Oriental Voyages: Marthe Bibesco's Extended Country[1]

Roxana Verona
Department of Comparative Literature, Dartmouth College
HB 6051, 203 Reed Hall, Hanover, NH 03755, USA
Email: Roxana.M.Verona@Dartmouth.edu

Abstract Marthe Bibesco (1885 – 1973), who lived and wrote under the sign of a double belonging—to Romania, her country of birth, and to France, her country of adoption—deserves an influential place in a European Francophone Literary History that is yet to be written. This essay will approach Bibesco's work from a francophone perspective that will enable the examination of her double-writing—a permanent negotiation between a set of dualities between Paris and Bucharest, between new and old, between the aristocratic and the popular—that also speak for the difficulty of establishing herself in one place or the other. A cross-reading of her travel to Persia (*Les Huit paradis*, 1908) offers an insight into the negotiations between Europeanism and Orientalism. Bibesco's standpoint is "Oriental" when Romanian realities are under consideration, but "Occidental" when Persian realities are filtered through the French model. The separation between the two Orients—Persian and Romanian—triggers an examination of the voice of the young author that tells her first story. It also establishes a stage for the eccentricity of an "Oriental" princess in Paris, as Bibesco represents it herself in writing. Behind the Eight Paradises' "fabulous Orient," one can detect the influence of the French writers' exoticism but also the traces of repression of a Romanian reality that the author wants to escape from.
Key words Poetical travelogue; Francophone zone; French cultural model; cultural commuting; reading double

This project emerges from a suggestion I made at the conclusion of my book on Anna de Noailles and hercultural family.[2] There I argue about the need of a history of Francophone Romanian literature that would place it alongside other Francophone and European literary traditions. It is in this spirit that I examine the work of Marthe Bibesco (1885 – 1973), who like Anna de Noailles, her cousin by marriage, belongs to a group of authors who contributed to the construction of a francophone zone between Paris and Bucharest. Despite their similarities, which are due above all to their familial background that designates them as authors of Romanian origin and French extraction, the two writers followed fundamentally different creative tracks. While Anna de Noailles, born on the banks of the Seine, sets out to ignore her paternal Romanian heritage, Marthe Bibesco lived and wrote implicitly through a dual allegiance: to Romania, her country of birth, and to France, her adopted country.

Marthe Bibesco's spiritual back-and-forth between these two countries constitutes her work's creative motor and one of the objectives of this article. My investigation is both cultural and literary. As I pursue a case of francophone literature emerged from a tradition of Romanian francophilia, I will also revisit and examine the specificity of a work that is neither French nor Romanian, but complex hybrid.

The foundation of Bibesco's work consists of a blend of antagonistic tensions; while remaining faithful to the country of her birth, she writes uniquely in French and wants to become a French writer. In the first decades of the 20th century, the success of her formula seems certain: by maintaining visibility within the salons and the circles of power in cosmopolitan Europe, Bibesco also gets remarkable attention among French literary circles with her first book on Persian travels (*Les Huit Paradis*)[3], awarded by the French Academy and praised by an "admiration club" composed of men of letters such as Barrès, Montesquiou and Proust. Nevertheless, today, the French literary institution has almost forgotten her, and her works have been relegated to the "Old Europe" corner of the library. Quite the opposite, in Romania, the public has just begun to gradually discover her, thanks to recent translations of her work.

This investigation will approach Bibesco's work from a francophone perspective in order to better understand her "double-writing", her permanent negotiation between a set of dualities (between Paris and Bucharest, between new and old, between the aristocratic and the plebeian) that also speak for the impossibility of establishing herself in one place or the other. Despite its uncertainties, Bibesco's existential and literary "in-between", site of my analysis, opens up a rich space of connections and communication.

In what follows I examine and define Bibesco's Frenchness as filtered through multiple variants of "Orientalism" that give us access to understanding her multiple identities as a francophone Romanian writer. Europeanism and Orientalism: A cross-reading of her travel toPersia (*Les Huit paradis*, 1908) offers an insight into the heterogeneity of her double "Orientalism". Bibesco's standpoint is part of Eastern European Orientalism when Romanian realities are considered, but and Western European Orientalism when she filters Persian realities through a French model. The distinction between Orients—Persian, French and Romanian—decides the zigzags of the story-telling. It also establishes a stage for the eccentricity of Bibesco's representation of herself as "an Oriental princess in Paris."

When one asks about the specificity of the "Orient" for an author born in Romania who writes in French and commutes, for a good part of her life, between the two countries, there is always a double answer: On the one hand, Romania is considered "Oriental" by the Western European countries due to its geographical position in what was then called "Oriental Europe" and to its historical status (Romania was part of the Ottoman Empire until 1877). On the other hand, the Romanian cultural elite systematically denied any connection with the Orient, turned completely toward the West and France. In this context, Marthe Bibesco' status was at the same time Oriental and Orientalist since, as an enthusiastic francophile, she embraces the French cultural model and its discourse.[4] There is in *Les Huit Paradis* [The Eight Paradises], Bibesco's travelogue to Persia that I will consider here, the discourse of a Romanian

aristocrat profoundly francophile who closely adopts the French writers' orientalist point of view—one more proof of the Orientalism's heterogeneity that asks, each time for a specific interpretation.

In 1905, Marthe Bibesco accompanies her husband, prince Georges Bibesco, toPersia, who was sent by King Carol I on a diplomatic mission to the Shah. She keeps a journal of the trip that becomes the point of departure for the travelogue. They traveled by car, a most unusual venture for the time, with a small group of people including Claude Anet, a journalist at *Le Temps*. He published his travel impressions in 1906, *Les Roses d'Ispahan. Voyage en Perse en automobile* [The Roses of Ispahan. Travel to Persia by car]. In 1908, Marthe Bibesco publishes her own variant of this trip, *Les Huit Paradis. Perse*, *Asie mineure*, *Constantinople* at the Hachette Publishing House. The book is rewarded with the "prix de l'Académie". Robert de Montesquiou, well known for his discriminating literary taste, writes a laudatory article about it in *Le Figaro*. He speaks about a "fort joli livre" ("a beautiful book") written by a princess that he noticed at a ball, dressed "… d'une robe de satin rose, du rose d'une rose dont seule, elle pourrait nous dire le nom …" [… in a pink satin dress, the color of a flower which only she could tell the name …] (Bibesco 102). Marcel Proust, wanting to write the author directly, wrote a burlesque epistle asking her cousin Emmanuel Bibesco, for her Romanian address:

> Faites à savoir àla Princesse
> Qu'elle est belle et géniale (sic)
> De cela je n'ai de cesse
> Mais où l'écrire, c'est le hic. [5]

[Do tell the Princess /That she is beautiful and a genius/ I'm sure of this/But where to write, that is the question…].

Proust's letter surprised the author with its excessive praises and critical observations. The superlative words could find their place in the album of a literary amateur. She is, as Proust says, the author"… d'une suite ininterrompue d'aquarelles admirables et limpides et d'une Œuvre d'art nouvelle qui atteint la perfection" [… of a suite of admirable watercolors and of a new work of art that reaches perfection]. And further: "Vous êtes un écrivain parfait, princesse, et ce n'est pas peu dire quand comme vous on entend par écrivain tant d'artistes unis, un écrivain, un parfumeur, un décorateur, un musicien, un sculpteur, un poète."[6] [You are a perfect writer, Princess, and it's not too little to say that one understands that a writer like you is actually many artists united: a writer, a perfumer, a decorator, a musician, a sculptor, a poet]. However, in the same letter, Proust also carried out pertinent critical observations in addition to the type of flattery used with his friends. He warns her of the danger of pastiche, by being too much influenced by other writers. It is an overt allusion to Anna de Noailles' work, with which Proust compares *Les Huit Paradis*. His view coincides with the salons' opinion circulating at the time that Bibesco's book was "de l'Anna de Noailles en prose" [Simply, Anna de Noailles in prose]. Twenty years later, Marthe Bibesco reflects on the time of her first publication, and

on the number of enemies that she made for herself because of the praises brought "à-la-dame-à - la-robe-fleurie-auteur-d'un-joli-livre" [to the …lady-in- a- flowery-dress-author-of-a-beautiful-book].[7]

The travelogue[8] starts the day of their arrival in Persia, on May 8, date inscribed on the first page of the book. The chronological indications—days, months, and time of the day—are always present, announcing a real travel log of the journey and its close resemblance to a diary. Yet, the reader's expectations are quickly deceived: if the book is triggered by real facts, the bulk of the story shows no precise information about the itinerary, the travel companions, or the adventures they encounter. For any specific details about the trip, the reader would have to go to Claude Anet's book.[9] There we learn about the identity of the travelers, the itinerary, and the incidents of this dangerous trip. After all, the 1906 expedition by car that starts in Bucharest, Romania, cross Russia and the Caucasus on their way to Persia could be equated to a Jules Verne adventure novel. One learns about the dangers of crossing Russia on the treshhold of Revolution, the meeting with Maxim Gorki, the political turmoils in the Caucaus, as well as the numerous cars' breakdowns.

In the preface, Anet states the intention of the book: "Je voudrais animer les ruines, les paysages, les hommes, et montrer, au milieu d'eux, les voyageurs que nous avons été." [I would like to give life to the ruins, the landscapes, the people, and show, among them, the travelers that we were]. A multitude of photographs adds visual interest to Anet's travelogue, thus satisfying the readers' need for strong sensations and curiosities. The book finishes with a few pages entitled "Comment aller en automobile à Ispahan" [How to go by car to Ispahan], a guide to future travelers on the same route. After six weeks of travel and many adventures, the expedition, as Anet tells it, arrives in Persia, on May 8th, which is the first day in Bibesco's book, who decides to leave out the first part of the travel. Travel does not seem to be the author's main interest or the need to feed the readers' curiosity for this extraordinary trip. As the book enfolds one discovers a poetical meditation on another culture that the author tries to approach through literature, music and philosophy.

Certainly, *Les Huits Paradis* belongs to the travel literature genre narrated by a first person subjective voice, the adventures of a voyage presented as real. But in this specific case, M. Bibesco—author, narrator, and heroine—deviates the course of the story from a realistic travel narrative to a distant poetic land. In the *Foreword* to the book, the author explains the origin of the title, based on the Islamic belief in the Seven Hell and Eight Paradises, that confirms that "God's mercy surpasses his justice." The words in epigraph by Renan and a quotation from a Persian philosopher indicate that intertextuality is the leading principle of this travel narration. The book is indeed scattered with quotations taken from "The Song of Songs", the *Koran*, Racine's tragedies, Flaubert's stories as well as from numerous Persian philosophers and authors. One could also add songs, poems, stories and numerous incursions in the Persian culture and civilization—an array of evidence that speaks for the minute documentation of a woman traveler who wants to overcome the condition of a lady tourist.

The traveler's real encounters become pretexts for digressions on literature, history or philosophy. Arriving in Ispahan and walking through the maze of the city's streets, in front of a pottery shop she tells the story of*Rubbayat* by Omar Khayyam, a meditation that ends with a homage to the nine hundred years ago poet and philosopher.[10] Impressed by the music that she hears from a neighborly garden, she is able to name all the mono-chord instruments which she compares to those of the Greek tradition and French poetry: "They sing in the minor key, as Verlaine would have liked it."[11] The French writers (mostly Racine, but also Hugo and Flaubert) are omnipresent (in the epigraphs and in the text) always in dialogue with the Persian culture. In an imaginary discussion with the old Khayyam, she tells him about Ronsard, the poet of the roses—"I want to teach you the name of Pierre Ronsard who, in the Occident, liked roses."[12]

Aware that her travelogue is framed by the French tradition, the author resorts sometimes to self-derision: "One would like to salute them all: heads (people) with turbans from M. Jourdain's feast, Orientals coming from the old engravings and Persians invented by Montesquieu to mock theParisians."[13] The irony, coming for a fervent francophile allows to wonder if the author sees the world uniquely through French lenses.

An answer could be found by following the ambiguity of the line—always present—between the Occident and the Orient.

The traveler who comes to Persia with great knowledge of the*One Thousand and one Nights* confesses that she heard those stories in her childhood back in Bucharest: "Et les noms magiques de Damas et de Bagdhad traversaient ces récits, oppressant de désirs nos cœurs d'enfants prédestinés aux voyages"[14] [The magic names of Damascus and Bagdhad, crossing all those stories, filled our young hearts, predestined to travel, with desire]. Her visit to Persia brings back the Orient of her Romanian childhood that she presents in a French cultural mould. Her atemporal attitude finds the perfect expression in the Persian travelogue with its incursions in the past, in the Persian garden that are also "les verts paradis des amours enfantines" as Baudelaire puts it ("Moesta et Errabunda").

The contact with the new country takes place through the senses. This is how the author describes her first impression of the new continent: "J'ai dit d'abord, voyant l'Asie: comme elle est verte et parfumée!" [When I first saw Asia I said to myself: How green and perfumed it is]. Even the air is different, heavy, filled with the aroma of orange trees where one can barely catch a glimpse of the shadow of caravans and camels in the sunset.[15] But Bibesco's big discovery is the Persian garden: in each city, at every stop, she looks for the garden that fills her dreams. The garden becomes the vehicle of her poetical dreaming. And it is in Ispahan, the city of roses that the author becomes a poet. From the roses of her room to the roses of the two gardens that surround her house, among the enamel basins and water fountains, the woman traveler compares the many real tableaus with Saadi's "flowery Eden."[16]

However, turned exclusively toward the past, her impressions happen mostly in the library. Looking at images from an old manuscript of "Goulistan" by Saâdi, she describes at length everyday scenes that she prefers to the present ones: "Mais pour

retrouver le décor d'une idylle persane, je n'ai qu'à repousser les rideaux deces fenêtres"[17] [In order to find the decor of a Persian romance, all I have to do is to push back the curtains of those windows].

Interested in images rather than people and by lansdscape she peints what Proust her*literary watercolors*. He used these words of appreciation also for Anna de Noailles' poetry, in his 1907 article on *Les Eblouissements* in which, enthused by the impressionistic brush of her poems, he compares them with some old Persian miniatures. Proust's poetic sensibility contrasts Bibesco's prose and Noailles' poetry and allows for a free association between "l'aquarelle encadrée de fleurs" (Proust 535) [the watercolors framed with flowers], the vivid colors and the exaltation of creation—leitmotifs for both writers. Among the watercolors, Proust finds in the work of these two authors an imaginary Orient with its artificial paradises that speak through the senses (Noailles 3 – 4).[18] And even if M. Bibesco did visit Ispahan and A. de Noailles saw it only from her window, it is the same Orient that they represent, the same one imagined by the French during their "travels" at the theater, exhibitions or Parisian world fairs.

In this respect, Marthe Bibesco's vision ofPersia is also *Franco-française*, leaving the Other always on the opposite side of the fence… The author responds to the call of a "fabulous Orient" as she calls it, which "illuminates the imagination"[19] and she represents it in her book richly ornated poetical images.

Leaving aside the reality—political or social—she let herself immersed in the daydreaming of the Other, grafted on the always-present opposition between Orient and Occident. Confronted with a different set of practices and customs, her perspective, saturated with occidental culture, exploits the exotic vein, similar to French writers use of it during the 19th century. This is, for instance, how she considers the Persian women, questioning their freedom and the rigid laws that imprison them. She thinks of their lives — "aux chambres basses des harems, dans les jardinsmurés"[20] [in the narrow rooms of the harem, in the fenced gardens] and feel sorry for their veiled faces, for their bodies dressed in their "black gloomy dresses" that makes one feel in a cemetery.[21] She would like to know their secrets but she acknowledges the impossibility of any dialogue: "Est-il possible de concevoir une différence aussi profonde entre leur humanité et la nôtre."[22] [Is it possible to conceive a more striking difference between their humanity and ours?]. She generalizes with the help of cultural stereotypes: "Les Persanes ont mille raison d'être heureuses. Elles sont enfantines et leur vie se passe à jouer dans les jardins…"[23] [The Persian women have thousand reasons to be happy. They are childish and pass their lives playing in their gardens…]. Observations that seem to fit characters coming from old poems or images taken from Goulistan's manuscript, more than real women that in fact she didn't have the opportunity to meet. All throughout the travelogue, one has the impressian that the author is bent over the books, images and manuscripts. The result is a view from a distance: "Vue de très loin, de très haut, la ville semble un grand champ bossué de tombes"[24] [Seen from afar, and from on high, the city looks like a big field blistered with tombs].

The distance, impossible to overcome, is defined not only in terms of space.

Her univocal perception betrays an absence—that of her Romanian voice. While born in a country labeled "oriental" byWestern Europe, the author reacts to the visited country like a French traveler. Pierre Loti appears to be the model. When Maurice Barrès advices her to write her travel notes, she asks: "Comme écrire sur la Perse après Loti?"[25] [How could one write about Persia after Loti?]. In Loti's footsteps, Persia becomes exotic, sensual, veiled, mysterious and atemporal. Outside of her reality, Bibesco finds herself in a land of miniatures, of poets and philosophers who sing love, women and a flowery paradise.

But these poetical watercolors hide a repression, that will surge to the surface later in her other works. The land of miniatures is also a flight from another reality that she wants to escape from. It is the patriarchalRomania to which she belongs where the laws toward women are similar to those she condemns in Persia. Marthe knows them well, herself a victim in her own marriage, in which the husband behaved openly as an oriental despot. Prisoner of laws and conventions of her country of birth, elle tries to find her freedom and her voice in Paris, the country where she starts writing.

Later, she takes on her double condition in her writing, decided to mark her own territory in a cultural field that is both Romanian and French. And while she writes fromParis, she imagines in her work "la patrie étendue" [the extended country] as she calls it, this intermediate space between Occident and Orient that she appropriates. The assessment of Bibesco's work changes drastically when one places it in the context of the francophone zone, a larger cultural space between East and West. From this space, at the same time close and distant vis-ὰ-vis Paris and the East, one can read her work through lenses of both Frenchness and orientalism, and grasp the richness of her univers. Bibesco's "oriental voyages" should be examined in contrasting dialogue between her travel to Persia and her foray into the life of Romanian peasants (*Isvor*, *pays des saules*, 1928), ar well as her autobiographical pages of *La Nymphe Europe* (*Mes vies antérieures*, 1960; *Où tombe la foudre*, 1972). in order to ponder the true spiritual dimensions of her "extended country."

Reading double is in fact a requisite for studying a literature born in the process of cultural commuting in thefrancophone zone (Verona 115–26), a *modus operandi* that brings to light a dynamic family of francophone writers who, like Marthe Bibesco, negociate their literary status between the appeal and impositions of the French cultural model and that of their country of origin.

Notes

1. Marthe Bibesco (1886, Bucharest–1973, Paris). Born Lahovary; her father, Ioan N. Lahovary was Romanian Ambassador to France (1893–95), Foreign Minister (1899–1900; 1907) among other high level appointments. In 1902 Marthe marries prince Georges Bibesco, son of Georges Bibesco and of Valentine de Caraman-Chimey. Her cousins Emmanuel and Antoine Bibesco introduce her to Proust. In 1905 she travels to Persia, topic of her first book, *Les Huit Paradis* [The Eight Paradises] published in 1908. After this date, she travels regularly between Paris and Bucharest until 1945, when the communist regime forbids her to enter Romania. She wrote a vast work, written in French. In 1955 she is elected member of the Belgian Académie Royale de langues et de

littératures françaises.

2. *Parcours francophones*: *Anna de Noailles et sa famille culturelle*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2011.

3. The first book refers to*Les Huit Paradis*(Paris: Hachette, 1908).

4. As it was first defined by Edward Said in *Orientalism*, New York, Vintage, 1979 and modified later by cultural critics and historians who applied Said's theories to specific cases. See for instance Maria Todorova and her theory of Balkanism in *Imagining the Balkans*, Oxford University Press, 1997.

5 – 7. *Au bal avec Marcel Proust*, 52 – 3, 56 – 7, 106.

8. A rereading of this text today can be made only in the first editions on 1908 since there is no other reprint of that book, a clear signal about the reception of the author's first book.

9. *Les Roses d'Ispahan La Perse en automobile à travers la Russie et le Caucause*, Paris, Librairie Félix Juven, 1906. Anet's book is dedicated to the two women who took part of the expedition, Princess Georges-Valentin Bibesco and Madame Michel Charles Fhérékyde.

10 – 17. *Les Huit Paradis*, op. cit., 179 – 80, 46 – 7, 182, 124, 56 – 7, 5 – 6, 101 – 6, 131.

18. In the Preface that Anna de Noailles wrote to the translation of *Goulistan ou le jardin des roses*, she lingers over the musicality of the word Ispahan, Saâdi, *Gulistan ou Jardin des roses*, *F. Toussain trad.*, Paris, Fayard, 1913, 3 – 4.

19 – 24. *Les Huit Paradis*, *op. cit.*, 94, 20, 151, 21, 154, 167.

25. *Au bal avec Marcel Proust*, *op. cit.*, 51.

Works Cited

Bibesco, Marthe. "Au bal avec Marcel Proust." *Les Cahiers Marcel Proust*, Paris: Gallimard, 1928.

Noailles, Anna de. "Préface, Saâdi." *Gulistan ou Jardin des roses*, *F. Toussain trad.* Paris: Fayard, 1913.

Proust, Marcel. "*Les Éblouissements*, par la Comtesse de Noailles." *Contre Sainte-Beuve précédé de Pastiches et mélanges et suivis de Essais et articles*. Ed. Pierre Clarac. Yves Sandre collab., Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, 1971.

Verona, Roxana. "In the Francophone Zone: The Romanian Case." *The Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 52(2005):115 – 126.

责任编辑　刘富丽