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**Author:** Julia Szołtysek

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Julia Szofłysek

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7487-7807>

University of Silesia in Katowice  
Katowice, Poland

## Between ‘the me that leaves and the me that returns’: Gertrude Bell’s Persian Gateways and Walls

„Ja, która wyruszam a ja, która wracam”  
– perskie pasaże Gertrude Bell

**Abstract:** *Persian Pictures*, Gertrude Bell’s first published collection, differs substantially from her later works; critics have accused it of sentimentality, lack of substance – a mere ‘folly’ incommensurable with Bell’s later writings. In the present article, I intend to advocate for Bell, though, proposing to see the supposed faults of *Persian Pictures* as the work’s greatest strengths which in fact reveal the author’s other, more lyrical and less ‘business-like’, side. With special emphasis placed on the concept of gateways and walls I will attempt to shed light on how, by traversing and/or transgressing borders of various types and putting herself to a series of identity-forming tests, *Persian Pictures* – to the contemporary reader – offer insight into the broader apparatus of British (and Western) colonialism.

By linking each of the selected essays with one of John Frederick Lewis’s orientalist paintings, I hope to further strengthen my argument that aspects of *Persian Pictures*, originally seen as the work’s weaknesses, have the potential to actually enrich discussions of Western mis/representations of the Orient, without compromising its author, and should thus be approached as instances of powerful and vivid responses to the ‘shock of the new,’ as experienced by Gertrude Bell – and, in fact, many other travellers, male and female alike, who ventured into these realms.

**Keywords:** Gertrude Bell, colonialism, Orientalism, Persia, Victorian travellers

**Abstrakt:** *Persian Pictures*, pierwsze opublikowane dzieło Gertrude Bell, znacznie różni się od jej późniejszych prac. Krytycy zarzucali jej, że jest to kolekcja sentymentalnych anegdot, niewspółmiernych z jej dojrzałą twórczością. W niniejszym artykule podejmę próbę „rehabilitowania” Gertrude Bell, proponując uznać przywoływane wady tekstu za najmocniejsze strony zbioru, które pozwalają ujrzeć inną – młodszą, mniej doświadczoną – Bell, ale już wtedy oddaną „sprawie wschodniej”. Kładąc nacisk na kwestie przekraczania granic i transgresyjnych pasaży, przyjrzę się wybranym esejom z kolekcji *Persian Pictures* pod kątem ukazania ewolucji tożsamości Bell i rozwoju jej twórczości w kontekście szczytu brytyjskiej ekspansji kolonialnej na Bliskim Wschodzie. Dzięki porównaniu poszczególnych anegdot Bell z orientalistycznym malarstwem Johna Fredericka Lewisa, pragnę dowieść, że pewne aspekty *Persian Pictures*, pierwotnie uznawane za ich najsłabsze punkty, stanowią tak naprawdę o sile i świeżości wczesnego pisarstwa Bell i są asumptem do prowadzenia dyskusji na temat reprezentacji Orientu w twórczości zachodnich badaczy i artystów.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Gertrude Bell, kolonializm, orientalizm, Persja, wiktoriańscy podróżnicy

The East and the West have long been engaged in a peculiar type of camaraderie which has come to constitute perhaps one of the most over-analysed and over-criticised dilemmas to generations of intellectuals, scholars, academics, authors and artists, as well as politicians, economists and world leaders. So far, though, no clear-cut consensus has been reached – and perhaps never will be, with opinions and attitudes ranging from the openly hostile, mildly pejorative, benignly patronising; to overly enthusiastic and all-embracing. Kipling, Conrad, Disraeli, Said, Rushdie – this is just a random selection of the ‘giants’ of opinion-making, whose voices have penetrated deep into the fabric of the East/West bond. Whether we accept – following Kipling’s perhaps most often misquoted and misappropriated line – that “East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet” (1889); whether we subscribe to Disraeli’s statement that “The East is a career” (1847); or finally, whether we allow Rushdie’s more striking view on the Occident and Orient as “sexually incompatible pandas” (1991, 61), it clearly follows that anyone pursuing any kind of personal and/or professional involvement with the East should have at least a modest try at capturing the ‘essence’ of the East, in order to define and enclose all the East’s idiosyncrasies and ambiguities in relatively straightforward terms, in this way subscribing to the series of debates, not to say battles, which only perpetuate the viciousness of the East/West circle.

Gertrude Bell, too, contributed to these discussions:

Many, many years have passed since the ingenious Shahrazad beguiled the sleepless hours of the Sultan Shahriyar with her deftly-woven stories, and still for us they are as entrancing, as delightful, as they were for him when they first flowed from her lips. Still those exciting volumes keep generations of English children on wakeful pillows, still they throw the first glamour of mystery and wonder over the unknown East. By the light of our earliest readings we look upon that other world as upon a fairy region full of wild and magical possibilities; imprisoned efreets and obedient djinns, luckless princesses and fortunate fishermen, fall into their appointed places as naturally as policemen and engine-drivers, female orators and members of the

Stock Exchange with us; flying carpets await them instead of railway trains  
(2014, 123).

By referring to the shared British, or even universal, experience of being read *The Arabian Nights* as bedtime stories in childhood, she highlights the intertwining threads of what I shall call the 'Occident/Orient discourse,' i.e. tropes of temptation, promise and threat, all to be discovered and imagined, felt and experienced in one's encounters with the East.<sup>1</sup> What can also be deduced from this fragment is the implied sense of excitement and bewilderment at the Eastern 'magic' and 'witch-craft' which at once enchant and deceive the susceptible Western mind. The Western susceptibility and bewilderment are exactly what I wish to 'field back' at Gertrude Bell in the following article, in which I will focus almost entirely on Bell's first published work, deriving directly from her first 'brush' with the East – her 1894 *Persian Pictures*, or, as I like to see it, her vivid, somewhat sentimental, series of sketches, vignettes, if you wish, of her 1892–93 initial encounter with the East.

*Persian Pictures*, published somewhat against herself at the bidding of her parents, did not merit particular attention, and the work was soon forgotten, which perhaps after all pleased Bell who remained adamant in her conviction that she did not wish them to be read. However, maybe going against this wish of Bell's, what I am after in the present endeavour is to 'resuscitate' both a general and a more scholarly interest in *Persian Pictures*, seeing the work as an important prologue to Bell's subsequent achievements and her later, surely more mature and more academic, texts and works. In a way, I am permitting myself to treat *Persian Pictures* as a kind of a 'rite of passage' for Bell, depicting her complex evolution from a highly educated, intelligent, if somewhat bookish, maybe a bit naïve, maybe a bit snobbish, girl of the Victorian era, to a full-fledged

<sup>1</sup> By using the term 'East', I am adhering mostly to the geographical region ascribed within the bounds of the 'Middle East/North Africa' (MENA) concept, at times substituting the more nuanced "Orient" for further cultural exploration.

expert in her own right and an experienced woman with a fair share of tragedy to her name, as well as substantial psychological burden. I am thinking here specifically of her relationship to her parents, her father in particular, and how throughout her life she never ceased to act as the dutiful and obedient daughter, even if it meant compromising her personal happiness. For the purposes of the present article, I have decided to concentrate in depth on a single chapter of *Persian Pictures* – “In Praise of Gardens” – albeit with frequent excursions to other essays, as well as other texts and works.

Close to the beginning of the first essay in the collection, Gertrude Bell says: “The East looks to itself; it knows nothing of the greater world of which you are a citizen, asks nothing of you and your civilisation” (2014, 11). This rather radical statement resonates throughout *Persian Pictures*, especially with regards to the allusions to the timelessness of the Orient or in fact its location outside of time altogether. In “In Praise of Gardens”, though, Bell appears to be adopting a somewhat milder, less confrontational perhaps, tone, that is, one of admiration for, enchantment with and awe of the unmatched beauty of the East:

The East is full of secrets – no one understands their value better than the Oriental; and because she is full of secrets she is full of entrancing surprises. (...) The East sweeps aside her curtains, flashes a facet of her jewels into your dazzled eyes, and disappears again with a mocking little laugh at your bewilderment; then for a moment it seems to you that you are looking her in the face, but while you are wondering whether she be angel or devil, she is gone.

She will not stay – she prefers the unexpected; she will keep her secrets and her tantalizing charm with them, and when you think you have caught at last some of her illusive grace, she will send you back to shrouded figures and blank house-fronts.

You must be content to wait, and perhaps some day, when you find her walking in her gardens in the cool of the evening, she will take a whim to stop and speak to you and you will go away fascinated by her courteous words and her exquisite hospitality (2014, 19–20).

Hearing – or reading – Bell's almost synesthetic description one cannot help but yield to the charm which has provided many a fine artist with a prime subject for their work. Visual arts have understandably taken the lead here, especially the school of Western Orientalist painting, brilliantly represented by John Frederick Lewis. Two images especially come to mind – *In the Bey's Garden, Asia Minor* (1865), and *Lilium Auratum* (1871).

Indeed, looking at these two paintings seems to bring about a similar wave of emotion as reading Gertrude Bell's descriptions of the East. One issue which emerges, though, is that on a closer scrutiny one is bound to discover that Lewis gives his 'Oriental' beauties quite Western features, especially considering for instance the lines of their faces, their complexions. In fact, Lewis, although he lived for over a decade in Cairo, could not enter any of the Egyptian harems, for obvious reasons, and many of his most famous paintings, including these two, were created only after his return to England, in his studio, with his wife being a frequent model for the 'odalisques' or haremites. In the passages describing the beauty of the East, Gertrude Bell is personifying the East as a woman, and not just any woman, but a temptress, seductive, charming, flirtatious, which actually is quite in line with the general image of the East, with one crucial difference, though – the one doing the personification is a woman herself. Could it then be stipulated that Gertrude Bell, by allowing this 'mysterious temptress' to seduce her, is adopting a thoroughly male perspective and, in effect, performing a kind of 'self-masculinisation' on herself? Of course, one should tread very carefully when attempting to apply contemporary sensibilities and theories to texts and works so firmly based in the climate of their geopolitical, historical and social era as Bell's; still, allowing ourselves a foray into post-postmodern feminist discourses, the question which we may wish to pose is whether there is something more to that than just 'a sign of the times'.

While naturally, building an overreaching argument on this premise is rather an exaggeration, it still offers some potentially 'exciting' outlets through which one might ponder on the rather problematic issue of Gertrude Bell's opposition to the Suffrage Movement, or – from a

less direct and immediate stance – on the indeed very gendered and male-oriented language which in equal measure was used by Bell in her works and by others in their references to her. A good example of that is her obituary by David George Hogarth published in *The Geographical Journal*:

Her masculine vigour, hard common sense and practical efficiency – all tempered by a feminine charm and most romantic spirit (...). Not given to any sort of self-advertisement, she escaped, thanks to a lifelong indifference to what are called Feminist Movements, that advertisement by others which some distinguished members of her sex have suffered (1926, 363).

Yet another interesting illustration of this – call it ‘trend’ – comes from Anthony Minghella’s 1996 film *The English Patient* – in one of the scenes Maddox and Almasy pore over some old maps, discussing possible routes across the desert:

Maddox: You can’t get through there, it’s impossible.

Almasy: I was looking again at Bell’s old map. (...)

Maddox: So on Thursday you don’t trust Bell’s map, Bell was a fool, Bell couldn’t draw a map, and on Friday he’s suddenly infallible? (Minghella 1996, 1: 36).

In Ondaatje’s novel, however, the reference to a “Mr. Bell” is not present, so obviously this must have been the director’s intervention; after all, Anthony Minghella had an extensive background knowledge of the East and the Orient, given that he was also the director of probably one of the best productions of Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* staged at the English National Opera in London in 2005. It is worth mentioning, too, that Bell made several quite explicit references to opera and staged performances, linking their qualities of ‘wonderful artificiality’ to the ‘fantasy’ and ‘exoticism’ of the East itself, or herself, as she would probably rather have it. In none other than *Persian Pictures* she says:

The garden, with its tents and its water, was like some fantastic opera stage, and the women, in their strange bright garments, the masqueraders, who would begin to dance a pas de trois before us as soon as the orchestra should strike up (Bell 2014, 72).

It is indeed interesting to try to imagine what Bell herself would say to these instances of 'masculinisation', whether she would dismiss them out of hand or perhaps give them a bit more thought? Indeed, *Persian Pictures* offer a curious insight into these broadly understood 'gender issues', all the more valid today in that they address the question of women's rights and their position in Eastern societies, with the unavoidable motif of the harem confronted very straightforwardly. In "In Praise of Gardens" Bell relates a visit she made to the harem of the Zil, one of the sons of the Shah of Isfahan. Her comment runs as follows:

Behind the house in which we were received lay the women's dwelling, a long, low, verandaed building standing round a deep tank, on whose edge solemn children carry on their dignified games, and veiled women flit backwards and forwards. Shaded by trees somewhat desolate, arid, uncarved-for in appearance, washed up at the further end of the garden beyond the reach of flowers, the sight of the andarun and its inhabitants knocks at the heart with a weary sense of discontent, of purposeless, vapid lives – a wailing, endless minor (Bell 2014, 26).

Writing these words at the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, she situates herself within the ranks of women such as, to name but one, Florence Nightingale, a staunch critic of Eastern, in particular Turkish, harems; here, her sympathies cannot be called otherwise than purely 'feminist' and very much in line with what contemporary commentators notice, too. Not only does she perceive the endemic, virtually – innate, inferiority of women in Eastern communities, she also sensitizes the reader to the stark contrast between the vitality and abundance of the place and the sad, helpless, not to say – hopeless, condition of its silent, muted inhabitants. How come, then, that the East continues to be perceived as a



flirtatious and seductive woman if – to echo the words of Sara Suleri – “there are no women in the Third World” (2013, 20), of course provided that we accept the term ‘Third World’ in this context.

It is all the more surprising to recall here yet another Englishwoman’s opinion on the harem and the ladies of the *zenana*. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, accompanying her husband on an embassy to Constantinople in 1718, saw in the harem and its inhabitants “the only free people in the Empire” (2012, 72), blessed with the ‘liberating concealment’ of the veil which allowed them to pursue many an escapade, including, too – at least according to Lady Mary – not infrequent illicit affairs. That is not to say we can really draw a direct line of comparison between accounts thus removed, at least temporally; what we do achieve, though, is a partial ‘demolition’ of the argument over Gertrude Bell’s masculinisation, whether arbitrarily inflected upon her or self-imposed – when confronted with

a life so monotonous, so unvaried from age to age that it does not present any feature marked enough to create an impression other than that of vague picturesqueness, of dullness inexpressible, of repose that has turned to lethargy, and tranquillity carried beyond the point of virtue (Bell 2014, 26–27),

she by no means allows herself to be ‘captured,’ captivated by fancy and thrill at the imaginary sensual pleasures the harem is supposed to offer, reflecting bitterly at lives thus ruined and pre-empted.

“In Praise of Gardens” ends on a somewhat wistful note, acknowledging the unsurpassed power of the desert which consigns everything – even the opulent mansions and their lush gardens – to oblivion, a sentiment expressed somewhat in the like of the Biblical “*Vanitas vanitatum*” motif. The melancholic, rueful mood is revisited in Chapter XIV, “Two Palaces”, in which Gertrude Bell recalls a longer horse ride she undertook with Henry Cadogan – when night fell, they were forced to seek accommodation for the couple of hours before dawn, an adventure she thus relates:

At any rate you will search in vain for the welcoming sign which hangs in English cottage windows (...). Fortunately palaces are many in this land where inns are few, and if the hospitality of a king will satisfy you, you may still be tolerably at ease. But luxury will not be yours. The palaces, too, have changed since the fairy-tale days; they are empty now, unfurnished, neglected, the rose-gardens have run wild, the plaster is dropping from the walls, and the Shah himself, when he visits them, is obliged to carry the necessaries of life with him. Take, therefore, your own chicken if you would dine, and your own bed if you have a mind to sleep, and send your servants before you to sweep out the dusty rooms (Bell 2014, 125).

Again, the association with the 'Vanitas' motif comes to mind – all is gone, turned to ruin, empty, desolate, and cold.

Naturally, Gertrude Bell was not the first woman to penetrate the 'mysterious' realms of the Middle East; it was probably the already mentioned Lady Mary Wortley Montagu who had been – if not the pioneer, then surely one of the pioneers – paving the way for quite a procession of women to follow. Despite the time lapse, it proves particularly noteworthy to compare, or confront, the 18<sup>th</sup> century British aristocrat and Gertrude Bell on at least two issues, each of a special interest – and allure – to the Western traveller. One of these is of course the harem, which I have already briefly mentioned and over which the two women would in all probability not see eye to eye; the other – and just as 'symptomatic' in the context of Western mis/representations of the East – the hamam. In 1718, Lady Mary offered the following description of the baths:

I went to the bagnio about 10 o'clock. It was already full of women. It is built of stone in the shape of a dome with no windows but in the roof, which gives light enough. [There was an] outer hall where the portress stood at the door. Ladies of quality generally give this woman a crown or ten shillings, and I did not forget that ceremony. I was in my travelling habit, which is a riding dress, and certainly appeared very extraordinary to them. Yet there was not one of them that showed the least surprise or impertinent curiosity, but received me with all the obliging civility possible. there was

not the least wanton smile or immodest gesture amongst them. So many fine women naked, in different postures, some in conversation, some working, others drinking coffee or sherbet, and many negligently lying on their cushions while their slaves. The lady that seemed the most considerable amongst them entreated me to sit by her and would have fain undressed me for the bath. I excused myself with some difficulty, they being all so earnest in persuading me. I was at last forced to open my shirt, and show them my stays, which satisfied them very well, for I saw they believed I was so locked up in that machine, that it was not in my own power to open it, which contrivance they attributed to my husband. It is the women's coffee-house, where all the news of the town is told, scandal invented, etcetera. They generally take this diversion once a week, and stay without getting cold by coming immediately out of the hot bath into the cool room, which was very surprising to me (Wortley Montagu 2012, 59–60).

Visiting a 'bagnio' in the present-day city of Bursa some 170 years later, Bell wrote of the baths as follows:

They lie a little to the east of the town, in fields which vine and olive share with irises and great scarlet poppies. You enter, and find yourself under the dome of a large hall, round the walls of which are railed off compartments where, upon piles of cushions, the bathers rest after the exertion of the bath, smoking a nargileh and drinking a cup of coffee. Beyond this is another and smaller hall, with a fountain of clear cold water in the midst of it, and through various chambers of different temperatures you reach the farthest and hottest of all. The air is thick and heavy with the steam which rises from the blue-tiled basin, where, when the process of washing is over, the Turkish youths swim in the hot water of the sulphur spring, while through the mist the sunlight glimmers down on them from the windows in the dome (Bell 2014, 159).

Gertrude Bell's description is significantly more 'matter-of-fact' in tone than Lady Mary's, and quite meticulous in recalling many of the technical details regarding the functioning of the baths, in contrast to

Lady Mary who focused much more on the bathers and their appearance and appeal. After all, Bell was an ironmaster's daughter what perhaps did have some bearing on her mode of perceiving the scene. Technical accuracy notwithstanding, Bell – with her immaculate schooling, her natural curiosity of the world – easily fell under the spell of the East, what her musings on various Eastern matters testify to. Importantly, though, Gertrude Bell discerned much more in this 'Oriental spectacle' that she was just familiarising herself with – following the footsteps of many a great mind before her, Bell looked at the Orient as the "Ur-source" of Western culture and civilisation, ancient traces of which she would later in her life be quite literally uncovering. When in *Persian Pictures* she describes the region around the city of Brusa (today's Bursa in the Marmara region in north-western Anatolia), she touches upon very similar tropes, motifs and myths as her 18<sup>th</sup> century predecessor Lady Mary, thus grounding her observations in a tradition of discourse at once ennobling and patronising towards the Orient. Both Lady Mary and Gertrude Bell recognized the beauty and significance of the Orient, especially insofar as it provided the West with its 'foundational' histories and myths. Where Lady Mary speaks of Theocritus and the epithalamium of Helen of Troy, Bell imagines that

Homer may have had the slopes of the Bithynian mountain in the eye of his mind when he wandered singing through the Troad. The beech coppices whispered graceful legends in our ears, the glades, thickset with flowers, seemed to us to be marked with the impress of divine feet – it was the Huntress and her train who had stirred the fritillary bells, Pan's pregnant footing had called the golden crocuses to life, the voices of nymphs who charmed away Hylas the Argonaut still floated on the air, and through the undergrowth what glimpse was that of flying robe and unloosed shining locks? (Bell 2014, 163).

To take all this in, one needs to place Bursa, or the City of King Prusias, properly on the map, because only upon realizing that it is located nearly perfectly opposite to Troy, or Truva, does the town's historical

significance fully emerge. Troy, Canakkale, Galipoli – names heavily marked with the burden of Western history; tragically meaningful for Bell, too, after the 1915 Galipoli campaign. In 1892, though, as yet unsuspecting of any personal drama about to ensue, Bell scans the landscape and writes:

The mountain-top was all bare and silent; no clash of battle rises now above the plain of Troy; in the blue peaks of Ida, Aenone's cries are hushed; Paris is dead, of Helen's beauty there is nothing but the name; Zeus no longer watches the tide of war from the summit of the Bithynian Olympus, and the nymphs have fled (Bell 2014, 162).

Just how powerful an image – and a symbol – Troy/Canakkale is for the West is made acutely evident in a 2015 collection of poems *This Intimate War: Galipoli/Canakkale 1915* by the Irish-Australian author Robyn Rowland (2015). In one of the poems – published in a bilingual, English-Turkish edition – “The Folly of Myth” Rowland points to the sad historical continuity which she traces all the way back to Troy, opening it with a quote from Patrick Shaw-Stewart, poet and soldier at Gallipoli, exclaiming: “Think of fighting (...) on the plains of Troy itself! I am going to take my Herodotus as a guidebook” (Rowland 2015, 20). Just how misguided such voices were was soon to be proven through deadly confrontations with Ataturk's armies, doing their commander's bidding, as he made plain in his instruction to the troops under his command – “I don't order you to fight, I order you to die.” Rowland comments, rather wistfully:

When the British came they sailed in the wash of Agamemnon.  
Every English Officer and Gentleman grew up with  
Homer in his hand, unruined Troy on his horizon.  
Greek history was furrowed ground where skeletons of immortal  
Dreams sprout to life. From a country where the rich built  
Fake ruins for their 'follies,' they longed for ancient valour.  
Bred on the classics, lusting for another Troy, they camped

In castle grounds on Tenedos and dreamed at night  
Of sending their ships up the straits to the city of gold.  
Straddling present and past above the cove in which the Greeks  
Waited for a signal that the Trojans had accepted the horse,  
Modern pride swelled to think they would follow in their wake.

Rowland 2015, 20–22

Even though in the 1890s Bell was still a relative fledgling in Oriental affairs, her exquisite observation skills and her ability to penetrate surfaces and reach deeper meanings were already quite evident. Nevertheless, there can be little denying that her sympathies at the time lay entirely with what she called “the swift current of Western life” (Bell 2014, 176), against which – throughout her Persian vignettes – she juxtaposes the idiosyncrasies of Eastern existence, highlighting its unchangeability, resistance to modernisation, exclaiming with dismay at “such hoar conservative antiquity” (Bell 2014, 176). Her statements in the like of “You may journey here with the latest guidebook in one hand and Strabo in the other, and the Murray of the first century will furnish you with more minute information than he of the nineteenth” (Bell 2014, 177–178) might easily make some contemporary readers frown, especially given our post-postmodern schooling in politeness, gentleness, and the widely advocated overarching respect for all that is different from what we know. Surely such ‘immobilization’ and ‘freezing’ of a region so vast and diverse as the Middle East exposes a very particular Eurocentric attitude, one we could say is overridden with a sense of superiority verging on hubris. But then, perhaps, one may wonder whether – if we set aside our somewhat arbitrarily inculcated notion of propriety – we would not arrive at conclusions more rather than less similar to those of Gertrude Bell.

Certainly the question of the geopolitical, historical and sociocultural context should not be overlooked when attempting to offer a critique of Gertrude Bell’s attitudes. As a young woman of an exceptional education, of substantial material means due to her father’s position and wealth, but a woman nevertheless, living and working in the late Victo-

rian era, she cannot be seen otherwise than as a brave and extraordinary person, challenging the time-honoured and tradition-sanctioned norms and expectations. Importantly, all of these, too, contributed to making Gertrude Bell an outstanding scholar and critic, and at a very young age. What strikes in many passages of *Persian Pictures* is the quality and validity of her observations and judgments which, though oftentimes bold even by our present-day standards, give testimony to the impressive breadth of her mind, equipped (or armed) with skills and qualities which later on would perplex and amaze even Winston Churchill.

The Gertrude Bell which emerges from *Persian Pictures* sometimes appears to the reader as a young and ebullient girl who gives in totally to the charm of her surroundings, allowing herself even to fall in love, quite in line with the good old 'desert romance' formula; at other moments she voices her views and opinions in a steadfast, if somewhat stubborn or unrelenting manner; finally, there are numerous passages when she assumes a truly analytical or philosophical tone to treat about timely social and cultural phenomena, with a poignancy which lacks nothing when revisited today.

Such indeed are her musings on travel, travellers and the various motivations for travel that they profess. She does not mince her words, speaking with a panache and briskness that is often woefully missing from many of today's reportages and travel accounts. Her observations could well match those of Dean MacCanell's from his seminal work *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (1999) first published in 1976, and by all means merit being treated as Gertrude Bell's original theory of travel:

All the earth is seamed with roads, and all the sea is furrowed with the tracks of ships, and over all the roads and all the waters a continuous stream of people passes up and down – travelling, as they say, for their pleasure. What is it, I wonder, that they go out to see? Some, it is very certain, are hunting the whole world over for the best hotels; they will mention with enthusiasm their recent journey through Russia, but when you come to question them, you will find that they have nothing to tell

except that in Moscow they were really comfortable as if they had been at home, and even more luxurious (...). Some have an eye fixed on the peculiarities of foreign modes of life, that may gratify their patriotic hearts by condemning them when they differ (as they not infrequently do) from the English customs which they have left, and to which their thoughts turn regretfully; as I have heard the whole French nation summarily dismissed from the pale of civilisation because they failed to perceive that boiled potatoes were an essential component to the roast. To some travelling is merely the traversing of so many hundred miles; no matter whether not an inch of the country, not an object of interest, remains in the eye of the mind – they crossed a continent, they are travellers. These bring back with them only the names of the places they have visited, but are much concerned that the list be a long one (MacCanell 2014, 185–186).

In an era when the tourist industry boom was just around the corner, though travel still remained rather a privilege for a few than an inalienable right of all, Gertrude Bell goes all the way and puts forward a definition of the traveller (as opposed to the tourist or the hanger-on), through this securing herself a place right at the roots of a long – and predominantly male – genealogy of intellectuals, artists and authors trying to resolve the 'traveller vs. tourist dilemma'.

The impression that the readers of *Persian Pictures* are left with is one of 'beautiful ambivalence.' Concluding a comment on the miserable fate of Turkish and Persian families crossing hostile seas "when storms sweep the crowded deck, and the wind blows through the tattered blankets, and the snow is bedfellow on the hard mattresses" (Bell 2014, 196), Gertrude Bell eventually says, as if sighing with relief:

but for us the pleasant summer weather lies for ever on those inland seas, sun and clear starlight bathe coasts beautiful and desolate sloping down to green water, the playground of porpoises, the evening meals are eaten under the clear skies we knew, and morning breaks fresh and cool through the soft mists to light mysterious lands and wonderful (Bell 2014, 196).



The contrast in the conditions of the less ‘fortunate’ travellers and ones like herself – Western, well-off, frequently travelling for pleasure, and hardly ever short on at least those most ‘basic’ creature comforts – could not be greater. We may wonder whether she is speaking in earnest here or whether she is being ironic and critical of the Westerners with all their privileges. Is this the voice of a cynic, of a somewhat embittered and smirking critic? Or is she drawing on her own experience of a privileged and comfortable life, without any thought whatsoever of denouncing it? If so, should we condemn her and accuse of being an ‘Orientalist’ in the worst sense of the word, exercising her authority over the objectified – or worse, ‘abject-ified’ – Eastern masses? Or would we then be allowing the apologetic discourse of ‘white guilt’ to blind us and cloud our discernibility?

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JULIA SZOŁTYSEK – PhD, Institute of Literary Studies, University of Silesia in Katowice, Katowice, Poland.

Dr. Julia Szoltysek is an Assistant Professor at the University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland. Her academic interests include literary and artistic representations of the Middle East, travel writing, queer theory, and opera studies. She is the recipient of the 2016 Peter Lang Young Scholars Award. Her monograph *A Mosaic of Misunderstanding: Occident, Orient, and Facets of Mutual Mis/Construal* was published in 2016 by Peter Lang.

Adiunkt w Instytucie Literaturoznawstwa Uniwersytetu Śląskiego w Katowicach. Jej zainteresowania badawcze koncentrują się wokół literackich i artystycznych reprezentacji Bliskiego Wschodu, podróżopisarstwa, teorii queerowych i studiów operowych. Szoltysek jest laureatką 2016 Peter Lang Young Scholars Award. Jej monografia pt. *A Mosaic of Misunderstanding: Occident, Orient, and Facets of Mutual Mis/Construal* została wydana w 2016 przez Wydawnictwo Naukowe Peter Lang.

E-mail: [julia.szoltysek@us.edu.pl](mailto:julia.szoltysek@us.edu.pl)