

## Triangular Desire: the mediation of Pierre Loti's exoticism

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In *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (*Deceit, Desire and the Novel*), René Girard offers a comprehensive analysis of what he terms 'le désir triangulaire' (triangular desire) (Girard: 15-67). He uses Don Quixote as one of his main examples, to illustrate the meaning of 'le médiateur du désir' (the mediator of desire): 'Don Quichotte a renoncé, en faveur d'Amadis, à la prérogative fondamentale de l'individu: il ne choisit plus les objets de son désir, c'est Amadis qui choisit pour lui' (Don Quixote has ceded to Amadis the fundamental prerogative of the individual: he no longer chooses the objects of his desire, Amadis chooses for him) (16). Whilst in many fictional works there may be no mediator, in which case a straight-line links the subject with the desired object, in the case of *Don Quixote* the presence of the mediator in the literary creation, in the person of the chivalrous knight errant Amadis de Gaule, creates a triangle. This structure influences all of his adventures: 'L'objet change avec chaque aventure mais le triangle demeure' (the object changes with each adventure, but the triangle remains). His desires are no longer spontaneous, and his judgment is suspended. A similar case of 'le désir selon l'Autre' (desire following the *Other*) is to be found in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. Emma Bovary 'désire à travers les héroïnes romantiques' (desires through romantic heroines) and her imagination has in this way 'détruit en elle toute spontanéité' (destroyed all spontaneity in her) (18). Girard refers to this 'absence de réaction individuelle' (absence of individual

reaction) as what Jules de Gaultier called ‘bovarysme’. In *Loti’s* case (see end note) such mediation can be observed in the form of exoticism, as most of the women and men he desires are desirable for their quality of “otherness”. As Claude Gagnière suggests in his preface to Loti’s *Romans (Novels)*, they all seem to be modelled after the gypsy girl of his first romantic encounter at age fifteen, all possessing the same exotic qualities (*Romans*: viii). Just as with Don Quixote and Emma Bovary, the love-object changes with each new adventure/romance, but the triangle remains the same. Spontaneity has been destroyed by the repetitive pattern. The mediators in both the examples given by Girard are ‘extérieur à l’univers du héros’ (outside the hero’s world) (Girard: 22), being examples of ‘*médiation externe*’ (external mediation), as opposed to the example he gives of Stendhal’s *Le Rouge et le Noir* (Red and Black), where Julien Sorel’s mediators are ‘à l’intérieur de ce même univers’ (inside his world), or representative of ‘*médiation interne*’ (internal mediation) (23). This is because Julien becomes so successful socially that he manages to leave his provincial roots behind and enter the world he had previously only ever dreamed about. In this latter case the mediation is necessarily complicated: ‘La médiation engendre un second désir parfaitement identique à celui du médiateur. C’est à dire que l’on a toujours affaire à deux désirs *concurrents*. Le médiateur ne peut plus jouer son rôle de modèle sans jouer également, ou paraître jouer, le rôle d’un obstacle’ (Mediation creates a second desire perfectly identical to that of the mediator. Which means that we are always dealing with two *concurrent desires*. The mediator can no longer play his/her role without playing, or seeming to play the role of an obstacle) (21). As the mediator has become a rival rather than a model, s/he engenders feelings of intense hostility. The tension created here reveals how paradoxical the idea of mediation is, as what binds the mediator to the subject is also what would appear to separate them. In this way the feelings of hostility do nothing to weaken the link between the subject and the mediator and ‘loin d’amoinrir le prestige de ce dernier, ne peut guère que l’accroître’ (far from reducing the mediator’s prestige, it

actually increases it) (24). The union of these two contrary emotions, 'la vénération la plus soumise et la rancune la plus intense' (submissive veneration, and intense resentment) is hatred. Even this is not straightforward, though, as '[celui] qui hait se hait d'abord lui-même en raison de l'admiration secrète que recèle sa haine' (the hater firstly hates himself for the secret admiration that his hatred is concealing). In order to 'dissimuler son imitation' (hide his imitation) the subject will insist that 'son propre désir est antérieur à celui de son rival' (his own desire predates that of his rival) (25). The subject is affirming his/her spontaneity, although this is a delusory perception, and s/he denies being influenced. Girard suggests that jealousy and hatred are nothing but 'les noms traditionnels donnés à la médiation interne' (the names traditionally given to internal mediation), and that both always involve 'un élément de fascination à l'égard du rival insolent' (an element of fascination with regard to the insolent rival) (26).

For Loti, one example of the intrusion of the rivalry of 'la médiation interne' (internal mediation) which perfectly illustrates the hatred and assertions of spontaneity which Girard describes can be seen in the references he makes to other tourists. Their presence transforms the external mediation of his exoticism into an internal mediation where his spontaneity is brought into question. That he contemptuously refers to them as 'Cooks' throughout his work, and constantly insists on his own difference is a case in point. His desire for exotic experience must be seen to be unique, and not simply part of a shared Orientalist fantasy.

Indeed Loti goes to great lengths to emphasise what he sees as his unique experience. Above all else readers must not be allowed to mistake him for one of the increasingly ubiquitous 'touristes bavards tenant en main leur *Baedeker*' (chattering tourists with their *Baedekers*) (*Jérusalem*: 45). A good example of this is his lengthening of the time-frame of his stay in Japan as portrayed in *Madame*

*Chrysanthème* in order to ensure that no such suggestion can be made. In his dedication to the novel Loti claims he is simply reporting what actually happened to him: ‘C’est le journal d’un été de ma vie, auquel je n’ai rien changé, pas même les dates’ (It is the diary of a summer of my life in which I have changed nothing, not even the dates) (*Romans*: 650). Suetoshi Funaoka points out, however, that the thirty-six days covered in the *Journal intime* (*Private Diary*) are lengthened to seventy-nine in the novel (Funaoka: 46). Loti is trying to create the illusion of established residence, referring to ‘Diou-djen-dji’ where he sets up house with his “wife” as ‘notre quartier’ (our neighbourhood), and doing his best to give the impression of having settled down: ‘Et maintenant nous sommes presque de vieux mariés; entre nous, les habitudes se créent tout doucement’ (And now we are almost like an established couple, between us, our habits are gently taking form) (670-671). The lengthening of the period of his stay strengthens the illusion and gives him greater authority with which to impart his impressions, setting him apart from tourists and even from other contemporary travel writers.

For Roland Barthes, the distinction Loti insists upon is central to his self-image. In his essay on *Aziyadé* Barthes discusses the three different stages of ‘le voyage, le séjour et la naturalisation’ (the trip, the stay and naturalisation) (*Zéro*: 182), and analyses the implications of the second stage within which Loti most often tries to situate himself: ‘De ces trois moments, le plus contradictoire est le séjour (la résidence): le sujet n’y a plus l’irresponsabilité éthique du touriste (qui est simplement un national en voyage), il n’y a pas encore la responsabilité (civile, politique, militaire) du citoyen’ (Of these three moments, the most contradictory is the stay (taking up residence): the subject no longer has the ethical irresponsibility of the tourist (who is simply a national on holiday), he doesn’t yet have the responsibility (civic, political, military) of the citizen) (183). Loti finds himself in the centre of these two positions. The ambiguity of this positioning is made clear in Barthes’ summary of *Loti’s* situation in *Aziyadé*: ‘« [j’habite] un des plus beaux

*pays du monde* — propos de touriste, amateur de tableaux, de photographies — *et ma liberté est illimitée* » — ivresse du résident, auquel une bonne connaissance des lieux, des mœurs, de la langue permet de satisfaire sans peur tout désir (ce que Loti appelle: la liberté) (*“I live in one of the most beautiful countries in the world — a tourist’s remark, an admirer of scenery and a photo taker — and have unlimited liberty”* — rapture of the resident, whose knowledge of the locality, customs, and language allow him to freely satisfy any desire (which is what Loti calls liberty)). While the Nagasaki of *Madame Chrysanthème* is not compared favourably with the idyllic Istanbul of *Aziyadé*, Loti’s desire to be seen as a resident is essentially the same. He wants us to see him not as simply a ‘national en voyage’ (national on holiday) but as someone who has a ‘bonne connaissance des lieux, des mœurs, de la langue’ (a good knowledge of the locality, customs, and language) and can consequently talk quite naturally of his ‘famille japonaise’ (Japanese family) (*Romans*: 683). The perceived rivalry of increased and increasingly popularised tourism presents a threat to his self-image, which must consequently be repeatedly reinforced and reaffirmed. To take one more example, in *Jérusalem* he shows his contempt for the ‘*touristes qui font Hébron*’ (*tourists who do Hebron*) (*Jérusalem*: 33) although he might easily be said to be doing more or less the same thing himself. The very clear similarity, the fact that his love of the exotic is essentially an imitation of the nineteenth-century Orientalist obsession, is what drives his desire to be different. The vehemence of his insistence on this (apparently slight) difference is redolent of what Freud terms ‘the narcissism of minor differences’ (SE21: 114). Freud raises this point with regard to anti-Semitism, observing that ‘the intolerance of groups is often, strangely enough, exhibited more strongly against small differences than against fundamental ones’ (SE 21: 91). Loti is of course asserting himself as an individual and not confirming his identity as part of a group, but the basic emotion is the same. The smallness of the difference suggests similarity and as a result threatens the perception of unique identity. Only *Loti’s* experience can

therefore be acknowledged as authentic and that of others must be shown as a mere pale imitation of his own. The “Cooks” are here being used by *Loti* to emphasise his uniqueness. They must in no way be allowed to usurp this exclusively-owned quality.

To return to the characterisation of the “other”, Girard writes that the ‘transfiguration de l’objet désiré’ (transformation of the desired object) is the defining factor of both internal and external mediation. He presents it in terms of fertilisation: ‘L’imagination du héros est la mère de l’illusion mais il faut encore un père à cet enfant et ce père est le médiateur’ (The hero’s imagination is the mother of the illusion, but a father is also needed and this father is the mediator) (Girard: 36). Our rival is consequently our benefactor in love, giving immense importance to a previously insignificant desire. This dynamic is evident in *Madame Chrysanthème* in the jealousy *Loti* experiences. On the surface the love triangle of the book, and the jealousy thereby engendered are embodied in the rivalry of *Loti* and his friend Yves for the affections of *Loti*’s “wife” Chrysanthème. However, as argued by Damien Zanone, the jealousy we see is not over Chrysanthème but over Yves for whom *Loti* has an overwhelming affection, and it is hence Chrysanthème who is *Loti*’s benefactor in love, changing the implications of Girard’s male-female-male triangle. Zanone comments that ‘cette jalousie se fixe sur la personne d’Yves seulement et [...] la fidélité de Chrysanthème importe fort peu au héros’ (this jealousy is fixed on Yves alone, and Chrysanthème’s fidelity matters very little to the hero) (*Colloque*: 107). He quotes *Loti*’s open admission of this: ‘De cette Japonaise, je me soucie comme de rien. Mais Yves... ce serait mal de sa part, et cela porterait une atteinte grave à ma confiance en lui...’ (I care nothing at all for this Japanese woman. But Yves... it would be very bad of him, and would seriously damage my trust in him) (*Romans*: 697). Zanone is clearly demonstrating that ‘[dans] la jalousie qui occupe le héros, l’objet de rivalité n’est pas Chrysanthème, prise entre Yves et Loti; c’est Yves, que

Chrysanthème, nouvelle venue, dispute à la vieille affection de Loti' (in the hero's jealousy, the object of the rivalry is not Chrysanthème, caught between Yves and Loti; it is Yves, over whom Chrysanthème, the newcomer, is competing for Loti's long-standing affection) (*Colloque*:107). This is evident in the contempt with which Loti describes Chrysanthème, saying for example 'je lui trouve un air *peuple* dans le plus mauvais sens du mot' (I find her to be *common*, in the worst sense of the word) (*Romans*: 697). Loti's "marriage" to Chrysanthème should thus be read in terms of the effect it has in triangulating Loti's desire for Yves.

Girard also makes a parallel with snobbery. Snobs are 'imitatifs' (imitators), and '[être] snob en amour, c'est se vouer à la jalousie' (to be a snob in love is to be jealous) (Girard: 38). Snobbery and jealousy are seen as firmly linked and are illustrated through looking at Proust: 'Le mimétisme du désir est tel, dans *A La Recherche du temps perdu*, que les personnages seront jaloux ou snobs suivant que leur médiateur est amoureux ou mondain' (The mimicry of desire is such that, in *Searching for Lost Time*, the characters are jealous or snobs depending on whether their mediator is in love or a socialite) (38-9). In Loti's case this parallel of jealousy/snobbery is to be found in his desire for the exotic. Although this is of course largely romantic, exotic experience of any kind is central to his work as is shown by his contempt for the 'Cooks'. His ability to travel and become a part of the local culture, or as he puts it in *Aziyadé* 'être soi-même une partie de ce tableau plein de mouvement et de lumière' (to become oneself part of this tableau full of movement and life) (*Romans*: 49-50), lies at the heart of the unique self-image he cultivates. The 'Cooks' he meets threaten to undermine this image he projects of his own uniqueness by the suggestion of similarity they represent. They consequently act as his benefactors, enhancing as they do his sense of having a unique identity, and serving as a reminder of the importance of insisting on this point. Although he despises them they are nevertheless essential in creating and sustaining his image.

The fact that they reappear so often throughout his work is also of interest, as their reappearances seem to be suggestive of the instability of *Loti's* self-image, and of his consequent need of the constant reassurance that repetitive condemnation brings.

According to Girard, the influence of mediation is such that it takes away all authentic impressions, it in fact reveals that the concept of authentic impressions is a false one. An example from Proust of Marcel being persuaded that he enjoyed a production of 'Berma' '[vingt]-quatre heures après la représentation' (twenty four hours after the play) (Girard: 51) is used to make this point. Marcel is incapable of judging for himself, and needs a mediator to judge for him: '[c'est] croire en soi-même grâce à l'*Autre*' (it is believing in oneself thanks to the *Other*). This process 'ne serait pas possible sans un *oubli* presque instantané de l'impression authentique' (would not be possible without an almost instantaneous *forgetting* of the real impression). He argues that mediation is omnipresent, and that it is only the 'vaniteux romantique [qui] ne se veut plus le disciple de personne [et qui] se persuade qu'il est infiniment *original*' (the vain romantic who wants to be no one's disciple, who persuades himself that he is completely *original*) (29). Such claims to originality are, according to Girard, simply hiding a new kind of copying, and he gives as examples the stereotypes of '[les] dégoûts romantiques, la haine de la société, [et] la nostalgie du désert' (romantic dislikes, hatred of society, nostalgia for the desert). It is of course easy to see how closely this description of the romantic pose conforms to the image Loti projects of himself. His claim to uniqueness, of being like the 'merle blanc' (rara avis) of Alfred de Musset's 1842 short story *Histoire d'un merle blanc* ('Tale of a Rara Avis'). This suggestion that Loti is a 'merle blanc' (rara avis) is made by Plumkett in *Fleurs d'ennui*: 'je me déclare incapable de vous ranger dans une classe d'écrivains quelconque; [...] Voyez le merle blanc, on lui dit qu'il est une pie, on lui dit qu'il est un geai, on lui dit qu'il est un pigeon ramier. Rien de tout cela; il était une bête à part. De même vous, mon cher Loti, vous êtes très unique



dans votre manière; vous n'appartenez à aucune espèce connue d'oiseau' (I find myself incapable of classifying you in any class of writer at all; Take the *rara avis*, some told him he was a magpie, some a jay others a wood-pigeon. Not at all; he was a different creature altogether. As you are, my dear Loti, you are completely unique in your ways; you belong to no known species of bird) (*Fleurs*: 105). This uniqueness may be arguable in some respects, but is certainly not justified by the emotions and desires he depicts. These correspond all too well with the romantic Orientalist obsessions of nineteenth-century Europe, as witness indeed the immense popularity of Loti's work.

Girard also explores the implicit effects of triangular structure on the intensity of desire. The value of the object is seen as increasing with the proximity of the mediator and the distance of the desired object. This is expressed in terms of the shape of the triangular relationship: 'Le triangle du désir est un triangle isocèle. Le désir se fait donc toujours plus intense à mesure que le médiateur se rapproche du sujet désirant' (The triangle of desire is an isosceles triangle. Desire therefore becomes more intense as the mediator nears the desiring subject) (Girard: 101-2). Correspondingly the value of an object diminishes as the subject approaches it, although the illusion of passion becomes more intense: 'Plus le médiateur se rapproche, plus la passion se fait intense et plus l'objet se vide de valeur concrète' (The closer the mediator becomes, the more intense is the passion felt and the more the object becomes emptied of concrete worth) (103). When finally the subject gains "possession" of the object of desire, disappointment is inevitable, and the object loses its value: 'C'est l'objet soudainement désacralisé par la possession et réduit à ses propriétés objectives qui provoque la fameuse exclamation stendhalienne: "Ce n'est que cela!"' (The object is suddenly desacralised by its possession and reduced to its objective properties provoking the celebrated Stendhalien exclamation: "It's only that!") (106). This situation might lead to a realisation of the absurdity of

triangular desire: ‘Voici le héros contraint, semble-t-il, de se rendre à l’évidence. Plus rien ni personne ne le sépare de ce Moi abject et humilié que le désir recouvrait’ (It seems the hero is now forced to face the facts. Nothing and no one now separates him from the abject and humiliated Self that the desire was concealing) (107). The subject is able to extract himself from this ‘abîme du présent’ (abyss of the present) by admitting the absurdity of that one particular desire, and choosing a new one: ‘La déception ne prouve pas l’absurdité de *tous* les désirs métaphysiques mais l’absurdité de ce désir particulier qui vient de décevoir’ (Disappointment doesn’t prove the absurdity of *all* metaphysical desires, only the absurdity of the particular desire which has just disappointed). He can choose between ‘un nouvel objet par son ancien médiateur’ (a new object through his old mediator) or ‘il peut aussi changer de médiateur’ (he can also change mediator). Emma Bovary can change lovers as many times as she likes without changing her dream or, as in Proust, a change of mediators can take place with the resulting confusion: ‘C’est à la multiplication de médiateurs que nous devons cette «décomposition de la personnalité» dont s’inquiétaient et s’irritaient les premiers lecteurs de Marcel Proust’ (It is the multiplication of mediators that gives us the “decomposition of character” that bothered and irritated the first readers of Marcel Proust) (109). Both forms of desire are possible, and both are ‘faites de mensonge et d’illusion’ (made up of lies and illusion): ‘Un mensonge unique qui embrasse l’existence tout entière n’est pas moralement préférable à une série de mensonges temporaires’ (One lie alone that covers all our existence is not morally preferable to a series of temporary lies). The triangle almost inevitably perpetuates itself since, without mediation and the resulting desire, the subject would be left with nothing but self-hatred.

This process in which the object becomes ‘soudainement désacralisé par la possession’ (suddenly desacralised by its possession) is also described by Girard in terms of the ‘valeur illusoire’ (illusory worth) (Girard: 31) that mediation gives to

the desired object. Accordingly '[du] médiateur [...] descend un rayon mystérieux qui fait briller l'objet d'un éclat trompeur' (a mysterious beam shines from the mediator which lights the object with a false aura) (32). This idea of a 'valeur illusoire' (illusory worth) and the inevitable disappointment that follows "possession" is interesting in terms of *Loti's* desire for the exotic, as the fragility of the illusion is clearly apparent in his work. The expectations aroused by his imagination are often crushed when faced with a reality that all too often betrays this 'éclat trompeur' (false aura). The disappointment *Loti* experiences on arrival in the Meiji Japan of *Madame Chrysanthème* is a good illustration, as it lies behind his notorious generalised dislike of the Japanese people. The gap between the romanticised image of his expectations and the banality of the mundane reality he finds inevitably causes disillusion. From a distance as his ship approaches the Nagasaki coastline he is ecstatic: 'Quel pays de verdure et d'ombre, ce Japon, quel Eden inattendu!...' (What a country of greenery and shadows, this Japan, What an unexpected Eden!) (*Romans*: 653). Disillusion sets in almost immediately however: 'Quand Nagasaki parut ce fut une déception pour nos yeux: aux pieds des vertes montagnes surplombantes, c'était une ville tout à fait quelconque' (When Nagasaki appeared it was a disappointment to see: at the foot of the towering green mountains, it was just like any other city). Expecting to find something mysterious, he is confronted with the commonplace of an international port, plunging him into pessimism: 'Il viendra un temps où la terre sera bien ennuyeuse à habiter, quand on l'aura rendue pareille d'un bout à l'autre, et qu'on ne pourra même plus essayer de voyager pour se distraire un peu...' (There will come a time when the world will be a dreary place to live in, when it will have been made the same from one end to the other, and we won't even be able to try to travel to have a little distraction). This reaction is a clear example of the 'Ce n'est que cela!' (It's only that!) reaction to which Girard refers. It is a direct result of the 'éclat trompeur' (false aura) of the mediation of nineteenth-century "japonisme". This false image is interestingly recognised by Oscar Wilde in a contemporary account. In the

imaginary discussion of art that is ‘The Decay of Lying’, the main character Vivian comments directly on the illusory nature of “Japan”, and shows that it is nothing but artistic creation:

Now, do you really imagine that the Japanese people, as they are presented to us in art, have any existence? If you do, you have never understood Japanese art at all. The Japanese people are the deliberate self-conscious creation of certain individual artists. If you set a picture by Hokusai, or Hokkei, or any of the great native painters, beside a real Japanese gentleman or lady, you will see that there is not the slightest resemblance between them. The actual people who live in Japan are not unlike the general run of English people; that is to say, they are extremely commonplace, and have nothing curious or extraordinary about them. In fact, the whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people. (Wilde: 82)

Wilde, through Vivian, is arguing that anyone trying to find the “Japan” of “japonisme” will inevitably be frustrated. *Loti* clearly has this exact experience leading to his bitter exclamation on first seeing the harbour traders who swarm aboard his ship: ‘Mais, mon Dieu, que tout ce monde était laid, mesquin, grotesque!’ (My God, how ugly, shabby and grotesque they all are!) (*Romans*: 654). His disappointment also inevitably extends to Chrysanthème herself. This is crystallised in his description of her in the *Journal intime (Private Diary)* in terms of his preconceptions: ‘j’avais déjà vu son portrait partout, sur des paravents, au fond des tasses à thé; cette figure mignarde de poupée, ces beaux cheveux d’ébène, lisses et comme noués’ (I had already seen her picture everywhere, on fans, at the bottom of tea cups; this pretty-pretty doll shape, the beautiful ebony hair, smooth and tied up) (*Cette éternelle Nostalgie*: 168). Getting to know her of course spoils the image, and the consequent disillusion *Loti* experiences is reflected in the irritation he obviously feels with her. This is particularly apparent in a scene where *Loti* warns Madame

Prune not to wake her: 'Gardez-vous-en-bien, bonne madame Prune! si vous saviez comme elle me plaît mieux ainsi' (Don't do it Mrs. Prune! I like her much better like that) (*Romans*: 684). He is reverting to the security of his preconceptions in this purely aesthetic image of her. Awake she threatens his sense of the exotic and, as a result, just like Emma Bovary, *Loti* will move on to 'un nouveau objet par son ancien médiateur' (a new object through his old mediator). He will inevitably resume his search for a new 'petite poupée' (little doll), changing lovers again and again but not changing the mediation of his exoticism.

### Note

- 1) To avoid confusion over identity in the use of names, 'Loti' will be used to indicate the position of implied author and public persona, and '*Loti*' to designate his protagonist/narrator. All references to a cited text will appear after quotations, passages without page references are from the last-cited page. All translation and ellipses are mine.

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In his book *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (*Deceit, Desire and the Novel*) René Girard explains his theories of the mediation of desire, showing that the presence of a mediator creates a complex triangular relationship. He looks at the repercussions of this triangularity, using examples from French literature, such as Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir*, and Proust's *A la Recherche du temps perdu*. This article applies Girard's theory to the work of the celebrated nineteenth-century author and French naval officer Pierre Loti, drawing parallels with Girard's examples, and uses it to explain certain aspects of Loti's exoticism, as well as some of his often contradictory attitudes such as his own love of travel but contempt for tourists, and his fascination with 'japonisme' but notorious dislike of Japan.