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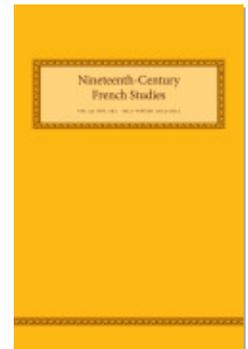
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“Dans le passé mort”: Pierre Loti, Images, and Time

CAROLINE FERRARIS-BESSO

Often overlooked as a theorist of photography, Pierre Loti (1850–1923) provided original insights that anticipate those of critics such as Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag. Through consideration of three Loti texts—“Dans le passé mort” (1891), the 1893 preface to Charles Lallemand’s *Le Caire*, and “Photographies d’hier et d’aujourd’hui” (1909)—I show that Loti, who started experimenting with photography as a child, recognized the medium as an art form early on. Photographs, whose analogical nature makes them effective tools to preserve family memory and history, provide him with an alternative to the more fragile, less truthful painted portrait. Finally, as parts of collections, photographs enable Loti to construct a character and to find his place in history.

In “Dans le passé mort,” a short text from his 1891 *Le Livre de la pitié et de la mort*, Pierre Loti affirmed the superiority of photography over painting because of its analogical nature: photographs, as “reflets émanés des êtres” (*Œuvres* 5: 607), capture even the most fleeting of gestures, producing a stronger and more vivid impression than paintings ever could. Three decades after Charles Baudelaire’s indictment of photography on the basis of its servility to nature in the *Salon de 1859*, Loti, the eccentric author of the best-selling novels *Aziyadé* and *Pêcheur d’Islande*, celebrated a medium that he considered an art form in its own right rather than the documentary adjuvant Baudelaire had criticized.¹

Loti’s lifelong passion for photography is well documented. Bruno Vercier’s 2002 *Pierre Loti: portraits: les fantaisies changeantes* presented many of the portraits staged by the writer. In 2012, Vercier and Alain Quella-Villéger edited *Pierre Loti photographe*, a volume that gathers five hundred of the one thousand pictures taken by Loti during his travels around the world as a naval officer. Although Loti’s collection of images has received ample critical

attention,² his theoretical contributions have too often been overlooked. In addition to “Dans le passé mort,” two other texts are of particular interest: the 1893 preface to Charles Lallemand’s *Le Caire* and the 1909 essay “Photographies d’hier et d’aujourd’hui,” first published in *Je sais tout*, and then as part of the 1910 collection *Le Château de la Belle-au-bois-dormant*. In these texts, Loti shows not only an awareness of the technical facets of the photographic practice, but an interest in the familial and social aspects of photography. He understands the photographic image as a technological feat that is also capable of retaining memory, so that it communicates something about the passing of time even as it allows one to pass through it. Photography emerges in this view as a strikingly modern phenomenon, one which, rather than spreading “le dégoût de l’histoire et de la peinture” (617) as Baudelaire feared in the *Salon de 1859*, actually participates in the process of distilling “l’éternel du transitoire” (694) that defines modern aesthetic practice for Baudelaire in his 1863 *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*. Loti’s prescient theories of the photograph, influenced by the evolution of photographic technology during his own lifetime, seek to reconcile an artistic modernity turned inward, in search of new forms of representation, with a technical modernity aimed at reproducing the outside world.

“D’HIER ET D’AUJOURD’HUI:” AGING WITH/IN PICTURES

Pierre Loti was born Julien Viaud in 1850, when photography had existed for little more than a decade. The technology continued to evolve throughout his life. Loti thus grew up and then old with photography, and his experimentations with different techniques defined his take on the medium. In 1839, Louis Daguerre, perfecting Nicéphore Niépce’s earlier experimentations, had succeeded in fixing positive images on his daguerreotypes, which did not allow the reproduction or transfer of images to another material. Invented in England, Henry Fox Talbot’s 1841 calotype seemed to mark a notable technical improvement as it allowed “un nombre indéfini d’épreuves positives d’après une image négative parfaitement fixée sur papier et capable de supporter de violents éclairages” (Prinet et al. 12). It remained an imperfect technique, however, resulting in uneven, smeared images;³ nevertheless, it was the one Gustave Viaud—Loti’s brother—elected to use.⁴ The images taken by Gustave in Polynesia would deeply impress Loti, making Tahiti “l’île rêvée” for him (*Œuvres* 1: 63). By the time Loti got behind the camera in 1894 (Quella-Villéger and Vercier 9), the American George Eastman had developed the Kodak camera, a lighter machine specifically designed to be used with film rolls. Even though Loti used glass plates, he favored machines that were radically different from the heavy,

cumbersome equipment that professional photographers of the time would use. A few years later, he would witness the development of color processes, in particular the Autochrome—patented in 1903 by the Lumière brothers—which his friend Jules Gervais-Courtellemont immediately started using.⁵

In the first half of “Photographies d’hier et d’aujourd’hui,” Loti offers a snapshot of the era that gave the world photography through tales of his own early experimentation with the medium, in the early 1860s. From the start, photography was for Loti a family affair: his interest was fostered at an early age by Corinne, “[sa] tante photographe,”⁶ an amateur photographer at a time when “les ‘amateurs’ ne se risquaient point à faire [de la photographie]” (211). In these comments, he mentions some of photography’s technical facets—“Les ‘positifs’ directs sur verre” (211), the use of “la chambre noire” (212)—and, through what we can assume is his childish gaze, likens them to a mysterious, even magical process, which takes place in a “caveau,” where Corinne uses “ses drogues magiques” (212). Even though Julien is, at the beginning, awe-stricken as he triumphantly resurfaces in the garden with his pictures, he quickly grows impatient with their grey tones and begs his aunt for color images. Corinne makes it clear that she cannot fulfill his dream, lest a “diablotin” intervene. Nonetheless Julien keeps hoping that his aunt, like a fairy godmother, will be able to obtain that something “merveilleux” “au fond de ses cuvettes de porcelaine” (213), only to be further disappointed by more grey images. Even a posed portrait of Julien’s cat, Monsieur Souris, so detailed that “l’on eût compté les brins de sa moustache” (215), does not make up for the disheartening absence of color, which leads Loti—and, as a consequence, a saddened Corinne—to abandon photography a few weeks later.

The second half of the text transports us to 1909, decades after these first attempts and his aunt’s passing in 1878. It parallels the first half, with only one difference: “[Ce] n’est plus tante Corinne qui photographie, mais Gervais-Courtellemont” (216). A professional photographer, Gervais-Courtellemont had by then made the “miracle des couleurs” (216) a reality with his colored Autochromes; ten of the ones that he took in Loti’s Rochefort house accompany the text in *Je sais tout* (Quella-Villéger and Vercier 357). Gervais-Courtellemont repeats the same mysterious, magical operations as aunt Corinne; he uses the same “‘positifs’ directs sur verre” (Loti, *Le château* 218), works in the same “caveau.” Yet the result is completely different, and not only because of the “mosaïques d’éclatantes couleurs” (219) that have replaced the many tones of grey, but because it is now as if the objects, not the photographer, performed the operation: “les murs de ma mosquée sont venus se fixer là, comme en des miniatures trop patiemment finies” (219). To be sure, Loti admires Gervais-Courtellemont’s work, which he finds moving, emotionally and even physically, since the images the photographer brought

back from his travels to Islamic countries have the ability to transport Loti back to Istanbul, a city where he stayed several times in his travels as a naval officer, and the setting for *Aziyadé*. Nevertheless, although what Gervais-Courtellemont manages to achieve is “la réalisation si complète de ce que [Loti] avait autrefois rêvé comme l’impossible” (221), in the end it falls short of “les modestes œuvres si imparfaites de tante Corinne” (220), “une novatrice un peu excentrique” (211) with no claim to realism. The imagined, realistically colored perfection proves unsatisfactory, perhaps because in Loti’s words, when the photographer gained the ability to replicate nature so perfectly that a whole world could be encapsulated in an image, he was also seemingly robbed of his agency. The 1893 preface to Loti’s *Le Caire*, illustrated with photographs by Gervais-Courtellemont and written by the latter’s father-in-law Charles Lallemand,⁷ presented the photographer as a much more active participant in the photographic process—a position that Loti, who was himself about to take up photography, undoubtedly preferred.

By the end of the nineteenth century, photography had gone beyond what Baudelaire had deemed one of its sole legitimate roles: “[sauver] de l’oubli les ruines pendantes [. . .] qui demandent une place dans les archives de notre mémoire” (618). On the one hand, the camera had become an analytical tool, and photographs were used as objects of study by scientists, doctors, and explorers alike (Gunthert and Poivert 140). On the other hand, photography was taking an artistic turn with the publication in 1869 of Henry Peach Robinson’s *Pictorial Effect in Photography*, which was released in France in the mid-1880s as *De l’effet d’art en photographie*. This text proposed “une théorie artistique de la photographie dans laquelle recettes et principes correspondent à une esthétique du pittoresque” (Gunthert and Poivert 204). Loti recognizes both developments in Gervais-Courtellemont’s images: they capture the minuscule and the elusive, which makes them worthy tools of cognition, and also show the inexpressible and the unfathomable, by way of which they venture into the realm of art. While acknowledging the importance of technique, Loti puts it in the background: “Ce que j’admire, bien plus encore que votre procédé un peu magique, c’est le goût qui a guidé le choix exquis de vos images” (Loti, “Préface”). The photographer’s taste allows him to make a selection that results in what can only be recognized as a work of art. Like paintbrushes and words, photography is a tool to the *artist* using it, but it is a much more effective one: “hélas, [cette œuvre d’art] rend inutile l’effort de tous ceux qu’avait charmés avant vous cet Orient profond et qui, par les moyens anciens, s’épuisaient à l’exprimer soit avec des pinceaux et des couleurs, soit avec des sonorités, des mots. À quoi bon peindre ou décrire après que vous avez passé par là . . .” (Loti, “Préface”). Photography shows more than the human eye can see and expresses more than the human heart can feel, which

leads Loti to claim that the superiority of photography could drive him to give up on other forms of art, deemed insufficient to express the Orient. But this may well just be flattery directed at Gervais-Courtellemont. Loti, a writer and a talented artist, actually never stopped painting or describing what he saw on his travels. When he took up photography the year after writing this preface, he did so using smaller, portable machines aimed at amateurs rather than at professionals (Quella-Villéger and Vercier 10), as if to claim his right to produce imperfect pictures for the purpose of entertainment and for the family circle, very much like his aunt Corinne.

In 1893, Gervais-Courtellemont is presented as an artistic creator rather than a simple technician: he selects his subjects and frames and composes his images. In 1909, on the other hand, a whole, colored world appears in his pictures, but in an apparent regression, he seems to have little to do with the process. Loti's lack of wonderment in front of Gervais-Courtellemont's colored images, which he welcomes with a somewhat cold: "Merci, mon ami, c'est vraiment très bien!" (Loti, *Le Château* 221) can partly be read in light of the creative impoverishment that seems to be the consequence of technical improvement. But "Photographies d'hier et d'aujourd'hui" also highlights the notion that perception of light and color—or rather lack thereof—is a symptom of one's upcoming disappearance: "à présent [la vie] est presque toute derrière moi, demain elle sera partie; demain je ne percevrai plus ni les couleurs ni le soleil, et déjà sans doute je commence par m'en désintéresser" (221). Loti's cold reception of Gervais-Courtellemont's color pictures is but the result of lassitude and constitutes an attempt to detach from the visual elements that are usually signs of life. The truthfulness of color pictures serves as a painful reminder that time passes, destroying lives and sending them into oblivion: between Loti's childhood and 1910, *nothing has changed* in the physical picture, but *some people* have disappeared. If the vividness of color renders Gervais-Courtellemont's photographs not particularly enticing, it is because the people who should have populated the photographs are not in the world anymore.

FADING FACES: PORTRAITURE AND ANXIETY

Loti's experience of time can be said to be the experience of an absence, as much as what Sylviane Agacinski calls "une expérience imagée" (69). And if absence indeed puts an anxious Loti "aux prises avec sa propre temporalité et sa finitude" (Agacinski 31), it is crucial to consider what he writes about portraits, which present people as their subject. "Dans le passé mort" shows the importance of portraits to Loti's perception of time: through them, he learned the faces and smiles of close ancestors (Loti, *Œuvres* 5: 596). During

his lifetime and after his death, a room of his Rochefort house, the *Salon Rouge*, was dedicated to family portraits painted by his older sister Marie Bon and other artists. Appearances mattered so much to Loti that when he inquired about people, he referred to physical characteristics. For instance: “Comment étaient leurs figures? À quoi ressemblaient-elles?” (597), he asks his grandmother and her sister Berthe about two of their sisters who died at a young age. Loti is not in search of anecdotes about the dead. Rather, he wants to find out what they looked like when they were alive, and how they presented themselves to others. Images, verbal and graphic, are the privileged way to discover someone. Around the same time during his childhood that he asks about his great-aunts, Loti’s worry and incomprehension in the face of death appear: “Déjà se dressait devant ma route le sombre et révoltant mystère de l’anéantissement brutal des personnalités, de la continuation aveugle des races” (597). The structure [singular noun—singular adjective—des + plural noun] seems to suggest that what happens to the individual (“personnalités”) parallels the fate of the “race” as a whole, yet the meaning of each phrase contradicts that of the other, with “anéantissement” responding to “continuation,” and “brutal” responding to “aveugle.” Thus, the adjective does not simply denote loss of sight, but also a lack of historical perspective, since the continuation of races comes at the price of the erasure of everything that had made the dead individuals significant. Loti’s quest to gather information so that he can recreate their image as faithfully as possible in his mind is but a response to this original anxiety, a way to fight against becoming “poussière” (596; 597) like his forefathers, against forgetfulness. But reverie and dreams also prove to be powerful tools for reviving the past, as two consecutive moments evoked in “Dans le passé mort” demonstrate.

The reverie begins “un soir [. . .] de mai” (598), at dusk, very much like the events described about two decades later in “Photographies d’hier et d’aujourd’hui,” which also take place “au temps de mon enfance, certain beau soir de mai de je ne sais quelle année lointaine” (Loti, *Le Château* 211) and “en 1909, au début d’un mois de mai qui est sensiblement pareil à ceux de mon enfance” (216). Back in 1893, the smell of jasmine interrupted Loti’s observation of his familiar surroundings, the roofs of neighboring houses, and acted as a trigger: “et alors je songeai au passé” (Loti, *Œuvres* 5: 598). As he explains earlier, for him jasmines are linked to the past: they are ancient flowers, and he claims that the walls of the family house in Saint-Pierre d’Oléron had been covered in them for two or three centuries. Aware that “les soirées de mai, l’odeur [des] fleurs [de jasmin], et le temps passé” (596) are associated in his mind, he dates this association more precisely to the moment when he asked about his two great-aunts and when the two contextual elements (a spring night, the smell of jasmine) became linked to

what would become a constant source of worry for him: the past. But the past that he revives in his 1893 reverie is a close one, still somewhat contiguous to the time in which he is living. While the connection between him and his aunts had been established through the living grandmother and great-aunt, the proximity to the past of his reverie is slightly less tangible, or rather on the verge of becoming so. Characters from the past are experienced as close, “les acteurs [qui] ont encore forme sous la terre dévorante et encomrent les cimetières de leurs cercueils presque intacts” (598). The disintegration process undergone by the bodies is materialized through the use of adverbs (“encore,” “presque”) and of the adjective “dévorante,” which signifies the constant work of the earth to swallow the ever accumulating corpses, “pauvres débris qui ont été” someone, but are not anyone anymore, “et que déjà l’on oublie.” As people become corpses, they move from the position of grammatical subject (“qui”) to that of object (“que”). Physical decomposition is not only always already tied to the forgetting of deceased loved ones by their relatives; it also appears in language. In contrast, the environment seems immutable: the provincial town has barely changed, providing what is truly a stage. Loti populates the streets of Rochefort with characters he dresses in period clothing (“manches à gigot,” “étrange coiffure,” 599). The result is a bittersweet scene, “[un] amusement mélancolique,” painstakingly created, very much in the same way a stage director would, and vividly staged inside the theater of Loti’s mind. With this scene Loti moves away from reverie, from what is but an involuntary mind work, triggered by the moment and the olfactory context, and makes an *effort* to go back in time to an earlier date—“la date [. . .] plus jeune” (599). Through the transferred epithet “plus jeune,” Loti extends his concern with human beings to time itself, as if to signify that time can grow old—and perhaps die?—too.

In the next part of the text, Loti’s concern becomes overwhelming as he reports that that very same night, the scene—“une tombée de nuit de mai, vers le premier quart de ce siècle prêt à finir” (599)—appears to him in a “songe.” This time, he is an actor of his own dream, along with someone unidentified, from his generation, a somewhat ghostly presence: “un être invisible, pur esprit” (600). During the dream, Loti and his companion, who turns out to be his niece, try to find something familiar: first their neighborhood, then family members, someone they could *recognize* in a rather frightening environment. Vocabulary related to the ghostly appears throughout the passage: “ombres,” “errer,” “fantôme,” “spectres furtifs.” Yet if Loti and his companion are struck with dread, it is not only because of these ghosts and the unfamiliarity of the surroundings, but because of the setting, “pâle fantasmagorie clignotante” (600). This revival of a dead period takes a form reminiscent of the cinematic image at its beginnings. It is described

as “artifice magique,” unstable, on whose fixity one cannot count—images blink every half-second, and they might disappear with a “coup de baguette,” which evokes magic and stage magicians, and by extension, photography as it was understood by Loti when he was a child. His dream is as much a physical experience—specters brush against him—as it is a visual one—they watch with their “pleins yeux” what is a “revue” (601) of the past. When he and his niece finally see people they might know, they can barely recognize them: the Dougas, a couple of neighbors already old when Loti and his niece were young, are now young and in love again. This “dévisagement” performed by Loti is rendered necessary by the “dévisagement”—disfiguration—resulting from the passing of time, which renders people unrecognizable. The passage concludes abruptly as Loti realizes that only youth and love are worth living for and that they are bound to disappear with time.

The last impression evoked by Loti is neither a reverie nor a dream. It takes place in Corsica, in Napoleon’s birth house, a tourist attraction in which he has at first little interest. He contrasts the intact state of the neighborhood and the house with the world turned upside down by Napoleon. It seems paradoxical, then, that like many of the places described by Loti, Napoleon’s house has undergone physical changes that evoke the past, “[agité] d’une vie spectrale:” “l’usure des marches de l’escalier,” “le badigeon *fâné* des murailles,” “le *délabrement* extrême de ces meubles Louis XV ou Louis XVI” (603, my emphases). But these changes always stop at some point in time—in the case of the emperor, after his childhood. Chronology becomes organized in function of characters’ lives, of a before and an after what happened in a given place at a given time. In the midst of another ghostly atmosphere, Loti visualizes “en costume d’autrefois, l’enfant singulier qui devint l’empereur” and resuscitates Lætitia Bonaparte and her children for a family dinner. This event is both close in time—it happened less than a century before—and very remote, as it was “plus d’un demi-siècle avant qu’il fût question dans ce monde de ma mère à moi” (604). This contrast between the seemingly identical periods, then and now, and what is for Loti a drastic difference—the fact that his own mother was not alive then—unsettles him and makes him feel like he and his mother are “rien” (605). Surprisingly, even Lætitia, the mother of the Emperor, is barely someone. As he exits, a pale portrait of her, which bears a striking resemblance to her son, halts Loti: “Dans un ovale dédoré, sous une vitre moisie, un pastel incolore, une tête blême sur fond noir” (606).

Like the house, the portrait displays the marks of time; it is in a state of disrepair. Although it is painted, it now presents itself in shades of black and white, like an early photographic picture. It is also very vivid, yet in a way that is difficult to describe: “Son expression, d’une intensité surprenante a

je ne sais quoi de triste, de hagard, de suppliant; elle paraît *comme* en proie à l'angoisse de ne plus être" (606, my emphases). The anxiety of not being is predatory. It is but a prelude to actual physical death, as it threatens to devour the woman in the portrait, painted when she was not dead yet, but who nevertheless looks like a dead woman, "effarée de se trouver dans la nuit, qui aurait mis furtivement la tête au trou obscur de cet ovale, pour essayer de regarder, à travers la brume du verre terni, ce que font les vivants—et ce qu'est devenue la gloire de son fils . . ." (606). The illusion of movement is induced by the fact that the face of Lætitia has apparently moved from the middle of the frame. Loti does not consider any possible logical explanation—pigment degradation, loss of tension in the canvas—in order to present Lætitia as a scared living dead, a zombie peeking through the darkness to observe the living and what has become of her son's glory. This last phrase should give us pause. The glory is not simply the fame that comes from Napoleon's military exploits. Lætitia is thus likened to the Virgin Mary and Napoleon to a messianic figure (in painting, "la gloire" is the aureole surrounding the body of Christ). If Lætitia is peeking outside of her frame, then, it is as much to *hear* about the *fama* of her son, as it is to *see* whether his glory still shines through the darkness where she now resides, because unlike Mary, Lætitia does not manage to survive in people's memory through the deeds of her son. Although Napoléon has immortalized himself, "en moins d'un siècle sa mère est oubliée; pour la sauver du néant il reste à peine deux ou trois portraits, comme celui-ci qui déjà s'efface" (607). *His* glory is not enough to ensure the survival of his mother in people's minds, and Lætitia's only glory is literal. It is, in the portrait Loti describes, the oval frame out of which she peeks, which surrounds her face like a halo, and already its color has faded, foreshadowing the definitive, unavoidable forgetting of the mother of the Emperor.

CROSSING THE PHOTOGRAPHIC THRESHOLD

Loti's take on painted portraits shows that to him they are but a last resort; remembrance depends on people's willingness to perpetuate their ancestors' memory. The fate of Lætitia seems to confirm this: being preserved only under a painted guise not only jeopardizes the possibility that she be remembered, but puts into question her very existence: has she ever existed? According to Susan Sontag "[p]ainting was handicapped from the start by being a fine art, with each object a unique, handmade original" (51). For Loti, however, it is actually not the impossibility of reproduction that is perceived as most threatening, but rather the human capacity to forget. If Loti singles out photographs as a particularly effective "garde-mémoire" de l'aventure domestique" (Chéroux 91), this is because "the eye perceives more swiftly

than the hand can draw” (Benjamin 219), hence the increased truthfulness of photography in comparison with drawing or painting. Unlike the brush of the painter, the camera fixes forever and exactly what the eye sees at a given moment, which is what gives the photographic image a more evocative quality. Its strength lies in the implication “that something exists, or did exist, which is like what’s in the picture” (Sontag 5). In his 1980 *La Chambre claire*, Roland Barthes explains that: “telle photo, en effet, ne se distingue jamais de son référent (de ce qu’elle représente), ou du moins elle ne s’en distingue pas tout de suite et pour tout le monde (ce que fait n’importe quelle autre image, encombrée dès l’abord et par statut de la façon dont l’objet est simulé)” (16). In other words, it is not immediately possible to detach a photograph from its referent, as the gaze of the viewer is inextricably attached to the subject of the photograph (18). Loti’s anticipation of the views of both Sontag and Barthes becomes obvious in the closing sentence of “Dans le passé mort:”

Je songe à ce qu’il y aura de frappant et d’étrange, dans un siècle ou deux, pour quelques-uns de nos arrière-fils, à passer en revue des photographies d’ancêtres ou d’enfants morts. Si expressifs qu’ils soient, ces portraits, gravés ou peints, que nos ascendants nous ont légués, ne peuvent produire sur nous rien de pareil comme impression. Mais les photographies, qui sont des reflets émanés des êtres, qui fixent jusqu’à des attitudes fugitives, des gestes, des expressions instantanées, comme ce sera curieux et presque effrayant à revoir, pour les générations qui vont suivre, quand nous serons retombés, nous, dans le passé mort . . . (Loti, *Œuvres* 5: 607–08)

Whereas a painting and its referent are linked by their resemblances (and conversely, what appears in the gaps between resemblances: the differences, divergences, distances that encumber, in Barthes’ terms, this relationship) photographic images seem to entertain an identity relation with their referent: they are but one and the same. Loti notices that it is the identification of a photograph with its referent that makes it “frappant” and “étrange,” because by the law of transitivity, it also makes the viewer closer to the referent than a painted portrait does, weighed down by the canvas, the paint, the varnish. Moreover, unlike paintings, photographs do not have to be removed from a wall or a frame. Walter Benjamin likens them to transportable reflected images (231). We have seen that Loti liked this casualness, as illustrated by his insistence on an amateur practice. This closeness of the photograph, actual and perceived, is what Barthes also expresses when looking at a picture of Jérôme Bonaparte. He remarks: “Je vois les yeux qui ont vu l’Empereur” (*La Chambre claire* 13). In other words, as a viewer, perhaps holding this photograph, he is only once removed from the Emperor, in spite of the

several generations that were born between the death of Jérôme in 1860 and his own birth in 1915.

Loti adds to the proximity described by Barthes another kind of closeness: family ties, which we know were dear to him. He evokes people entangled in a web of family relationships, actual or aborted: the *arrière-fils*, the ancestors, the dead children who did not *generate* any progeny, generations to come, and those falling back into the *passé mort*. Loti writes about several layers of time: a future-to-be, looking both at the past that gave birth to it and at the past arrested, without hope of ever being inscribed in genealogy. Photographic portraits are truthful and ghostly. They have the ability to make all these moments present at the same time, to bring the dead back to the present. Yet this bringing-to-presence is only momentary: the dead—including Loti himself after his death—are doomed to fall back into the *passé mort*, that which cannot be revived. Looking at photographs of his mother that do not particularly interest him, Barthes argues: “pour beaucoup de ces photos, c’était l’Histoire qui me séparait d’elles” (*La Chambre claire* 100). Like Barthes’s history, Loti’s *passé mort* is away in time, separate. It is always a time before the viewer was born, when he did not exist, perceived as distant precisely through the realization of this non-existence. Photographs are, by essence, sacred pictures, in Jean-Luc Nancy’s sense of the term: they are a manifestation of the separation of the referent of the photographs from the person who is looking at them—holding, manipulating, and touching them.⁸ But they also emanate directly from this referent. Their power comes from the fact that they are separate *and* contiguous. They attach to and detach from the past, attach to and detach from the referent, functioning synecdochically to bring part of it to the viewer. In fact, in the familial framework delimited by Loti, they are biologically part of the viewer: the picture, attached to its referent, carries some of those genes that made it through the layers of time, to reach the *arrière-fils*. At the end of “Dans le passé mort,” Loti observes the picture of Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte. Although he is still inhabited by the same anxiety that governs his relationship with the past, he is able to move forward and envision a time situated beyond his own death. A powerful feeling causes this detachment: the feeling of his becoming not just a memory to those who will survive him, but an object passing from hand to hand, which makes him feel resigned to being forgotten.

Throughout his life, Loti practiced another kind of photographic objectification: he posed for numerous portraits, in costumes from various periods and countries. These collections of pictures reveal yet another aspect of Loti’s relationship with time. As Vercier recounts in *Pierre Loti: portraits*, Loti’s image “est largement diffusée dans le public par le truchement de cartes-photos, cartes postales, vignettes, sans parler des portraits utilisés par

la réclame. Dandy ou académicien, Loti vante les mérites de Félix Potin ou du vin Mariani” (5). At the time, the passionate deltiologist could dig out a postcard of Viaud in full dress uniform (58) or a “photo-carte” of Loti, “non momifié encore en 1909” (156). Even children could find a picture of Pierre Loti, captioned: “246. Pierre Loti, de l’Académie-Française” (21) in the package of their favorite chocolate bar. They could then file it in a stockbook named “Livre d’or des célébrités contemporaines du chocolat Guérin-Boutron,” which was meant to protect five hundred images of “celebrities” of the time. Loti’s image could thus become part of a series in which Eleonora Duse was number 95 and General Florentin number 125. But was completing the series really the goal? Jean Baudrillard points out that “the collection is never really initiated in order to be completed” (13), but rather, to keep the thrill of the missing piece alive. With the *Livre d’or des célébrités contemporaines*, Loti does not determine the value of his image, which has the same importance as all the others; it can “only [acquire] [an] exceptional value *by dint of being absent*” (13). The public diffusion of Loti’s portraits could not grant him permanence, since to a large extent, the value of his image in the Guérin-Boutron series—and in any series he had not initiated—was a matter of chance: if no one found the image, it became exceptional.

Through his staging of many of his own series of pictures—for instance the series depicting him clad as Osiris (Vercier, *Pierre Loti* 32–35 and front cover), or one taken in 1904 in Istanbul, showing Loti in full dress uniform, from which the Guérin-Boutron postcard was taken (54–58)—Loti was able to regain the control that he did not have over public collections. The 1887 Osiris series is a good example of the functioning of collections initiated by Loti. The costume Loti wears in these pictures was created for a masquerade ball given by his friend Juliette Adam. Bruno Vercier gives little information about the context in which the pictures were taken, simply specifying: “les photos sont prises en studio” (32). From February 13 to 20, 1887, the day of the ball, Loti writes about the costume, without mentioning the photographic sitting. Vercier publishes three pictures: Loti seated, seen from his left side; standing in three-quarter profile facing right; and sitting, torso and head in three-quarter profile facing right. In the last two, the same helmet has replaced the striped headgear Loti wears in the first one. It could be considered a collection, insofar as the successive poses seem to want to capture the entire body of the model. Yet it is the viewer who becomes obsessed with this series and the question it bears: is there a missing term? Where does it end? Or: does it ever end? The interrogation persists: collections *point* in the direction of totality, and photography promises it—total perception, a perception not affected by the flaws of the human eye. Loti’s photographs, then, have to be considered as an ensemble

of series and odd pieces, or yet another *collection* of isolated elements and small collections: “la collection est faite d’une succession de termes, mais le terme final est la personne du collectionneur” (128). It is even truer in the case of Loti’s photographs, for with their elaborate *mise-en-scène*, they build a character, adopting a series of personas. In his portraits, Loti is rarely presented in plain clothes, except in his old age. Even then, though, he is disguised: “*en grand-père*” as Vercier puts it (152, my emphases), with his grandson Pierre as a prop. Writing about the biblical Noah’s attempt to save “the model pairs from which all life forms could be reconstructed” in his ark, Roger Cardinal and John Elsner state: “The collection is the unique bastion against the deluge of time” (1). Noah’s collection of pairs not only takes inventory: it salvages. Loti’s collection of pictures does with human experience what Noah’s did with animals: his transformations—Albanese, Spahi, wearing a Spanish coat, medieval, Breton fisherman or wearing the traditional Breton dress, Bedouin, Renaissance, samurai, in uniform—make time and space coexist on the same support, as Loti himself turns into an all-encompassing man from which “Loti” can be (re)constructed.

Loti never ceased to fight against time and the fear of being forgotten. After purchasing his first photographic equipment in 1894, he started to record “le grand récit familial” (Chéroux 11)—“enfants, parents, amis, animaux domestiques, occupations quotidiennes, situations amoureuses, cérémonies, fêtes, lieux de villégiature ou de tourisme” (91). Additionally, with his self-portraits, Loti—“[qui] s’est donné à lui, auteur, le nom de son héros” (Barthes, *Le Degré zéro* 165)—becomes “sujet et figure” of his own story (Nachtergaele 10). Both uses of photography are necessary to Loti: the forgetting of Lætitia Bonaparte worries him so much because it brings him back to the thought of his own mother, and all the anonymous mothers of “les ignorés,” whom he fears none will remember once he has passed. Loti’s insistence on constructing his character is linked to his desire to protect the memory of his mother: his not being an *ignoré* might allow her to survive in people’s memory.⁹

At the time of writing “Dans le passé mort,” Loti had been a member of the Académie Française for two years, thus becoming another kind of “Immortel.” But this immortality was conditional to the existence of Pierre Loti as a construction. Hence the importance of portraits: his apparent objectification through photography is the story of Julien Viaud’s becoming Loti; it is a performing of the disappearance of Viaud.¹⁰ As critic Jean-Marie Schaeffer points out, outside of the family circle, photographs are but “des témoignages, puisqu’elles ne proviennent pas de [notre] propre monde personnel et familial et ne sont nullement redondantes par rapport à [notre]

propre mémoire” (87). This limitation becomes their strength: it guarantees that once the last Viaud disappears, the eccentric character created by Loti—and perhaps, as a consequence, his mother—will be all that remains, almost *immortel*.

Although it has become uncontroversial to single out photography as the most important shift in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century visual culture, this recognition was hardly self-evident at the time of Loti’s writing. His acute awareness of photography’s potential is remarkable in that it anticipates two phenomena: the gradual abandonment of representation to focus on mechanisms and means of production, which would eventually lead to the birth of abstract art; and the emerging use of photography in new narrative models such as André Breton’s 1928 *Nadja*, later revisited by Barthes, Christian Boltanski, and others. Breton failed to identify the modernity of Loti, whom he relegated in 1924 to the “communal grave of literature.” It thus fell to Barthes to praise the modernity of *Aziyadé* and the boldness of its author (165, 178), perhaps because, although several decades separated them, Loti and Barthes shared not only theoretical insights about photography, but also a practice of the medium that had become an integral part of life.

NOTES

1. The photographic image was still understood primarily as “un support d’information reproductible et diffusible” until the beginning of the 1980s, when a few events—in particular the opening of spaces dedicated to photography in museums—marked the accession of the medium to an artistic status (Chéroux 21–22).

2. In addition to *Pierre Loti: portraits*, see Quella-Villéger, *Istanbul* and “Loti, portraitiste et paysagiste;” Vercier, *Les Orient*s; and *Pierre Loti et la photographie*, a special volume of the *Revue Pierre Loti*.

3. For an extensive discussion of the competition between daguerreotype and calotype and the development of paper photographs, see Gunthert and Poivert 66–100.

4. Loti’s brother, Gustave Viaud, a naval surgeon, was also an amateur and pioneer photographer. During his stay in Tahiti from 1859 to 1862, he realized the first calotypes of the island (Tréhin 18–39).

5. Jules Gervais-Courtellemont (1863–1931) spent his youth in Algeria and was the first Westerner to photograph Mecca. In 1890, he launched *L’Algérie artistique et pittoresque*, in which Loti published “Les Trois Dames de la Kasbah.” Known for the color images he produced using the Lumière Autochrome, Gervais-Courtellemont used excerpts from Loti’s writings as captions for projections of these images “d’Orient” in Paris between 1908 and 1910 (Quella-Villéger and Vercier 356–57).

6. Loti, *Le Château* 212. Corinne Serrié was in fact Loti's mother's cousin (Quella-Villéger and Vercier 6).

7. Gervais-Courtellemont was married to Héléne, daughter of Charles Lallemand (1826–1904), “grand voyageur d’Orient,” “avocat et journaliste starsbourgeois qui a fondé à Poitiers *L’Avenir de la Vienne*” (Quella-Villéger and Vercier 356n3). Lallemand was also a photographer and a watercolorist, whose work—like Loti's—conjugated regionalism and exoticism.

8. Referring to the etymology of the word sacred from the Latin *sacer*, which means “that which is set apart, prohibited,” Jean-Luc Nancy defines it as that which is separate.

9. Loti's insistence on maternal loss suggests a point of comparison with Proust, who as a teenager admired *Le Mariage de Loti*, and gave the book to his own mother. Much has been written about Proust and his use of photography as a structural model or as a metaphor (see Brassai and Chevrier), but the relationship between Loti and Proust with regard to photography also merits further study.

10. Julien Viaud literally disappears: in Saint-Pierre d’Oléron, the tomb only bears the name “Pierre Loti.” Pierre Loti's son Samuel also legitimized the existence of “Loti” when he took the name “Loti-Viaud.” Samuel's sons changed this to “Pierre-Loti-Viaud,” which is the name borne by Loti's descendants to this day.

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