FEELINGS ABOUT ASPECTS: HENRY JAMES ON PIERRE LOTI

> Mais les mots, si vagues qu'ils soient, restent encore trop précis pour exprimer ces choses.
>
> *Pêcheur d'Islande*

Henry James's first essay on Pierre Loti [1] was written in 1888, shortly after the publication in 1886 of *Pêcheur d'Islande* [2] which James immediately recognised as a masterpiece, writing: « *Pêcheur d'Islande* is to my sense perfect », and again « The history of Marguerite Mével and Yann Gaos strikes me as one of the very few works of imagination of our day completely and successfully beautiful » [3]. This chaste and pure Breton love-story with its delicate shades of feeling and its awareness of atmosphere was peculiarly suited to appeal to James, who was much more suspicious of the Polynesian revels of *Le Mariage de Loti* (1880) which he had also read. The story of Loti's love for and seduction of a Polynesian girl-child (for the *mariage* was far from binding) offended James's moral sensibilities, and his defence of Loti at this point is no defence at all:

> The whole second-rate element in Loti, for instance, becomes an absolute stain if we think much about it. But practically (and this is his first-rate triumph) we *don't* think much about it, so unreserved is our surrender to irresistible illusion and contagious life [4].

1. HENRY JAMES, *Essays in London and Elsewhere*, « Pierre Loti », London, 1893.
2. PIERRE LOTI, *Pêcheur d'Islande*, Paris, 1886.
3. « Pierre Loti », *cit.*, p. 187.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 169-70.

James, the connoisseur, was fastidiously anxious to avoid the second-rate, he was suspicious of the exuberant exoticism (and even more of the exuberant eroticism) of Loti—the very element which was to make Loti's books so rapidly and widely popular. Yet, in spite of himself, he could not help using such terms as « so rare and individual a genius as this exquisite Loti »[5], and even more indicative of his evaluation was his resorting to an image which he had used throughout his work to define the task of the true artist, who concerns himself with « the purest distillation of the actual »—the image which was to give the title to his own *The Golden Bowl*:

> *Rarahu (Le Mariage de Loti)* is a wonderful extension of the reader's experience... The impression is irresistible and the transfusion of our consciousness, as one may say, effected without the waste of a drop[6].

Henry James is in some ways the first and in others the last person whom we should expect to appreciate Loti. He was the first in the sense that he could appreciate that Loti « wrote like an angel »[7] and the last in that Loti's choice of subject-matter at times deeply shocked him by its lack of reticence. In his second essay on Pierre Loti, published in the form of a preface to the English edition of *Impressions* in 1898[8], James censors this exploitation of autobiography:

> Nothing, in consequence, is more striking than the failure of any sense — as we ourselves understand it — of a division between the public and the private...[9].

5. *Ibid.*, p. 168.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 183.
7. James actually says that Loti wrote, as Goldsmith talked, like an angel, confusing Johnson's original verse which stated that Goldsmith « *Wrote* like an angel / And *talked* like poor poll ».
8. Pierre Loti, *Impressions*, Westminster, 1898.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

This lack of reticence James finds particularly in Loti's openly autobiographical works: *Le Roman d'un Enfant* (1890), *Le Livre de la pitié et de la mort* (1891), *Figures et choses qui passaient* (1898). « There are precious kinds of silence that he ceases to be able to afford » [10], James comments, when he condemns Loti for making capital even out of his personal bereavements, and exploiting to the full for literary purposes all the most intimate experiences which life had afforded him. James, who was happily spared any foresight of the activities of Mr. Léon Edel, was horrified at the thought of such publicity, but even he concedes « the egotism lives and blooms too, scatters the rarest fragrance and throws out pages like great strange flowers » [11].

The five years which had elapsed between James's two essays, that published in 1893 in *Essays in London and Elsewhere* and the preface to *Impressions* in 1898, while they reveal no shift in James's admiration for or appreciation of Loti, show a marked step forward in critical caution. The bugbear of Taste blocks James's path, and it is only with considerable courage that he disposes of it. His method of laying the bugbear is well illustrated in a passage to which Miss Fabris draws attention in her book on *Henry James e la Francia* [12]:

> Critically, on first knowing him, I surrendered — for it has always seemed to me that the inner chamber of taste opens only to that key; but, the surrender being complete — the chamber never again closed — I feel that, like King Amasis with the ring, I have thrown the key into the deep [13].

And the passage continues « He is extremely unequal and extremely imperfect. He is familiar with both ends of the scale of taste » [14]. Notwithstanding, James has taken the

10. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
12. I am indebted to Prof. A. Lombardo for drawing my attention to Alberta Fabris's careful analysis of both James's essays on Loti.
13. PIERRE LOTI, *Impressions, cit.*, pp. 1-2.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

plunge, and thrown himself together with the key into the deep. He is content to be known as an admirer, even when he has found much that is unacceptable in Loti's subject-matter. Because what he objected to was not the fake exoticism, which came out above all in the later Japanese stories and *Les Désenchantées* (1906), but a certain harsh realism which is to be found in *Les Trois Dames de la Kasbah, Conte Orientale* (1884) of which James writes:

> ... the truth and poetry of this little production are such that one cannot conscientiously relegate it (one wishes one could), to a place of even comparative obscurity [15].

What James wanted to relegate to obscurity was the *dénouement* « not even mentionable to ears polite » of this tale of a night out in Algiers, after which one of the sailors dies of a particularly virulent form of venereal disease, while the others live on to marry and to infect their brides:

> ils apportèrent cette contagion arabe; leur premier-né, à chacun d'eux, vint au monde couvert de plaies qui étaient honteuses à voir [16].

Loti, the exotic dreamer, who paints so suggestively the mystery of the veiled women who receive the sailors in the secret courtyards behind the high walls saves his tale from becoming a romantic novelette by such details as these: the waking up of the sailors in the early morning, when one of them finds that he has spent the night with the mother and not the daughter:

> Barazère aussi se leva, et regarda cette femme qui voulait le retenir en l'enlaçant. Il vit qu'elle était vieille, que son visage était ridé et sa chair affaissée [17].

and then with the wholly delightful description of the sailors' light-hearted prank when they fasten up the dog

15. « Pierre Loti », *cit.*, p. 180.

16. *Les trois dames de la Kasbah, Conte Orientale*, Paris, 1896, p. 103.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 92-3.

catchers who are raking the town in the early morning, in their own cart, and trundle it through the town:

Se prenants tout à coup pour ces *pauv'es* bêtes d'une pitié sympathique, d'une tendresse d'hommes gris, ils exigèrent qu'on les mît en liberté, et une querelle s'ensuivit.

La discussion ne fut pas longue: cinq minutes après, la petite voiture avait repris sa route; mais c'étaient les matelots qui la roulaient, en chantant leur chanson joyeuse, et les bons chiens délivrés suivaient, dans une joie folle, sautant, jappant autour de leurs amis, et leur léchant les mains. Et la charrette s'en allait gaiement, cahotée sur les pierres; — dedans il y avait les deux hommes, sous clef, dans le coffre à chiens . . . [18].

These, the gay thoughtless youths, must pay so dearly for their night's entertainment. The story is, in effect, wholly moral in purport, a sort of extended temperance novel, but what shocks James is the offence not against morality but against the proprieties.

For James is ultimately concerned not so much with questions of right and wrong as with the keeping up of appearances—it is the failure to do this which is punished most cruelly in his novels. In both the play and the novel versions of *The Other House,* a story in which a small girl has been remorselessly held under water and drowned, a doctor appeals to a witness in these words:

« From the bank of the river you saw something that bears upon this — he hesitated; then daintily selected his words — remarkable performance. We appeal to your sense of propriety to tell us what you saw [19].

The appeal is made not to the sense of honour, or even of duty, but, in a phrase which only James would have used in the context, to a sense of « propriety ».

This keen sense of propriety was undoubtedly outraged by much in Loti. While James as a man of the world was

18. *Ibid.,* pp. 84-5.
19. HENRY JAMES, *Complete Plays,* London, 1949, p. 747.

aware of the unfortunate French heritage of frankness in all that concerns the sensual aspects of physical love, yet, speaking for the whole Anglo-Saxon race he declares:

> We have a great and I think a just dislike to the egotistic-erotic, to literary confidences on such points [20].

Yet Loti, who has so often been set aside as a mere exotic dreamer, was much more of an innovator in both the substance and form of the novel than is generally realised. His reputation has suffered because of the lush exoticism present in his work at a time when the Turkish and Arabian scenes of Delacroix, Fromentin, Gérôme, Alphonse Le Touze de Longuemar and many others including Loti himself were all the fashion, and when Gustave Moreau had completed his long series of Salomés. Loti has always been seen as floating so surely down the middle of this stream toward popular success that it is not easy to fish him out in order to see what was his real achievement. With the help of Henry James this is what the present paper is setting out to do. If it is necessary to quote at length, this is because nothing can vindicate Loti so thoroughly as his own beautifully written pages: nothing can so easily free him from the smear of the « second-rate » which has spread from novels such as *Les Desenchantées* until it covers the whole of Loti's work, so that nobody today reads even such delicate and sensitive passages as « Tante Claire nous quitte » in *Le livre de la pitié et de la mort* (1891) or looks to the Tahiti novels for anything but the most obvious kind of entertainment. Yet Loti does much more than titillate his readers with mildly pornographic descriptions of his loves with teenage girls on south sea islands. He had set out to record his personal adventures and to register his own reactions to experiences which he had deliberately sought. His autobiographies narrate how dearly, how morbidly he

20. « Pierre Loti », *cit.*, p. 177.

loved his home—the very stones of the wall—and how he was forced, step by step, to take up a naval career and leave all that he most loved and treasured behind; how the compulsion came from within, not from without; it was some atavistic urge in himself which responded to the call of far lands. As a child (indeed all through school) he hated books [21], but he made an exception for a travel book concerning Polynesia. He recalls his own brother's residence there (later he was to search there for his brother's child), and the letters received from him. The pull was too strong for the boy, Julien Viaud [22], and he left the Rochefort that was a part of himself. Some of the magic and the mystery in the pages of *Le Mariage de Loti* are the magic and the mystery of the Polynesia he had preconceived and woven fantasies about as a child. But, side by side with this, he introduces two other elements into his novel of which the structure is so deceptively simple that James declared that it did not exist: the one is a painter's eye for the observation of natural beauties, and a painter's gift in describing them; the other is an awareness of harsh realities behind the magical setting. There is something decidedly modern in Loti's method of collecting his miscellaneous material together; the technique he uses reminds us today of Auden and MacNeice's *Letters from Iceland* [23], a travel book outstanding for its inventiveness and originality. Loti does not go so far in breaking up the accepted narrative form as Auden and

21. In *Roman d'un enfant*, Paris, 1890, p. 168, there is a passage on the « return to nature » of a book left out in the rain which would compare very well with Robert Browning's « Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis »: « Dans les cartés d'asperges, nous retrouvâmes, toute trempée d'eau, tout éclaboussée de terre, cette *Histoire* de Durey. Avant l'orage, des escargots, énoustillés sans doute par la pluie prochaine, l'avaient même visitée en tout sens, y dessinant des arabesques avec leur bave luisante . . . »

22. Pierre Loti was the pseudonym used by Julien Viaud throughout his literary career.

23. W. H. Auden and Louis Macneice, *Letters from Iceland*, London, 1937.

MacNeice, but he can and does surprise us, most of all in the chapter headed « Inqualifiable »:

> ... Il est certaines nécessités de notre triste nature humaine qui semblent faites tout exprès pour nous rappeler combien nous sommes imparfaits et matériels — nécessités auxquelles sont soumises les reines commes les bergères, « la garde qui veille aux barrières du Louvre, etc.... ».
>
> Lorsque la reine Pomaré est aux prises avec ces situations pénibles, trois femmes entrent à sa suite dans certain réduit mystérieux dissimulé sous les bananiers...
>
> La première de ces initiées a mission de soutenir pendant l'opération la lourde personne royale. La deuxième tient à la main des feuilles de *bourao,* choisies soigneusement parmi les plus fraîches et les plus tendres... La troisième, qui commence son office lorsque les deux premières ont achevé le leur, — porte une fiole d'huile de cocotier parfumée au sandal (*monoi*), dont elle est chargée d'oindre les parties que le frottement des feuilles de bourao aurait pu momentanément irriter ou endolorir...
>
> La séance levée, — le cortège rentre gravement au palais...[24].

This in the nineteenth century can hardly have been considered suitable material for inclusion in a love story (Henry James, mindful of the « ears polite » does not even make mention of it) nor can the account of how the hero tried to trace his brother's illegitimate son (he finds the mother and examines doubtfully a number of her progeny) be considered a part of the romantic background, turning as it does an enquiring beam of light on the future of such temporary girl-brides. He records too his discussions with the old Queen Pomaré on the whole question of the exploitation of her realm for the purposes of international prostitution. Loti himself would like to regard Polynesia as an unalloyed paradise of the senses, but some fundamental honesty, while it allows him to paint the glowing surface, forces him to look

24. *Le Mariage de Loti,* Paris, 1880. All quotations are taken from Vol. II of the *Romans complets illustrés de Pierre Loti,* Paris, 1910, p. 148.

behind the scenes and to follow even poor old Queen Pomaré into her most private retreat.

Yet this is not what James is thinking about when he writes that Loti « betrays a precocity of depravity which is disconcerting ». What disconcerts James is the lack of sexual morality, of propriety in « the supreme surrender to polygamous practices among coral-reefs and in tepid seas » [25]. The facts, James finds, « are singularly vulgar », and what makes them vulgar is « his almost inveterate habit of representing the closest and most intimate personal relations as unaccompanied with any moral feeling » [26].

To be vulgar was for James the most serious accusation he could lay against an artist. How could he be expected to understand the rebellion of Loti, a rebellion born of profound pessimism, against God, against all morality, against (worst of all) « toute convention sociale ». For as early as his first novel, *Aziyadé* (1879) Loti had thrown down his gauntlet at the feet of the moralists:

> Il n'y a pas de Dieu, il n'y a pas de morale, rien n'existe de tout ce qu'on nous a enseigné à respecter; il y a une vie qui passe, à laquelle il est logique de demander le plus de jouissance possible, en attendant l'épouvante finale qui est la mort... nous pouvons avoir encore une foule de maîtresses, et jouir de la vie... J'ai pour règle de conduite de faire toujours ce qui me plaît, en dépit de toute moralité, de toute convention sociale [27].

Love for Loti, the sort of love into which the pessimist could plunge to forget himself, was no union of the minds: it is rather the negation and blotting out of thought—a love which James could only regard with fastidious disgust. One of his comments recalls the « Just like little dogs » of the magistrate in Dylan Thomas's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog.* This, couched in Jamesian terms, becomes:

25. « Pierre Loti », *cit.*, p. 181.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 182.
27. *Aziyadé*, Paris, 1879. Quotations taken from *Romans completes*, *cit.*, Vol. II, p. 150.

« a close personal relation which is not quite human, which is too simplified, too much like the loves of the quadrupeds »[28].

Even in the love of Yann and Gaud in *Pêcheur d'Islande* James finds something « incontrovertibly carnal ». Why at the climax of a love story this should not be so James fails to explain, yet surely the magnificent evocation of the drowning of Yann, of his nuptials with the sea, a scene where the sexual images and implications are so fully stressed, would have lost much without the contrasting description of his flesh-and-blood union with his earthly bride. While employing a conventional theme of the period (for d'Annunzio had already written his *Trionfo della Morte* and E. A. Poe *The Assignation*)[29] these lines of Loti's remain extremely effective:

> Une nuit d'août — là-bas, au large de la sombre Islande, au milieu d'un grand bruit de fureur, avaient été célébrées ses noces avec la mer.
>
> Avec la mer qui autrefois avait été aussi sa nourrice; c'était elle qui l'avait bercé, qui l'avait fait adolescent large et fort, — et ensuite elle l'avait repris, dans sa virilité superbe, pour elle seule. Un profond mystère avait enveloppé ces noces monstrueuses. Tout le temps, des voiles obscurs s'étaient agités au-dessus, des rideaux mouvants et tourmentés, tendus pour cacher la fête; et la fiancée donnait de la voix, faisait toujours son plus grand bruit horrible pour étouffer les cris. — Lui, se souvenant de Gaud, sa femme de chair, s'était défendu, dans une lutte de géant, contre cette épousée de tombeau. Jusqu'au moment où il s'etait abandonné, les bras ouverts pour la recevoir, avec un grand cri profond comme un taureau qui râle, la bouche déjà emplie d'eau; les bras ouverts, étendus et raidis pour jamais[30].

James cites this passage at length without criticisms or condemnation of its contorted sexuality. Yann, struggling

28. « Pierre Loti », *cit.*, p. 184.

29. See Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, London, 1933, for further contemporary examples.

30. *Pêcheur d'Islande*. Quotations taken from *Romans completes*, *cit.*, vol. I, p. 252.

like a giant against the spouse who was his grave is a projection of Loti's own fight against the thought of death, a thought that for all his life both fascinated and haunted him, and from which he took refuge in physical love. As a result of this fascination Loti has left us some of the most macabre descriptions of corruption after death that can be found anywhere outside of Poe. In one of the letters of *Journal Intime* 1878-1881, dated 15th July, 1878 he writes that he wishes to be buried in the same grave as his mistress:

> Je voudrais que, dans la fosse, elle fût couchée sur moi, pour que la décomposition de son corps passât au travers du mien ... Mais pas dans ces cimetières saturés de morts, dans ce sol où pourrissent pêle-mêle tous les rebuts humains. Non, quelque part dans les bois, où nous serions seuls à nous fondre ensemble dans la terre, à passer dans les racines, dans les branches, dans les mousses [31].

The idea of physical union in death is not uncommon, and is frequently to be found in the poetry of the metaphysicals, especially of John Donne. But in Donne there was hope of resurrection, while for Loti death was the end. He seeks to lessen his fear by familiarising himself with the details of death and corruption, and by dwelling on the least terrible aspect, that the body returns onto earth as it was « to pass into the roots, the branches and the moss », or, in the case of his brother's burial at sea, « evanouie dans les organismes des coraux, des algues, ou de ces bêtes inconnaissables qui hantent l'obscurité du fond des océans » [32].

By far his best excursion into the macabre is in a piece of straightforward reporting of the exhumation of four young sailors who had been drowned near Bidassoa

31. *Journal Intime, 1878-81,* ed. Samuel Viaud, Paris, 1925, p. 4.

32. *Prime jeunesse,* Paris, 1919, pp. 73-4. Although this seachange reads like a quotation from Shakespeare's *Tempest* it is extremely unlikely, in view of Loti's almost total lack of a literary background and declared antipathy for books, that he had in fact « borrowed » the idea. It was a natural thought to have occurred to him during his long voyages.

some four years earlier. The setting is a cemetery on a beautiful May morning, full of flowers, and particularly of roses, a morning which can make death seem to be no more than a horrible dream. The closest literary parallel is Henry Green's *Back* where, it is true, the speaker does not exhume his buried wife, but he imagines her corruption in the coffin in the rose-filled cemetery with a vividness which pales only before Loti's horrific details. For Loti spares himself and the reader nothing:

> En remontant toujours, voici le plus horrible, la poitrine: entre les cercles encore rougeâtres qui son les côtes, apparaissent des tas de pourriture noire, des amas de vers. Alors, malgré le souriant soleil, malgré toutes les fleurs trompeuses, un frisson de révolte et d'effroi passe en nous, et le vieil homme lui-même se redresse hésitant.
>
> Il prend son parti toutefois, réunit ses deux mains, les doigts joints, et puise dans ce thorax comme avec une cuiller... Il a raison, en somme; tout cela n'est que de la matière inoffensive, fécondante pour les racines profondes, déjà presque de l'humus, qui passera dans les branches des rosiers à la pousse prochaine.
>
> Et, de nouveau, mais définitivement cette fois, l'horreur s'en va; la révolte, le dégoût, font place à je ne sais quelle résignation grave... de voir que *ce n'est que cela,* un cadavre, qu'au bout de trois ou quatre années c'est déjà si peu humain, si proche du terreau et des pierres [33].

Having achieved for himself a resignation which his later writings show to be extremely precarious, Loti cannot resist on the following page the temptation to cause a further shudder in the reader who has failed to reach his own stage of philosophic acceptance:

> Voici que l'homme y jette même un morceau du cercueil; alors je lui demande:
>
> — Pourquoi, ce bout de bois?

33. *Figures et choses qui passaient,* « Profanation », Paris, 1898, pp. 195-6.

— Oh! répond-il, *c'est pour ce qui tient après;* tenez, voyez, ça vient de lui, *c'est de ces vers.*

Et il retourne la planche pour me montrer, en dessous, un amas de larves qui s'y tient collé [34].

Possibly Loti's early preoccupation with death came from his upbringing in a house full of old people: a grandmother, a great-aunt and an aunt lived in the same house as his parents, and other old relations lived nearby. He lost, while still a boy, both his elder brother and a childhood playmate. This, in a reflective and sensitive boy may have developed a concern with mortality which amounted to an obsession, but which has furnished the material for some of his most beautiful writing: there is the death of Yann recorded above, there is the description of the death of his aunt Claire in *Le livre de la pitié et de la mort,* remarkable in its restraint and observation of detail, a passage which should be read in conjunction with the flamboyant prose of « Profanation » to see the range of Loti as a writer. Here his tone seems to have dropped to a whisper, the reader is careful not to miss one of the quiet words. The account of the death of his aunt should be read as a whole, for no selection can give an idea of its restrained charm. An extract must sound either sentimental or meaningless: the whole justifies the sentiment and communicates the meaning. Its construction is extremely simple: the pronouncement by the doctor, the slow death, the preparation of the body for burial and the funeral itself. Another piece in the same key is to be found in *Figures et choses qui passaient*: « Passage d'enfant », which describes the death of the two-year-old son of his house porter, a child whom he pictures to us as full of life and gay, whom he had observed closely and loved more than he knew. The details of the carefree life of the child, recollected after his death, are made almost

34. *Ibid.*, p. 197.

as painful to the reader as to the writer, but they give force to the violence of his protest:

Ou plutôt, pourquoi étaient-ils venus, alors, puisqu'ils devaient s'en retourner si vite après avoir subi l'inique châtiment d'une agonie [35].

The description of the child's suffering

Il a été étouffé en pleine vie, luttant, tordant ses petites mains dans la souffrance... il ne voulait pas mourir... [36].

while not ceasing to be particular are yet generalised into a vision of the whole human predicament that Loti felt so strongly. The death of this little child he makes much more convincing than the news of the death of Rarahu from tuberculosis in *Le Mariage de Loti*. Possibly this is because of an obvious association with Murger's *Scènes de la Vie de Bohême*, which may not after all have influenced Loti, for while Murger's text was written in 1848, Puccini's opera was only performed in 1896, long after *Le Mariage* was written. It is simply another example of Loti's confounded bad luck in being so decidedly « with it » all his life. Because, in all probability, Rarahu's disease had an autobiographical origin in the death of his childhood friend, Lucette, the day she returned home from the colonies. Loti was literally haunted by the thought of this death for he recounts in *Prime Jeunesse* that he had a recurring dream which over a period of years he dreamed every week. In this dream he visits Lucette and finds her sitting silent. Lucette's mother, placing a finger on her lips, explains to him:

Tu vois, me dit-elle, nous avons trouvé le moyen de la retenir encore auprès de nous, mais il ne faut pas la faire parler; ça la fatiguerait, tu comprends, parce qu'elle n'a plus de poumons, sa poitrine est vide [37].

35. *Ibid.*, « Passage d'enfant », p. 2.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
37. *Prime jeunesse, cit.*, p. 94.

Loti was a great dreamer. In his autobiographical works he frequently tells us in detail of dreams so vivid that he has remembered them over the years, and in his novels his semi-autobiographical heroes likewise narrate their dreams. As a child he had few playmates, and those few were never boys of his own age. His sailor brother, home on leave from the sea, expresses concern:

> ... que je devenais d'un raffinement excessif, malgré mes accès incohérents d'enfantillage, et que presque tous mes jeux étaient des jeux de rêve [38].

The favourite game over many years was a theatre of « Peau d'Ane » which he began when he was quite a small child and with which he continued to play even when he was attending a course in Philosophy and making love to a gypsy girl in the woods. Round this theatre his early day-dreams centred: for it he created many elaborate and exotic décors, littering up the room of his orderly Aunt Claire with scraps and paper clippings. Besides becoming a writer Loti was to become a painter, and as he describes in great detail the care he took over the scenography, we can trace the beginnings of that emphasis on the visual which is so characteristic a feature of all his work:

> ... et il y avait; comme personnages accompagnant la fée, des dauphins et des conques argonautes; pour leur donner des reflets nacrés, à ces figurants-là, je les avais recouverts des élytres d'un vert métallique de certains scarabées qui, l'été dernier, étaient venus s'abattre en nuage, comme les sauterelles du désert, sur les bois de Fontbruant [39].

Loti began early to dream of far countries: the tales of his sea-faring ancestors, the letters of his sailor brother from Polynesia and the Far East, all excited his imagination, so that he tore himself away from the family to which he was so closely bound, and on which he was so totally de-

38. *Le roman d'un enfant*, Paris, 1890, p. 284.
39. *Prime jeunesse*, *cit.*, p. 123.

pendant, to take up the hard life and rough companionship of the sea. Not, as he tells us, for any love of ships, but for the call exerted by the sea itself, and by far-distant lands. It is this innate quality of Loti's exoticism which gives it so distinct a tone. He describes scenes, places and people that he has seen with all the realism of a close and accurate visual observer, but he has seen them through the eyes of a dreamer. In *Le Mariage de Loti* he shows an awareness of this himself, inverting Wordsworth's process of artistic creation, of emotion recollected in tranquillity:

> Petit garçon, au foyer de famille, je songeais à l'Océanie; à travers le voile fantastique de l'inconnu, je l'avais comprise et devinée telle que je la trouve aujourd'hui. — Tous ces sites étaient DEJA VUS, tous ces noms étaient connus, tous ces personnages sont bien ceux qui jadis hantaient mes rêves d'enfant, si bien que par instants c'est aujourd'hui que je crois rêver . . . [40].

Loti's dreams furnished him with much of the material for his art. Instead of literary sources he had recourse above all to autobiographical material, particularly that gathered in his youth, and to archetypal patterns released by dreams. Aware of the influence of his dreams, he sought for an explanation as to their origin, and, long before Jung had expounded his theory, Loti wrote that « La tête humaine est remplie de souvenirs innombrables, entassés pêle-mêle . . . » but that these memories go back from generation to generation. He tells of a fragment of a dream that he had had, a dream *which does not belong to him:*

> . . . c'est le dernier fragment d'un fil brisé, qui doit finir là où s'est arrêté mon rêve; le commencement et la suite n'existaient que dans d'autres cerveaux depuis longtemps retournés à la poussière.
>
> Parmi mes ascendants, j'ai eu des marins dont la vie et les aventures ne me sont qu'imparfaitement connues; et il y a certainement, je ne sais où, dans quelque petit cimetière des colonies,

40. *Le mariage de Loti, cit.*, p. 130.

de vieux ossements qui sont les restes de la jeune femme au grand chapeau de paille et aux boucles noires; le charme que ses yeux avaient excercé sur un de ces ancêtres inconnus a été assez puissant pour jeter un dernier reflet mystérieux jusqu'à moi . . . [41].

These insights into psychological processes are one of the most interesting features of Loti for the modern reader: they reveal a sensitivity to impressions and subtle reading of the processes of the mind, together with a delicacy of expression which are rare in any writer. We meet the same kind of questions in Poe, although Poe's approach is more scientific and less emotional. Poe would not have added to the above lines, like Loti: « J'ai songé à elle [the young girl in the dream] tout un jour . .. et avec une mélancolie si étrange ».

This all-pervading melancholy in Loti's work, a melancholy which is present even in his innumerable accounts of love-affairs, is due to the constant presence in his mind of death: death followed by nothingness. His first affair with the gypsy girl in the woods is linked in his mind, he tells us, with the dragon-flies which abounded in that particular spot—but the dragon-fly, with its fragile, delicate beauty and short day of life becomes the symbol of all that is ephemeral in human joy and passion. Although Loti had vowed with considerable bravado in a letter to his friend Plumkett in 1878 « dans la vie, je ne vois plus rien que l'amour . . . » and had repeated the same idea in 1880 in *Le Mariage de Loti* yet this physical love is only a barrier, something to hang on to « que je ne retombe dans le vide » [42].

This sense of emptiness, the nothingness which surrounds human life is caught over and over again in his word-paintings, for most of his narrative prose is concerned not with action, but with pictures. Just as in every mention of his childhood games with the model theatre what he tells

41. *Le livre de la pitié et de la mort,* Paris, 1891, p. 14.
42. *Journal intime, cit.,* p. 3.

us concerns not the plays performed, but the elaborate décors and costumes which he created, so too in his books most of his time is spent setting the stage. Very often the details are extremely clear and precise; but at times instead the scenes are indefinite, fluctuating, in an attempt to catch what is unseizable in human thought, and above all in an attempt to define the indefinable « néant » which he is so conscious of as surrounding human life. He has been accused of making too great a use of the words « vague », « immense », « mysterious » etc., but this is a deliberate attempt to paint in a new way, to give his readers not a picture but an *impression*. Henry James, with his keen sense of movements in taste ends his essay on Loti with the words:

> He has not settled the other, the general question of how long and how far accomplished and exclusive — practically exclusive — impressionism will yet go [43].

As far as I know, no-one else has associated Loti with impressionism: his paintings are quite of another order and he himself would have been unutterably shocked, for writing of his sister's painting in *Prime Jeunesse* he says

> ... on ignorait ces *taches* de couleur, boueuses, informes, par lesquelles aujourd'hui on arrive beaucoup plus facilement et plus vite à des semblants d'effets; la peinture était restée honnête ... [44].

Yet, without intending to do so, was he not in his best work achieving just these « semblances of effects » in words, with patches of colour not muddy perhaps, but certainly shapeless?

> Il ne faisait même pas absolument nuit. C'était éclairé faiblement, par un reste de lumière, qui ne venait de nulle part. Cela bruissait comme par habitude, rendant une plainte sans but.

43. « Pierre Loti », *cit.*, p. 194.
44. *Prime jeunesse*, *cit.*, p. 30.

C'était gris, d'un gris trouble qui fuyait sous le regard. — La mer pendant son repos mystérieux et son sommeil, se dissimulait sous les teintes discrètes qui n'ont pas de nom [45].

Translated into paint, this is Turner at his best, Turner in his latest phase. It is built up, word upon word, out of attenuations and negations: « pas absolument », « faiblement », « un reste de », « nulle part », « sans but », « trouble », « se dissimulait », « discrètes », « pas de nom ». The colour is grey, the most indistinct of colours, and even this grey is « vanishing ». I can think of no passage in any other writer, not even those other great sea-scape painters, Conrad and Melville, which achieves these particular half-tone effects. It can only be paralleled by other passages from Loti himself

Et pourtant, autour d'eux, c'étaient des aspects de non-vie, de monde fini ou pas encore créé; la lumière n'avait aucune chaleur; les choses se tenaient immobiles et comme refroidies à jamais, sous le regard de cette espèce de grand oeil spectral qui était le soleil [46].

Or again the description of the mist over the sea: a mirror with nothing to reflect

L'oeil saisissait à peine ce qui devait être la mer: d'abord cela prenait l'aspect d'une sorte de miroir tremblant qui n'aurait aucune image à refléter; en se prolongeant, cela paraissait devenir une plaine de vapeur, — et puis, plus rien; cela n'avait ni horizon ni contours [47].

Henry James speaks of Loti as « an incomparable painter of the sea » and again says of him that:

Pierre Loti speaks better than of anything else of the ocean, the thing in the world that, after the human race, has most intensity and variety of life [48].

45. *Pêcheur d'Islande, cit.*, p. 198.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 153.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 132.
48. « Pierre Loti », *cit.*, p. 174.

This appreciation is the more valuable as coming from James who would never, himself, have anything to do with the sea. Only one of his stories, « The Patagonia ». concerns an ocean crossing and what is really extraordinary is the extent to which the sea, itself, is kept out of the tale. The liner is to all intents and purposes a floating hotel and all James' attention is concentrated on the intrigues of its passengers. Though the heroine of the tale commits suicide by jumping overboard she might, for all the difference that it would have made to the story, have simply jumped out of a hotel window. Yet James could appreciate a form of art so outside his own genre to the extent of quoting almost in full the long description of a storm at sea in *Pêcheur d'Islande,* a description which is one of Loti's masterpieces. The temptation to follow James in this, and to let Loti at his best speak for himself is very great, but as this book is his most famous it is better perhaps to leave the passage in its context. One or two words concerning this storm should however be said here: first that it is extremely interesting to compare Loti's storm with storms in Melville and in Conrad. The difference is at once apparent, and it is a difference of technique: while Melville and Conrad are concerned with action, Loti's storm is the work of a painter. Even the long description of the ship flying before the wind, with words which are light and rapid to suggest movement « *fuite* », « *légèreté* », « *bondir* », « *montait* », « *enlevée* » which follow each other in rapid succession gives, more than anything else, the impression of motion caught and fixed as in a Japanese print or a Decadent painting with frilly breakers. Possibly this frozen quality in a passage wholly set to suggest movement is due in part to the emphasis on visual detail—it could have been a storm on a Grecian urn, destined to go on forever. This was probably one of the effects which Loti intended, for later on in his description he writes

A la longue pourtant, cela devenait une extrême fatigue, cette fureur qui ne s'apaisait pas, qui restait toujours à son

même paroxysme exaspéré. Les rages des hommes, celles des bêtes s'épuisent et tombent vite; — il faut subir longtemps, longtemps celles des choses inertes qui sont sans cause et sans but, mystérieuses comme la vie et comme la mort[49].

Another point concerning the storm is strictly that of context: of its place in the structure of the tale. James, like other critics, had censured Loti for absence of composition, « the *décousu* quality makes each of his productions appear at first a handful of flying leaves », or again « I am sure M. Loti has no views nor theories as to what constitutes and does not constitute a plot ». *This* from the author of *The Sacred Fount*! Yet, in defiance of such views and theories, the construction of *Pêcheur d'Islande,* while seemingly casual, is masterly. The whole point of the story is that the hero is to be drowned at the end, and although this outcome is not announced in so many words, yet a certain suspense is built up through a mounting sense of despair which interweaves with the basic love story. The great storm, the passage in the book into which Loti throws the whole of his art, is *not* the storm at the end in which Yann's ship is lost, but the first storm on his first voyage at the beginning of the story. After that the reader is conscious of the perils Yann must run and fears for him on every voyage, Knowing that from one of these he will never return, and anxious for him not to lose time in his courtship of Gaud. We are reminded of his danger from time to time throughout the novel by the fact that other ships go out and fail to return, and there is also the curious evocation of legend in the encounter of the *Marie* with the ghost-ship, the *Reine-Berthe,* an encounter which may or may not have a rational explanation. When in the end Yann is drowned in the Icelandic waters there is no description of the storm, just the long wait of Gaud for his return and the beautiful though morbid evocation of his other bridal. So the tale does not build up to a climax; rather it recedes from it in a motion

49. *Pêcheur d'Islande, cit.,* p. 161.

that gets slower and slower until with the long wait that has no ending it stretches away into infinity.

Loti's concern with infinity is a direct result of his constant awareness of the finite nature of man, an awareness which adds poignancy to his descriptions of both the seas and the heavens. In *Le Mariage de Loti* his description of the night sky is only equalled by that of another painter in words, D. H. Lawrence, whose starlit sky, both in *Kangaroo* and at the end of *Sons and Lovers* gives the same sense of infinity which Loti conveys in the following lines:

> Les grandes nébuleuses de l'hémisphère austral scintillaient comme des taches de phosphore, laissant entre elles des espaces vides, de grandes trouées noires, où l'on n'apercevait plus aucune poussière cosmique, — et qui donnaient à l'imagination une notion apocalyptique et terrifiante de l'immensité vide...[50].

In *Le Mariage de Loti* he gives us a list of words from the native language of the islands in one of those strange interpolations which led his contemporaries, including Henry James, to accuse him of lack of structure, but which today suggest rather an experiment with the traditional narrative form and remind us once again of *Letters from Iceland* with its page-long lists of local proverbs. Such interpolations serve to give a local habitation to what might otherwise seem a mere fairytale world. And what Loti notices about the language are the large number of what he calls mystic words:

> Au premier abord je fus frappé de la grande quantité des mots mystiques de la vieille religion maorie, — et puis de ces mots tristes, effrayants, intraduisibles, — qui expriment là-bas les terreurs vagues de la nuit, — les bruits mystérieux de la nature, les rêves à peine saisissables de l'imagination...
>
> e.g. *Po,* nuit, anciens temps, monde inconnu et ténébreux, enfers.

50. *Le mariage de Loti, cit.,* p. 176.

Totoro ai po, repas mystérieux dans les ténèbres.
Ari, profondeur; vide, vague de la mer . . .[51].

The etymology of the name that Rarahu has given to him « Mata reva », seems to him peculiarly appropriate, for « mata » means « eye », and, upon further investigation:

Je consultai le dictionnaire des vénérables frères Picpus, — et trouvai ce qui suit:
Reva, firmament; — abîme, profondeur; — mystére . . .[52].

Not that Loti's scenes were always vague and mysterious, although he certainly had a peculiar power to evoke the sense of emptiness. Like all good painters Loti has also an eye for the significant detail, the detail which becomes symbolic, such as the ceramic madonna on board *La Marie* to whom the fishermen, who have no belief in an after-life, look with child-like faith for protection:

Ils n'avaient pas peur, ayant la notion exacte de ce qui est *maniable,* ayant confiance dans la solidité de leur bateau, dans la force de leurs bras. Et aussi dans la protection de cette Vierge de faïence qui, depuis quarante années de voyages en Islande, avait dansé tant de fois cette mauvaise danse-là toujours souriante entre ses bouquets de fausses fleurs . . .[53].

A similar detail strikes the imagination when he describes the Breton crucifixes standing out on the bare flat land

Le terrain était ondulé, rocheux, et, de toutes les hauteurs, on voyait la grande mer. Plus d'arbres du tout à présent; rien que la lande rase, aux ajoncs verts, et, ça et là, les divins crucifiés découpant sur le ciel leurs grands bras en croix, donnant à tout ce pays l'air d'un immense lieu de justice[54].

51. *Ibid.*, p. 126.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 136.
53. *Pêcheur d'Islande, cit.*, p. 160.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 164.

There is something about this stark landscape with its multiplicity of crucifixes, which appears to challenge this symbol of Christianity—to see it as typifying cruelty rather than mercy. Loti's own religious position was stated very firmly at the outset in his first novel *Aziyadé* (1879): « Je n'ai ni foi, ni espérance ». Brought up in a strict Protestant family, his first intention as a young boy had been to make the Church his career, but later he lost his faith. Possibly this is why he was so conscious of the nothingness which surrounds this life, the absence of any *before* or *after* troubled him more than it would have done had he not held as a child the firm conviction of a future resurrection and reunion with his beloved family after death. Loti was filled with a profound sadness at the thought of the eternity he had lost, and yet there was no escaping from the sense which he shared with Yann, the hero of *Pêcheur d'Islande*:

> Dans son idée à lui, la mort finissait tout... Il lui arrivait bien, par respect, de s'associer à ces prières qu'on dit en famille pour les défunts; mais il ne croyait à aucune survivance des âmes.
>
> Dans leurs causeries entre marins, ils disaient tous cela, d'une manière brève et assurée, comme une chose bien connue de chacun; ce qui pourtant n'empêchait pas une vague appréhension des fantômes, une vague frayeur des cimetières...[55].

This sense of deprivation and injustice became at times in Loti's work a source of extreme bitterness, which is the more striking in that it is so rarely voiced. His outcry for the death of Roger, the two-year-old child with flaxen hair, was a protest inspired by a particular and personal affection: his complaint against nature is a protest against the death of all men—the life-cycle of Birth and Copulation and Death seems to him to be wholly cruel:

> Là-bas, au fond de quelque région lointaine de la Libye, leur race avait pullulé dans des amours exubérantes. Leur race avait

55. *Ibid.*, p. 199.

pullulé sans mesure, et il y en avait eu trop; alors la mère aveugle, et sans âme, la mère Nature, avait chassé d'un souffle cet excès de petits oiseaux avec la même impassibilité que s'il fût agi d'une génération d'hommes [56].

It was this fundamental bitterness which drove Loti to the contemplation and painting of « vague immensities », but he was capable of a very different style of description. His portraits of women are in another style altogether, « honest » portraits full of precise detail as to costume (when they are wearing any) and playing up both the exotic and sensuous elements to the full in the simplest kind of escapism. Although skilled (like most contemporary painters) in the treatment of mysterious veiled Turkish and Arabian women, Loti's real preference is for certain exotic flesh-tints, those of Rarahu:

Une même teinte fauve tirant sur le rouge brique, celle des terres cuites claires de la vieille Etrurie, était répandue sur tout son corps [57].

or of his first gypsy love: « couleur des vieilles terres cuites d'Etrurie » (*Prime Jeunesse*, p. 136). He was attracted by all that most contrasted with his sheltered and ordered life as a child in the quiet of a provincial town. There had been no rebellion against this way of life, it was rather that a charm had bewitched him and dragged him unwillingly away to a Lotus land:

Le temps s'écoulait, et tout doucement se tissaient autour de moi ces mille petits fils inextricables, faits de tous les charmes de l'Océanie, qui forment à la longue des réseaux dangereux, des voiles sur le passé, la patrie et la famille, — et finissent par si bien vous envelopper qu'on ne s'échappe plus . . . [58].

Like all sailors, he wanted to find everything at home exactly as he had left it, but this strongly conservative trait

56. *Ibid.*, p. 176.
57. *Le mariage de Loti, cit.*, p. 116.
58. *Ibid.*, pp. 163-4.

in his nature had been present even as a child, possibly nurtured by his constant contact with old people, his uncle with a scientific « collection » and his aunts and great aunts. He records in *Prime Jeunesse* his despair as a child when it seemed that his parents might have to sell the house at Rochefort which had been in the family for generations:

> ...je croyais bien sentir que ce serait moi la mort, et je m'attachais d'autant plus a ces humbles choses, d'une facon excessive, désespérée, presque fétichiste [59].

This childish attachment to the house never decreased. As a young naval officer he kept, for example, the room in which his Aunt Claire had died, exactly as it had always been, never allowing it to be used except to place there for a short time for safe keeping the treasures which he brought back from his voyages, exactly as he had been used to placing his treasures in her care as a child.

In *Roman d'un Enfant* (1890) he tries to explain to himself his affection for an old grey stone wall of his family home:

> Non seulement je l'aime et le vénère, ce vieux mur, comme les Arabes leur plus sainte mosquée; mais il me semble même qu'il me protège; qu'il assure un peu mon existence et prolonge ma jeunesse. Je ne souffrirais pas qu'on m'y fit le moindre changement, et, si on me le démolissait, je sentirais comme l'effondrement d'un point d'appui que rien ne me revaudrait plus. C'est, sans doute, parce que la persistance de certaines choses, de tout temps connues, arrive à nous leurrer sur notre stabilité, sur notre propre durée; en les voyant demeurer les mêmes, il nous semble que nous pouvons pas changer ni cesser d'être [60].

This passage shows, as do many others in his autobiographical works (and which of his works are not autobiographical?) considerable insight into his own thought-processes, into the origin of his sentiments and emotions. Too often dismissed, without being read, as superficial or merely

59. *Prime jeunesse*, *cit.*, p. 111.
60. *Roman d'un enfant*, *cit.*, p. 82.

at best decorative, it is time for us to go back to Loti to find one of the forerunners of Proust. It is true that the most Proustian passage in his work was written *after A la Récherche du Temps Perdu,* but it is also true that this road into his own past was one which Loti never tired of retracing, and the technique Loti uses is the one Proust made famous. He realised, as Proust realised, that the process of memory is a process of association, and wrote:

C'est étrange que, à toutes les grandes émotions de ma vie, se sont toujours associés dans ma mémoire de menus objets, d'infimes détails de choses, qui ensuite ne s'en séparent plus [61].

The example which he gives of this is the occasion when, as a boy, he learned of his elder brother's death at sea:

Ainsi la robe que portait ma mère ce jour-là — et que je ne revis jamais, puisqu'elle prit le deuil jusqu'à la fin de son existence, — je la retrouve aussi nettement que si elle était encore devant moi; c'était une robe que j'avais dénommée sa « robe-musique » parce que, sur la soie noire du fond, étaient brochés en semis des petits dessins d'une soie verte très brillante qui figuraient absolument des *dièzes;* pendant les longues minutes où mes yeux restèrent fixés de tout près sur ce bas de robe, les petits dièzes verts se sont pour ainsi dire photographiés en moi-même, et je les vois reparaître chaque fois que je repense à cette heure d'épreuve [62].

The Proustian process is here seen in reverse: it is as if Combray had reminded Proust of dipping the « madeleine » —the process can work both ways. Loti's association, as was most natural for him, was a strictly visual one, but among his evocations of the past there are a number of old songs such as he had heard the sailors sing as a child:

. . . vieux airs à bercer les matelots; vieilles complaintes venues de la mer, venues je ne sais d'où, de la profonde nuit des temps [63].

61. *Prime jeunesse, cit.,* pp. 6-7.
62. *Ibid.*
63. *Pêcheur d'Islande, cit.,* p. 144.

and the refrain of the old woman who passed the house every evening in his childhood: « Gâteaux, gâteaux, mes bons gâteaux tout chauds! » and who appears in both *Roman d'un Enfant* and again, twenty-nine years later « comme ces coucous qui, pour chanter nos heures fugitives, sortent automatiquement des vieilles pendules » [64].

Always in Loti there is a profound awareness of the passing of time and the inevitable approach of death. The conservation of the things of the past, and above all those of his own past, give him a transitory impression of security. An image which recurs throughout his work in connection with the transitoriness of human life is that of the butterfly, which links up with the dragonfly and his first mistress, the gypsy girl. Loti's reputation has suffered much from his use of the obvious: we immediately associate the butterfly with pre-Raphaelite and Decadent painting and Loti seems to be exploiting a symbol all too accessible to his contemporary readers. The only passage which seems today to be in doubtful taste in the delicate and touching narrative of a personal bereavement « Tante Claire nous quitte » is the big butterfly which his batman has pinned to the curtains of Loti's bed in the guardroom. Loti, returning to duty from the bedside of his dying aunt, regards the last struggles of this fragile creature

> . . . J'aperçois, posé sur ces laids et tristes rideaux jaunes du lit, un pauvre papillon qui bat des ailes comme pour mourir, — un grand papillon d'été et des fleurs, une « vanesse », dont l'existence en décembre, après cette série de froids excessifs, inconnus dans nos pays, a quelque chose d'anormale et d'inexpliqué; je m'approche pour le regarder: il est piqué par une grosse épingle qu'on a enfoncée jusqu'à la tête dans son petit corps affreusement crevé [65].

To a modern taste the plain details of his aunt's last struggle for life require no deliberately artistic foil to set them off, and the tears the young officer sheds over the

64. *Prime jeunesse, cit.*, p. 20.
65. *Le livre de la pitié et de la mort, cit.*, pp. 236-7.

butterfly are tears we could well spare. And yet, before dismissing the butterfly offhand as a sentimental intrusion, we should consider that for Loti the butterfly flew naturally into the picture. It is not so much that, like most children of his time, he spent his summer days running over the countryside with a butterfly net in his hand, that he was very proud of his collection to which his brother from abroad had added some rare specimens; what makes the butterfly so valid a symbol for Loti is its association with his childhood games of make-believe. In *Le Roman d'un enfant* he describes how as a seven-year-old boy he played with his little friend Antoniette at the transformation of the larva into chrysalis and thence into butterfly, a game that always ended in the gay fluttering from flower to flower:

Puis, tout à coup, on commençait des courses folles, — très légères en petits souliers minces toujours; à deux mains on tenait les coins de son tablier de bébé, qu'on agitait tout le temps en manière d'ailes; on courait, on courait, se poursuivant, se fuyant, se croisant en courbes brusques et fantasques; on allait sentir de près toutes les fleurs, imitant le continuel empressement des phalènes; et on imitait leur bourdonnement aussi, en faisant; « Hou, ou, ou! » la bouche à demi fermée et les joues bien gonflées d'air . . . [66].

An extraordinaty poignancy is given to this game by the fact that he sees a similar scene enacted by a crippled beggar boy one April evening in Constantinople

. . . la mère lui tendait cette loque, et il présentait ses menus bras que terminaient des mains croches.

Mais tout à coup, avant que la seconde manche fût passée, il s'échappa, dans un subit élan d'espièglerie, et il se mit à courir, à courir, décrivant des cercles fous devant les passants, s'amusant à agiter, dans le vent froid qui se levait, les manches de son burnous comme des ailes . . .

Un peu de l'éternelle et si fugitive jeunesse, un peu de cet enfantillage joueur du début de la vie, qui est commun aux

66. *Le roman d'un enfant*, *cit.*, p. 65.

hommes et aux bêtes, venait par hasard de s'éveiller en lui.

... Je le regardais, étonné, l'ayant toujours connu inerte, et je ne sais quelle impression d'infinie tristesse se dégageait pour moi de sa pauvre petite gaîté si éphémère, de sa course follette ... Ce fut fini, brusquement, comme cela avait commencé [67].

This natural association in Loti's mind of the butterfly with the carefree gaiety of childhood and, at the same time, the emphasis on the brevity of such enjoyment makes the death of the big « vanesse » which had lived on into December to die in a cruel and useless struggle, a fitting symbol for the long-drawn-out passing of his aunt Claire. It is easier for him to speak of the sufferings of the butterfly: of his aunt he can only repeat the words of his mother:

« Comme c'est long! » — Cette chose qu'elle ne nomme pas et que nous connaîtrons tous, c'est l'agonie. Elle trouve que, pour sa soeur, c'est bien long, que rien ne lui est epargné [68].

It is time for a re-assessment of the work of Pierre Loti: speaking to the Académie Française in 1892 of the work of Octave Feuillet, Loti had said:

... les plus belles choses d'hier tombent toujours dans un défaveur momentanée; mais elles reprennent leur charme ensuite, dès que ce *hier*, qui fuit si vite, commence un peu à devenir *le passé* [69].

For us today Loti belongs no longer to yesterday but to the past, and I would suggest that his peculiar charm for us now is no longer the exotic subject matter which made him so popular with his contemporaries, but rather the « susceptibility » which James, one of his earliest but most perceptive critics, noted: the susceptibility which « finds a language which fits it like a glove ». His prose, as James noted in the preface to *Impressions* « consists of the happiest conceivable utterance of feelings about aspects ».

At his best Loti was attempting something new. With-

67. *Figures et choses qui passaient*, « Papillon de Mite », pp. 182-3.
68. *Le livre de la pitié et de la mort*, *cit.*, p. 229.
69. *Discours de réception de Pierre Loti*, Paris, 1892.

out ever theorising about it, he attempted in the novel a new form of impressionism which was to lead to the *nouveau roman*. He was taking a first step along the road that was to lead, beyond *A la récherche du temps perdu* to *La jalousie*. He loosened up the form and structure of the novel in a way which shocked Henry James, and beyond this, without ever breaking down into incoherence, he sought to express the inexpressible through images caught from dreams, as well as through the use of words with ill-defined contours. His grammar remained precise and his vocabulary traditional —he was, that is to say, an Impressionist, although sensitive enough to see the possibility or perhaps the desirability of a further process, a process of formal disintegration which was to come about in painting with Picasso and in writing still later with *Finnegans Wake*. Speaking of Yann, the fisherman in *Pêcheur d'Islande* who is struggling to comprehend the mysteries of life and death, Loti says:

> Il était coutumier de ces étranges associations d'images, comme il s'en forme surtout au commencement de la vie, dans la tête des enfants... Mais les mots, si vagues qu'ils soient, restent encore trop précis pour exprimer ces choses; il faudrait cette langue incertaine qui se parle quelquefois dans les rêves, et dont on ne retient au réveil que d'énigmatiques fragments n'ayant plus de sens [70].

Written in 1886 these words were a pointer into the future, and an indication of why so fastidious a reader as Henry James could find so much pleasure in Loti's books. For Loti was an artist who could not only read deep into the human heart (more precisely, in the French tradition of journal writing and autobiography, into his own), but could express all the suffering and despair he found there in a language which suggests rather than defines « une tristesse profonde, angoissée, pleine d'inconnu et de mystère » [71].

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70. *Pêcheur d'Islande, cit.*, p. 198.
71. *Ibid.*