

Aesthetic Deviation: Victor Segalen in China

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Early twentieth-century French travel literature reveals attempts to map a literary space of both authenticity and difference where the traveler encounters the foreign other. The aesthetics at work in this particular space of encounter bridges nineteenth-century exoticism, where the foreign other adds drama to the text, and the modernist aesthetic of early twentieth-century ethnography, where the other is seen as a tool in ultimately doomed efforts to understand the self. Texts by the French doctor and author, Victor Segalen (1878-1919) reveal the aesthetic and literary problematics inherent to twentieth-century travel literature. Segalen traveled extensively in Asia and the South Pacific and documented both his archaeological research and personal experiences. He produced many texts on China, including plays, poetry, fragments, and at least one novel. In seeking an articulation of his aesthetic of the foreign other I will here concentrate on *Equipée* (written in 1915), “*récit de voyage et d’aventures*” ‘an account of travel and adventures’ (2: 265), and *René Leys* (written in 1917), a novel.¹ Both of these works were published posthumously in the 1920s and a complete version of *Equipée* only appeared in 1955. Segalen’s “*Essai sur l’exotisme*,” a series of fragments and thoughts from 1904-1918, presents his “aesthetic of the diverse” and additionally serves as a guide to his perception of the aesthetic encounter with the foreign other.

Segalen, a native of Brittany, enrolled in the French navy as a doctor in order to travel. His medical studies reveal his attraction to and interest in the worlds of literature and art: his medical

thesis is a study of the mental states of naturalist writers.² Throughout his life he maintained close contact with many writers and artists, often referring to them in his writings. In 1903 Segalen traveled to Tahiti, arriving just after Gauguin's death, and returned to France via Djibouti in 1905 where he stopped to research Rimbaud's life. In France in 1907 he and Claude Debussy worked together on a new version of *Orpheus*. Finally, in 1909, after diligently studying Chinese, he left for China. On the way he stopped in Aden, Ceylon, Japan and Hong Kong. In 1913 he made a second trip to China via Russia, taking the Transsiberian like Blaise Cendrars who immortalized the voyage in his 1919 poem "Prose du Transsibérien." In 1917 Segalen returned to China for his third and last trip and in 1919 he met a sudden and unexpected end while walking alone in a French forest.³ A fair number of his articles were published in his lifetime, sometimes under the pseudonym Max Anély. However only three of his books were published before his death: *Les Immémoriaux* (1907),⁴ a first-person account by a Maori of his changing world, *Stèles* (1912), a collection of poems based on Chinese characters, and *Peintures* (1916), a series of detailed and poetic descriptions of Chinese paintings. With time Segalen was read and praised by R.M. Rilke, J.L. Borges, the painter Balthus, Francis Ponge, Michel Leiris and Edouard Glissant. Since the publication of more of Segalen's works in the 1980s and 1990s interest in this prolific and demanding writer has increased.

Segalen's writing at the dawn of our century opens the door to a jarring and heterogeneous aesthetic of exotic encounter by re-evaluating the position of the European abroad as well as the literary forms used to depict the foreign. His first-person narrators include not only European travelers very similar to himself but also a Maori boatman and China's last emperor. Segalen gives the reader every occasion to doubt the authenticity and reality of his experiences. In many of his texts he questions his own literary projects. Always remaining in the aesthetic register, these instabilities of truth value, authenticity, and form serve to enhance the texts and make his travel literature more problematic and fascinating. Aesthetic perceptions of the world (in the literary text as

well as in the visual image) allow the traveler to admit, if only momentarily, the possible coexistence of complete or perceived contradiction: of desire and repulsion, of death and life, and of self and other. The aesthetic view of the other allows for an examination of the self *vis-à-vis* the foreign other's beauty, seductiveness and yet disturbing presence while not inordinately questioning the reality of the self, in either a political or material context. A heterogenous aesthetic which embraces contrast and conflict appeared in nineteenth-century French texts like Hugo's discussion of the grotesque in his preface to *Cromwell*, fantastic literature and of course in Baudelaire's poetry where repulsion and seduction join forces. Segalen literally takes aspects of this aesthetic on the road and tries to apply it to actual experiences of that which he sees as most foreign and most real: China.

Segalen's travels and texts focus on the quest for an encounter of the *imaginaire* and the *réel*. He does not clearly define these terms, the imaginary and the real, or even pay particular attention to them in his "Essai sur l'exotisme," yet they haunt most of his works on China. In Segalen's writing the imaginary and the real are not invested with cultural or historical significance. His *imaginaire* and *réel* are figures for the opposition of the fictive and factual, mythical and literal accounts, what he has dreamed and what he has actually seen. For example, in a letter cited in Gilles Manceron's biography of Segalen, he wrote: "Ce n'est ni l'Europe ni la Chine que je suis venu chercher ici, mais une vision de la Chine. Celle-là, je la tiens et j'y mords à pleines dents" 'I came here neither to seek Europe nor China, but a vision of China. I hold that vision and sink my teeth into it' (347). The imaginary and the real China will struggle throughout Segalen's texts, contributing to the ambiguous and almost fantastic nature of the events he recounts. *Equipée* concludes with a drawing of a dragon and another beast both biting into and pulling at a Chinese coin pierced in the middle. These are the two monsters which will continue to tear at the writer's self: the imaginary and the real.

In reading Segalen's text I wonder if the aesthetic experience of the foreign other must always be a tearing between two poles. Is there any possible alliance of two cultural experiences outside of

the aesthetic of an imaginary/real binary, or will there always be an insurmountable boundary between the expectations of a traveler and the actuality of his destination? In examining Segalen's responses, I will turn to *Equipée*, a first person account of Segalen's actual, in his terms *réel*, travels across China. This trip was primarily an archaeological expedition with Gilbert des Voisins who is quite absent from the text. *Equipée* is neither completely fictive nor completely documentary. It is sometimes fantastic, recounting unbelievable encounters, mostly autobiographical and yet turned toward the experience of the other outside of the self. The chapters are not marked by date and place as in a travelogue but are 28 short essays recounting moments and thoughts that do not fall into a necessarily linear structure.

In Segalen's aesthetic of difference, diversity and contrast must be maintained at all costs and, most importantly, on the symbolic level. In *Equipée* Segalen writes, "L'Inventé, c'est le Blanc-mâle, le souffle aux milliers de couleurs. Le Réel sera le Noir-féminin, masse de nuit" 'Invention is the masculine whiteness, the breath of thousands of colors. The Real will be the feminine blackness, a mass of nightness' (2: 282). When Segalen discovers a village that was thought to have long ago disappeared, it is the yang of the yin of the existent village: "Trou du sel blanc" 'White salt hole.' In the mythical "Trou du sel noir" 'Black salt hole' he discovers the past: the black hole in the white half of the symbol. He discovers the real embedded in the imaginary and thus we can conclude that a small white island of the imaginary also persists in the real. The yin yang symbol perfectly captures the interrelatedness of male and female, white and black, and imaginary and real.

Manifestations of Segalen's aesthetic and ways out of his unsuccessful quest for a truly different diverse also appear in *René Leys*. This novel is written in the first person, narrated by a character called Segalen, and relates the narrator's friendship with a young Belgian, René Leys, in Peking. Leys will be Segalen's Chinese language instructor, initiator into Chinese society and theater as well as an object of admiration and homoerotic desire. The young man dies by the end of the book but not before leading the narrator to believe that he has secret connections inside the

Imperial Palace. The text walks the line between fiction and actual experience, never letting the reader be sure whether the real or the imaginary dominates. The text is marked by dates from February to November, 1911; however, in an endnote the author adds that it was actually written from November 1913 to January 1914. This was shortly before news of the war precipitated Segalen's return to France. Truth is a recurring question in the plot of René Leys which hinges on an unreadable note in Chinese written by Leys. After the young man's death, Segalen the narrator cannot bring himself to have the note, which could reveal the truth about Leys's relationships in the Imperial Palace, translated or read by anyone else. The narrator cannot and will not bring the text out of its ambiguous state.

The real and the imaginary (which Segalen at times refers to as "mystère" 'mysterious' or "irrél" 'unreal') rub up against each other during Segalen's journeys but all he has done is capture an image, the vibrations of this impingement. Although he takes pictures of his travels in China he does not elaborate in his writings whether these visual indices belong in the white and masculine world of the imaginary or the black and feminine world of the real. By creating texts on travel he endeavors to communicate the irreconcilable yet beautiful sensation of utter difference and liminality. In *Equippée* Segalen expresses his endeavors to capture the aesthetic experience of the diverse as follows:

C'est qu'en effet, partout où le contact ou le choc s'est produit, avant toute expertise des valeurs en présence, s'est manifestée la valeur du divers. Avant de songer aux résultats, j'ai senti le choc ainsi qu'une beauté immédiate, inattaquable à ceux qui la connaissent. Dans ces centaines de rencontres quotidiennes entre l'Imaginaire et le Réel, j'ai été moins retentissant à l'un d'entre eux, qu'attentif à leur opposition. —J'avais à me prononcer entre le marteau et la cloche. J'avoue maintenant avoir surtout recueilli le son.

In fact, wherever the contact or the impact [of the real and imaginary] occurred, before any evaluation of the qualities present could be made, the diverse appeared. Before thinking about the results, I felt the impact as well as an immediate beauty, undeniable for those who know it. In these hundreds of daily encoun-

ters between the Imaginary and the Real, I was less resounding from one or the other but rather paying attention to their opposition. –I had to pronounce myself between the hammer and the bell. Now I confess, I mainly collected the sound. (2: 318)

The writer must finally admit that even if he did experience the encounter between real and imaginary, self and other, the only means he has to express this are visual symbols, the drawing of the dragons or the yin-yang, or the aesthetically pleasing but puzzling metaphor of the bell toll of perpetual liminality. The experience remains trapped in the aesthetic. This is the problematic of consciousness for travel writers who write in the space between the exotic dream of literature and the ethnographer's empirical charts. The question remains: how can one ever document the moment of utter difference?

In Segalen's texts when this power play, the meeting and negotiation of the culturally different, manifests itself outside of the purely aesthetic, a symbolic if not literal death awaits those who insist on placing themselves in a liminal reality between cultures and modes of being. René Leys, the protagonist of the novel by the same name, is Belgian but feels more at home in China. Leys fatally attempts to both follow European models and enter into the inner sanctums of Chinese society, real or imaginary. One can appreciate the aesthetic from many different loci, yet in Segalen's work the self cannot simultaneously occupy all of these cultural locations. Literary or aesthetic creation affects its object, placing it in a system of values, but also its subject who endeavors to create or influence the aesthetic system by which the object is judged.

Segalen's exoticism is modern and self-conscious and does not seek a synthesis of the diverse, but purports to seek difference above all. In *Equippée* he writes, "L'exotisme n'est pas celui que le mot a déjà tant de fois prostitué. L'exotisme est tout ce qui est Autre. Jouir de lui est apprendre à déguster le Divers" 'Exoticism is not that which the word has pimped so many times. Exoticism is everything which is other. Taking pleasure from exoticism means learning to savor the diverse' (2: 318). Like the sublime, this is an aesthetic of experience rather than an ethics or a means

of judging the value of an object. In his *Critique of Judgment* Kant associates the sublime experience with a stopping. He describes the sublime: "the feeling of the sublime is a pleasure that only arises indirectly, being brought about by the feeling of a momentary check to the vital forces followed at once by a discharge all the more powerful, and so it is an emotion that seems to be no sport, but dead earnest in the affairs of the imagination" (2: 23). Kant's sublime arrest is analogous to Segalen or any traveler's return to the dead point of the journey, home or France. The mirror that is held up to home after the exotic journey is cracked and multifaceted, sending images off in many directions. The truly diverse or sublime obliges one to face the limits of reason and language.

Segalen's definition of the word aesthetic is one conscious of the work of representation. In his essay on exoticism he writes:

Je garde au mot 'esthétique' le sens précis, qui est celui d'une science précise que les professionnels de la pensée lui ont imposé, et qu'il garde. C'est la science à la fois du spectacle, et de la mise en beauté du spectacle. C'est le plus merveilleux outil de connaissance. C'est la connaissance qui ne peut être et ne doit être qu'un moyen non pas de toute beauté du monde, mais de cette part de beauté que chaque esprit, qu'il le veuille ou non, détient, développe ou néglige. C'est la vision propre du monde.

I retain the precise meaning for the word 'aesthetic' from a precise science which knowledge professionals have imposed on the word and which it retains. It is at once the science of the spectacle and the beautification of the spectacle. It is the most marvelous tool of knowledge. It is the knowledge which can only be and which should only be the means, not of all the beauty in the world, but of the part of beauty which each spirit, whether it wants to or not, has, develops or neglects. It is the correct [or unique or individual] vision of the world. (1: 778)

This a very personalized vision of the aesthetic which implies the participation of the individual. The aesthetic seems to find its place in the act of creating, the how and why of creation as well as witnessing a spectacle of beauty. Three elements, the spectacle, its *mise en beauté*, and the individual's knowledge participate in this aesthetic. For Segalen the subject's personal experience of itself becomes the only site of beauty production. However, ex-

ternal forces must act on the subject to set off the “vision propre du monde” ‘unique vision of the world.’ As Segalen writes in his essay on the exotic, “le sujet épouse et se confond pour un temps avec l’une des parties de l’objet, et le Divers éclate entre lui et l’autre partie. Autrement, pas d’exotisme” ‘the subject weds and confuses itself with one of the object’s parts for a while, and the Diverse explodes between the subject and the other part. Otherwise there is no exoticism’ (1: 767). For the exotic experience to occur, there must be both union and difference in the two sites of self and other. The dialectics of vision at work in *Equipée* generally falls under the problematic of either making the foreign strange or making it familiar in order to represent it.

In *Equipée* writing becomes a tool for negotiating between the *imaginaire* and the *réel*. Segalen states that his journey is an attempt to answer the question: “l’Imaginaire déchoit-il ou se renforce quand on le confronte au Réel?” ‘Does the Imaginary weaken or strengthen when one confronts it with the Real?’ (2: 267). He wishes to compare the China he imagined or read about with the real physical place. He writes: “Il n’est ici question que de chercher en quelles mystérieuses cavernes du profond de l’humain ces mondes divers peuvent s’unir et se renforcent à la plénitude” ‘Here it is only a question of in which mysterious caverns of the depths of the human element the diverse worlds can unite and reinforce each other to plenitude’ (1: 266). The jarring experience of being *dépaysé*, removed from oneself and one’s country in the encounter with the other, cannot easily be portrayed in any medium even if it has been drawn out of the depths of human experience. The delusion of travel writing, that of conquering or at least mastering the world through language and then transporting this vision in texts, is a temptation for Segalen even as he realizes that this is ultimately a homogenizing process, removing the delicious sensation of difference by writing the strange into the familiar. In order to communicate difference it must be described in known terms or one writes a text that estranges the reader by trying to replicate the experience of strangeness. To place reality into words one must fragment the vision, break it down into communicable elements: color, smell, shape.

But how can this be accomplished with the experience of the real itself or with its effects on the subject? Segalen writes, “De même qu’un voyage se compose de pas, de même la somme du bonheur incluse ici est possible à connaître si je la fragmente à l’extrême. Impossible, en revanche, à exprimer d’un seul mot” ‘Just as a journey is made up of steps, so too the sum of happiness included here is possible to know only if I fragment it to the extreme. Quite impossible, on the other hand, to express it with a single word’ (2: 318). The one word for the real, the unique literary beauty, does not exist. In writing a journey one can never portray the whole but only the series of steps taken toward one’s destination.

Operating solely in the aesthetic realm allows the writer to maintain the illusion that his imagined world and reality can meet through language. As Bouillier writes in his introduction to *Briques et Tuiles*, a collection of Segalen’s notes on his travels: “En poète habitué désormais à passer du Réel à l’Imaginaire, il sait bien que l’oeuvre d’art seule peut mettre en valeur les réalités secrètes plus réelles que le visible et le sensible” ‘As a poet now used to going from the Real to the Imaginary he well knows that only the work of art can valorize the secret realities which are more real than that which can be seen or touched’ (1: 842). However, before long Segalen realizes that he doesn’t have the words to exactly describe a Chinese city. He bemoans the fact that “L’abondance même de ce qu’on a lu permet de passer facilement du souvenir visuel au ‘mot qui fait image.’ Un paysage en littérature est devenu le plaisant chromo verbal” ‘The abundance of what one has read allows one to easily go from the visual memory to the “word which paints a picture.” A landscape in literature has become an agreeable color print’ (2: 306). But in his description of the city, its “air papillotant” ‘sparkling air,’ its “brun roussâtre profond et chaud” ‘deep and hot reddish brown,’ and its “écheveaux affadis du rouge au blanc, laissant glisser le son comme une corde de luth dont on dévisse le clef” ‘skeins fading from red to white letting the sound slide like a lute string when one loosens the key,’ the vision is that of a literary color lithography, although Segalen’s purported aim is to transmit something more powerful and real.

The inverse of the difficulty of putting difference into words is the portrayal of the imagined exotic which never manifests itself in the real. How can one write the exotic which one hoped to find but which never actually appears? The dream of exotic travel may always call to mind a more poetic text than the reality which must be recounted. Segalen writes: "Car je n'ai jamais, jamais trouvé face à face les panoramas de rêve rêvés. Je les conserve avec piété. Je les compare parfois avec leurs protagonistes, leurs parèdres réalisés . . ." 'Because I never, never found the dreamed-of dream landscapes face to face. I retain them with piety. Sometimes I compare them with their protagonists, their realized demi-gods' (2: 306). The landscape of the dream can never become reality and only the memory or nostalgia, that is to say the imaginary form, of the real can be translated into the imaginary. In *Equipée* Segalen says: "J'ai vu des étendues pleines d'espace, de dessins, de plans colorés, et d'autres choses, indicibles avec des mots; – sans que jamais imaginées telles . . ." 'I have seen expanses full of space, of drawings, of colored maps, and other things, unutterable with words; without them ever having been thus imagined' (2: 306). He will never see what he has imagined nor could his imagination have provided the images that he actually witnesses in China. Thus language, far from uniting the imaginary and the real, only reveals its own weakness as an aesthetic tool for recounting difference. Just as the real and the imaginary can never compare, simple words cannot truly reveal the real lived experience or the exotic dreamed China.

As his journey becomes increasingly real through physical suffering Segalen realizes that the words of his writing can no longer conjure up the mysterious imaginary that was formerly in their power. These words are but shells filled with the echo of the imaginary. Distance is necessary in order to place the experience of difference into language. The vocabulary of exoticism loses its power when face to face with the supposedly exotic. Segalen expresses this difficulty of writing difference: "le plus grand nombre de ces mots ne m'évoquent plus rien du tout. Il n'y a pas de réponse à l'appel. Il n'y a pas de communication. Les mêmes mots, il faut les repenser, les mûrir, les adapter à mes très grossiers besoins

quotidiens . . ." "Most of these words no longer evoke anything for me. There is no answer to the call. There is no communication. The same words must be rethought, ripened, adapted to my very crude daily needs . . ." (2: 284). This difficulty of expression occurs not only when writing on the exotic but when writing about the extra-subjective world which writers perceive as more and more different from themselves. This inability to place the *réel* into language reaches an obvious apex in the figure of Sartre's Roquentin in *La Nausée* who cannot write a word about his own travels nor about the world he inhabits. Ironically this does not prevent him, or Segalen, from actually producing texts which become reflections on their own impossibility.

The search for a language that can function in the immediate, fixing an impression as rapidly as a photograph, will ultimately lead to nothing more than a postmodern dilemma where symbol after symbol after sign crumbles without a referential real. The physical reality of the experience cannot be portrayed without the material body living in the moment. Even the notion of material experience has a tenuous connection with reality in the context of travel literature. The language of the exotic experience must be written on or through the body. Exoticism has been traditionally linked with the erotic, calling for a physical response on the part of the viewer or reader. The encounter with the other demands a physical element of proof of experience; otherwise, one is no more than an armchair traveler or a voyeur living second hand through the experiences of others. A purely textual experience cannot satisfy a modern aesthetic which wishes to look behind and beyond oniric perceptions of reality.

In Segalen's writings the body never quite finds its proper place in the experience of difference. One can sense a desire for physicality yet there is always distance between the subject's body and the body of the other. The human being of soul and matter, real and imaginary, is surrounded by the only organ that, according to Segalen, can experience self and other at once, the skin. "*La peau est un admirable organe . . . le seul qui puisse, pour ainsi dire, jouir de son organe jumeau: d'autres peaux*" "Skin is an admirable organ, the only one which can, so to speak, take plea-

sure in its twin organ: other skins' (2: 287). Through the body one can thus be both subject and object or self and other. The sense of touch has long been privileged as having greater truth value than the sense of sight. The eyes can be fooled more easily than the skin. Despite this poetic expression of twin organs, never in *Equipée* does Segalen actually describe the sensation of another skin. His encounters with the other remain dreamed and thus aestheticized above all. He does not indulge the erotic facet of exoticism or act like an ethnographer, seeking physical data on the foreign other in its quotidian reality.

Chinese coolies, real men, were an important part of the expedition in *Equipée*. Segalen's strangely futurist rather than ethnographic or exoticizing gaze transforms these human others into nothing more than a mass of muscles and bones capable of carrying great weight. The Chinese man becomes a human machine. At some points, to Segalen's dismay, he is carried on a coolie's back, the twin organs being thus in great proximity. This fear of directly experiencing another body, albeit very removed, reads like a tourist guide to pre-revolutionary China and one unwilling to take on the more difficult aspects of Chinese society. Segalen treats his porters worse than any pack animal. He feels more attachment for the horse which he has bought than for the hired porter and claims that "l'on s'attache naturellement moins à l'homme vulgaire qu'à la bête rare" 'Naturally one becomes less attached to a vulgar man than to a rare beast' (2: 296). The man who carries him is never placed in a system of value. To do so would necessitate a dialogue about the *réel* of the porter which could be too troubling. In a shockingly dehumanizing revery, Segalen even fantasizes about the best way to render his porters more like horses, with bits and bridles or using nose rings and spurs. The black and white of the real and the imaginary serve as a pretext for omitting the political from the discourse of diversity. The porter has become a Chinese object. The desire for an encounter with the other is transposed onto subjectified objects rather than the objectified man.

In the tradition of exoticism objectification usually takes place with the foreign female body. Dead and foreign bodies are

often seen as feminine. During his journey Segalen sees the tortured corpse of a missionary being transported on the road he is traveling. The body has been “fusillé mécaniquement, puis amputé, lacéré, trépané, meurtri.” ‘mechanically shot, then amputated, lacerated, trampled, bruised’ (2: 292). The flesh of the other can be brought into the aesthetic negotiations between real and imaginary and be fascinatingly pleasing in its repulsiveness. Yet unlike the trope in Baudelaire, this cadaver is not feminized. The contrast between revulsion and aesthetic appeal is apparent in Segalen’s description. He writes, “Le crâne est presque vide, vert et liquéfié. Les mains qui ne sont pas jointes, ni résignées, tordent leurs doigts noirs et secs” ‘The skull is almost empty, green and liquefied. The hands which are neither joined nor resigned wring their black and dry fingers’ (2: 293). Death is finally the experience of the impossible other but in the view of Segalen, writer and doctor, a very aestheticized experience. He is at once able to detail the techniques applied to the mutilated body and admire the strange object it has become.

Finally we must explore Segalen’s treatment of the other’s body as an object of physical desire. In his observations on the Chinese female body he does not remain true to his aesthetic of the diverse. The Chinese woman is too different and appears ugly in Segalen’s eyes. This ultimate difference in gender, race, and history should appeal to a lover of the diverse yet he is overwhelmed. Segalen describes the Chinese woman in what he assumes to be the Chinese aesthetic but cannot approach this beauty as one which could elicit desire:

car laide, elle est plus honteuse qu’une femelle de phoque putréfiée, –et jolie, déjà détournant du sexe, et belle, selon les rites chinois, –belle au-delà de toute commune mesure: ses joues se laquent, ses yeux s’immobilisent; sa poitrine disparaît chastement, son ventre, on ne sait pourquoi, bombe et se dandine, chastement aussi; ses cheveux chargés d’émail gras, accusent un ovale impassible; sa bouche est petite, petite, trop petite, trop ronde . . . et parfaitement belle ainsi . . . paraît-il. . . .

When ugly, she is more shameful than a putrified female seal—and when pretty she is already sexually offputting, and when

beautiful, according to Chinese custom, more beautiful than any collective measurement: her cheeks become lacquered, her eyes immobilized, her chest chastely disappears, her stomach, for unknown reasons, swells and sways from side to side, chastely as well; her hair, heavy with a greasy enamel, emphasizes an impassive oval, her mouth is small, small, too small, too round, and as such perfectly beautiful . . . so it seems. (2: 299)

Segalen is thus incapable of going completely to the limits of his aesthetic. There is beauty in China but it is other, too other, and cannot enter into his codes but must be seen through the filter (and not philter) of the Chinese version of beauty. He writes:

La beauté chinoise doit être reconnue, mais dans un monde différent du nôtre. Il y a beauté, indéniable, et parfois si hautaine, si lointaine, si picturale, si littéraire que d'autres sentiments peuvent s'incliner devant celui-là: une étrange stylisation vivante. Mais combien peu conduisant à l'étreinte corporelle . . . C'est le triomphe austère et chaste du Divers.

Chinese beauty must be recognized, but in a world different from ours. There is undeniably beauty, and sometimes so haughty, so distant, so pictorial, so literary that other feelings can bow down before it: a strange living stylization. But so little encouraging of corporeal embraces . . . It is the austere and chaste triumph of the diverse. (2: 299)

For Segalen the truly exotic cannot be fruitful in its union. The physical encounter of difference will never go beyond merely textual desires.

In Segalen's aesthetic view, the most sexually attractive women in China are the *jeunes garçons*, whose performances as women on stage represent an imaginary but unreal woman. This is a recurring modern theme of the encounter with the beautiful other for many male travelers. One need only think of M. Butterfly, Barthes's travels in Japan and in an earlier context, Balzac's *Sarrasine*. The imaginary and ideal woman has become so removed from the real that it can no longer be portrayed by actual women. The most 'beautiful' female signifiers are often male or inhuman. In neither *Equipée* nor *René Leys* does Segalen write about physical contact with a woman. He encounters prostitutes (often Tibetan and thus other to the Chinese) on his journey but

they are only of interest in their rarity as textual objects. He writes: "On peut songer qu'elle, au moins, comme son pays indépendant, est restée vierge; sinon de l'assaut de ses mâles, du moins des romans d'amour distillés par nos voyageurs français" 'One can dream that they at least, like their independent country, have remained virgin; if not from the attack of their men, at least saved from the romantic novels brewed by our French travelers' (2: 300). The aesthetic negotiations of the diverse in this case take place at a distance which protects the observer from opening up a dialogue between the person objectified and oneself, the viewer or writer.

Eventually Segalen will portray himself as an aesthetic object. A woman is the reflecting subject who has no subjectivity but gives Segalen the opportunity to write himself as the object of the gaze. At the end of his journey he sees an aboriginal woman on his path and describes the encounter:

Je me suis trouvé tout d'un coup en présence de quelque chose, qui, lié au plus magnifique paysage dans la grande montagne, en était si distant et si homogène que tous les autres se reculaient et se faisaient souvenirs concrets . . . Et c'était toute la face d'une fille aborigène, enfantée là, plantée là sur ses jambes fortes, et qui, stupéfaite moins que moi, regardait passer l'animal étrange que j'étais, et qui, par pitié pour l'inattendue beauté du spectacle, n'osa point se détourner pour la revoir encore.

Suddenly I found myself in the presence of something which, linked to the most magnificent landscape in the high mountains, was so distant and so homogenous that all the others drew back and became concrete memories. . . . And there was the face of an aboriginal girl, born there, planted there on strong legs, and which, less stupefied than myself, observed the passing of the strange animal that I was and through pity for the unexpected spectacle, did not dare turn around to see it again. (2: 307)

Segalen projects feelings and a reaction onto this motionless figure, the *quelque chose* that is a young girl. Never will she share her actual impressions with the reader despite Segalen's professed desire to see the exotic gaze reflected by those who are normally only objects of tourist interest. In his essay on exoticism he criticized exotic writers, "Ils ont dit ce qu'ils ont vu, ce qu'ils ont senti

en présence des choses et des gens inattendus dont ils allaient chercher le choc. Ont-ils révélé ce que ces choses et ces gens pensaient en eux-mêmes et d'eux?" "They spoke of what they had seen, what they had felt in the presence of unexpected things and people of whom they went to seek the impact. Did they reveal what these things and these people thought about them and within themselves?" (1: 746). The *choc* is finally only that between imaginary and real and between the writer and his text, but not between the impressions of Segalen and those of a Chinese subject.

The consciousness of self as object reaches its climax in Segalen's encounter with the ultimate other, not a Chinese woman different in race and gender, but his own self. At the climax of his journey he sees a mute vision of his younger self on a mountainous path. As *Equipée* and his voyage near an end Segalen has reached his geographic goal and found his most beloved other, himself. Night falls and the vision of the young Segalen becomes transparent and disappears without ever having uttered a word. Segalen repeats again and again that this apparition is *l'Autre*. Self and other, subject and object are no longer entirely different but two facets of one person. The real self and the imaginary self are interlocked like the white and black halves of the yin yang symbol which Segalen repeatedly calls up during his journey. After this ultimate encounter he can start his return journey back to France, his wife and his writing.

At the completion of Segalen's journey only the text remains. He must reread this material remnant in order to decide whether the imaginary or the real is victor. He writes that to find the answer to this question he must:

me reporter à chaque instant de ce livre, et voir, pour chaque ligne si la dose de beauté, de valeur, que me rendit le réel, surpassa ou non la promesse imaginaire, ce qui est mêlé à tous les mots. J'aurais ainsi une ligne sinueuse, brisée, cassée, arabesque cisailée d'à-coups, parfois noble comme une parabole, parfois enfuie vers les irrationnels, mais qui en comparant ponctuellement l'écart entre l'attendu, le désiré et le trouvé, le rendu,—pourra me fixer avec une ironique et impassible précision.

refer to each instant of this book and see whether for each line the dose of beauty, of value, which the real gave to me, surpassed the promise of the imaginary, which is mixed in to all the words. Thus I would trace a sinuous, broken and cracked line, an arabesque cracked in fits and starts sometimes as noble as a parabole, sometimes fleeing towards the irrational, but which in punctually comparing the distance between the expected, the desired and the found, the given—could place me with an ironic and impassible precision. (2: 318)

Equipée does not resolve itself. The text which began with the notion that “Tout est immobile et suspendu” ‘all is immobile and suspended’ (2: 265) ends with “l’être en un mot reste fièrement inconnu” ‘in a word, the being remains proudly unknown’ (2: 320). The beginning and the end of the voyage thus remain suspended in time and mystery. The self, despite or because of its unexpected appearance as a young specter, is unknown and nothing more. The aesthetic experience reveals itself through the creation of a text which is all that remains of the encounter between real and imaginary. This is finally a text which is exotic in many of its descriptions but ultimately ethnographic in its documentary aims, or perhaps even a precursor of the late twentieth-century search for the inner child as a journey through space and time.

The quest in *René Leys* is of a different sort. The author comes to Peking in order to write a book about the already deceased Emperor. In this novelistic account he must create a character separate from the narrator and who can bridge the gap between the dreamed of and eternally desired object of the text, the Emperor, and the actual object of the text, Segalen himself. Writing in *René Leys* directs and shapes the space of the encounter with the other through a literary figure who is and is not Segalen. Segalen as narrator can thus observe the Chinese and operate once removed through time, space, and language, thus seeking the distance required to write the exotic. The character René Leys is both self and other, Chinese and European, young and old, sexual and asexual, fictive and real and above all aesthetically pleasing. Segalen writes:

Il est beau dans l'action, le mouvement libre dans l'air, à cheval, ou chevauchant une histoire au galop, avec moins de faits et de gestes qu'une belle domination contenue de l'acte et de ce qu'il dit. –Et il est impossible d'oublier le persistant de son regard d'ombre, dilaté brusquement.

In action he is handsome, free movement in the air, on horseback or galloping through a story, with fewer acts and gestures but rather a beautifully contained domination of the act and what it says. And it is impossible to forget the persistence of his shadowed gaze, abruptly dilated. (2: 513)

As a fictional figure Leys, who was nonetheless based on a real man, Maurice Roy, can negotiate the irreconcilable dialectics set up by Segalen's aesthetic of the diverse and his questions on representation.

This book is a project in negativity, although it ultimately seduces the reader with its novelistic elements. Segalen tells us what the text will not be: "J'avais cru le [le livre] tenir d'avance, plus 'fini,' plus vendable que n'importe quel roman patenté [...] Mieux qu'un récit imaginaire, il aurait eu, à chacun de ses bords dans le réel, l'emprise de toute la magie enclose dans ces murs . . . , où je n'entrerai pas" 'I believed that I grasped the book ahead of time, more 'finished', more saleable than any copyrighted novel. . . . Better than an imaginary tale, with each of its leaps into the real, it would have held all of the magic enclosed in these walls, where I will never enter' (2: 457). In a modern literary aesthetic one can read novels which claim they are not novels, books which refuse to be books and texts which explore the very limits of textuality.

The text which follows Segalen's statement is already placed in an ambiguous state. It cannot and will not be a travelogue like *Equipée*. He writes, "Je dois clore, avant de l'avoir mené bien loin, ce cahier dont j'espérais faire un livre. Le livre ne sera pas non plus. (Beau titre posthume à défaut d'un livre: 'Le livre qui ne fut pas!')" 'I must close, before having taken it very far, this notebook from which I hoped to make a book, The book will never be (A lovely posthumous title instead of a book: The book that never was!)" (2: 457). Segalen conditionalizes the entire project: "J'adopte

malgré moi le style qui conviendrait si jamais j'écrivais ce livre . . . ce livre qui ne sera point, car ne vaut-il pas mieux le vivre?—Problème” ‘Despite myself I adopt the style which would be appropriate if ever I wrote this book . . . this book which will never be, because isn't it better to live it?—Problem’ (2: 521). The life that the narrator wants to live is that of his own creation, Leys. Segalen is incapable of living this experience which reveals itself to be just another text, most likely fictional.

Texts, writing, and reflections on truth play a much more important thematic role in *René Leys* than in *Equipée*. Homi Bhabha writes, “shifting the frame of identity from the field of vision to the space of writing interrogates the third dimension that gives profundity to the representation of Self and Other—that depth of perspective . . . literary theorists describe it as the transparency of realist metanarratives” (48). The literary aesthetic seen in *René Leys* is necessarily concerned with writing and negotiating representations of truth. The metanarrative of this text is the impossibility of a representation of the *réel* of the other. The only recourse the author has is to present yet another *imaginaire* of the Orient in which Leys is the main and doomed character.

This text is rooted in ambiguity: sexual, racial and factual. Recurring shifts between states of identity show a desire to map liminality in the text. However, at the end of the text Leys's death reveals that an ambiguous identity cannot be eternally suspended without threatening the self and its creations. The description of Leys's cadaver includes elements noted in *Equipée* as markers of aesthetic value and underlines the conflicts of identity seen in his body. Segalen writes:

à suivre le contour de ses reins et de ses cuisses, j'ai compris comment il se liait à son cheval fou, et le geste même détendu de ses bras m'a fait voir comment il aurait dompté les femmes s'il avait vécu! Juste assez brun pour n'être pas traité de 'blanc' par les Jaunes . . . Et un dépoli de la peau déjà froide très semblable au toucher délicat de l'épiderme chinois . . .

following the contour of his lower back and his thighs I understood how he was one with his wild horse and the gesture of his arms, even in their relaxed state, showed me how he would have

dominated women if he had lived. Just brown enough to not be treated as a white man by the yellow men. . . . And the dull sheen of the already cold skin that was very much like the delicate touch of the Chinese epidermis. (2: 569)

Leys manages to straddle the aesthetics of the diverse by being too brown for a European, having Chinese skin but remaining apart from both races. His difference also appears in the feminized description of his *reins* and *cuisses* in contrast with the fact that he could have dominated women. Leys is just similar and different enough in race and sexuality to be perfectly attractive to Segalen. The diverse that Segalen finds most pleasing must be accompanied by some elements of the familiar or of the self.

Segalen as both author and narrator in *René Leys* has conflicting desires about his own body entering into the scene of the encounter with the other. He lives through Leys but always at a distance from the Chinese life which so fascinates him. Leys gives him filtered information about his contacts with the Chinese. Never does Segalen become more than an observer despite his desire to be part of the action. The narrator disturbingly describes his relationship to the Chinese reality: "Je me sens ainsi –non point participer à cette vie pouilleuse et 'unanime' des vers grouillant sur le fumier, ou des ténias intestins, mais vivre parallèlement, dans toute la rigueur froide et mesurée du terme, parallèlement à la vie cachée du Palais" "Thus I feel I don't participate at all in this squalid and unanimous life of worms writhing on the manure pile, or intestinal parasites, but rather I live a parallel existence, in all the cold and measured rigor of the term, parallel to the hidden life of the Palace" (475). The Emperor's body, the already dead object of the writer's desire, cannot be approached or touched. The writer must suck the blood, the life sap of the other, even if this other only exists in the imaginary. Segalen is finally as parasitic as the Chinese worms living off the Imperial Palace. He must feed his text, if not himself, with the lifeblood of the Emperor. Segalen writes: "Je reviens donc tourner comme un vampire à l'entour de mon héros triplement emmuré, par sa vie, par son rêve, par sa mort . . ." "Thus I return like a vampire to turn around my hero who is triply walled-off, through his life, through

his dream, through his death' (478). Two male bodies, the Emperor and Leys, are thus inaccessible for Segalen through death, the ultimate difference.

The female body in this novel is the object of a strangely distanced desire. Segalen is fascinated by the idea of an encounter with his Chinese tutor's wife yet he makes little effort to get to know the woman. He notes: "*j'en arrive à me demander si, [...] entre l'étranger, accueilli ou toléré que j'ai conscience d'être, et cette jeune femme mandchoue, si . . . quelque chose ne pourrait exister, au prix de gestes ou de mots, ou d'argent même,—autre chose que ce qui se passe et va passer: un obscur état de désir ou d'ironie*" 'I begin to ask myself if between the foreigner, welcomed or tolerated, which I know myself to be, and this young Manchurian woman, if . . . something couldn't exist, at the price of certain gestures, or words or even money—something other than that which occurs in this moment and will pass: an obscure state of desire or irony' (2: 519). Even when, through Leys's intervention, Segalen encounters women who are supposedly available to his very apparent relief nothing happens.

Leys also has an ambiguous and unrealized relationship with women. He is described as having "*Une ardeur, un élan, une beauté adolescente; un attrait évident, non point de lui vers la femme, mais de la femme pour lui*" 'An ardor, a vigour, an adolescent beauty; an obvious attraction, not of him for the woman but of the woman for him' (2: 561). Yet Leys's possible encounters are never revealed entirely to the narrator who does not hide his love and appreciation for Leys. In a very sensual moment Segalen lies down in his courtyard at night with Leys. They smell the lotus and "*Tout se fond et se dissout et disparaît dans la pénétration de cette nuit*" 'Everything melts and dissolves and disappears in the penetration of this night' (2: 474). The only time Segalen will describe approaching Leys's body is after the young man's death. The physical attraction between the two men will remain as unsummated as any desire between Chinese women and European men.⁵ This is true unless of course one believes Leys's dubious claims to having fathered the Empress's child. The occasional dinner with available women is a very chaste event, whether because

of Chinese mores or Segalen's lack of desire for the subject or for placing it in the text.

Once again the only material object resulting from these encounters is the manuscript. No physical unions occur which will create new life. As at the end of *Equipée*, all that remains of the experience is the text, "mon seul témoin valable: ce manuscrit" 'my only worthwhile witness: this manuscript' (2: 571). As the novel nears its close Segalen the narrator increasingly questions the truth of what Leys has told him as well as the meaning of the only text left behind by Leys, a note in Chinese that could prove his interaction with the Palace. Segalen writes, "Et d'un geste machinal, relisant le premier feuillet du manuscrit, je souligne ces mots: 'Je ne saurai rien de plus.. je me retire . . .' Et j'ajoute d'une toute autre écriture: . . . et ne veux savoir rien de plus" And with a mechanical gesture, rereading the first page of this manuscript, I underline these words: I will know nothing more . . . I pull myself back. And in completely different writing I add . . . and I do not wish to know anything more' (2: 567). The abîme between the subject and object persists and even the aesthetic textual encounter mitigated by a third and fictional party in the form of Leys cannot successfully bridge the *réel* and the *imaginaire*.

In order to write his text the narrator must allow for the fluctuation between *réel* and *imaginaire*, between truth and fiction. He writes:

Il y a le même élément de créance brutale à tout croire ou à tout repousser. Je me reprends: je m'explique: ce n'est pas devant le merveilleux de l'aventure que l'on doit se récuser. Il ne faut pas tourner le dos au mystérieux et à l'inconnu. Les rares instants où le mythe consent à vous prendre à la gorge . . . à solliciter son entrée parmi les faits quotidiens de la vie . . . , les minutes hallucinées mesurables pourtant à la montre, –dont le battement retentit ensuite sur les années, –il ne faut rien négliger de cela . . .

Whether one believes everything or rejects everything there is the same element of brutal credence. I'll start again: I'll explain myself: it is not when facing the marvelous of the adventure that one must decline taking a stance. One should not turn one's back to the mysterious and unknown. The rare instants where the myth consents to take you by the throat . . . to demand admission

amongst the quotidian facts of life . . . the hallucinated minutes nonetheless measurable by a watch—whose pounding then echoes over the years—none of this should be neglected. (2: 560)

Segalen as writer and narrator thus stages his truths for the reader just as Leys creates a scenography of reality for Segalen. The precious moments of being swept up in the imaginary finally take on as much value as the real which will never ultimately be known.

Equipée and *René Leys* as well as the essay on exoticism are rich in reflections on the self and other, the aesthetic of difference and the unresolvable but fascinating conflict between real and imaginary. These texts are perpetually caught in a dialectics of perception and representation. Reading the text on the other can bring us back to our own experience in the image. Either we find ourselves there, particularly our younger selves formed by adventure books, or the text exposes us to something outside of ourselves. Then we are faced with a rupture or images we never lived. A recurring aesthetic concern of the twentieth century is the conflict between a desire for visual pleasure and an intellectual call to step outside of ourselves and examine the mechanisms of truth and representation at work in our world. Facets of these aesthetic concerns can be discovered by reading late nineteenth and early twentieth-century literature on the other, whether it take an exotic or ethnographic tone. By studying how the foreign other is portrayed one can see the beginnings of questions on the limits of literature and representation.

The modern literary aesthetic shimmers as a pleasurable yet eternal reflection on the impossibility of representation. However, this aesthetic as seen in Segalen's texts also shows a desire to negotiate and map the space left between the image and the word, the self and the other, or the author and the reader. The question remains, however: what does the occidental modern aesthetic truly seek in an encounter with the foreign other, whether in an exoticizing or ethnographic mode? In the work of Georges Bataille and some of the surrealists, the extreme manifestation of the desire for the eroticized, chaotic and threatening other reveals the flowering of an aesthetic which seeks and embraces conflict, contradiction and challenges to the self. In perceiving the world we

must, despite the threat to the self, take into account the illusion of unity and the necessity of diversity. Or perhaps there is no true difference, there are only moments of diversity to send us back to ourselves. As Segalen puts it in his essay on exoticism: "L'Exotisme n'est donc pas une adaptation; n'est donc pas la compréhension parfaite d'un hors soi-même qu'on étreindrait en soi, mais la perception aiguë et immédiate d'une incompréhensibilité éternelle" 'Exoticism is thus not an adaptation; it is not the perfect understanding of something outside of the self which one would embrace within the self, but the sharp and immediate perception of an eternal incomprehensibility' (1: 751).

Notes

Author's Note: Since this article was submitted in 1998, two important works on Segalen have appeared in English. Charles Forsdick's *Victor Segalen and the Aesthetics of Diversity* (Oxford UP, 2000) provides a wealth of information on Segalen's work, philosophy and impact. Yaël Schlick's recent translation of Segalen's *Essay on Exoticism* (Duke UP, 2002) is an attentive and rich presentation of Segalen's aesthetics. In France several new critical editions of Segalen's work have appeared in the last few years and his readership and popularity have continued to grow.

1. All Segalen citations are from the Bouillier version of his complete works and are my translations in English unless otherwise noted.

2. Segalen introduces his thesis as an effort to "tenter l'analyse des tableaux de pathologie mentale relevés—innombrables—dans notre actuelle littérature, mettre en relief la valeur des névroses considérées comme matériaux artistiques, esquisser, en un mot, une brève esthétique des idées-malades" 'attempt the analysis of the innumerable depictions of mental pathology in literature from our time, to draw attention to the value of neuroses which are considered to be artistic material, in a word, to create a brief aesthetics of unwell ideas' (1:14).

3. Henri Bouillier has noted that some researchers see the discovery of Segalen's dead body with one shoe off and with a copy of Hamlet

lying open in the grass nearby as a karmic conclusion to the violence he inflicted on Chinese archeological sites as recounted in Segalen's short story, "La Tête."

4. See Arnoux.

5. One European character in the book, Jarignoux, gains Chinese nationality in order to marry Chinese wives. However, both Segalen and Leys have very little respect for this man and his actions.

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