Better Documented Than Most Guides: Reproduction and Prior Knowledge in Wyndham Lewis's Journey into Barbary

«موثَّقًا أكثر من أغلب الأدلّاء»: إعادة الإنتاج والمعرفة السابقة في «رحلة في بلاد البربر» لويندهام لويس

Dr. Abderrazzak Oumoussa د. عبد الرزاق وموسى

Researcher in English Studies

English Department, Sultan Moulay Slimane University, Beni Mellal, Morocco

oumoussaabderrazzak@gmail.com

Abstract:

Research context: The authority of travel writing rests on presence: the genre is defined as a factual, first-person account of a journey the author-narrator has undertaken, and the traveller claims the standing of an eye-witness. Wyndham Lewis's Journey into Barbary (1983), the posthumous edition of his 1931 Moroccan travels, opens by declining that claim. Research problem. Lewis stops in Paris for books and maps, states that before setting foot in Maghreb he knew more about the inhabitants of the hinterland of Tetouan than they know themselves, and steps ashore in Algeria better documented than most guides although he had never seen an Arab before. Criticism has read the travelogue for its exoticism and its representation of the Berber; it has not asked what follows from a book whose knowledge of its subject precedes the journey. Research methodology. The article proceeds by discursive analysis of the travelogue, framed by Hall on representation, Said on reproduction and the forms of knowledge affiliated with domination, Behdad on the belated traveller, Bhabha on the colonial stereotype, and Spurr on debasement, with the historical apparatus of French knowledge about Morocco supplied by Burke. Main findings. Lewis's account reproduces a body of prior writing rather than reporting an encounter; the essentialisms and debasements that follow are consequences of that reproduction rather than observations; and the book's guarantee is the reverse of the one its genre offers, a solitude that was itself arranged.

Keywords: representation, reproduction, Orientalism, essentialism, travel writing

الملخص:

سياق البحث: تقوم سلطة أدب الرحلة على الحضور؛ فالجنس يُعرَّف بوصفه سردًا واقعيًا بضمير المتكلم لرحلة قام بها الكاتب نفسه، ويدّعي الرحّالة مكانة شاهد العيان. غير أن كتاب ويندهام لويس يستهل بالتخلي

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عن هذا الادعاء. إشكالية البحث: يتوقف لويس في باريس ليقتني الكتب والخرائط، ثم يعلن أنه عرف سكان ظهير تطوان أكثر مما يعرفون أنفسهم قبل أن تطأ قدمه المغرب. قرأ النقد الرحلة من جهة التغريب وتمثيل الأمازيغ، ولم يسأل عما يترتب على كتاب تسبق معرفته بموضوعه الرحلة نفسها. منهج البحث: تحليل خطابي للنص في ضوء مفهوم التمثيل عند هول، وإعادة الإنتاج عند سعيد، والرحّالة المتأخر عند بهداد، والنمط الاستعماري عند بابا، والتحقير عند سبور، مع السياق التاريخي للمعرفة الفرنسية بالمغرب عند بورك. أهم النتائج: يعيد الكتاب إنتاج متن سابق من الكتابات بدل أن يروي لقاءً؛ وما يتبع ذلك من تنميط وتحقير نتيجة لإعادة الإنتاج لا ملاحظة ميدانية؛ وضمان الكتاب نقيض ما يعد به جنسه، حتى العزلة التي يدّعيها كانت مُرتَّبة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التمثيل، إعادة الإنتاج، الاستشراق، التنميط، أدب الرحلة

Introduction

In his widely acclaimed essay, “The Work of Representation”, Stuart Hall points out that “representation connects meaning and language to culture”, and defines representation as the production of meaning through the use of language (Hall, 1997, p. 15). He states that

> *Representation means using language to say something meaningful, or to represent, the world meaningfully to other people…Representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It does involve the use of language, signs and images which stand for or represent things (Hall, 1997, p. 15).*

According to this definition, language is central to the process of representation; in fact, any attempt at representation is impossible without the use of language. It is worth noting in this regard, however, that ‘language’ in this context is used to refer to any form of signs that is used to communicate meaning, including spoken, written, visual, and body language. Language is the communicative tool we use to turn objects either concrete or abstract into signs that can represent them and help establish and foster a communication between the sender and the receiver. Hence, it is language that the sender resorts to in order to make up and send his/her message about the world; and it is this same tool that the receiver has to master so as to be able to decipher the signs that constitute the sender’s message. In a word, the process of representation is inconceivable without a careful employment of the multiple signs of language.

In spite of the importance of language in the achievement of representation, Hall explains that there is more to representation than language. He argues that language is still hollow and insignificant without the element that gives it energy and vitality: meaning. The latter for Stuart Hall depends primarily on the context of use, and it is at this moment that culture comes into play. He points out that

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DÉPÔT LÉGAL: 2026PE0013

> *Things 'in themselves' rarely if ever have any one, single, fixed and unchanging meaning. Even something as obvious as a stone can be a stone, a boundary marker or a piece of sculpture, depending on what it means […] It is by our use of things, and what we say, think and feel about them – how we represent them – that we give them a meaning (Hall, 1997, p. 3).*

Based on this argument, the meaning one extracts out of language or linguistic signs is dictated by the culture within which those signs evolved. This suggests that the overall process of representation is also profoundly informed by the culture of the speaker or writer, or what might be called in this context the 'representer'. Another equally significant idea that the above quotation points out is that meaning is unfixed and constantly vulnerable to change. The idea of the unfixity of meaning draws our attention to the chronological dimension in the work of representation, demonstrating the fact that the signs circulated within the process of representation can have different readings in different historical periods. Representation so understood is a claim about where meaning comes from. In a travel book the claim is usually settled by the journey: the writer went, saw and reports. Lewis settles it before departure.

1. The Equipment of the Journey

The authority a travel book claims is the authority of presence. It is, Thompson writes, "that of the eye-witness, someone who has observed for him- or herself what others have only learnt about secondhand, through the reports of intermediaries" (Thompson, 2011, p. 60), and Clifford gives its ethnographic form as a formula: "You are there . . . because I was there" (Clifford, 1988, p. 22). Lewis's foreword offers something else. The kit it lists is largely textual. Lewis leaves "with a loupe, water and oil colours […] an Arabic Without Tears, a Berber for the British, and a Fool-proof Tifinar, a map of the Sahara and one of the High, Middle and Anti-Atlas", and the foreword closes on a sentence the book will be held to later: "unaccompanied, I set out" (Lewis, 1983, p. 24). One of the astonishing facts about Lewis's travel account is that, before he attempts to deliver any information about, or description of, any aspect of the journey, he begins by a strategic drawing of the reader's trust: The definition of the genre rests on the same ground: travel writing, for Youngs, "consists of predominantly factual, first-person prose accounts of travels that have been undertaken by the author-narrator" (Youngs, 2013, p. 3).

> *My first stop was in Paris […] There I provided myself with a quantity of books and maps. I always desire the fullest information regarding any habitation or work of man, strange to me, which I propose to approach and interrogate. I was about to visit the country of Jugurtha and of Masinissa, so I began reading about these persons […] (Lewis, 1983, p. 26)*

In the above quotation, Lewis gives the reader the impression that he is fully acquainted with the important facts about his destination. As a result, the reader is drawn to believe that Lewis is trustworthy, thereby according his account a sufficient amount of reliability. To further assure this reliability, Lewis adds:

> *before I set foot in Maghreb I knew more about the inhabitants of, say, the hinterland of Tetouan than they know themselves – though I never have been to Tetouan […] I knew long before I put my legs across its back or had ever clapped eyes on it, that the ass of which the Berbers make such an extensive use is of Egyptian origin, and that the Berbers got to know of these valuable*

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DÉPÔT LÉGAL: 2026PE0013

> *little animals through the Libyans […] Then, when I reached it, I was able to recognize in Maghreb which manner of goat alone in fact belongs to it, the skinny one namely, with very long black hair […] This will suffice to give you an idea of the extent of my reading before I landed at Oran. (Lewis, 1983, p. 26)*

The claim is repeated on the following page, and there it is made explicit that the reading has replaced acquaintance: "I stepped on shore in Algeria better documented than most guides, although I had never so much as seen an Arab before, except in France selling carpets" (Lewis, 1983, p. 27).

Lewis's elaboration on such unnecessary details is by no means purposeless. With such a valuable addition to his first contention, Lewis assures that his seizing of the reader's trust is complete. However, it is not difficult to grasp the shortcoming of Lewis's contention if examined from another perspective. It lies in the fact that his knowledge of Morocco is entirely based on reading, and hence liable to fall in what Edward Said calls 'reproduction'; that is, being within, but seeing from without, and thus 'reproducing' what one has read before beginning the journey, or what others have already said about the subject under scrutiny.

Meyers lists that reading. Lewis "had heard about the Rif Wars of 1921-1925 on news broadcasts; learned about the Arabs from T. E. Lawrence […]; read about Morocco in Cunninghame-Graham's classic Mogreb-el-Acksa, Gautier's Les Siècles obscurs du maghreb and Saint-Exupéry's Vol de nuit; and had himself written about primitive culture in Paleface" (Meyers, 1980, pp. 193-94). Behdad describes the condition such reading produces. The orientalists of the later nineteenth century, he writes, "undertook an exoticist project marked by an anxiety of coming after what had come before", travelling "at a time when the European colonial power structure and the rise of tourism had transformed the exotic referent into the familiar sign of Western hegemony" (Behdad, 1994, p. 13). Lewis arrives two generations later still, and the anxiety has hardened into a boast.

2. Reproduction

'Reproduction' runs throughout Lewis's account, whether in his description of peoples, their race, their cultures, or even the land itself. 'Reproduction', however, does not refer to a mere tendency on the part of the writer to repeat what other writers have said about a specific place or inhabitants; rather, as Edward Said explains, it is suggestive that the set of statements about non-European peoples and cultures have become a discourse that infiltrates Western cultures and institutions. Thus, viewing the non-European from that particular perspective in travel writing or other genres of writing, even the academic ones, has in turn become a tradition. In his reflection on this fact, Edward Said assures that "What is thought, said, or even done about the Orient follows (perhaps occurs within) certain knowable lines" (Said, 1978, p. 8).

What Said means by the phrase "knowable lines" is the fact that 'Orientalism', as a Western discourse on non-Western peoples, has founded conventions to follow and abide by. In fact, this idea is also true of any other form of discourse on 'Others'. More important, however, is the fact that such texts, as Said argues, "can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they

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DÉPÔT LÉGAL: 2026PE0013

describe" (Said, 1978, p. 94). Thus, for the individual writer, apart from the necessity to go in line with the prevalent discourse about a specific people and nation, as he perceives the non-Western, he starts comparing what he has in mind with what he can perceive, but eventually, as the constant reproduction testifies, he forces the perceived subject to match up with the idea he has in mind.

It is the observation of this fact that drove Edward Said to conclude that "the Orient was almost a European invention" and "that Orientalism makes sense at all depends more on the West than on the Orient, and this sense is directly indebted to various Western techniques of representation that make the Orient visible, clear, "there" in discourse about it" (Said, 1978, p. 21). The reading available to Lewis was not neutral either. By the time he sailed, France had produced a substantial body of writing about the country, and Burke describes its governing category as follows: "Moroccan Islam was an assertion of the hegemonic power of French colonial rule that reduced the complex realities of Morocco to a few metonyms […] In an audacious rewriting of history, it recast the French protectorate as the bridge between 'the Morocco that was' (precolonial Morocco) and modernity" (Burke, 2014, p. 12). What Lewis reproduces, then, is not simply earlier travel writing but a colonial apparatus of knowledge already in place.

Behdad's account of the belated traveller makes the same point from the side of the writer: such travellers "find it impossible to avoid the 'baggage' of orientalist knowledge that has mediated the desire to produce an other discourse on the Orient" (Behdad, 1994, p. 15). Said pursued the same argument at book length in Culture and Imperialism, where the imperial experience is traced not through single texts but through "a structure of attitude and reference" running across a whole body of metropolitan writing (Said, 1994, p. xxiii). Neither imperialism nor colonialism, he writes there, "is a simple act of accumulation and acquisition"; both are "supported and perhaps even impelled by impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people require and beseech domination, as well as forms of knowledge affiliated with domination" (Said, 1994, p. 9). Youngs makes the same point about the genre rather than the empire: the truth claims of travel writing are now widely read as a rhetorical strategy, the Other it produces as a textual construction in which "an important role […] is played by an intertextual exchange between texts", so that it is "important to view travel narratives internally, intertextually and contextually" (Youngs, 2013, p. 13).

3. The Mark of the Plural

Wyndham Lewis, as the statements quoted above testify, shows that he is quite prepared to follow those "knowable lines". He appears so confident of the knowledge he acquired from his reading that he claims to know the inhabitants of Tetouan "more than they know themselves". Examined critically, the contention works the other way around, demonstrating that Lewis's claims throughout the account are closer to fiction than to reality. In this context, Lewis asserts that the Berbers have, not only in their culture but also in their nature, some unreasonable aversion to particular activities:

> *Give the Berber a waste—a sandy one or one of salt water, it is immaterial—and he will be entirely chez lui. In their nature, like the early Celts and Germans, these people despise trade*

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DÉPÔT LÉGAL: 2026PE0013

> *and agriculture. They cannot see why, when you can plunder, you should do what they for their part always got Negroes to do. Indeed, the Touaregs […] have a saying […]: "With the plough enters in dishonour". (Lewis, 1983, p. 201)*

In this quotation, first of all, one can notice that Lewis uses the singular pronoun to talk about the Berbers, which recalls Pratt's argument that the othered people "are homogenized into a collective 'they,' which is distilled even further into an iconic 'he' […] the subject of verbs in a timeless present tense, which characterizes anything 'he' is or does not as a particular historical event but as an instance of a pregiven custom or trait" (Pratt, 1992, p. 139).

In this particular case, one does not, in fact, need to examine the use of 'he' to argue that Lewis ascribes to the Berbers this contempt for agriculture as a "pregiven custom or trait", since he states explicitly that he believes it is "in their nature" and apparently easily observable. Worth examining, however, is the fact that Lewis sets out such an unexplainable 'essentialization' of the Berbers that one is drawn to believe that Lewis has made a serious field study before he decides to articulate such contentions. It indeed gives the impression that Lewis has met with every individual Berber and questioned him or her about their relationship to agriculture.

The strategy at work here has a name in postcolonial criticism, 'homogenization' or 'essentialism'. The term 'essentialism' refers to the tendency to put all members of a specific group or culture in one single category, so to speak, and hence perceive them as one single person, drawing on "the assumption that groups, categories or classes of objects have one or several defining features exclusive to all members of that category" (Ashcroft et al, 2013, p. 77). However, in colonial discourse, one cannot speak of any innocence in this practice; it is rather a denial of diversity that falls within the discourse of debasement and 'inferiorisation'. Bhabha describes the form such knowledge takes: the stereotype is "a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated", as if what needs no proof "can never really, in discourse, be proved" (Bhabha, 2004, pp. 94-95). Lewis's Berbers, whose contempt for the plough is stated as fact and demonstrated nowhere, are that form of knowledge exactly.

Quite a considerable number of years before the publication of Pratt's Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation, Albert Memmi, seen as one of the first critics to apply Postcolonial criticism, published The Colonizer and the Colonized in which, among other things, he identifies some strategies that serve to achieve what he calls the "depersonalization of the colonized". The most important of these, according to Memmi, was what he termed "the mark of the plural", which is referred to in postcolonial studies today as 'essentialism'. He argues:

> *Another sign of the colonized's depersonalization is what one might call the mark of the plural. The colonized is never characterized in an individual manner; he is entitled only to drown in an anonymous collectivity ("they are this." "they are all the same"). (Memmi, 1965, p. 129)*

Therefore, the practice of essentialism constitutes an important stage in the production of colonialist discourse. Travel writers along with colonial officers, reporters, anthropologists, and a number of other writers who produced the huge legacy of writing termed colonialist discourse,

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DÉPÔT LÉGAL: 2026PE0013

developed this ethnocentric tendency to reduce the inestimable diversity within groups and cultures into a monotonous homogeneity that imprisons numerous subjects in a devilish 'he'. The goal behind this, as it is the case with other colonialist strategies, is quite obvious: it is to achieve "depersonalization", or in other words, to guarantee the superiority of the 'self' by assuring the inferiority of the 'other'.

On another occasion, Lewis goes even further as to 'essentialize' not only Berbers but also Arabs and Jews. In this case, Lewis claims to be able to identify and even describe and elaborate on the different 'races' that make up the population of Morocco. He states:

> *As to the stature and so on of these various component races: the Arab, since he lives in the town, is sedentary, and better off—he as a rule is fatter than the Berber, who is particularly lean and often very tall. The Jew is any size: but generally he is lean and as a matter of fact famished-looking and wolfish […] (Lewis, 1983, p. 45)*

That the Berber is taller than the Arab, or that the Arab is fatter than the Berber, can neither be proven nor denied except through a scientific study that, as a necessity, must have examined a sufficient number of participants. But it is not strange for Lewis's statement to run against reason and fall prey to the European fallacy of being capable of studying the non-European with brief and casual surveillance. Such examples display the extent to which the author's discourse about the 'Other' is full of instances of homogenization based on his own observations. On the whole, such 'essentialisms' serve as rhetorical strategies that allow the author to provide a single judgment on a diverse group of individuals, be they the Arabs, the Berbers, or the Jews. As a result, such a judgment soon turns into a stereotype, a general belief about those people held to be true by the general reader. The purpose of such judgments is not description. The objective of colonial discourse, Bhabha argues, "is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction" (Bhabha, 2004, p. 101).

4. Debasement

Homogenization is not the only operation at work. Spurr places the debasement of the Other, achieved through his or her association with filth and idleness, at the centre of colonial writing, and finds it "linked both to cultural necessity and to psychological danger" (Spurr, 1993, p. 80), the danger being the European's fear of being "prostrated before the unconquerable lassitude which the climate quickly engenders in him" (Stanley, cited in Spurr, 1993, p. 80). The motive, Spurr argues after Hayden White, lies less in the need to construct the Other than in the need to hold the self's categories in place:

> *When notions such as "civilization" and "reason" are in danger of being called into question, their definition, as well as their identification with a particular people, is established by pointing to their supposed opposites, to what can be designated as "savagery" or "madness" (Spurr, 1993, p. 76).*

Whether the natives' culture incarnates that opposition or not does not seem to matter, since it is bound to be forced to match whatever the self's culture requires as its opposite. This is a recurrent

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DÉPÔT LÉGAL: 2026PE0013

practice in Lewis's account, and it takes as its object either the natives themselves or their culture, though it is the latter that receives the fuller elaboration. In the following example, Lewis dwells on the idea of laziness as an inherent part of Moroccan culture:

> *The shops generally are cupboards in a mud wall. […] In these the merchant squats or crouches, often asleep or dropping to sleep, or if awake majestically resigned as regards the customer-question. The customer-question has been solved by Islam. That is left in the hands of Providence. […] Even the Jews in the Mellah seem tarred with the same brush, and have the airs of whiling listlessly away their time […] they act the same as Arabs and as though Fate were their God as well. (Lewis, 1983, p. 55)*

What the example demonstrates is that the non-European culture has to be contrasted with, and eventually opposed to, the European, no matter how unreasonable the process might appear. It is difficult to make a reader believe that Moroccan merchants stock their shops in order to sit "majestically resigned" before the customer, or that any merchant, whatever his culture, is uninterested in selling his goods. Lewis then ridicules the merchants', and Moroccans' at large, belief in fate, and stretches it so far as to contend that they do only what fate dictates, as though they were in constant communication with it. Whatever Lewis might think of the Moroccan belief in God, what must not be missed is that Moroccan culture has to be opposed to the European whatever the cost. The evidence becomes clearer a few lines later, when Lewis makes the opposition direct and brings the European individual into the same sentence:

> *This great rule of massive mercantile indifference does not apply to the large establishments of the big rug and curio merchants. They, or their scouts, dart screaming out upon the visitor. […] Rug after rug is unrolled – some so large that they stretch right across the road to the opposite pavement. But these are the people who have learnt restlessness from the European, who is their main customer for such goods. (Lewis, 1983, p. 55)*

The quotation demonstrates the author's belief not only in the centrality of European culture but in its superiority. European culture becomes the norm through which other cultures are scrutinized. Restlessness in this particular context, given the colonial situation underlying its setting, can be taken to refer to travel, exploration and colonial invasion. Yet Lewis, well read as he might appear, ignores the fact that history testifies that such a characteristic is not peculiar to the European. Other peoples are historically reported to have had an equal urge for travel and exploration. The only difference, Lewis should conclude, is that power relations have been reversed.

Moroccan culture in these passages is turned into a set of arbitrary beliefs and customs, demonstrated, as Lewis has it, in the natives' idleness and their submission to fate. The author achieves this debasement through his homogenization of Moroccans, which allows him to refer to Moroccans, or to a unified portion of the Moroccan population, as if they were a single individual. This form of cultural othering, which assaults different aspects of Moroccan culture, is motivated by the desire of the author, as a European, to establish the superiority of European culture through a biased contrast that takes the latter as the norm and regards the difference of others as abnormity, and so as inferiority.

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Behind these homogenizations stands the notion of Eurocentrism. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin argue that European maps, "apart from locating Europe at the top of the globe or map, established an ideological figuration, through the accompanying text and illustrations, which firmly centralized Europe as the source and arbiter of spatial and cultural meaning" (Ashcroft et al, 2013, pp. 77-78). The naïve question raised in this context is how it was possible for Europe to construct itself as superior to other cultures of equal diversity. In response, the writers explain that

> *By the eighteenth century this conception of a collective 'Europe' constructed as a sign of superiority and in opposition to the rest of the world's cultures had become firmly consolidated […] Imperial displays of power […] and assertions of intellectual authority in colonialist institutions such as schools and universities […] established European systems and values as inherently superior to indigenous ones. (Ashcroft et al, 2013, p. 91)*

Conclusion

Results:

The book's guarantee is therefore the reverse of the one its genre offers. Lewis does not go in order to find out; he goes having found out, and the journey is left to confirm what the reading has already settled. Even the solitude is arranged. "Unaccompanied, I set out", the foreword says (Lewis, 1983, p. 24), and Lewis travelled with his wife throughout (Meyers, 1980, p. 194). What the account finally offers is therefore not a record of Morocco but a record of the reading that preceded it, confirmed on the ground. Lewis is not an eccentric case in this respect, and the interest of the book lies in how openly it states a condition that most travel writing of the period leaves unstated. The exoticism of the travelogue was analysed in an earlier study (Oumoussa, 2021), and the most recent treatment reads it again for that exoticism and for its representation of Berber women (El Aissi and Belgaid, 2025, pp. 254-65); what the reproduction of prior reading adds is an account of where that exoticism was obtained. Clifford writes of the "now apparently naive claims for experiential authority" that underwrote an earlier anthropology (Clifford, 1988, p. 38); Lewis does not make them, and does not appear to feel their loss.

The suppression is not peculiar to him: Thompson notes that many travel writers "have not deemed it necessary to inform readers that their journey was made with a companion, or companions, or possibly even a whole support team", sometimes so as to make the journey seem a more heroic undertaking (Thompson, 2011, p. 26). In Lewis's case what is made more heroic is not the journey but the reading that preceded it.

Recommendations

Two lines of further work follow. The first is source-critical: the books Lewis names as his preparation, Cunninghame-Graham, Gautier and Saint-Exupéry, can be collated against his text, which would allow the extent of the reproduction to be measured rather than inferred. The second concerns the material this article leaves aside: the travelogue's treatment of Moroccan women, which recent criticism has begun to examine, should be read in the light of the same mechanism, since a figure known in advance from books is not encountered on the road either.

ISSN: 3119-6837 - E-ISSN: 3119-6845
DÉPÔT LÉGAL: 2026PE0013

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