



Leo
Africanus

Amin Maalouf

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Translated by Peter Sluglett



NEW AMSTERDAM

Ivan R. Dee, Publisher
Chicago

For Andrée

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First paperback edition published in 1992 by
New Amsterdam Books
c/o Ivan R. Dee, Publisher
1332 North Halsted Street, Chicago 60622
by arrangement with W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Maalouf, Amin.

[Léon, l'Africain. English]

Leo Africanus/Amin Maalouf; translated by Peter Sluglett.

p. cm

Translation of: Léon, l'Africain.

ISBN 978-1-56131-022-7

1. Leo, Africanus, ca. 1492—ca. 1550—Fiction. 2. Africa—Discovery and
exploration—Fiction. I. Title.

[PQ3979.2.M28L413 1992]

843—dc20

91-36145

CIP

ISBN 1-56131-022-0 (paper : alk. paper)

Manufactured in the United States of America.

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‘Yet do not doubt that I am also Leo Africanus the traveller’

W.B. YEATS

1865–1939

I, Hasan the son of Muhammad the weigh-master, I, Jean-Leon de Medici, circumcised at the hand of a barber and baptized at the hand of a pope, I am now called the African, but I am not from Africa, nor from Europe, nor from Arabia. I am also called the Granadan, the Fassi, the Zayyati, but I come from no country, from no city, no tribe. I am the son of the road, my country is the caravan, my life the most unexpected of voyages.

My wrists have experienced in turn the caresses of silk, the abuses of wool, the gold of princes and the chains of slaves. My fingers have parted a thousand veils, my lips have made a thousand virgins blush, and my eyes have seen cities die and empires perish.

From my mouth you will hear Arabic, Turkish, Castilian, Berber, Hebrew, Latin and vulgar Italian, because all tongues and all prayers belong to me. But I belong to none of them. I belong only to God and to the earth, and it is to them that I will one day soon return.

But you will remain after me, my son. And you will carry the memory of me with you. And you will read my books. And this scene will come back to you: your father, dressed in the Neapolitan style, aboard this galley which is conveying him towards the African coast, scribbling to himself, like a merchant working out his accounts at the end of a long journey.

But is this not in part what I am doing: what have I gained, what have I lost, what shall I say to the supreme Creator? He has granted me forty years of life, which I have spent where my travels have taken me: my wisdom has flourished in Rome, my passion in Cairo, my anguish in Fez, and my innocence still flourishes in Granada.