

# AN ETHNOBIOLOGICAL APPROACH TO DISEASE AND HEALTH IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S *TRACKS*<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Although the world today has embarked on an ongoing process of globalization – a phenomenon which can be defined, here, in terms of cultural contacts and interdependences of peoples – some kinds of vestiges of a monolithic vision of the world remain a very much alive tendency both in our thoughts and our practices. Consciously or unconsciously influenced by a dominant Western culture, most people, principally those educated through the standard of the Western set of knowledge concerning medical science, strongly believe that the causes of disease and, subsequently the preservation of health, only depend upon physical factors. For Westerners, indeed, the body of an individual is affected by diseases when, among other reasons, hygienic conditions become poor. Similar explanations are often given concerning the emergence of an epidemic, that is, a disease affecting a very large number of people and spreading quickly to other human communities. Then, whether it concerns an ordinary disease affecting a single individual, or an epidemic, the medical science developed by Westerners views any disease as a dysfunction in the physical body when there is no more protection against bacterial attacks. It is true that some theories concerning the links between diseases and the perturbation of the social structures of the community in which the individual lives are sometimes referred to. However, the prevalent opinion remains that any disease is believed to be essentially a sign of abnormality in the human body, and, on the contrary, health is viewed as the good physiological state of a person. The Western approach to disease is therefore marked principally by factors that remain both measurable and quantifiable. Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* begins with a description of a case of epidemic affecting many Indian families. But beyond their distress due to the epidemic causing the death of many of them, the Indian characters echoing the culture of Indian Americans explain the reasons for the loss of Indian lives. Exploring *Tracks* in a cultural perspective – which means an analysis founded upon the method of ethnocriticism – the present paper seeks to show how in the Indian American cosmogony as described in the novel, disease and health are all dependent on an ancestral contract. That contract becomes a form of dynamic relationships existing between members of the tribe and their natural environment, hence the ethnobiological perspective developed in this study. The paper will seek to show that because these relationships are principally created and strengthened

by the ancestral land, they include both the past and the present time concerning the Indians. The study will show that, for these people, beyond mere physical facts, health has a close link with factors related to the soul of individuals as well as tribal heritage. That may be regarded as superstition. But holding this kind of position would suppose that there exists a canon of knowledge for the explanation of things. Based on an ethnocritical reading of the novel *Tracks*, this paper explores aspects of Indian culture. It will develop the notion of health as a state intimately related to a kind of trinity including the land, the tribe, and the soul of the individual. In this sense of culture-based reading of the novel, I will also show how the breach of the ancestral occurs in the novel. The last section of this analysis discusses the notion of cultural hoop as a means of protection against such epidemic as the tuberculosis evoked in the novel.

### **I. The land, the tribe, and the soul of the individual: the trinity of health**

Dramatizing the lives of Native Americans following what the American critic Arnold Krupat would call the “*postcontact period*”<sup>2</sup> (*Ethnocriticism: Ethnography, History, Literature*, 186) remains the major concern of Louise Erdrich in her *Tracks*. One of the striking facts in the novel is this introductory statement by the narrator: “*We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall.*” (Erdrich 1) Then, the reader is immediately informed of the existence of a series of deaths affecting a community. But a question remains unanswered in the passage: What causes the characters to die? Before reading through the narrator’s account in order to know about the causes of death, it seems relevant to mention the dull atmosphere presented in the novel. Trace elements of malaise and disease permeate this fiction. Many characters are described as lying down and agonizing because of a mysterious disease. Talking of his proper experience, Nanapush, one of the two narrators, reports that he can no longer go in for hunting which he certainly views as one the major activities traditionally valuing the individual. With this description, we learn that the visible manifestations of health include upright standing, work or activity, and walking or running. To these manifestations of health one must add joy, contentment, and dancing<sup>3</sup> (Harris Memel-Fotê, *La santé, la maladie et les médecines en Afrique: une approche anthropologique*, pp.60-61). But these are absent from the novel. In other words, the overall atmosphere of *Tracks* remains that of the opposite of any sign of health. Investigating the causes of disease becomes in this context an important task. But like the units of a puzzle, the elements contained in the narrators’ accounts are presented without any apparent link between one another. The first two pages of the novel are marked by confusion in the mind of the reader who cannot help asking questions about the reasons why

the Indian characters' clans are struck by a long series of cases of sickness resulting in death for most of them.

The style of Nanapush, one of the two narrators, consists in providing information without establishing a link between events, as the reader who is left alone must gather together various units of the puzzle. Although the exact cause of the Indian characters' distress is not revealed by Nanapush, we can guess that the people's "*long fight west to Nadoussioux where [they] signed the treaty*" (Erdrich 2) is a significant piece of information. Also essential is Nanapush's statement according to which he has "*refused to sign the settlement papers that would take away*" the Indians' woods and lake (Erdrich 2). From these pieces of information, we learn that the cohabitation between Euroamericans and Indian Americans has been one of the most turbulent for the latter, because of the issue of land. Referring to the "*reservation*" – a term that reminds of an episode of the history of Indians forced to leave the lands they traditionally occupied – the narrator mentions the dire living conditions of his kinsmen whose tribes and families were dislocated as they "*unraveled like a coarse rope*," (Erdrich 2) which means that illness and death affected the Indians in successive waves.

Central to the tragedy of the Indians is therefore their loss of the land. Evoking a sorrowful picture of the tragedy of various families whose members die without any apparent reason, Nanapush mentions the term "*trouble*" (Erdrich 4). In other words, there existed a former harmony within the Indian communities prior to the loss of the land. But many of the Indians sell their natural heritage without knowing the consequences of their actions, as like fishes they are attracted by the "bait" taking the form of "*liquor and the dollar bill*" (Erdrich 4). The narrator does not tell us whether or not the Pillagers, one of the many Indian families in the novel, have also sold their land, but we read that this family has lost many members. This is significant because the Pillagers are described as those knowing the "*secret ways to cure*" (Erdrich 2). Then, if the traditional healers themselves are affected by the epidemic, it is the entire tribe as a social body which loses any protection. One guesses the additional anguish and distress within the tribe, because the "*medicine wheels*"<sup>4</sup> representing one of the symbols of the cycle of life in Indian thought comes to be broken (Arnold Krupat, op.cit, 38). Indeed, imparting the special function of healing people to a specific family in the tribe becomes for the Indians the way to maintain the hope of a regenerating life even though death remains an inevitable reality. More than a mere evocation of the death of many Pillagers, Nanapush's account is revealing of the characters' secret needs to have at their disposal a healer representing God, the dispenser of life. He is certainly panic stricken, for the Pillagers known as the medical

profession in the novel plays a very significant role, that of engraving in the collective memory of the Indian characters the principle of a form of resurrection. Observing that this family is affected too by the epidemic the other members of the tribe undoubtedly get more and more anxious and hopeless, as the foundation of their community is apparently undermined. We can therefore see that all human societies have always been anxious for having a healer whose function is to protect the lives of individuals living in the community.

Moreover, Moses'<sup>5</sup> retreat in the woods, as he refuses to live in the village, can be interpreted both as the Pillagers' need to safeguard the healing power of the family and their objective to win back their land, which, they know, makes it possible to keep the soul of each individual in the whole tribe. The term 'soul' is defined here as the immaterial value founding the existence of the tribe or the community, and as a stake in social cohesion. And the land becomes the physical medium of ancestral contract, the kind of contract that nourishes and maintains the soul of the individual and that of the tribe, protecting people against illness and any form of danger. For the narrator Nanapush the "*trouble*", that is, the devastation of many Indian families due to illness and death occurred when they sold their land by signing what he calls "*the treaty*"( Erdrich 1). As the cause of the calamity affecting Nanapush's kinsmen, that treaty represents, not simply the administrative document enabling the White government to remove the Indians, but more essentially the breach of the ties between these Indians and the land they inherited, and beyond their ancestors whose ghosts, according to Indian belief, inhabit the woods, the lake, and the surroundings of the village. The government treaty simultaneously breaks off the ancestral contract between the Indians and their ancestors and, as a consequence, the individual and the tribe become weaker, being without protection against any diseases. In this sense, it can be argued that Fleur Pillager's stay in Argus – the white town representing the government which bought the Indians' land – becomes a trip leading to the recovery of her soul, which will possibly enable the character to recover symbolically her health and restore the healing power of her family.

Besides their actions related to the reconquest of the family land, the fight for Fleur Pilager and Moses include a collective purpose, namely the tradition of Indians. Obstinate trying and recreate the mythical significance of the land, they seek to reconstruct the social and cultural structure of the Native American tribe. In other words, as they fight to win back their land, these characters representing Indian tradition seek to recreate the "*tribal coherence*"<sup>6</sup>(Arnold Krupat, op.cit, 222) of their community. Like many other characters in the novel, these advocates of tradition have been affected by the epidemic also known as the "*consumption*" (Erdrich 2).

Fleur Pillager's and Moses' endeavors to regain their land and their homes follow upon their illness. That is, in their mind, the land-oriented fight comes to be intimately associated with the health-oriented fight. These characters are conscious that they will totally recover provided they win the fight for the land.

Finally, while the land represents for the Indian characters, the space in which the tribe develops its cultural values – as we read through the chronicling of Nanapush's acts of bravery on the occasion of hunting (Erdrich 2) – it serves as a magic medium enabling the individual to maintain his physical health. The chronology of events in the novel reveals that the tribal cohesion is impossible to maintain without the land, and the tribal dislocation becomes the major source of the Indian Americans' psychological trouble causing them to become both emotionally weak and physically affected. The category of characters including Fleur Pillager, Moses, and Nanapush decide to fight and survive after the epidemic, which they view, on the one hand, as the effect of the crisis within the trinity of health represented by the land, the tribe, and the soul of the individual. On the other hand, the epidemic is viewed as a punishment due to the breach of the contract between both the individual and the whole community and the land.

## **II. The breach of the ancestral contract**

The distress of the Indian characters is expressed by Nanapush when he qualifies the epidemic of tuberculosis as an “*invisible disease.*” (Erdrich 6) The epidemic may be invisible, but for the narrator, the trouble started when his kinsmen “*stumbled toward the government bait, never looking down, never noticing how the land was snatched from under [them] at every step.*” (Erdrich 4) Giving more details the narrator confesses: “*In the past some had sold their allotment land for one hundred poundweight of flour.*” (Erdrich 8) The reason why some Indians sold their land is therefore indicated. For the narrator, it is starvation that urges people to sell their land. But whatever be the reason evoked by these land sellers, Nanapush believes that selling the land equates with foolishness (Erdrich 8).

Selling the land deserves corresponding punishments, too. For Nanapush, indeed, the sequence of sicknesses including “*the pox and fever*” and later the “*consumption*” is only but an evidence of “*bitter punishments*” (Erdrich 2). The one who punishes the Indians is apparently not mentioned, if disease must be regarded as the outcome of a punishment at all. But the reader knows that there is something wrong. Scrutinizing the tracks of events in *Tracks* becomes important in this sense. Many passages in the novel can be quoted. The end of the work, for

instance, describes Nanapush as someone feeling “*uneasy, lonely,*” (Erdrich 219). It is at this moment that he says he has that “*heard the hum of a thousand conversations.*” (Erdrich 220) He even recognizes the voices of the spirits of his late wives. The belief in the spirit of the dead is also mentioned in the first chapter of the novel when we read that, for Indians, those who died still keep on living near the tribe, in the vicinities of their clans (Erdrich 5-6).

Beyond the affirmation of a belief, which some people may find superstitious and retrograde, these passages are evidence of Indians’ ties to their ancestors. Embodying their tradition, Nanapush, Fleur Pillager and Moses pose as defenders of the memory of the dead. Their efforts to win back the land they inherited can be interpreted as a refusal to break the links between the past and the present time, that is, the contract between them and their ancestors. However, because some of them prove more interested in money than in the keeping of ancestral traditional values, the tribe loses in the end the battle of the land. The loss of the land occurs too, when, according to Nanapush’s account, there is a change of the face of the landscape due to the actions of loggers (Erdrich 221). When the narrator says, “*The land will go. The land will be sold and measured,*” (Erdrich 8) he certainly expresses the anxiety and the hopelessness he feels, but we can see that the verbs “*go,*” “*sold,*” and “*measured*” seem to mark in his mind the loss of the values upon which Indian tribes are founded. The end of the novel relates even more profoundly the feeling of this advocate of Indian tradition. In fact, through the adjectives “*uneasy*” and “*lonely,*” used to describe Nanapush (Erdrich 219), we can note the disconnection between the Indian and his ancestors. With the loss of the land he loses his serenity, and his loneliness relates that breach of the link he has ever since kept with the dead, his ancestors living in the woods. The voices of his late wives that he hears become in this sense a necessity for him and other tradition defenders to seek comfort and protection within the cultural circle. The objective is to strengthen their physical body as well as their soul.

### **III. The cultural hoop as a means of protection against epidemic**

The cohabitation between Euroamericans and Indian Americans in the United States has given rise to one of the most evident cases of cultural contact in the same geographical area. While *Tracks* provides an insight into that instance of contact involving a dominant Western culture and a subaltern Indian one, it also provides a tragic picture of a case of epidemic of tuberculosis affecting many Indian families. The novel opens with the description of the effects of this epidemic that many of the Indians do not survive. In other words, all other subsequent events, although important, come to be closely related to that picture of the epidemic. Such

verbs as “*dying*,” “*fall*” (Erdrich 1) and, *unraveled* (Erdrich 2) are all evidence of the manifestations of the epidemic also qualified by Nanapush as a *trouble* (Erdrich 4), and an “*invisible disease*” (Erdrich 6) that consumes the life of the entire Indian community. The invisibility of the disease causes it to become an unknown threat to the cohesion of the community, the members of which prove to be totally unable to have any control over the tragic events. The epidemic may be a mysterious pathology for the Indians, but for scientists its causes are well known. These include the insalubrious housing as indicated by the reservation which confines the characters to crowded space. The novel reads that on the reservation “*the clans dwindled*” because whole families were “*forced to live close together*,” (Erdrich 2). There is evidence of a degrading crowded reservation whereon the Indians live. One can also mention alcoholism as another principal factor of tuberculosis. The fiction evokes liquor for which some Indians are ready to sell their lands. Nanapush confesses that one of the Indian tribes’ “*troubles*” comes from liquor (Erdrich 4). Admittedly, as the novel indicates, these are the aggravating factors of tuberculosis.

With Nanapush’s statement concerning the mysterious or invisible size of the epidemic, it can be noted that the Indian character’s interpretation of the epidemic relates some sort of superstitious belief. Thus, on the surface, that appears different from the scientific explanation of the causes of tuberculosis. This apparent disagreement on the approach to the disease demonstrates, however, the importance of the issue of cultural dimension in the treatment of diseases, especially epidemics. With their traditionally oriented values, the Indians indicate the way to the treatment of the tuberculosis destroying their tribes. Voicing the concerns of their tribes some Indian characters show that prior to any medical treatment, the community needs a restoration of its cultural cohesion. The pronoun “*We*” (Erdrich 1) used at the very beginning of the novel emphasizes the definition of epidemic as a disease affecting a very large number of people. But more importantly, the pronoun “*We*” used by the first narrator comes to mean that for Nanapush, it is the whole community as a social body that needs to be reconstructed in order for it to develop resistance to the epidemic.

The framework of the novel is, therefore, that of the defense of traditional cultural values of Indians embodied by such characters as Fleur Pillager, Moses, and Nanapush. Nanapush recounts the lives of other characters at the same time he tells his proper life. While he accuses Pauline Puyat – the second narrator – of being a liar, like any Puyats who are “*an uncertain people*” (Erdrich 38), many readers may also be doubtful about the truthfulness of various episodes of his own account. When he enlivens the story of the tribe with some sort of

“autobiographical myths” – just to refer to the book title by Gerald Vizenor<sup>7</sup> – Nanapush gives the impression of celebrating himself before an audience. The reader may often wonder if Nanapush’s account is “*the whole truth or even part truth*”<sup>8</sup> – as Gerald Vizenor will put it to describe the trickster’s style and modes (“*A Postmodern Introduction,*” in *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Essays on Native American Indian Literature*, p11). In such a dullness of epidemic and death affecting all his kinsmen and other people of the tribe, we may ask the sense of acts of bravery evoked by the narrator. Similarly, we may be doubtful about the so-called mystic power of the Pillagers he mentions. For instance, we read in the novel that Moses, a Pillager, has defeated the sickness “turning half animal and living in a den” (Erdrich 35). In the same way, Nanapush might be found not credible when he puts: “*He [Moses] gained protection from the water man*” (Erdrich 36). We may ask the sort of protection the narrator talks about while we read that Moses has been affected by the sickness, that is, he too enjoys no immunity during the epidemic. Last but not least, Nanapush’s account may give way to laughter, when he pretends: “*In the first days of the fevers, when Moses was small, I spoke a cure for him, gave him a new name to fool death, a white name, one I’d learned from the Jesuits.*” (Erdrich 36) The question of whether or not a name could be a treatment efficient enough against sickness seems logical. In fact, if the protection provided by a “*water man*” and the act of giving a “*white name*” could immunize against disease, Moses would certainly have not suffered from the sickness. Moreover, if Nanapush, who seems to pride himself on his healing power, knew how to avoid the epidemic, he would not logically be affected. Then, objections to the truthfulness in Nanapush’s point of view in *Tracks* can be legitimately raised.

This section will analyze the narrator’s account in a different way. Focusing on what is said by Nanapush concerning how Moses has enjoyed protection against the sickness, this chapter will, nonetheless, point out the “*unspoken*”<sup>9</sup> in the narrator’s discourse (Pierre Macherey. *A Theory of Literary Production*, 85). The fact is, it is the “*unspoken*” – a concept also associated with the “*unconscious*” of the text– which, according to the French critic Pierre Macherey, “produces effects.”<sup>10</sup> (Pierre Macherey, *ibidem* 48) In my analysis, I will try and find out not so much the truth about Nanapush’s description of himself and his statements concerning the power of the Pillagers. That will be something quite impossible to prove no matter the case. We may trust Nanapush, or judge that the way he tells things is typical of the style of any storyteller who is involved in the story he relates. Even though we consider that Nanapush, at times, enlivens the story about his kinsmen with some sort of anecdotes, it is important to note that there are cases when the fundamental emerges from the anecdotal story<sup>11</sup>. Beyond any debate



over the truthfulness of Nanapush's discourse and the credibility of the narrator, it seems worth questioning the "effects" of such stories. Through the term "effects" I mean to discuss both the social implications and the "unspoken" or the "unconscious" in the narrator's account.

First, when he describes his act of bravery, guiding the last buffalo hunt, participating in the hunting of the bear, and trapping the beaver (Erdrich 2), Nanapush reveals outstanding aspects of Indian traditional activities which are about to disappear because of the policy of reservation forcing Indian clans to live outside their natural landscape. We can guess the nostalgic tone with which such recollections are evoked. We can equally see that the stakes in such recollections remain not so much in Nanapush's own acts of bravery, as in a somehow desperate endeavor aiming at the renewal of tradition in the sense of a regeneration of ancestral cultural practices. Importantly enough, these practices are evoked after Nanapush has described the way the sickness burst in the life of Indian community. Revealing of the unconscious in Nanapush's statement, it is apparent through this chronology of facts that the epidemic would not have affected the Indians, if their cultural coherence had not been undermined. In this way, it can be argued that Nanapush's account speaks or reveals the inmost dream of a regeneration of Indian clans while these are gradually losing their land and, as a consequence, their cardinal values because of a dominant culture against which the dominated people are powerless. Nanapush's account represents the dream of power upon which any human civilization, it seems safe to say, is founded.

Second, Nanapush's discourse in the description of the so-called power of Moses Pillager is designed to establish similar correlation between the possibility for Indians to regain physical strength and protection against sickness and the necessity of cultural cohesion central to the novel. For instance, when it is said that Moses defeated the sickness "turning half animal and living in a den" (Erdrich 35), and that he "gained protection from the water man" (Erdrich 36), it appears that more than the spoken it is the unspoken that reveals the true meaning in Nanapush's statement. No evidence can be provided to verify if Moses has truly turned half animal and lived in a den. The fundamental here is that we can nonetheless notice that Nanapush alludes to the traditional way of life of Indian people living in harmony with nature epitomized through the land they inhabit. And therefore, when the epidemic emerges, Moses' metamorphosis from an ordinary human to an animal shows that nature – embodied by animals in this specific case – becomes a refuge for those who, like Moses, remain linked with their natural milieu. We can understand why Moses prefers to smuggle up in the 'arms' of a protecting nature qualified by Nanapush as "the other place, boundless..." while he refuses to

live on “*this place of reservation surveys*” (Erdrich 7-8). The island on which he is said to hide (Erdrich 8) confirms that need to take refuge in nature at the time of the epidemic or the “*trouble*” as it is qualified by Nanapush (Erdrich 4).

From what precedes, it can be objected that the cultural hoop may not be an efficient means of protection against the epidemic of tuberculosis. As stated earlier, alcoholism and the degrading crowded reservation mentioned in the novel are, scientifically, aggravating factors of tuberculosis. However, the narrator who represents the Indian people’s cultural values seems to suggest another understanding of the epidemic, which is focused on the disintegration of the cultural space. That is why, like the characters of Fleur Pillager and Moses described as having been affected by the epidemic, Nanapush fights to win back the land which will restore, according to the category of characters he represents, the Indians’ cultural values along with the spirits of their ancestors, symbols of their ties to these values. Confronted with the epidemic, these characters seek the protection of their cultural hoop.

### **Conclusion**

What is evoked in *Tracks* relates to an episode of American history, particularly the period after the contact between Native Americans and Euroamericans. The novel also evokes the case of the relationship between a dominant culture and another, considered as inferior. But as no one will accept the disappearance of their cultural values, the Indian characters affirm their culture, their beliefs, and their worldview. Presenting one important facet of Indians’ vision of the world, this work focuses on an interpretation of health and a conception of disease in Indian tribes. But beyond the preoccupation of the Indian characters, the novel suggests the anthropological aspects of health and disease, these aspects being very often overlooked by modern practitioners in the treatment of diseases. Indeed, *Tracks* can be read in the perspective of the studies of the Ivorian anthropologist Harris Memel-Fotê for whom health and disease are not simply biological facts but also social phenomena. In this sense, too, *Tracks* allows to investigate tracks of culture studies that have grown to a substantial extent in this context of globalization. The purpose in this presentation of the novel is to know about a culture, which may be different from ours, or similar to our proper belief. At any rate, it appears important to note that the notion of cultural assimilation often evoked in sociology remains a painful experience, similar to the epidemic the Indian characters suffer and the loss of their cultural area.

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- <sup>1</sup> Louise Erdrich. *Tracks*. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1988
- <sup>2</sup> Arnold Krupat. *Ethnocriticism: Ethnography, History, Literature*. California: University of California Press, 1992, p 186
- <sup>3</sup> The visible manifestations of health mentioned here are quoted from the work of the Ivorian anthropologist Harris Memel-Fote, *La santé, la maladie et les medecines en Afrique: une approche anthropologique*, pp.60-61
- <sup>4</sup> Revealing Native American peoples' vision of the world in his book above cited, Krupat writes that sacred hoops and medicine wheels are believed to be the symbols the cycle of life characterized by a continuing beginning, but never an end.( Arnold Krupat, op. cit., p.38)
- <sup>5</sup> Moses is, in fact, a member of the Pillager family and Fleur Pillager's cousin. ( *Tracks*, 7)
- <sup>6</sup> I quote here Krupat who insists on the communitarian way of life of Indians despite the dislocation of their tribes as one effect of the Indian Removal Act in 1830. ( Arnold Krupat, op. cit., p.222)
- <sup>7</sup> I here refer to Gerald Vizenor's critical work *Interior Landscape: Autobiographical Myths and Metaphors*.
- <sup>8</sup> Gerald Vizenor. "A Postmodern Introduction," in *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Essays on Native American Indian Literature*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989, p11
- <sup>9</sup> Through this term, I allude to Macherey's view according to which any literary production contains many implications, and it is the task of the reader to question this silence in the work (cf Pierre Macherey. *A Theory of Literary Production*, Translated from the French by Geoffrey Wall. London: Routledge and Kegan, 1978 [reprinted in 1985], p85)
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., p48
- <sup>11</sup> This is an allusion to a statement by the French journalist Edwy Plenel quoted in the introduction of the book *La face cachée du Monde: Du contre-pouvoir aux abus de pouvoir*. France: Mille et une nuits, (p.12) edited by Pierre Péan and Philippe Cohen

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