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# Africa and Europe: En/Countering Myths

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## Beyond the Mask: Guy de Maupassant in Algeria

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The challenge of otherness is examined in the context of Guy de Maupassant's journey to the newly colonised Algeria in 1881. The quest to understand the Other runs parallel with the discovery of the Self. As he vacillates between opposing points of view, Maupassant's sincerity makes the series of chronicles, published as *Au soleil*, an interesting study for those concerned by the growing global conflict between sameness and diversity, assimilation and affirmation. The only solution may be to move beyond those notions and ideals that prevent us from seeing the other as a whole and wholly different being. A being that we can relate to precisely because his otherness is and remains beyond our comprehension and control. "I could already feel my flesh penetrated and burnt by that ferocious ruler who reigns over Africa from high above and I wished I had already arrived in the harbour of white Algiers, and had already left for the edges of the desert." (Maupassant 2000:Une fête arabe)<sup>1</sup>

Between 1881 and 1889 Guy de Maupassant undertakes two journeys to Algeria. He publishes several accounts of these travels in varied forms: two collections of travel essays under the titles *Au soleil* (In the Sun), in 1884 and *La vie errante* (A Wanderer's Life) in 1890. Both their content and form position these essays in-between the Parisian newspaper columns that he writes during and after his journeys and the fictional short stories they inspire.

Literary criticism has focussed largely on Maupassant's short fiction and novels and the travel writings are mostly only mentioned in passing. When the essays about Algeria are referred to (Bancquart 1999:9; Leclerc 1993:24), it is often maintained that they illustrate his strong disapproval of colonisation. However, a close reading of *Au soleil* shows that far from containing an unequivocal denunciation of the ongoing colonisation, the text reveals a painful confusion of opposing opinions and ideas.

Algeria in the 1880's is a frenzied hive of activity. Although France had taken possession of the country fifty years previously, it took several decades to conclude the conquest. Maupassant first travels to Algeria for a Paris newspaper in July 1881 to cover an insurrection lead by Cheik Bou-Amama. Rebellion



against French rule is a drawn out and loosely co-ordinated affair. After driving the Turkish rulers from Algiers in 1830, France discovers that it has only acquired rule over a few big towns. The rest of the vast region still had to be conquered. Resistance against the French occupation only acquires momentum in 1832 when the legendary Abd El-Kader, then only 25 years old, unites a few of the scattered tribes to mount a fierce and dedicated struggle that was to last for fifteen years. Not able to muster enough united support and paralysed by French scorched earth reprisals, Abd El-Kader surrenders in 1847 and is exiled to France. Throughout France's presence in Algeria, other lesser resistance movements were to rise and disappear sporadically.

In the meantime, a steady stream of settlers swells the European population. The *pièdes noirs*, as they came to be known, were mostly poor country folk, artisans, miners, builders and fishermen from Spain, Italy and France. After the 1878 phylloxera crisis in France had wiped out thousands of hectares of vine, many French winegrowers settle in Algeria, giving the *pièdes noirs* numbers and the Algerian economy a huge boost.

The administrative colonisation of Algeria was an equally drawn out process. In 1848, Algeria, unlike other French colonies, is annexed as an integral part of France and sub-divided in three French provinces to be governed by the Department for Home Affairs. The indigenous inhabitants are considered as French subjects, the settlers as French citizens. To acquire French nationality and the advantages associated with it, indigenous inhabitants have to renounce their right to fall under Islamic law, thereby effectively renouncing their religion. In 1881, the Native Code is instituted. (Prebensen 2000) It comprises a list of 27 misdemeanours such as refusing to work, late payment of taxes or attending unauthorised meetings all of which may be punished by arrest, confiscation of goods, detention or fines.

In France, the colonisation of Algeria divides political opinion. (Horne 1996:31) Clemenceau complains that France's presence in Algeria weakens its stand against the ambitious designs of Bismarck. French farmers feel threatened by the cheaper land and labour costs of their Algerian counterparts. In spite of this opposition, very few voices seem to be raised against acts of cruelty and injustice related to the process of colonisation itself.

The Maupassant who travels to Algeria in 1881 has recently begun his ascension in the literary and social world. In spite of his success, he seems weary and worn out by the monotony and numbing familiarity of life in Paris: "Life, too short, too long, sometimes becomes unbearable. It unfolds, always the same, with death at the end of it. One can neither stop it, nor change it, nor understand it." (Maupassant 1998:25) He riles against his neighbours who seem content, even happy, with an existence hardly changed by the passing of time. To travel, to leave it all behind seems to be the only way out of a world,

exhausted by repetition and sameness. The journey presents itself as an escape from this corrosive pessimism that turns the very act of breathing into a prison of routine. A voyage, he writes, is like a kind of door through which one leaves the known reality to enter an unexplored reality that resembles a dream. Maupassant feels himself drawn to Africa by a feeling of *saudade*, an almost nostalgic yearning for something that still remains to be discovered. Algeria seems to be the perfect unknown and exotic elsewhere. The element of danger created by rumours of a general uprising only serves as an additional incentive. Above all, Maupassant is excited at the possibility of meeting with Bou-Amama, the elusive leader of the insurrection. "I was becoming extremely curious to see the Arab at this moment, to attempt to understand his soul, that which hardly interests the colonisers." (Maupassant 1998:27)

This breathless opening discourse is steeped in contradiction. Life is too "short" and too "long". He feels outraged, yet powerless. We are to die without knowing anything, and yet we are revolted by what we *do* know. Even though he affirms his desire to *know* the thoughts of the colonised, he declares in the first paragraph of the very same text that we are, in fact, unable to ever understand anything. The entire text is steeped in this tone of ambivalence.

Maupassant's second journey to Algeria, seven years later, is described in the collection *La vie errante*. The first essay is called *Lassitude* and in it, he again expounds his reasons for wanting to leave France. This time, however, he is not irritated by the lack of change, but by too much of it. Paris is preparing for the Exposition Universelle in 1889. Maupassant intensely dislikes the Eiffel tower that has just been constructed. Foreign visitors throng the streets. He complains that the entire Universe has invaded Paris and that belly dancing is only fun to watch in the desert. (Maupassant 1999:*Lassitude*)

Although different, even contradictory, in content, the preludes to his two African adventures reveal a common motivation: Maupassant expects this journey, this exotic other country, to deliver him, not only from the weariness of the Old World, but also from himself. He senses emptiness in himself and in the banal pursuits of contemporary French society and Africa must fill this void. The quest for the African otherness is, if not a search for an own identity at least an attempt to reconcile two discordant voices within himself. "I was born with all the instincts and the senses of primitive man, tempered by the reasoning and emotions of a civilised being" (Maupassant 1999:*Amour*). The sun of Africa is expected to cauterise the wounds inflicted by a society where too much intimate contact intensifies the consciousness of an insurmountable individual solitude. This deep personal need evidently loads the expectations he has of the journey – and increases the risk of disappointment.

Against the background of these intense emotions, the decision to leave for Algeria on the 6<sup>th</sup> of July 1881 appears to have been taken on the spur of the



moment. He writes to Gisèle d'Estoc, with whom he had recently started an affair, from Marseilles, announcing the impending journey and excusing himself for not taking leave of her in Paris: "This long journey tempted me and I left the very day on which I conceived of it to still be able to join the expeditionary party against the seditious, heroic and elusive Bou-Amama [...]" (Maupassant 2000: *Correspondence*) Since Maupassant is to write a series of reports on the insurrection for the Parisian newspaper, *Le Gaulois*, the journey involves more than an escapist fancy. Maupassant had very definite ideas about contemporary politics and his newspaper columns often reflected these strong views. However, in ideology as in art, he refused to swear allegiance to any particular group or persuasion. To his friend, the poet Catulle Mendès, who had been trying to convince him to join the Freemasons, he writes the following in 1876:

Because of selfishness, spitefulness or eclecticism I never want to be linked to any political party whatsoever, any religion, any sect or any movement: I never want to enter into any association which preaches certain doctrines and not bow before any dogma or principle - and this, simply because I want to preserve my right to criticise anything. (Maupassant 2000: *Correspondence*).

This attitude is indeed reflected in his writing where he not only attacks aspects of centralist-rightwing politics, such as war, national chauvinism and empire building but also some traditionally socialist values such as equality and majority rule. For Maupassant, the only absolute value seems to lie in, what he terms, 'personal honour' (Maupassant 2000: *Contemporains*). His individualistic view of politics partly explains why his attitude towards France's colonial expansion seems ambivalent and difficult to categorise.

The journey to Algeria starts in Marseilles. A heady mix of races, languages, colours, smells and sounds makes the town palpitate with life and joy. The presence of the sun adds to this sense of vibrancy. Although Maupassant feels as if he is surrounded by foreigners, cultural diversity is perceived as a wholly positive experience at this point. During the crossing, Maupassant notes the diverse views that his fellow French travellers hold about Algeria and the way the country should be run. It is clear that each projects his own experience and occupation onto his opinion. Nonetheless, they all take for granted their right to decide for the colony as a mere extension of France. The Captain maintains that the navy should govern Algeria since the country can only be reached from the sea. This glaring eurocentricity also emphasises French perception of the country's exotic limited accessibility.

Arriving in Algiers, Maupassant is at first charmed by the dazzling luminosity of the town. Ensnared in his Northern European frame of reference he likens the blazing whiteness of Algiers in summer to snow. He soon notices the striking physical incongruity of the French presence. He feels ashamed of

the awkward signs of French civilisation, calling it progress badly adapted to the morals, the sky and the people. The Europeans, he says, are more barbarian than the indigenous population surrounding them. French structures, such as the 'Algerian Skating Rink', seem to be a gross error, like bad art, defying not only the autochthonous population but also the land itself.

As he moves further away from Algiers towards Oran, Maupassant discovers what he calls "the true soil of Africa" – naked and red. The heat becomes unbearable. The sun, he says, burns and devours the land, making it sterile, and the air is suffocatingly hot. The native inhabitants, on the contrary, seem to melt into and become one with the landscape. The light coloured clothes they wear take on the colour of the soil. Their tents, surrounded by natural hedges, can barely be distinguished against the backdrop of sand and dust. The French settlements, on the other hand, stand out awkwardly. The sun has scorched their trees, decorated with tattered French flags. Like the sun, the land also seems to side with the native inhabitants. The landscape appears to absorb and protect the rebel fighters. They leave no more signs of their passing, says Maupassant, than a flock of birds. (Maupassant 1998:50) The French, however, struggle as much against the land as against its inhabitants. They move slowly, laboriously, their touch heavy upon the land. Maupassant is deeply moved by his encounter with an old peasant woman from Alsace. She had come to Algeria with her four sons after the Franco-Prussian war, attracted by the promise of land. Now, three of her sons were dead, killed by "this murderous climate". They could not make anything grow in the soil, which is nothing but "burnt ash". (Maupassant 1998:30)

Very early in the text one can thus trace different portraits of colonisers and colonised. It nevertheless remains difficult to determine Maupassant's position with certainty. He arrives with certain personal and political ideals. He wants to know and understand the indigenous cause. As he descends into the swarming mass of people in Algiers, his first human experience is a negative one. He gives a young bootblack a few coins, only to see him brutally robbed by an older and stronger youth. When he wants to protest, a French military officer holds him back, explaining that that kind of thing happened all the time. The bootblack incident already warns the reader that a compromise is inevitable. Maupassant sees and disapproves of the injustice without getting involved, thereby anticipating that although he might recognise the iniquity of the colonial system, he will not intervene.

Having described the human presence in Algeria as divided into two clearly defined camps, Maupassant goes on to deny, albeit unconsciously, the identity of the colonised. "The Algerians, the true inhabitants of Algiers, know nothing of their country beyond the plains of the Mitidja. They live quietly in one of the most charming cities in the world, declaring that the Arabs are an



ungovernable people, good only to be killed or thrown into the desert.” (Maupassant 1998:51)

Maupassant criticises the colonisers’ mentality without, it appears, realising that he has already adopted their language. If the French colonisers are called “Algerians” and “true inhabitants of Algiers”, then the vanquished people have become non-entities. Not only are they dispossessed of their country; their identity is also usurped by the settlers. Moreover, the colonised are predominantly presented as a uniform, homogenous mass. Apart from the Mozabites, admired by Maupassant because of their industriousness and sense of commerce, all the other indigenous inhabitants are lumped together and simply referred to as “Arabs”.

This homogenisation in *Au soleil* is particularly striking since it is unlikely that Maupassant would not have been aware of the differences on cultural, linguistic and ethnic level, between, on the one hand Berber groups (such as Kabylis, Shawiya, Mozabites and Touareg) and, on the other hand, those indigenous inhabitants that were indeed of Arab descent. In a chronicle, published seven years later, he would remark on precisely those cultural differences apparently negated in *Au soleil*. (Maupassant 2000:*Afrique*) It may be argued that Maupassant only realised the importance and impact of cultural variety during his second voyage in Algeria.

This unwillingness to differentiate, however, can also be explained as a typical colonialist attitude. For the European coloniser (whether informed or not) it is probably easier not to differentiate, to group all native inhabitants in a kind of anonymous collective. It is far less complicated to deal with two distinct groups: ‘us’ and ‘them’, than with the complexities of cultural diversity.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, to recognise cultural differences would amount to accepting the existence of pre-colonial civilisations and cultures, thereby weakening one of the main vindications of colonialism: that no true civilisation existed prior to the arrival of the colonisers. Justifying the continuation of France’s colonial expansion in the Chamber of Deputies, Jules Ferry declared in 1885: “The superior races have a right with regard to the inferior races. They have a right because they have an obligation. They have the obligation to civilise the inferior races” (Delpin 2002:Clotexte) ‘Unshaped’ and ‘uncivilised’, the colonised exist neither as individuals, nor as members of a specific cultural or ethnic group. In the text, Maupassant refers with increased frequency to ‘the Arab’, ‘Arabs’ or simply, ‘they’. Sadly, this lack of differentiation was perpetuated in post-colonial Algeria where cultural minority groups again saw themselves sacrificed to ideals of a homogenous national identity.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, Maupassant does tell us about different colonisers in Algeria: the main classifications here would be the military, the inefficient bureaucrats, the cruel Spanish, the bombastic and

self righteous colonialist settlers and the poor, small colonists, also perceived as victims of the situation.

Another feature of the coloniser described by Maupassant is that of paternalism. In 1852, the French government awards the Grande Croix of the Légion d’Honneur to the exiled rebel leader Abd El-Kader, appropriating him through flattery and recognition. (Ironically, the boat on which Maupassant travels to Algeria is named the *Abd El-Kader*.) In much the same way, the colonial powers attempt to hijack one of the most holy manifestations of Islam, the month of Ramadan. Maupassant describes (disapprovingly) how a French cannon—the very symbol of violent oppression—is fired at dawn and dusk to signal the beginning and end of the fast.

It is clear that Maupassant’s fascination with the exotic turns into derision of superficial differences he detects among the indigenous populations as his journey takes him deeper into the country. In the desert, Maupassant starts to criticise several aspects of everyday indigenous life. At first these remarks, ranging from food and drink to moral values, work ethics and sexual practices, seem petty and almost laughable. In *Province d’Alger* he introduces the theme of ‘unnatural’ love with great circumspection, citing historical references from Socrates to Henry III. He claims that homosexuality is a common practice in Algeria, blames (amongst other factors) the ardent climate for this ‘deviation’ and relates several anecdotes. Gradually, he starts associating value judgements with these cultural differences, seeing them as so many indications of inferiority. Having admired the indigenous nomads’ freedom of movement, he now derides them for not having more material possessions.

A strange people, childlike, having remained as primitive as at the birth of races. ... No furniture ..., no craft, no art, no knowledge of anything whatsoever. ... Negroes have huts, Lapps have holes, Eskimos have igloos, the most savage of savages have some sort of dwelling dug into the earth or fixed upon it; they care about their mother earth. Arabs pass through, always wandering, with no tenderness for this earth that we possess and render fertile ... (Maupassant 1998:76-77)

Although he appears, at times, to side with the colonisers, Maupassant ‘switches sides’ throughout the text to attack the methods used by France to colonise Algeria. One of the key issues raised is the problem of land ownership.

In the text, *La Kabylie - Bougie*, Maupassant describes the different schemes used by the colonial powers to dispossess the indigenous inhabitants. Nowhere else is his criticism of the colonial machinery as caustic and to the point. Farms are numbered and drawn from a hat in Paris, the fate of families and entire tribes sealed in a light hearted and random fashion. The results of, what Maupassant calls, *this outright spoliation* (Maupassant 1998:109) are



misery, famine and insurrection. In addition to this, he launches a scathing attack on the way in which the country is governed. These remarks show a clear understanding of the complexities of the situation, as well as a pragmatic approach to politics and administration. He mentions the size and diversities of the various regions, the French governors' lack of knowledge and capacity, their favouritism, corruption, bureaucratic errors, as well as the absence of consistency. He concludes that ignorance of local infrastructure leads to fundamental administrative mistakes.

After denouncing – at some length – the iniquities committed in the name of colonisation, and even suggesting possible political and administrative remedies, Maupassant concludes the text as follows:

It is certain that the soil, in the hands of these men, will give much more than it would have in the hands of the Arabs; it is also certain that the primitive population will gradually disappear; this disappearance will undoubtedly be very useful to Algeria, but one is still revolted by the conditions under which this occurs. (Maupassant 1998:124)

In his ambivalence, Maupassant appears to wear a series of different masks: firstly, there is the mask woven of pre-conceived ideas and expectations, which prevents him from experiencing the newness of the foreign country and its inhabitants. When he is confronted with the chasm between his ideas and reality, this gives rise to a sense of betrayal and he fills the resulting void with simplistic observations, almost petulant criticisms and, ultimately, an acceptance of colonialist discourse. The newspaper columns he writes at the time are sometimes signed 'A colonist', sometimes 'A soldier' as if he assumes different identities to allow his reader to identify with the situation he describes. It could also be argued that Maupassant adopts some of the arguments of the French colonists in order to expose their preposterousness to his readers in France. Does he not perhaps condemn the homosexuality he encounters among the Arab tribes because at that time a public denunciation would have been the only acceptable way to introduce such issues in the press? In this way, wearing a mask might also constitute an effort to mediate between two irreconcilable worlds.

The sun in *Au soleil* acts as catalyst, stripping away masks and pretences and transforming the challenge of otherness into the discovery of self. This quest can be described in conjunction with the changing symbolic significance of the sun throughout the text. For Maupassant, native of misty and green Normandy, the sun is clearly the principal symbol of Africa's exoticism. Initially the sun is described as a sovereign ruler, source of light and life and regulator of all earthly activity (Maupassant 1998:26,27). As Maupassant ventures deeper into the country, this sun king becomes increasingly harsh and cruel (Maupassant

1998:57,71,75). It is described as a despot and a tyrant until, in a final paroxysm of power and destruction, it turns into fire and flame as Maupassant describes the forest fires that rage through Kabylia. This inferno is not only an expression of indigenous revolt; the sun itself seems to rise up to avenge the dispossessed.

In addition to this, the sun, as source of light, is linked to intellectual knowledge and cosmic intelligence. It reveals truth. However, the strength of the African sun is such that Maupassant invariably describes it as blinding. He expresses the need to shelter, both from its heat and the intensity of its light. When the sun is at its most intense, it seems to strip Maupassant of his mask of humanist tolerance. The climate, which he experiences as hostile, forces him to choose sides, to identify with the camp of the colonisers. In the process, he seems to acquire a double identity, on the one hand condemning and on the other, condoning colonialism. This image of the double, which is so frequently present in Maupassant's writing, reveals an unstable state of self in a troubled world. (Bancquart 1999:7) Finally, the sun forces him to express his fear of otherness and an admission of his failure to understand the Other. The rising of the sun and its movement across the sky further contains the idea of a journey. Maupassant often uses this cycle to punctuate the narrative. In much the same way, his voyage as an attempt to understand the Other, is reflected in the transformation of the sun from life-giving divinity to destructive tyrant.

It is, ironically, in the glaring light and barrenness of the desert that he finds some sort of inner peace. Whereas the uneventfulness of life in the city made him feel like a prisoner, the lack of exterior demands and distractions in the desert allows him to reclaim his personal integrity. The landscape is sterile, arid and abandoned. Surrounded by emptiness, he is forced to find within himself the fullness, which everything around him lacks. "Every day the silent desert invades you, penetrates your thoughts like the harsh light that burns your skin; and one would like to become a nomad, like these men who move from country to country without ever leaving their homeland" (Maupassant 1998:74). For a fleeting moment, Maupassant experiences solidarity, not only with the desert, but also with its inhabitants. This utopian union cannot last. In the short story *Solitude*, published at the same time as *Au soleil*, the narrator declares the impossibility of reaching the Other through the walls of our personal prison.

We do not know what happens in another. We are further removed from each other than the stars because thought is unfathomable. ... It helps me nothing to want to give myself, to open all the doors of my soul. I cannot hand myself over. Deep within me, I keep the secret of myself, which no one can penetrate because no one is like me, because no one understands anyone else. (Maupassant 1998: *Solitude*)



The maupassantian Other cannot be limited to the colonised, the coloniser or the culturally different. Although he set out for Algeria to understand the mind and soul of the colonised, the journey strips Maupassant of his preconceived ideas and ideals. Individuality dooms to failure any endeavour to conceive of the Other as a group. The desire to understand the Other is in itself a kind of colonisation: a desire to possess. This realisation, I think, is the true conclusion of this journey. As Maupassant foresees at the end of *La Kabylie-Bougie*, the Other *will* disappear, simply because the traveller cannot let go of wanting to understand him.

For the modern, post-colonial reader the key concern remains: how do we lay down the various masks that prevent us from seeing the Other as a whole and wholly different being that we can relate to precisely because this otherness is and remains beyond our comprehension and control. We *can* move beyond the mask, but we will have to rethink certain widely accepted concepts such as sameness and diversity.

In thought, Maupassant looks forward to meeting with a different and unknown culture. Yet, he seems unable to deal with some of these differences when he experiences them in reality. A useful concept here might be that of *heterophobia*, a term coined by the Tunisian author, Albert Memmi. (Memmi 1992:48) As the name indicates, it is the fear (or loathing) of that which is different (not necessarily foreign – as in *xenophobia* – but simply that which I am not accustomed to). These differences usually concern aspects of the Other that have no negative impact whatsoever on my life. Maupassant complains about the variety of chipped porcelain in which coffee is served in the desert. After a while he does not like the couscous anymore. He describes some of the food dishes as mediocre or inedible. The music is loud and monotonous. Somehow, his complaints and reactions seem very familiar. Heterophobia is, I believe, a common human emotion. It may, however, have dangerous consequences. It is very contagious. Each individual's fear can contribute to feed a communal hysteria. When these reactions are used in the laborious construction of a pseudo-philosophy to justify fear or hatred, it becomes racism. This happens in the text when Maupassant claims that the nomads are an inferior race because they do not have permanent dwellings. His arguments show the absurdity of racism. Cultural or ethnic purity does not exist; no notion of superiority is lasting and nothing can legitimise a privilege based on race.

Why does Maupassant vacillate so much in his attitude towards the colonised? One explanation would be that he realises how untenable the position is of the coloniser who does not accept colonisation. Once he has perceived colonialism as fundamentally wrong, as Maupassant seems to do, the only valid reaction would be to reject it, and to work towards the removal of the colonial presence. (Memmi 1985:49) But this would also imply rejecting his

own kind. Finding himself between the coloniser and the colonised, he realises that he is not prepared to become one of *them* either. His heterophobia might be a way of soothing his own conscience, of saying I had no choice. In doing so, of course, he implicitly justifies the actions of the colonisers.

Hesitating between two opposites, Maupassant founders on a kind of humanist pessimism. "Living with injustice one grows accustomed to it" (Maupassant 2000: *Lettre d'Afrique*). His conclusion refers back to the bootblack incident: it should not happen, but it will and cannot be changed. He has come full circle.

In his criticism of the autochthonous Algerian, Maupassant's point of departure is one of resemblance and assimilation. However, value judgements can only be based on comparison and comparison presupposes similarity. The myth of sameness is a placebo. Swallowing it causes us to engage with the other on a false premise and makes us bitter and cynical when our endeavours fail. According to this conception, we will always look at the Other through a mirror mask, always see him only with our own reflection superposed. And since we ourselves are the measure, the unknown Other will always be inferior in some way.

Enhancing the value of a group's diversity does not offer a lasting solution either. It tends to emphasise differences that serve to cement together the members of a group. Although belonging to a group does offer a sense of security and identity, the solidarity between members of one group automatically leads to the exclusion of those that do not belong to it. Moreover, this forces the individual into a framework, which has been pre-identified according to a group context.

Defining another only according to his differences is as restrictive as reducing him to sameness. No identity is fixed. We are not, we become. In attributing a certain identity, even positive, to an individual or a group, we freeze them in a state of being, denying them the possibility to become. A face that is identified according to its difference has been stripped of its otherness.

Ultimately, we can only relate to the Other on an individual basis. A true exchange can only be achieved if we renounce certain preconceived notions and ideals: "And it is precisely when we get close to the Other, when he is stripped of the exoticism which defuses, distances and freezes him, that his reality has the power to put us to the question." (Finkelkraut 1984:157) The Other is what he is because he is not I. He cannot be reduced to my understanding of him. I cannot appropriate him by attempting to find a portal into his mind. When we encounter the Other face to face, as travellers in a world that increasingly forces us into moulds of similarity, only a resolved sense of self can allow the barriers caused by differences to be absorbed into otherness.

In the bareness of the Algerian desert, Maupassant reaches the true destination of his journey when he resolves the tension within himself (Maupassant 1989:74): "... one desires nothing, aspires to nothing. This silent landscape, abandoned and streaming with light, is sufficient for the eye, for the mind, satisfies the senses and dreams, because it is complete, absolute, and cannot be conceived any differently".

## Notes

- 1 English translations of quotations are all my own, no other translation being available. Where text is quoted from Internet sites where pages are not numbered, the reference includes the year and the title.
- 2 According to Albert Memmi in «*Portrait du colonisé*», (1985 [1957]): 106-107, this attitude is also typical when it comes to recognising the individuality of the colonised. If the colonised gardener does not turn up for work, one is very likely to hear "You just can't count on *them*", rather than "I can't count on *him*".
- 3 In May 2001 (as previously in 1980 and 1986) a large-scale popular revolt broke out in Kabylia against the government's arabisation initiative and the subsequent repression of Berber culture and language.

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