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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Corroboration and Correction in Colonial Travel Writing: The Aissaoua Episode in Wyndham Lewis's *Journey into Barbary*

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| ABSTRACT
Following his travels through the French Protectorate of Morocco, the British author and artist Wyndham Lewis released *Filibusters in Barbary* in 1932. A 1934 libel lawsuit, however, prompted the withdrawal of the London version. C. J. Fox later republished it in the 1983 collection entitled *Journey into Barbary*. Within this text, Lewis relays a claim from two unnamed individuals who allege that a Moroccan Sufi sect consumes its offspring. Later, however, he includes an amendment that retracts only the familial connection, while leaving the core allegation unresolved. The travelogue has been read for its exoticism and for its representation of the Berber, and, by Stanfield, as a text in revolt against its genre; its evidential procedure has not been examined. This article reads the episode for how the claim is certified rather than for what it asserts, attending to its attribution, its reported speech, its tenses and its arithmetic. It argues that the passage does not state a stereotype but stages its verification; that the corroboration comes entirely from a closed circle at a French military table, none of them named and none an authority on the subject; that the correction trims the charge and substitutes for an event nobody has witnessed a performance anyone may watch.

| KEYWORDS
Travel writing, colonial discourse, testimony, cannibalism, Morocco, Wyndham Lewis

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1. Introduction

Travel literature relies on an inherently fragile premise. Authors tend to leverage their physical presence as proof of their claims. In so doing, the travel writer requires his/her audiences to trust accounts of foreign events that cannot be independently confirmed. Thompson states the difficulty as a rhetorical one: how can readers be persuaded of the truthfulness of a traveller's observations, and how can the travel text "obtain credit" with them (Thompson, 2011, p. 59)? The expectation of credit has outlived the conditions that produced it. Hulme and Youngs record the readerly demand that the travel writer "did not make it up", and note the investment that writers with a journalistic background have in maintaining their credibility (Hulme & Youngs, 2002, p. 10). The demand is not that the writer be right, but that the account be his own. The problem sharpens whenever the traveller meets something that strains belief.

The purpose of our study is to investigate how Wyndham Lewis deals with this epistemological challenge, particularly with regard to narrative credibility. In *Journey into Barbary,* he reports that the Aissaoua, a Moroccan Sufi brotherhood, eat their own children. The claim is fantastical by any standard, and Lewis neither suppresses it

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nor presents it as his own observation. He stages its corroboration, and then, several lines later, prints a correction obtained on a later occasion. The argument here concerns what the passage does rather than what its author intended. The correction does not withdraw the charge; it trims it, and in trimming it certifies the writer as one who checks. Taken together with what precedes it, the episode makes visible a procedure that is usually hidden: a strange claim is credited by witnesses drawn from a single closed circle, sustained by repetition, and then amended in a way that concedes the least damaging part of it and settles nothing else. That is how colonial hearsay becomes report.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Scholarship on Lewis's Moroccan Travelogue

Filibusters in Barbary has garnered minimal academic scrutiny. Originating from a 1931 trip and published in 1932, the London edition was suppressed in 1934. Aside from a 1973 reproduction of the American version, it remained largely unavailable until Fox's 1983 edition (Fox, 1980, p. 170). Fox defended the text as legitimate travel literature, noting its unexpectedly critical stance on colonialism for an author usually linked to conservative politics (Fox, 1980, p. 172). Stanfield, however, interprets the book as subverting its own genre, praising its early awareness of shifting imperial dynamics (Stanfield, 2005, pp. 173, 178). Farley gives it a chapter of his study of modernist travel writing (Farley, 2010, pp. 97–143), discussed below. Dellal finds the book's mood "more of a report for some military purpose than a mere travel text" and holds that Lewis "had been fed first hand information from officers in the Bureaux des Affaires Indigènes" (Dellal, 2004), and Aammari reads the travelogue as a contribution to the French colonial archive (Aammari, 2019). Against these, the anthropologist Victor Barac has argued that the book reaches beyond the conventional travel book into anthropology, as "a kind of ethnographic narrative unavailable to professional anthropologists of [Lewis's] era" (Barac, 2008, as cited in Fox, 2013, p. ix). The book has also been read, in a recent book review, for its representation of the Berber (El Aissi & Belgaid, 2025).

The difference from Stanfield can be put precisely, since his is the fullest account of the book's relation to its genre. He finds its energies centrifugal: a travelogue in revolt against the conventions of its own genre, balking at the gaze it is supposed to supply. The present reading looks at the same book and finds those conventions working normally, and working hardest at the moment when what they are asked to carry is least defensible. These critical interpretations seem to align. The latter, however, remains largely overlooked because scholars of colonial travel writing typically prioritise the author's representations over the methods used to validate their assertions. A text can subvert stylistic norms while still relying entirely on traditional mechanisms to establish credibility. This dynamic is clearly illustrated in this specific episode.

Within Lewis studies the material of this kind has been approached chiefly through the question of his politics. Phillips places Filibusters in the run of non-fiction in which Lewis wrote about race, from *The Art of Being Ruled* in 1926 to *America and Cosmic Man* in 1948, and argues against reading that body of work as straightforwardly racist, where Carey had read a strategic contempt in it (Phillips, 2015, pp. 114, 122). That question is live and this article does not settle it, since the procedure examined here would work in the same way whatever its author believed. Existing discussion has concentrated on what Lewis represents and on the book's formal relation to the travel genre; less attention has been given to the evidentiary procedures by which particular claims are authorised. That is the subject here.

2.2 The Veracity Problem in Travel Writing

The difficulty described at the outset is old and well documented in the criticism of the genre. Travellers have often encountered phenomena and practices which stretch the bounds of probability that normally operate at home, and many have been aware that their credibility and reputation for trustworthiness could easily unravel on the basis of just one seemingly fantastical detail in their account (Thompson, 2011, p. 74). Youngs notes that even where a text recounts a journey that did take place, there are disagreements over the degree to which it may be embellished (Youngs, 2013, pp. 7–8), and he reports Korte's point that defining travel writing by its authenticity, by the criterion that the journey narrated actually took place, depends on an assumption that can only be tested beyond the text itself (Korte, as cited in Youngs, 2013, p. 5). Due to the readers' lack of external evidence to believe otherwise, they must rely entirely and solely on the narrator's rhetorical presentation.

Travel writers have therefore developed rhetorical means of securing belief. Thompson describes the plain style and the sober narrator as one such means, in which a reputation for reliability and scrupulous note-taking, built up over the narrative as a whole, works to authorise each individual observation the writer presents (Thompson, 2011, p. 72). This technique is highly efficient. That is, credibility built in one section is leveraged in another. The Aissaoua segment functions in such a way that a reader who believes numerous mundane details is inclined to accept an extraordinary claim.

Travel writing recurrently displays a deep awareness of its own historical deceptions. In this light, Youngs rightly notes that previous fraudulent narratives generated a scepticism that, in turn, compelled subsequent authors to explicitly provide readers with some evidence. The mere act of introducing witnesses reminds audiences that some explorers entirely fabricated their trips (Youngs, 2013, p. 39). In this sense, providing corroboration is a well-established conventional tactic. That is, knowledgeable readers anticipate some corroboration when confronted with a bizarre allegation. Lewis fulfils an expectation based on a long-standing tradition.

Sherman points out that while the genre enabled travellers to become authors, it equally empowered authors to reinvent themselves as travellers. Consequently, "authors played with the boundaries between eyewitness testimony, second-hand information, and outright invention, and readers were often unsure whether they were reading truth or fiction". The structural expectations of these narratives, paired with the unfamiliarity of their subjects, saddled the authors with "acute problems of authenticity and credibility" (Sherman, 2002, p. 31). Farley carries the point into the modernist travel book, which on his account "gains its authority from the reliability of the traveler's eyewitness testimony", and whose writers, Lewis among them, make explicit "the contradictory messages of eyewitness testimony and secondhand reports" (Farley, 2010, pp. 13–14). His chapter on Lewis follows the satire rather than the secondhand report, and the Aissaoua passage does not figure in it. The boundary Lewis plays with in that passage is the first of Sherman's: between what he has seen and what he has been told.

Pratt gives a name to the figure in whom all this credit is vested. The protagonist of what she calls the anti-conquest is the "seeing-man", the white male subject of European landscape discourse, "he whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess", and the anti-conquest itself names "the strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony" (Pratt, 2008, p. 9). The passage analysed in this article shows a situation where the "seeing-man" turns out to have witnessed nothing firsthand. The question in this paradoxical situation is how a narrator could maintain credibility by simply repeating hearsay. This is extremely relevant to Pratt's framework. The author's claimed authority does stand intact even without firsthand observation. Instead of claiming the privilege of personal observation, the traveller relies on the presumed objectivity of his informants. This episode of Lewis's travelogue demonstrates that, without diminishing the writer's reliability, testimonial authority can replace visual evidence.

3. Methodology

3.1 Scope of the Study

A clear limitation of the present research must be acknowledged prior to any further reading of Lewis's rich travelogue. This study makes no claims of expertise as to the rituals and the lives of Aissaoua. Their ceremonial life is the subject of separate academic research such as that undertaken by Crapanzano (1972). It is worth recording, however, that such a scholarship already existed when Lewis travelled. Westermarck's ethnography of Moroccan ritual, in which the brotherhood appears by name, and Brunel's monograph on the order itself had both appeared in 1926 (Brunel, 1926; Westermarck, 1926), and neither leaves a mark on the page. What this article describes is a European transaction conducted in their name.

3.2 The Texts

The libel action is worth a sentence, because it bears on the matter at issue. What was complained of, eighteen months after publication, was Lewis's account of Major T. C. MacFie, a retired British officer living outside Agadir, whom the book described in terms that identified him and accused of defying the French authorities; Lewis refused to apologise, and his publishers withdrew the book and paid damages (Fox, 1980, pp. 169–170; Meyers, 1980, p. 218). Farley, who follows the portrait closely, calls its accusations "purely speculative" (Farley, 2010, p. 140). The travelogue was therefore legally vulnerable at exactly the point where it described a European who could be recognised and could answer back. The informants who supply the charge examined here are given a nickname and

a trade, and nothing in the passage exposes either of them to anything. It goes without saying that keeping sources anonymous protects their identities. It, however, simultaneously destroys any opportunity for readers to verify their statements.

Filibusters in Barbary appeared in 1932 in two distinct editions. The first was released in London and another in New York (Fox, 1980, p. 169). Only the London version was pulled following the libel case, which left the American printings intact (Fox, 1980, p. 170). C. J. Fox subsequently gathered the author's Moroccan texts in 1983 as *Journey into Barbary*. This version is the basis for the 2013 Tauris Parke edition referenced in this study, though its pagination may differ from the 1983 version. For the purpose of maintaining accuracy, quotations in this study follow the unedited 1932 New York text. Yet, references are also made to the corresponding page in the modern reprint available today.

The two differ in their accidentals throughout the episode, and the differences cannot be assigned, because Fox states that his basic text is the London edition, which I have not seen, and that he has diluted Lewis's "highly original system of capitalization" while retaining some of it. Fox had earlier recorded that the American edition differs from the English "notably in capitalization" (Fox, 1980, p. 170), so that a capital in the reissue may come from London or from Fox. As a result, the second witness is identified as "the civilian" in New York and "the Civilian" in the reprint. The discrepancy makes it impossible to tell whose capitalisation it is. However, these variations do not affect the current analysis. Quotations preserve the copy-text's spelling and grammar, including "Mauretania", "Riff" and the plural subject of "the annual feasts … is one of the big sights". Standard anthropological literature tends to use terms like 'Esawa, Aïssâwa, and Isawiyya to refer to the group; the neighbouring order Lewis names beside it appears here, as in his text, as Hamadsha. Throughout this study, however, the author's original spelling for the brotherhood is preserved intact for the sake of accurate referencing.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The Charge

The episode begins over lunch. Lewis has driven up to the French military post at Ait Baha, in the Anti-Atlas, the headquarters of the non-commissioned officers of the Goums, an irregular native soldiery, who held blockhouses on the line of the "dissidence" some miles further up in the mountains (Lewis, 1932, p. 225; 2013, p. 142). He is given lunch in the mess of the non-commissioned officers by six men, the sixth being the post's grocer, "the only civilian" at the table (Lewis, 1932, p. 228; 2013, p. 145). The talk turns to the brotherhoods:

> We discussed everything from the Aissaoua and Hamadsha to the black banners upon the mosques on Fridays. The annual feasts at Meknes, when the followers of Sidi Mohammed Ben Aisa assemble from all over Barbary and tear living sheep to pieces with their teeth, also swallowing knives and forks, glass, screws, cactuses and so forth, is one of the big sights. Europeans are kept at a safe distance, on the roofs, because, when the Aissaoua are at the summit of their frenzy, they are liable to fling themselves upon the White Man, and there are few Old Moroccans who have not some tale of being bitten. (Lewis, 1932, p. 229; 2013, p. 145)

Two features of this first passage govern everything that follows. The festival is represented as a public spectacle. European observers are positioned on rooftops. Such a particular placement provides physical distance and a privileged viewpoint. The proof of the supposed threat seems, in fact, to rely entirely on the folklore of the settler population; the stories of the "Old Moroccans," a term used for long-term European residents rather than the native population. Through this hearsay, Lewis publishes the antithesis of the civilised European. He introduces it as a local figure imbued with the impossible ability to consume glass, metal hardware, and cacti. Although these assertions completely defy logical probability, the narrative gives the Western audience no reason to question the idea that the brotherhood is "liable to fling themselves upon the White Man".

The segment that follows is lengthier, more detailed, and deliberately orchestrated. It is within these lines that the core accusation is delivered. The discussion shifts sequentially from wardrobe choices to the threat that makes such clothing significant. It eventually culminates in a clear acknowledgement that such practices, in fact, have never been witnessed by anyone.

> Beau Geste on this occasion insisted that if a European was going into the streets he must be careful to wear light-colored clothes. […] no Jew can go out of doors at such seasons, it is more than his life is worth. But the Jew is recognized by his black costume. Hence black is to be avoided. […] the Aissaoua foaming at the mouth, would rush you, and perhaps bite your nose off and swallow it raw. The civilian bore this out. […] Every year at the time of that feast several babies disappear. Whose? Why the newly-born children of the Aissaoua women. […] They eat their children every year—at least half a dozen or so disappear every year. […] No one has ever seen them eating their children: but every year at the same time a certain number disappear. (Lewis, 1932, pp. 229–230; 2013, pp. 145–146)

4.2 The Witnesses and the Wording

What the passage displays is not an assertion but a procedure. Nothing here is offered as Lewis's own observation. The claim about clothing comes from Beau Geste, the nickname Lewis gives the principal non-commissioned officer of the Goums; it is then said to be a fact heard often; the civilian bears it out; and the final sentence concedes that no one has ever seen the thing described. The chain of authority is complete and closed. Both speakers belong to the post, the third voice will be an unnamed authority consulted later, and the Moroccans are on the other side of it in two senses: the troopers of the Goums served under these men and none of them is at the table, while the only Moroccans in the passage itself are the objects of the charge and the Jews who, on the same account, must stay indoors. Not one of them speaks.

The second witness does not merely assent. He supplies circumstance.

> The civilian bore this out. A black overcoat was fatal. He had known a case! His friend (he gave the name) had lost a limb, through being mistaken for a Jew—he was in mourning at the time for his grandmother. (Lewis, 1932, p. 230; 2013, p. 145)

The loop then closes where it began. After the children have been introduced, the first witness returns to confirm what he himself started: "Beau Geste confirmed this. They were brutes—they ate their children. What more natural?" (Lewis, 1932, p. 230; 2013, p. 146). Nothing has entered the circle from outside it. Confirmation here means that the same man has said the same thing twice with a second man agreeing in between.

Behdad has described the condition that produces such a circle. The belated orientalist, he writes, is a flâneur who tries to see more of the Orient by erratic sauntering and by remaining dependent on chance, yet he is "always guided by a dragoman and feeling restrained by his ushering" (Behdad, 1994, p. 57). What Flaubert had in a dragoman Lewis has in a garrison mess. Military personnel seem to have replaced the traditional hired interpreter as the traveller's guide. Rather than restricting his physical mobility, this arrangement limits his access to information.

The author's available informants turn out to be the very personnel tasked with governing the territory. The first is referred to as "Beau Geste", a nickname taken from a well-known Foreign Legion novel by P. C. Wren (1924). The second source is simply designated as "the civilian". The third source, whom Lewis calls only a "high authority", lacks both a name and an official title. In keeping with the book's ordinary practice, this open anonymity renders all three sources impossible to verify. In fact, the core issue is not the mere absence of names or any other sort of identification. It rather lies in the rhetorical effect of this namelessness. While an identified source can be scrutinised (the origin, timing and underlying motives of his testimony), an anonymous speaker remains entirely beyond interrogation of any sort. Consequently, the text projects an impression of firsthand presence while evading all evidentiary responsibility regarding identification. None of these three figures possesses any specialised knowledge of the Aissaoua brotherhood. The credibility that the text grants these witnesses therefore stems from their physical residence in Morocco rather than from any actual familiarity with or expertise in the rituals under discussion. This narrative practice appears to be no more than an attempt to substitute collective agreement for empirical proof. Therefore, since the contributors to this shared view cannot be cross-examined by any reader of the travelogue, their agreement is simply presented as established fact. This feature makes the passage a study in flawed epistemic authority rather than simple colonial bias.

Stoler has given a name to the arrangement on display here. Reading the Dutch colonial archives of the Indies, she finds in them "the records of eyewitnesses with dubious credentials, dismissed rumors laced with pertinent truths, contradictory testimonies called upon and quickly discarded", and assessments that weighed the standing of their

authors against "the received scenarios of colonial common sense". These she calls the elements of a "hierarchy of credibility", scales of trust that measured what forms of witness could be taken as reliable (Stoler, 2009, p. 23). The phrase is older than her use of it. Becker coined it to describe the presumption, in the study of deviance, that the account given from the top of an institution is the credible one, so that anyone who doubts it is taken to be partisan (Becker, 1967, p. 241). What Stoler adds is an archive in which that presumption is colonial. Lewis's page is such a hierarchy in miniature. A non-commissioned officer of the Goums and a grocer outrank the absent Moroccans absolutely, and the unnamed high authority outranks them both.

What Lewis's page lacks is competition between such hierarchies, and Stoler's earlier study of a murder on a Sumatran plantation shows what that looks like when it is present. The colonial accounts of that killing, she writes, displayed different rhetorical strategies, "slipping between visual and verbal evidence and appealing to rumor to buttress one version or dismiss a counterclaim", and what they shared was only a loosely conceived colonial logic which individual planters and officials appropriated differently "to interpret what some had never seen but thought they knew" (Stoler, 1992, p. 151). The last phrase describes the Aissaoua passage exactly. The difference is that in Sumatra the competing versions were produced by men who had something to decide, and were contested in consequence; at Ait Baha there was nothing to decide, and the version went unchallenged into print. Lewis's page shows a single hierarchy with no competitor in it.

Testimony is one ground of authority; observation is the other, and the passage does not rest on it either. Spurr opens his account of colonial reporting with a proposition Lewis's practice inverts: "reporting begins with looking", and visual observation "is the essence of the reporter's function as witness" (Spurr, 1993, p. 13). The gaze on which the journalist relies for knowledge "marks an exclusion as well as a privilege", and by its nature excludes him from "the human reality constituted as the object of observation" (Spurr, 1993, p. 13); the distance that privilege imposes between the seer and the seen, he adds, "rarely enters into the explicit content of journalistic writing" (Spurr, 1993, pp. 14–15). Fox, making the case for the book, credits Lewis with the powers of "a consummate sociological 'eye-man'" (Fox, 1980, p. 166).

In the Aissaoua passage there is no seeing at all, and the book offers no seeing of the brotherhoods anywhere else either. Lewis names the Aissaoua and the Hamadsha only here; he describes no feast and no performance of any brotherhood at first hand in either text; and outside the episode the only further mention of the subject places the snake-charmers geographically rather than in view, as the country of origin of the Soussi (Lewis, 1932, p. 251; 2013, p. 158). The absence is not for want of opportunity, and Lewis himself explains it. Of the Djemaa el Fna at Marrakech, the square where he might most readily have watched such a thing, he reports that "much of the dancing that used to occur" there "has been, since the French Occupation, driven underground, or persuaded to remove itself into houses set aside for such strange African licenses, which is a pity" (Lewis, 1932, p. 109; 2013, p. 83). Much of what he could have seen had been cleared from view since the French occupation, and the officers of that occupation then told him what it was like. The privilege remains, and the exclusion is complete, but what is excluded is not only the object of observation; it is observation itself.

The charge itself has a literature, and its founding case is about evidence rather than about practice. Excluding conditions of survival, Arens reports that he has "been unable to uncover adequate documentation of cannibalism as a custom in any form for any society", and that while "rumors, suspicions, fears and accusations abound" there are "no satisfactory first-hand accounts"; the premise of his enquiry is that cannibalism "by definition is an observable phenomenon", so that evidence for it should derive from observation by reliable sources (Arens, 1979, p. 21). Lewis's passage is a small instance of the pattern Arens described, and compresses it into a single lunch: a report at several removes, repeated by a second speaker and offered as confirmed, resting on the explicit admission that nobody has seen the thing reported.

The sourcing is only half of it. How the charge is worded matters as much as who is said to have supplied it, and the first thing to notice is its arithmetic. The number of children is given three times and never twice the same: several babies disappear, then half a dozen or so, then a certain number. Precision is offered and withdrawn in the same breath, and the effect is not to weaken the claim but to make it seem the product of report rather than of invention. An exact figure would invite checking; an approximate one suggests a fact known well enough not to be counted.

The grammar works in the same direction as the arithmetic, and Pratt has described it exactly. The initial ethnographic gesture, she writes, homogenises the people to be subjected "into a collective they, which distills down even further into an iconic he", and this abstracted figure becomes "the subject of verbs in a timeless present tense", which characterise anything he is or does "not as a particular event in time, but as an instance of a pregiven custom or trait" (Pratt, 2008, p. 62). "They eat their children every year" is that sentence in miniature: a collective subject, a present tense with no date in it, and a practice given as custom rather than as occurrence. A custom does not require a count, which is why the number can vary without the claim weakening.

A few lines of the passage do more than carry a claim: they arrange the people in the scene. The instruction about clothing turns on the claim that no Jew can go out of doors at such seasons, and that black costume identifies him; the European is advised to avoid black lest he be mistaken for one. Moroccan Jews appear here only as a category of risk, and their danger is asserted on the same authority and with the same absence of evidence as the cannibalism. These lines thus arrange three groups: the brotherhood that threatens, the Jews who are confined, and the European who must dress correctly to pass between them, and the whole of it is drawn from what Lewis has been told.

The identification of the speaker gives the arrangement a further turn, and it is in the text. Three pages earlier Lewis describes the principal non-com of the Goums as "an Algerian, a Jew I should imagine", a young man of about twenty-one whose turn it is to ride up to the blockhouse after the siesta (Lewis, 1932, p. 225; 2013, p. 142); riding up to the blockhouse after the siesta is what Beau Geste is doing when Lewis passes him on the road that afternoon (Lewis, 1932, p. 233; 2013, p. 147). On the book's own account, then, the warning that a Jew is known by his black costume and had better keep indoors is delivered by a man the narrator takes for a Jew. The arrangement of threatening brotherhood, confined Jews and correctly dressed European is not a description of Morocco. It is a set of positions available at a French military table, and the speaker occupies two of them at once.

4.3 An Objection: The Passage as Satire

A reader may object that none of this is reported in earnest, and the objection has textual support. As the exchange proceeds, Lewis abandons attribution altogether and writes the talk as a chorus of question and answer:

> Is that possible? Is that possible indeed! I should say it is, since every year it occurs! Possible! Why, they would eat anything! They eat their children every year—at least half a dozen or so disappear every year. Is that so? That is alas so! There is no way of stopping it. (Lewis, 1932, p. 230; 2013, p. 146)

The exclamations are not a traveller's prose. They belong to the men whose table this is, and the passage can be read as Lewis mimicking their credulity rather than sharing it. That is broadly how Stanfield reads the book, as a travel text "in revolt against its genre" (Stanfield, 2005, p. 173), and it is how Lewis asked to be read. In a later letter to his publisher he called the book "a satiric enterprise, and not the mere horseplay of a fun-maker", and Farley, who takes the phrase for the title of his chapter, finds its ridicule "directed mostly at the intruding outsider whose presence undermines the health and traditions of society" (Lewis, as cited in Farley, 2010, p. 99; Farley, 2010, p. 100). The reading is available and should be granted.

There is a further measure of that reading, and Lewis supplies it himself. Two years before he sailed for Morocco he published *Paleface*, and in its long attack on Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* he anatomised a procedure close to this one with precision. He asks whether it was "honest at all to mingle the 'eighteenth century' information of this authority with gossip of today, and a few facts hastily gathered in a short tour" (Lewis, 1929, p. 294). Mayo's material from the eighteenth-century account of the Abbé Dubois, he objects, "is not necessarily quoted in his words", being "mixed up with material from *Young India*, Sept. 2, 1926, and that of other unspecified sources, and so recounted by the author as though all part of one story"; and of Mayo herself he writes that "she knows quite well that what she gives is not evidence" (Lewis, 1929, p. 295). Whatever else the Aissaoua page is, it is not the work of a man who had never considered what evidence about a colonised people would look like. He had set the standard out in print, against another writer, and had done it with contempt.

The satirical reading does not, however, dispose of the argument, for three reasons. First, satire and transmission are not alternatives: the story is printed, attributed to men who cannot be identified, corrected in a way that withdraws nothing but the kinship, and offered to a readership with no means of checking any of it. Lewis's own

account of the mode does not separate them either: satire, he wrote, "in reality often is nothing else but the truth—the truth, in fact, of Natural Science" (Lewis, as cited in Farley, 2010, p. 99). Even under a satirical reading, the alleged annual disappearance remains in the textual field as an unrefuted possibility. Second, the irony is local. It plays on the two men at the table, who belong to the colonial presence Farley finds the satire aimed at, and not on the brotherhood, which is never given a voice in which it might be funny or serious. Third, Lewis shows elsewhere that he can dispose of a rumour when he wishes, as he does with the report of Abd el Krim's escape (section 4.4), and he does not dispose of this one. Mockery of the informants does not withdraw the claim; it launders it.

4.4 The Correction and the Recurrence of the Formula

One element of the Aissaoua passage has no counterpart anywhere else in the book, and it is the most revealing feature of the episode. The correction is in the text itself. Asked later whether the Aissaoua ate their children, a "high authority" replied, "Oh, not quite that!—not their children" (Lewis, 1932, p. 230; 2013, p. 146). Lewis prints both, and in that order, so that the correction reaches the reader only after the thing corrected.

What the correction does is narrower than it appears. It removes the kinship and says nothing of the rest: the children are no longer the brotherhood's own, while the annual disappearance and the eating are neither confirmed nor withdrawn. Nothing in the passage is withdrawn except the detail that made the charge monstrous rather than merely murderous, and the identity and institutional location of the "high authority" who supplies the amendment are left unspecified. The account emerges from its own correction with its structure intact and with an additional proof of scrupulousness, since a writer who prints a correction appears to be a writer who checks.

It also substitutes. The authority's sentence does not stop at the denial: "But they do eat animals—like lambs, pigs and chickens—alive" (Lewis, 1932, p. 230; 2013, p. 146). The amendment therefore exchanges one claim for another of a quite different evidentiary kind. What is withdrawn concerns an event nobody has witnessed; what is offered in its place concerns a public performance which Lewis's own earlier page describes as a spectacle watched by Europeans from the roofs. The reader who accepts the correction is moved from a claim that cannot be checked to one that could be, and is never told that the first had no basis.

Lewis's next paragraph confirms the direction of the move. The snake-charmers of the brotherhood, he writes, do not confine themselves to charming, and it "has always been quite an everyday spectacle in Morocco" to see one "bite off the head of a living cobra and swallow it" (Lewis, 1932, pp. 230–231; 2013, p. 146). The revision and the subsequent lines focus on an observable public display. This focus shifts attention away from the initial accusation, for which, by the text's own concession, the narrative lacked any eyewitnesses who could corroborate the charge. This apparently simple replacement allows the narrative to claim further credibility with its readers.

Even the mere sequencing of these two claims is particularly significant. If the qualification had appeared prior to the initial allegation, readers would have encountered a tempered statement that could be evaluated on such terms. Since the revision arrives afterward, however, it confronts an assertion already reinforced by a full page of mutual agreement by anonymous witnesses. It, indeed, serves merely to pare down the original charge. The arrangement resembles a journalistic retraction buried at the bottom of a page. In other words, the initial impression endures even as the amendment is placed on record, and even as it allows the author to claim diligence for having included the update.

Furthermore, the revision itself passes without critical scrutiny; its inclusion of swine among the consumed animals sits uneasily with Islamic dietary law, an incongruity that neither the unnamed authority nor Lewis addresses.

One might reasonably ask whether this rhetorical pattern is isolated to this specific scene. In fact, such phrasing appears repeatedly across the travelogue to support assertions of varying magnitude. Aside from its thematic appeal, the second excerpt analysed here was identified by systematically scanning the 1932 edition for recurring hearsay markers. The search covered expressions such as "I am told", "it is said", "they say" and "informed me", and isolated the instances that replicate the complete evidentiary framework of the Meknes episode. It does not take long for a critical reader to observe that these accusations rest only on an explicit absence of eyewitnesses. This strict criterion yields a single parallel passage, which offers a structural match that begs for closer examination.

The recurrence is in the chapter on the Rio de Oro, and its subject is not a brotherhood but the Legion. Of deserters who escape into Mauretania, Lewis writes that "the nomads, that is a recognized thing, get fifty francs for a legionary", that they have not always the time to spare, "and then it is said they kill him", and that "None of these people are ever seen again: some may be held as slaves" (Lewis, 1932, p. 264; 2013, pp. 166–167). The region had a reputation for exactly such stories: Fox, describing the country as Lewis found it, notes that the Rio de Oro was then "an inexhaustible source of lurid café stories about the killings and kidnappings" attributed to the "Blue Men" of the desert (Fox, 1980, p. 171). The same three elements appear as in the Meknes passage: an anonymous report, a violence never witnessed, and a disappearance offered as its proof. In both cases the fact that nobody comes back is made to do the work a witness would otherwise do, and the absence of observation is moved from the side of the objections to the side of the grounds.

Lewis is nonetheless capable of doubting a rumour when he chooses. Writing of the Riff, he notes that "it is reported that Abd el Krim has escaped from his island" and adds at once: "But I expect this escape is apocryphal" (Lewis, 1932, p. 79; 2013, p. 63). The scepticism is available to him, and he exercises it on a report about a political leader whose movements could be checked. He does not exercise it on a report about a religious brotherhood whose practices could not.

With the correction and the recurrence in view, the episode becomes useful beyond itself. Thompson observes that the apparent truthfulness and factuality of a travelogue is always to some degree a rhetorical effect, and that no travel text should be read naively as a transparent window on the world (Thompson, 2011, p. 28). Lewis's passage is that effect in operation. Its subject is not the Aissaoua, about whom it establishes nothing, but the conditions under which a European reader will accept an account of them. Corroboration among Europeans is sufficient here because it is the only corroboration the text will ever meet: as JanMohamed observes, colonialist writing "tends to be unconcerned with the truth-value of its representation", since the people represented have no access to it and the audience has no contact with them (JanMohamed, 1985, p. 63). The correction Lewis prints is therefore not a concession to the Aissaoua, who will not read it, but an adjustment made inside the circle that produced the charge.

5. Conclusion

This passage turns out to be procedural rather than evidential. If we read it as a typical stereotype, it simply says what a hundred other colonial passages say. Read as a piece of rhetoric, however, it shows a fantastical claim that the genre's conventions ought to have made unusable. Such a claim must be rescued by corroboration drawn from a closed circle. The narrative sustains this sort of corroboration by repetition and finishes it with a correction. Accordingly, the correction concedes only the least damaging part of the claim. Unsurprisingly, the Moroccans in the passage are never consulted. The salient question of whether the charge is true is never put in a form that would allow it to be answered.

The episode is small, and nothing in this article depends on its being representative of the book as a whole. Its value lies in the fact that it shows, in one page, a sequence that is usually distributed across a whole travelogue. The same materials appear separately elsewhere in the book, but the join cannot be seen. The restriction of scope deliberately answers a standing objection to work of this kind. Thomas warns against too dogged an attachment to colonialism "as a unitary totality, and to related totalities such as 'colonial discourse', 'the Other', Orientalism and imperialism", and argues that "only localized theories and historically specific accounts can provide much insight into the varied articulations of colonizing and counter-colonial representations and practices" (Thomas, 1994, p. ix). A single lunch in the mess of a French post in the Anti-Atlas in 1931, recorded by an English traveller and printed in London and New York, is precisely such a local account. It does not describe colonial discourse; it describes one occasion on which a colonial claim acquired the standing of a fact.

Three consequences follow for the reading of this travelogue. The first is that hearsay, anonymous attribution and uneven corroboration are recurrent features of its evidentiary rhetoric, and that passages of this kind should be examined for how they secure assent rather than only for the prejudices they express. The second is that the figure of the informant deserves attention in travel writing as it has received attention in colonial ethnography. In this travelogue the informants are soldiers, settlers and officials of the protectorate, and the account they authorise is the account a French administration would recognise. This is not an inference laid over the book from outside it.

Writing of the tribes beyond Tiznit, Lewis remarks that the French "are completely documented, it is unnecessary to say, upon these unapproachable, 'dissident,' tribes", and that "they know all about them from their native agents and spies" (Lewis, 1932, p. 298; 2013, p. 181). He names the apparatus that supplies what he is told, and the terms on which it gathers. What that apparatus held on the brotherhoods was itself of a particular kind. Burke records that French knowledge of popular Islam in North Africa was built chiefly on the study of the Sufi turuq, which were widely believed to be deeply involved in resistance to the French presence (Burke, 2014, p. 30), and that the study of Moroccan Sufi orders was in the event "never a high priority for French policymakers" (Burke, 2014, p. 172). The orders were a security question that was never pressed. In fact, what filled the gap for this traveller was the talk at Ait Baha.

A third consequence concerns the study of the genre more widely. Criticism of colonial travel writing has concentrated on the images it produces and on the ideology those images can serve under wider political considerations. The Aissaoua episode shows that the procedures by which such images are certified deserve equal attention. In other words, they represent what converts a traveller's hearsay into something a reader will repeat. What the episode shows, in fact, is that the authority of the travelling eyewitness can be dispensed with altogether while the credit is still retained. A traveller who saw nothing is believed simply because other Europeans were heard to agree with the claims. Moreover, a genre whose whole warrant is having been there turns out to work just as well on having been told.

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