andalusí dress after a short break in performance after which Lope exploits the possibility that an audience may forget that she is in disguise. Costume also progresses the plot in *CV* and is a method adopted by Christian and Muslim alike. Pedro’s Andalusí ally, the noble Cerbín, suggests that ‘todos hemos de

<sup>14</sup> *El cordobés valeroso, Pedro Carbonero*, ed. by José Montesinos (Madrid: Centro de estudios históricos, 1929), p. 178. “Muslim” is assimilated into “Spanishness”; the exotic is part of the normal world of the *comedia*.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Case, *Lope and Islam: Islamic Personages in his Comedias* (Newark: Juan de la Cuesta, 1993), p. 59.

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Thacker, *Role-Play and the World as Stage in the Comedia* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2002), p. 177.

<sup>17</sup> Barbara Fuchs, *Passing for Spain: Cervantes and the Fictions of Identity* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003), p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Lope de Vega, *El cordobés valeroso, Pedro Carbonero*. (Alicante: Biblioteca Virtual Cervantes, 2002), I: 77 <<http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra/pedro-carbonero--o/>> [accessed 30 June 2019]. ‘He wears African dress’.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, I: 622–23. ‘Are you Christian or Moor?’, ‘I am who you want me to be’.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, II: 95. ‘A foreign Moor’.

tomar / de moros del campo el traje' in order for them all to escape the wrath of the Granadan king who wants to put Cerbín to death.<sup>21</sup> The performance of religio-cultural identity extends to episodes in which conversion is discussed. Pedro's Andalusi vassal Hamete considers conversion and does so because 'Y estar bona, porque al fin / comer jamón, beber veno'.<sup>22</sup> Here Christianity, like Islam throughout the play, is conceptualized as a physical performance (in this case, through eating).

*BM* similarly unveils how religio-cultural identity is constituted in costume. After Mudarra's Christian parentage is revealed, he journeys from Córdoba to Castile to meet his father and avenge his fallen half-brothers. Mudarra's conversion is a slippery process that, when viewed through the postcolonial lens of mimicry, operates on a behavioural and physical, rather than spiritual, level. Mimicry is outlined by Altschul as 'not only to imitate but at the same time to, paradoxically, resist the dominant power, allowing for the observation of subversion and modification'.<sup>23</sup> In the context of Mudarra's banishment from Córdoba, Castile must be denoted a 'dominant power', as on arrival he declares 'fuerte es Castilla'.<sup>24</sup> In his conversion Mudarra mimics Castilian behaviour yet retains what he chooses of Muslim Andalusi identity. After his uncle Almanzor decries him as 'bastardo' and 'bárbaro' whilst still in Córdoba, Mudarra quickly casts Islam as nothing more than a costume: 'no quiero sus bárbaros turbantes'.<sup>25</sup> In viewing Almanzor and the physical accoutrements of Islam as *bárbaro*, after being subjected to the same insult himself, Mudarra acknowledges how subjective conceptions of 'foreignness' are. After leaving Córdoba he is then included within 'nuestros moros',<sup>26</sup> a dismissive and possessive attitude towards his Andalusi identity. Once in Castile, Mudarra establishes a pattern of disguise and revelation, setting the terms of his own conversion based upon the reactions of others. He thus mimics Christianity while retaining his Muslim identity, a process that enables his assimilation into the Castilian ruling class while resisting complete Christianization.

When Mudarra meets his niece Clara, he then attempts to verbally convert himself in reaction to her fear of his Andalusi dress:

Cristiano soy, que sólo en Dios confío;  
presto veréis que el árabe turbante  
y el africano capellar desvío.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, II: 302–03. 'We all ought to put on Moorish country dress'.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, III: 689–90. 'And in the end it'd be a good thing, because I could eat ham and drink wine'.

<sup>23</sup> Nadia Altschul, 'The future of postcolonial approaches to medieval Iberian studies', *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies*, 1 (2009), 5–17 (p. 12).

<sup>24</sup> Lope de Vega, *El bastardo Mudarra y los siete infantes de Lara*, ed. by Delmiro Antas (Barcelona: PPU, 1992), III: 2412. 'Castile stands strong'.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, III: 2248. 'I don't want to wear their barbaric turbans'.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, III: 2405. 'Our Moors'.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, III: 2527–29. 'I am Christian, for I believe only in God. Watch as I remove my Arabic turban and my Moorish capellar'.

Religious identity is thus a costume that can be cast on and off at will. On arrival in Castile Mudarra also meets Lope, a Christian vassal of his father's family, who subsequently dresses in Andalusí clothing to appear as a vassal of Mudarra from Córdoba. He then reveals himself and removes his Muslim costume when in the final scene he declares 'no soy moro / Lope soy de Vivar, el asturiano'.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, in both *CV* and *BM* characters transform their arbitrary religio-cultural identity for socioeconomic gain. While Pedro's motives for entering Granada in disguise soon evolve into concern for his Andalusí friend Cerbín, initially he dresses as a Muslim in order to run his business; Hamete too considers conversion to Christianity to live a better life in Castile with Pedro. Meanwhile Mudarra converts in *BM* to not only meet his real father but to also become a vassal of the Count of Castile.

In *RD* a poignant instance of costume change occurs when the frontier captain Rodrigo Narváz falls in love with a married Andalusí woman Alara. Rodrigo's vassal Nuño encourages him to pursue a relationship and offers to cross the border into Coín dressed as a Muslim to deliver a letter and bring her back. Nuño claims 'bien su arábigo sé' and 'pondré unos almaizales / y hecho moro, iré a Coín'.<sup>29</sup> For Nuño, 'hecho moro' is an aesthetic and linguistic process rather than one connected to birth-right or belief. Rodrigo and Nuño then ask an Andalusí servant to write to Alara in Arabic, as 'la letra cristiana / ¿cómo la podrá entender?'<sup>30</sup> Rodrigo curiously refers to his language as 'la letra cristiana' in opposition to the more secular terminology of 'arábigo' used earlier. Religion is thus conflated with culture and undermined as a belief system; instead it connotes other mutable systems such as language. Nuño later returns to Christian territory in Act II still 'en hábito de moro' in a humorous scene in which the audience shares in his deception of Rodrigo who believes he is Muslim.<sup>31</sup> The plausibility of Nuño's disguise on both sides of the border and his desire to 'probar mis fuerzas' reveal how performative and flimsy religio-cultural identity is.<sup>32</sup>

This is moreover emphasized by Rodrigo's inconsistent treatment of Andalusí Muslims throughout the play: as lovers, friends, enemies and strategic allies. These multifarious relationships mean his designation of the disguised Nuño as 'enemigo' is arbitrary and nonsensical. Nuño then continues the charade by calling himself the Moor Marfuz, to which Rodrigo responds 'creo / que eres famoso y gran hombre / aunque nunca oí tal nombre'.<sup>33</sup> Nuño is able to invent a

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., III: 3065–66. 'I'm no Moor, but Lope of Vivar, the Asturian'.

<sup>29</sup> Lope de Vega, *El remedio en la desdicha*, ed. by Francisco López Estrada and María Teresa López García-Berdoy (Barcelona: PPU, 1991), I: 543–46. 'I know their Arabic well', 'I'll put on one of their veils and, dressed as a Moor, I'll go to Coín'.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., I: 553–54. 'How will she understand the Christian language?'

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., II: 1161–65. 'In Moorish dress'.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., II: 1164–65. 'Try my luck'.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., II: 1184–86. 'I believe that you're a powerful and famous man, though I've never heard such a name before'.

persona and ascribe importance to it and Rodrigo believes him, self-fashioning religio-cultural identity through both costume and language.

Religio-cultural identity is moreover adopted linguistically through self-identification or proposed conversion, unveiling the ease with which it is possible to move between categories. In *CV*, the eponymous *fronterizo* Pedro is described as fluent in Arabic and has an Andalusi vassal, Hamete, who moves between Castilian and Arabic by using an *aljamiado* (mixed) dialect throughout. While Hamete brings comic relief to the play, and is in part a stock *gracioso*, his role goes beyond the stereotype in his reassurance and sage advice: 'Nonca el fortuna a vós nega, / Pedro, on ventoroso fen'.<sup>34</sup> Language is also used to denote Pedro's ambiguous religio-cultural identity as a result of his border crossing: in the autographed manuscript Lope himself refers to him as *andaluz* in the dedication, as does Rosela in Act II. The same indeterminate designation is used in *RD*, as Rodrigo Narváez identifies as a liminal figure somewhere between al-Andalus and Castile: 'Aquel fronterizo fuerte, / aquel andaluz temido'.<sup>35</sup> Later the Abencerraje knight Abindarráez also refers to himself as *andaluz*.<sup>36</sup> Andalusi is therefore a cross-cultural designation of identity that supersedes and thus undermines the solidity of *cristiano* and *moro*.

The process of Mudarra's conversion to Christianity in *BM* also occurs in language, rather than a change in belief. At the start of Act III Mudarra plays chess with the man he believes to be his father, Almanzor. The two have a disagreement, leading Almanzor to lose his temper and declare Mudarra to be '¡Bárbaro, extraño / de nuestra sangre y nobleza, / y de nuestra misma ley!'<sup>37</sup> 'Bárbaro' paradoxically denotes foreignness in a familiar context: Almanzor attempts to demarcate the boundaries of Andalusi identity to exclude Mudarra. Yet Mudarra has, as far as we know, happily grown up in Córdoba and has fitted in to the extent of being considered valiant<sup>38</sup>. His religio-cultural identity is thus changed on the whim of his uncle: his identity is controlled by others and is not an essential characteristic. When he later meets his blind father Gonzalo Bustos, Mudarra pretends to be an outsider and speaks of himself in the third person, describing himself as 'entre cristiano y moro',<sup>39</sup> acknowledging the possibility to be both or neither. Mudarra's conversion encapsulates *BM*'s portrayal of cultural identity as mutable and conditioned by both dress and language, epitomized by Mudarra's self-proclamation that ends the play, 'ya soy cristiano'.<sup>40</sup>

A third way in which difference predicated on religio-cultural identity is

<sup>34</sup> Lope de Vega, *El cordobés*, II: 324–25. 'Fortune will never desert you, Pedro, you've got luck on your side'.

<sup>35</sup> Lope de Vega, *El remedio*, I: 565–66. 'That strong frontiersman, that feared Andalusi'.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, II: 1502–03.

<sup>37</sup> Lope de Vega, *El bastardo*, III: 2093–95. 'Barbaric! A stranger to our blood, nobility and faith!'

<sup>38</sup> See *Ibid.*, III: 2049.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, III: 2713. 'Between Christian and Moor'.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, III: 3070. 'Now I am Christian'.

undermined is the normalcy of intercultural relationships. In *BM* the plot's progression is conditional upon Ruy Velázquez's respectful alliance with the Andalusí king Almanzor. Gonzalo Bustos is then imprisoned by Almanzor at Ruy's bequest and pursues a relationship with his sister Arlaja. Arlaja establishes her agency in her demand to be Gonzalo's jailer because of 'con qué afición mira [Almanzor] tus cosas, cristiano'.<sup>41</sup> At no point does Arlaja hint at a crisis of faith in her fondness for Gonzalo. In *CV* Pedro goes beyond mere intercultural alliance to friendships that become crucial to his success as *fronterizo*: he befriends and works with both Hamete, a lower-class Granadan, and the noble Abencerraje Cerbín. Cerbín values their relationship and calls him 'Pedro amado',<sup>42</sup> while Pedro defends the importance of Cerbín to him to his sceptical vassals.

In *RD* Christian-Muslim cooperation is celebrated from the outset as news of a peace treaty has broken and cross-cultural relationships are central to the plot. Rodrigo treats his Andalusí captive Arráez kindly and releases him; evidence of mutual respect rather than arbitrary animosity. The two discuss what Arráez was doing when captured and Rodrigo empathizes with his relationship problems. Arráez is the husband of Rodrigo's Andalusí love interest Alara, and when the truth is revealed Rodrigo refuses to betray his new friend: 'la ofensa de mi honor temo',<sup>43</sup> demonstrating the value placed upon the friendship. This then comes to a head in the play with Rodrigo assisting the Andalusí noble Abindarráez whom he meets in battle to return to his love Jarifa. Akin to his relationship with Arráez, their friendship is borne out of a mutual comprehension of lovesickness, an experience that has no religio-cultural affiliation.

Though it is beyond the remit of this article, in addition to the construction of identity at the level of language and costume and intercultural relationships, the three plays also undermine religio-cultural identity as a marker for difference by de-emphasizing the practice, ritual and language of both Christianity and Islam. They moreover focus on internal conflict as opposed to clashes across religio-cultural lines and emphasize religio-cultural alliance; the obvious examples being the mass beheading of Granadans and Castilians in *CV* and *BM* respectively; deaths orchestrated by those from the same cultural milieu. The presence of Muslim-Christian warfare in both plays appears inconsequential versus the central internal conflicts.

To conclude, it is apropos to consider whether in portraying religio-cultural identity as fluid, adoptable and thus an unreliable marker of difference Lope makes a socio-political statement about his contemporary Spain in light of the marginalization and then expulsion of *moriscos*, as Fuchs has argued for Cervantes. While this is a reading that cannot be discounted, the medieval

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., II: 1135–36. 'The sympathy Almanzor has for your predicament, Christian'.

<sup>42</sup> Lope de Vega, *El cordobés*, III: 509. 'Beloved Pedro'.

<sup>43</sup> Lope de Vega, *El remedio*, II: 1263. 'I fear the damage that'd be done to my honour'.

context of *CV*, *BM* and *RD* is a crucial differentiator. In contrast to extant politicized readings of early modern literature featuring Muslim characters — as either maurophile or maurophobe — these history plays are ambivalent towards and sceptical of the capacity of religio-cultural identity to define self and other precisely because of the reality of Muslims on the Iberian Peninsula in the Middle Ages.

# Identifying with the Orient: Exoticism and Similarity in Jean Lahor's *Quatrains d'Al-Ghazali*

JULIA CATERINA HARTLEY

UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

*Abstract.* This article looks at a rare example of a nineteenth-century author who sought to present the Orient in terms of its similarity rather than its difference: the minor Parnassian poet Jean Lahor (pen name of Henri Cazalis). Lahor's collection of poems, *Les Quatrains d'Al-Ghazali* (first published in 1896 and then expanded for a second edition in 1907) presents the Islamic theologian Al-Ghazali as its author's alter-ego. The article analyses the language of similarity used in the collection's prefatory material and compares Lahor's poems to their alleged sources, which are Al-Ghazali's *al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl* and the *Robāyyat* of Omar Khayyam. It is shown that, ultimately, Lahor seeks to familiarize Al-Ghazali and remove their cultural differences in order to better exoticize himself. Lahor's seemingly contradictory pursuit of similarity and exoticism is further explained in light of Edward Said's and Tzvetan Todorov's analyses of French writing on cultural difference.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Introduction

We are all familiar with the status of the Orient in nineteenth-century French literature as Europe's cultural opposite, a screen on to which authors could project their fantasies of the exotic and their fears of difference, as was seminally described by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978). What has garnered far less critical attention are the efforts in the period to present the Orient in terms of its similarity.<sup>1</sup> The present article focuses on one such case: the collection of poems *Les Quatrains d'Al-Ghazali* by the minor Parnassian poet Jean Lahor (pen name of Henri Cazalis). In this collection, first published in 1896 and then expanded in 1907 for a second edition, Lahor ventriloquizes the eleventh-century Islamic theologian Al-Ghazali, imagining that he wrote poems in the form of the Persian quatrain (*robā'e*), to which Lahor had been

<sup>1</sup> Although it should be noted that Said acknowledges the role played by familiarization in the 'othering' of the Orient, as per the representation of the prophet Mohammad as an 'impostor', similar to Christ but irreducibly different. See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 72.



introduced by European translations of Omar Khayyam's *Robāyyiat*.<sup>2</sup> In the preface to the second edition, Lahor justifies his choice to write in the voice of Al-Ghazali by claiming that there exist strong similarities between the life and thoughts of Al-Ghazali and his own. Did this focus on similarity allow Lahor to challenge the period's predominantly exoticizing perspective on the Orient? In order to answer this question, I shall be analyzing Lahor's treatment of his Islamic sources in the collection's prefatory material and poems.

### Lahor's Prefaces

The preface to the first edition of *Les Quatrains d'Al-Ghazali* reads as follows:

Abou-Hamid-Mohammed-Ibn-Ahmed Al-Ghazali naquit à Thous, dans le Khorasân, l'an 1058 de l'ère chrétienne, et y mourut en 1111, en l'an 503 de l'hégire, à l'âge de cinquante-trois ans.

D'âme aimante et d'esprit inquiet, il erra toute sa vie à la recherche de la vérité, de pays en pays, d'un système à l'autre, mais s'arrêta surtout aux enivrantes rêveries du panthéisme musulman. Il fut longtemps soufi, c'est-à-dire panthéiste comme le fut Kheyam, le délicieux poète persan, qui mourut vers 1124, et ainsi fut son contemporain.

N'ayant trouvé nulle part, pas même en cette doctrine, la satisfaction ni le calme, excepté, comme il l'avoue lui-même, 'à de rares heures isolées', il revint vers la fin de sa vie à des études pratiques, surtout de morale, et 'se réjouit des progrès utiles et bienfaisants de la science humaine\*.

Al-Ghazali a écrit des traités religieux, philosophiques et moraux; il n'a jamais écrit ou n'a pas laissé de vers. Au cas où il s'y fut essayé, peut-être eût-il pris la forme du quatrain, immortalisée par Kheyam, qui vécut près de lui, dans le Khorasân. J'ignore s'ils se sont connus.

— PAUL RAVASSE, *Grande Encyclopédie*.<sup>3</sup>

Lahor informs his readers from the outset that Al-Ghazali did not write quatrains. The poems in the collection are thus neither a translation nor an adaptation, but a fiction taking its content from Al-Ghazali's biography and

<sup>2</sup> Lahor had read the 1859 English verse rendition by Edward Fitzgerald and the 1867 French prose translation by Jean-Baptiste Nicolas. Edward Fitzgerald, *Rubāiyāt of Omar Khayyām, the Astronomer-Poet of Persia, Translated into English Verse* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1859). Jean-Baptiste Nicolas, *Les Quatrains de Khéyam, traduits du persan par J. B. Nicolas* (Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1867).

<sup>3</sup> Jean Lahor, *Les Quatrains d'Al-Ghazali* (Paris: Lemerre, 1896), p. i. 'Al-Ghazali was born in Tus, in Khorasan, in 1058 AD and died in 1111, the year 503 of hegira, at the age of fifty-three. His soul was loving and his mind restless, he wandered his entire life searching for truth, from country to country, from one system to another, but he mainly dwelled on the intoxicating *reveries* of Muslim pantheism. He was for a long time a Sufi, that is to say a Pantheist like Khayyam, the sweet Persian poet, who died in 1124 and was thus his contemporary. Having found nowhere, not even in this doctrine, peace nor satisfaction, except, as he admits himself, "in some rare and isolated hours", he returned towards the end of his life to practical studies, especially ethics, and "rejoiced in the useful and beneficiary effects of human science". Al-Ghazali wrote religious, philosophical and moral treatises; he never wrote or at least has not left us any verse. Had he tried his hand at them, he may have used the form of the quatrain, made immortal by Khayyam, who lived near him, in Khorasan. I do not know whether they knew each other'. All translations are my own.

its form from Khayyam. Lahor justifies this choice of form by positing a relationship between Al-Ghazali and Khayyam, who we are told shared the same religion and lived at the same time. All of the information provided on Al-Ghazali is taken from the entry on Al-Ghazali in the *Grande Encyclopédie*.<sup>4</sup> The one moment in which Lahor expresses a subjective impression is the phrase ‘d’âme aimante et d’esprit inquiet’, which foreshadows the manner in which he will characterize Al-Ghazali in the quatrains. This preface therefore has two functions: it justifies the choice of the quatrain as a form and it provides the reader with some authoritative background; by citing Ravaisse’s entry, Lahor is establishing that these poems are based on a real person. What the preface does not do, however, is tell us why a minor Parnassian poet until then known for his interest in Buddhism and Hinduism would want to write in the voice of one of Islam’s greatest authorities. For this we need to turn to the second preface, which comes from a defensive position and as a result has a lot more to say about the choice of Al-Ghazali.

Lahor introduces his second edition, which was published in a volume entitled *En Orient*, as follows:

Quelques-uns ont aimé ce livre, trouvant en certains de ces quatrains comme un ‘triple extrait’ de la poésie orientale, et en d’autres la vibration, l’émotion sincère d’une âme moderne. Beaucoup l’ont peu lu, ou, l’ayant lu, peu compris; la forme d’abord leur en a paru monotone. [...] ces parfums d’orient, il est mieux peut-être de ne les respirer que par gouttes.

Quelques-uns ont donc blâmé cette forme des quatrains, mais, faisant parler en vers le philosophe persan Al-Ghazali, qui vécut à l’époque de Kheyam, l’auteur de quatrains adorables, j’avais le droit de lui faire adopter cette forme poétique, très goûtée de son temps.<sup>5</sup>

Lahor uses a strategic false dichotomy: the opposition between those who appreciated his poetry and those who did not understand it. Focusing on the latter, he defends the choice of the quatrain as a form, on the basis that it belongs to Al-Ghazali’s cultural context. This is the same argument that was made in the first preface, but there has been a shift in vocabulary: while the first preface had said that one *could imagine* that Al-Ghazali, *had he* written poetry, *would* have chosen the quatrain, the second preface tells us: ‘j’avais le droit de lui faire adopter cette forme poétique’. The focus is no longer on Al-Ghazali’s biography, but on Lahor’s instrumentalization of Al-Ghazali, his agency made explicit by

<sup>4</sup> Paul Ravaisse, ‘Gazzali’, in *La grande encyclopédie: inventaire raisonné des sciences, des lettres et des arts*, vol. 18, (Paris: Lamirault [puis] Société anonyme de ‘La Grande encyclopédie’, 1885–1902), pp. 899–900.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Lahor, *En Orient* (Paris: Lemerre, 1907), pp. 5–6. ‘Some have appreciated this book, finding in some of these quatrains a kind of “triple extract” of Oriental poetry, and in others the vibration, the sincere emotion of a modern soul. Many read it little, or, having read it, understood little; the form seemed monotonous to them. [...] it is perhaps better to only inhale these Oriental perfumes in small doses. Some have thus blamed the choice of the quatrain, but, putting into verse the Persian philosopher Al-Ghazali, who lived at the time of Khayyam, the author of adorable quatrains, I had the right to make him adopt this poetic form, which was very popular in his lifetime’.

the term 'faire' (to make), which has coercive connotations. In contrast with the first preface, which had only used the first person once and in a detached manner ('J'ignore s'ils se sont connus'), the second preface has a personal tone. The first person is used a dozen times and always in relation to Lahor's creative process, vindicating his right to poetic license. But Lahor is also vindicating something else: his closeness to Al-Ghazali, which is the ultimate justification for the collection. The second preface continues as follows:

Ces quatrains d'Al-Ghazali, qui n'écrivit jamais en vers [...] sont [...] fort imprégnés par endroits de la pensée moderne [...], ce qui est peut-être un de leurs défauts. Mais je croirais volontiers que *le philosophe Al-Ghazali ressemblait à certains d'entre nous*. Du moins c'est l'opinion que j'ai retirée du peu que j'ai lu de lui. [...]

Il a eu, *lui aussi*, la passion de la vérité; *lui aussi* à travers le monde, à travers toutes les écoles philosophiques, s'est mis à sa poursuite et ne l'a pas trouvée; *lui aussi* au sortir des religions, comme de ces écoles où il avait donc si longtemps et si vainement erré, il s'est contenté [...] de quelques lueurs çà et là entrevues [...]. Et alors, revenu de ses grandes ivresses, de ses infinis espoirs, de [...] l'amour mystique, il n'a plus vu et affirmé que deux choses, le peu qu'est l'homme dans les gouffres du temps et de l'espace, et devant l'incertitude de *notre sort*, [...] la nécessité de la pitié qui peut alléger ses souffrances [...]. Une phrase [...] du philosophe Al-Ghazali m'étonna: *j'y retrouvais une partie de ma pensée; sa vie, quand je vins à la connaître, ressemblait à la mienne*. C'est ainsi que j'eus l'idée d'écrire ces quatrains sous son nom, *comme si j'étais un peu lui, ou qu'il eût été un peu moi*. (My emphasis)<sup>6</sup>

Similarity and equivalence are present not only through the use of verbs such as 'ressembler' and 'retrouver', but also through the anaphoric repetition of 'lui aussi' and the powerful mirroring effect of the final clause: Lahor cannot decide whether it is he who is like Al-Ghazali or Al-Ghazali who was like him.

What is striking about this preface is that it functions outside of the paradigm of Orientalism identified by Edward Said, in which the Orient is defined in diametric opposition to the Occident. Al-Ghazali is not defined by his otherness, but by his similarity to Lahor and modern French readers. Lahor suggests this by describing the parallels between his own search for truth and that of Al-Ghazali, and also by emphasizing the universality of the

<sup>6</sup> Lahor, *En Orient*, pp. 6–7. 'These quatrains by Al-Ghazali, who never wrote verse, [...] are at times strongly imbued with modern thought, [...] which is perhaps one of their flaws. But I am willing to believe that the philosopher Al-Ghazali *resembled some of us*. That is at least the opinion that I have formed from the little that I have read of him. [...] *He too* had a passion for truth; *he too* pursued it, across the world, across all philosophical schools; *he too* leaving religions, like those schools in which he had erred in vain for such a long time, contented himself [...] with a few glimmers glimpsed here and there. [...] And then, returning from his great intoxications, his infinite hopes, [...] from mystical love, he only saw and affirmed two things, the insignificance of man before the abyss of time and space, before the uncertainty of *our fate*, [...] the necessity of compassion in order to alleviate [...] suffering. A sentence [...] by the philosopher Al-Ghazali surprised me: *I recognized in it a part of my thought; his life, once I came to know it, resembled mine*. That is how I had the idea of writing these quatrains under his name, *as if I were a little him, or he were a little me*'.

human condition, in particular through the use of the first person plural: 'l'incertitude de notre sort'. Lahor thus suggests that existential angst and the search for meaning exist beyond historical, geographic or religious boundaries: the sensitivity and preoccupations that he shares with Al-Ghazali are powerful enough to create a feeling of intimacy, in spite of the distance between them. The question is: on what basis and with what aim did Lahor make this universalist claim?

### Lahor's *Quatrains* and Al-Ghazali's *Munqidh*

In the first preface Lahor states that Al-Ghazali was 'soufi, c'est-à-dire panthéiste comme le fut Kheyam'. But although they were both eleventh-century men from Khorasan, Al-Ghazali and Khayyam's outlooks differed widely. Al-Ghazali was a devout Muslim, as one would expect from Islam's most influential theologian. Khayyam's religious beliefs in contrast will always be open to debate, some seeing him as a mystic and others as a heretic. This is unsurprising, since medieval Persian poetry is characterized by its ambiguity and openness to interpretation. While we can speculate as to whether Khayyam was a pantheist, that is someone believing that God is present in all of creation, calling Al-Ghazali a pantheist is wildly inaccurate. Pantheism, which was identified with certain Sufi groups — and we should note that pantheism is not a synonym for Sufism — was strongly condemned by orthodox Muslims, and the one text by Al-Ghazali that we know Lahor had read includes one such condemnation.

Lahor's source for the *Quatrains* was Al-Ghazali's intellectual and spiritual autobiography, *al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl* (*Munqidh* for short). This first-person Arabic treatise was translated into French in 1842 by the German Orientalist Augustus Schmölders, under the title *Ce qui sauve des égarements et ce qui éclaire les ravissements*, and later retranslated by Barbier de Meynard with the more unfortunate title *Le Préservatif de l'Erreur* (1877). In the *Munqidh* Al-Ghazali explains that he was born with a God-given thirst for knowledge and therefore devoted his adult life to the pursuit of truth. This leads him to study, to quote Schmölders's translation, 'les diverses classes d'hommes qui, selon mon avis, cherchaient la vérité'.<sup>7</sup> These are the various religious sects and philosophical schools that existed when Al-Ghazali was writing, and which he classifies and reviews in turn, ending with Sufism. Al-Ghazali writes that of all sects, the Sufis are the closest to God, with the exception of those Sufis who believe in pantheism, since that is a sin.<sup>8</sup>

In the opening of the *Munqidh*, Al-Ghazali states that in order to find the truth, he had to forget established authorities and proceed to his own

<sup>7</sup> Auguste Schmölders, *Essai sur les écoles philosophiques chez les Arabes et notamment sur la doctrine d'Alghazzali* (Paris: Firmin Didot Frères, 1842), p. 24. 'The different classes of men searching for truth'.

<sup>8</sup> Schmölders, *Essai*, pp. 60–61.

conclusions. This passage appeals to modern secular sensibilities, since it posits the individual's independence from received knowledge. It is in this very passage that Lahor encountered the mysterious 'phrase' which he tells his readers led him to identify with Al-Ghazali. An earlier draft, rather than exciting curiosity by leaving the actual sentence unrevealed, paraphrased the following paragraph from Schmölders's translation of the *Munqidh*:

Qui t'assure donc que tout ce que tu reconnais dans l'état de veille, grâce à la sensation ou à l'entendement, existe effectivement? Tout cela est assurément vrai en égard à ton état actuel; mais il est pourtant possible qu'un autre état s'offre à toi, lequel soit à ton état de veille ce que celui-ci est maintenant à ton sommeil, de sorte que, par rapport à cet état, ton état de veille ne soit qu'un sommeil. Quand tu auras atteint cet état, tu reconnaîtras que toutes les choses perçues par ta raison sont des imaginations sans réalité.<sup>9</sup>

But what is even more telling, is what Lahor chooses to omit. In the *Munqidh*, the doubts described by Al-Ghazali are not an end point, but a starting point: a straw man that is countered by his faith in God.

Le malaise que je ressentais était bien grave et dura environ deux mois [...] jusqu'à ce que Dieu me guérit de cette indisposition [...], et que mon âme recouvra la paix et la santé. [...] Quiconque s'imagine qu'une vérité ne peut être rendue évidente que par des preuves, met des bornes bien étroites à la large miséricorde de Dieu.<sup>10</sup>

Lahor's use of the passage from the *Munqidh* in this draft is selective to the point of distortion, turning a tribute to God's 'miséricorde' into a declaration of scepticism. This misrepresentation continues in the final version of the preface, which states that Al-Ghazali searched for truth without ever finding it.

Lahor's erasure of Al-Ghazali's religious faith is obvious both in his selective quotation in the draft preface and in the quatrains themselves, which are organized into three parts: 'L'Amour', 'Le Doute', and 'La Pitié du Renoncement'. The poems in the second section describe a loss of faith and those in the third section merge together elements from Sufi poetry, Buddhist thought, and Hindu liturgy. This sequencing creates a narrative according to which Al-Ghazali abandons Islam in favour of syncretism, two developments that do not appear in the *Munqidh*, in which Al-Ghazali states that he is assisted by God in his search for truth. In a subtler manner, Lahor's references

<sup>9</sup> Schmölders, *Essai*, p. 20. 'Who can guarantee that all that you recognize while awake, through your senses and understanding, truly exists? This may well be true with regards to your current condition; yet it remains possible that another state might offer itself to you, whose relationship to your condition while awake is comparable to your current relationship with your condition while asleep. When you will have reached such a state, you will recognize that all the things perceived by your reason are nothing more than unfounded fantasies'. Lahor's draft is quoted in René Petitbon, *Les Sources orientales de Jean Lahor* (Paris: Nizet, 1962), p. 213.

<sup>10</sup> Schmölders, *Essai*, p. 23. 'The malaise that I was feeling was a grave one and it lasted about two months [...] until God cured me from this indisposition [...], and my soul regained peace and health. [...] Whomever imagines that a truth can only be revealed by bringing forth evidence is placing very narrow limits on God's vast mercy'.

to Al-Ghazali as a 'Persian philosopher' (as opposed to 'Islamic theologian') also contribute to this process. The term is technically correct, but it draws attention away from Al-Ghazali's religion: one can be Persian and one can be a philosopher without being Muslim.<sup>11</sup> We find ourselves wondering: how could Lahor write an Al-Ghazali that was so far removed from what his sources indicated? There are two explanations: either Lahor did not read beyond page 20 of Schmölders's translation or he knew that he would not be able to claim a resemblance between himself and Al-Ghazali if he provided an accurate summary of the *Munqidh*, a work written in order to defend Islam against other religions and philosophies.<sup>12</sup>

Another element of cultural difference that is erased by Lahor is that of poetic form. The collection's most original feature is its (claimed) imitation of the Persian quatrain or *robā'e*. But whereas the *robā'e* has a fixed rhyme structure of *aaba*, Lahor uses couplets, *rimes embrassées* and *rimes croisées*, that is to say, the rhyme structures of French versification. The most important difference between the French quatrain and the *robā'e* is that whereas the former is always used as a stanza, the latter can be used as a stand-alone poem. This brevity gives the *robā'e* an axiomatic quality, which showcases the poet's powers of synthesis: the reason behind Khayyam's popularity is his ability to pose existential questions within the space of only four lines. Lahor does not attempt to recreate this defining feature of the Persian quatrain. Instead, he arranges his quatrains into thematic sequences, connecting them through strategies such as the use of refrains or a unifying title.<sup>13</sup>

### Conclusion

The question this article set out to answer was whether Lahor's choice to focus on similarity rather than difference challenged the period's dominant understanding of the Orient as Europe's diametric opposite, i.e. what Edward Said calls 'Orientalism'. In order to answer this question, I will draw on another important analysis of European writing on cultural difference: Tzvetan Todorov's *Nous et les autres* (1989). Todorov argues that French thinkers from the Enlightenment to the twentieth century viewed cultural difference either through the prism of universalism (which, in its negative form, becomes ethnocentrism) or relativism (which, in its negative form, does not view all

<sup>11</sup> Lahor, *En Orient*, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Another possible explanation is that the scholarship of the time regarded Asian religions as interconnected: Sufism in particular was viewed as merging Islam with Hinduism (see René Petitbon, *Sources orientales*, p. 97 and p. 108). But the leap from the *Munqidh*'s defence of Islam to the *Quatrains*'s rejection of Islam in favour of syncretism is so great that one must admit that, even if Lahor was basing himself on academic authorities, he nonetheless chose to ignore the explicit message of the single work by Al-Ghazali that he claimed to have read.

<sup>13</sup> See for example the use of the refrain 'Oh! qu'il est doux, près de l'aimée' in the first and fourth quatrain pp. 26–27 or the section entitled 'Le dialogue d'Allah et du poète' pp. 67–83 of Lahor, *En Orient*.

human beings as equal). The ‘Orientalists’ described by Said would fall into the former category, since they considered the ways in which the Orient differed from Europe as grounds to determine its inferiority. Indeed, the colonial *mission civilisatrice* was based on the premise that it would be preferable for France’s others to be more similar to France. Although universalism and relativism are two opposite views, they can masquerade as one another. Todorov gives as an example of this the cultural relativism of Montaigne’s essay *Des Cannibales*, which praises the ‘cannibals’ by comparing them to the ancient Greeks. Montaigne’s aim in praising a different society is to show cultural relativism, but he is ultimately speaking from an ethnocentric perspective, since the otherness of the ‘cannibals’ is only judged positively because of its perceived similarities with the European classical heritage. The same can be said of Lahor’s *Quatrains*: Al-Ghazali is only praised in terms of his similarities, an ethnocentric approach which relies on the erasure of differences — most notably, Al-Ghazali’s unwavering faith in Islam.

Todorov suggests that the universalist who claims to be a relativist is unimpeachable because ‘il ne s’est pas aperçu de la différence des autres’.<sup>14</sup> This can certainly be said of Lahor’s use of form, which shows no awareness of the differences between French and Persian versification. Lahor’s erasure of Islamic faith from Al-Ghazali’s search for truth, however, seems too deliberate to be caused by mere ignorance. Lahor’s overt aim was to familiarize Al-Ghazali, but this was in reality a means to an end: that of exoticizing himself. Indeed, although Lahor rewrote Al-Ghazali’s religious identity, he nonetheless wanted the *Quatrains* to maintain an exotic quality. This exoticism is present in the first preface, which emphasizes Al-Ghazali’s cultural belonging to medieval Iran; the second preface, which refers to the quatrains as ‘parfums d’Orient’; and the second edition’s placement of the *Quatrains* alongside translations from Khayyam’s *Robāyyiat* and the *Song of Songs* in a volume entitled *En Orient*. These editorial choices give the volume the appearance of an anthology of Oriental literature, of which — it is implied — Omar Khayyam, the anonymous authors of the Hebrew Bible, and Jean Lahor are all equally representative.

One question remains: why did Jean Lahor choose to write in the voice of Al-Ghazali, a devout Muslim, when he was in fact interested in a form of syncretism derived from Hinduism and Buddhism? I would suggest that Lahor’s main reason for choosing Al-Ghazali was the theologian’s name. The equivalence between Lahor’s thought and the Hindu literature from which he drew inspiration had previously been suggested by Mallarmé.<sup>15</sup> What Lahor needed in order to confirm the Oriental character of his poetry was an alter-ego, one so close that it would be impossible to tell them apart. Having previously

<sup>14</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *Nous et les autres: La réflexion française sur la diversité humaine* (Paris: Seuil, 1989), p. 71. ‘He has not noticed that others are different’.

<sup>15</sup> ‘[T]on Orient s’exhale tout entier de ton âme, [...] tu n’as fait que juxtaposer un mal exotique à ta pensée, comme une preuve ou une illustration’. 18 June 1888 letter from Mallarmé, quoted in Marcel Schwab, *La Renaissance orientale* (Paris: Payot, 1950), p. 568.

used the pen name Caselli, an Italian surname chosen for its homonymy with his surname (pronounced without sounding the final 's'), he would no doubt have been struck by the phonetic closeness between Cazalis and Ghazali. The title *Les Quatrains d'Al-Ghazali* can therefore be read as a pun on its author's name. If we revisit the second preface from this perspective, it yields a different meaning: the final words 'comme si j'étais un peu lui, ou qu'il eût été un peu moi' no longer seem an expression of intimacy, but rather an unveiling of the game of masks that is being played. You cannot tell who is who, because this Al-Ghazali is none other than Henri Cazalis.

Should we conclude from this that *fin-de-siècle* French poets were ultimately incapable of identifying any real similarities between their concerns and those of medieval Islamic authors? The cases of Marceline Desbordes-Valmore — who redeployed Sa'di's meditations on the pleasures and pitfalls of language in a modern, secular, and feminized context — and Armand Renaud — who in his collection *Les Nuits persanes* (1870) borrowed in equal measure from French and Persian poetic traditions, creating unexpected analogies between the status of poetry in *fin-de-siècle* Paris and fourteenth-century Shiraz — forbid us from making this generalization.<sup>16</sup> What we can say is that Lahor capitalized on the perceived otherness of the Orient: selling his French verses as 'Oriental perfumes' was all it took to convince French readers of their originality.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> On Desbordes-Valmore see my article 'Beyond Orientalism: When Marceline Desbordes-Valmore carried Sa'di's Roses to France', *Iranian Studies* 52.5–6 (2019), 785–808. Armand Renaud's collection is analysed in my current book project on Iran in French literature, which is supported by the Leverhulme Trust.

<sup>17</sup> Admirers included the young Marcel Proust (see Petitbon, *Sources orientales*, p. 271).