

‘De-exoticizing’ the Exotic: Victor Segalen’s Aesthetics of Difference

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Abstract- *If Segalen’s radical approach to the exotic has earned him the appreciation and the consideration of such authors as Michel Leyris, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Abdelkêbir Khatibi, and others, it has gone almost unnoticed by Edward Said in his Orientalism, who mentions him only once in passing, and dismissively so, among writers who were not ignorant of “the wisdom of the east” such as Pound, Eliot, Yeats, Arthur Waley, Fenellosa, and Paul Claudel. Although Said does not inflict on Segalen the bad treatment he inflicted on some other French Orientalists, and in fact puts him alongside such ‘venerable’ figures as Pound, Yeats, and Claudel, one would expect him to make a more honourable mention of Segalen whose views on colonialism and exoticism were radically opposed to the then-accepted colonial views on such issues. Whether this was simply an oversight on the part of Said or an intended critical dismissal, it is, nonetheless, a fact that Segalen is becoming more and more ‘incontournable’, difficult to ignore, overlook, or dismiss, and this, for the exceptional views he expresses on the question of exoticism and colonialism.*

KeyWords- *Exoticism; colonialism*

Segalen’s *Essai sur l’Exotisme, Une Esthétique Du divers* [sic], the posthumously published collection of often disjointed and fragmentary notes and letters to friends, has lately become a must in post-colonial studies. Despite the repetitiveness, and at times the outlandish nature of some of the declarations Segalen makes, the essay remains very clear in its purpose: it stands as a severe critique of alterity, difference within the ethos of imperialism and colonialism, and its attendant romantic conception of exoticism put forth by the sovereign western self. This tradition is represented by such nineteenth-century writers, or as he calls them, ‘pseudo exots’, like Pierre Loti, Alphonse de la Martine, and George Sand, among others, who thought of nature as the reflecting mirror of their ego. Such ‘pseudo exots’ as Pierre Loti, in quest of new sensations and new flavours that would revive their jaded palates, ended up in the process, appropriating the ‘native’ and even reifying him as well as his land in some self-serving fixed ‘state of primitive grace’, unadulterated by the more and more encroaching modernity and its new technological dynamics. Unlike these ‘escapists’, Segalen, out of integrity, and out of respect for difference, never sought to appropriate the indigenous, and never sought to invert the self and the other, imposing on himself the rigor of his radical aesthetics that chastens all self-serving forms of sentimentality and escapism.

Unlike Edward Said, Abdelkebir Khatibi is impressed by Segalen’s distinctiveness from other travel writers. In his *Figures de l’étranger dans la littérature française*, Khatibi includes a brilliant essay about Segalen’s work, stating in his introduction that “L’œuvre

de Victor Segalen fut une chance, une exception remarquable,”¹ because, as he declares, “l’exotisme n’est pas, ici, un folklorisme de surface.”² Khatibi goes on to point to the special position that Segalen occupies in French literature by saying that

*Victor Segalen a été parmi les fondateurs de cette internationalité, de cette modernité littéraire. Son œuvre voulait faire sortir la littérature française de son ethnocentrisme et de ses domaines trop nationalistes. Elle mettait ainsi en jeu cette littérature dans des «formes» d’art irréductibles à toute vérité (de territoire, de langues, de civilisation). Formes qui puiseraient dans un dehors tout à fait concret (peuples, langues, sites) une plus grande expérience du monde en tant qu’exploration du langage littéraire.*³

Segalen, as Khatibi goes on to explain, relinquishes insideness in favour of outsideness. In fact, not only does he submit to “l’exigence du dehors, il en fait une loi d’écriture.” His radicality resides in his desire and will to set himself apart from a whole literary tradition that has been generally inward-looking rather than outward-

¹ Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Figures de l’étranger dans la littérature française* (Denoël : Paris, 1987) 13. Translations from this text are all mine.

“The work of Victor Segalen was a chance, a remarkable exception.”

² Khatibi, 9.

“Exoticism here is not a folklorism of surface.”

³ Khatibi, 15.

looking. Segalen “ne peut écrire que sur ce dehors, sur les étrangers. Dehors du territoire et marges du livre français, dehors des valeurs de l'écrivain, de son système de référence. Tel est cet exercice d'une altérité et d'une altération en marche. Il s'agit de se *désenclaver* par rapport à la tradition de son pays d'origine. En ce sens, l'Exote ne fait pas d'exotisme.” Khatibi goes on to insist on this demanding art that Segalen practises in these strong terms:

L'œuvre de Segalen est regard vers le Dehors, exil de soi. Elle s'est constituée, de bout en bout, en un déplacement entre deux lieux de l'imaginaire, celui d'une civilisation lointaine et celui de la littérature française. En dédiant son œuvre à la Polynésie et surtout à la Chine impériale, Segalen poursuit une expérience unique par sa force d'extranéité dans l'espace littéraire français. Expérience d'un exotisme « exacerbé » (écrit-il), un exotisme au second degré, qui viendrait réveiller à l'intérieur de la langue mère d'autres formes du Dict. Cette œuvre qui se construit en se déplaçant, se développe en un art excentrique.⁴ (Khatibi, 22)

Khatibi's text on Segalen is worth quoting at length because, first of all, it is a highly poetic and a highly creative text, and hence, worth reading in its own right; but also because of its perceptiveness on the uncompromising nature of Segalen's aesthetics and the position he holds, especially in the French literary tradition on alterity. Khatibi indeed sets the right tone for the discussion of Segalen, and this, by making us aware, right away, that we are dealing with a writer who is quite uncommon now, let alone at the start of the Twentieth Century, when colonialism was still an unquestioned *fait accompli*. Segalen's radical thought on the issue of exoticism is evident at the outset in his uncompromising attempt to redefine the concept itself by first 'clearing the field', and

“Victor Segalen was among the founders of this international, this literary modernity. His work sought to free French literature from its ethnocentrism and of its too nationalistic domains . It thus brought into play this literature in "forms" of art not reducible to any truth (of territory, of language, and of civilization). These forms would draw from a concrete outside (peoples, languages, and locations) a greater experience of the world as an exploration of literary language.” (My trans)

⁴ Khatibi, 22.

“Segalen's work is a gaze towards the outside, a self-exile. It has been constituted, from end to end, in a displacement between two sites of the imaginary, that of a distant civilization and that of French literature. By dedicating his work to Polynesia and especially to imperial China, Segalen pursues a unique experience with the strength of its foreignness in the French literary space. It is an experience of an ‘exacerbated’ exoticism (his own term), an exoticism at a second remove that would come to wake inside the mother tongue other forms of dict. This work which is constructed as it is displaced develops into an excentric art. [My trans]

this, by throwing overboard all the clichés and the stereotypes long associated with the term by travellers, tourists, and writers alike; this is what Segalen sets out to do in his initial ‘spadework’:

Avant tout, déblayer le terrain. Jeter par-dessus bord tout ce que contient de mésusé et de rance ce mot d'exotisme. Le dépouiller de tout ses oripeaux : le palmier et le chameau ; casque de colonial ; peaux noires et soleil jaune, et du même coup se débarrasser de tous ceux qui les employèrent avec une féconde niaiserie. Il ne s'agira donc ni des Bonnetain, ni des Ajalbert, ni des programmes d'agences Cook, ni des voyageurs pressés et verbeux...Mais par Hercule ! Quel nauséabond déblaiement!

⁵

The strength and the intensity of Segalen's declaration is fuelled by the use of such strong terms as ‘mésusé (misused), ‘rance’ (rancid), and ‘oripeaux’ (old rags). It is difficult for us to imagine that in 1908, the time at which Segalen wrote his essay, exoticism had already been cheapened by poor taste, commercialism, organized trips, cheap sensations, and had already accumulated enough negative images such as those of the palm tree, the camel, the colonial helmet, black skins, the yellow sun, coral reefs, etc. It is surely the accumulated heap of similar topoï that made an artist of a fine sensibility like Segalen want to shout his disgust and outrage and ask for a whole new vision of the exotic. The accumulation of bad associations is so bad that the sweep-out required was for Segalen a ‘Herculean task’.

With the type of sensibility he had, Segalen was, at the height of the colonial empires, deeply vexed by the incursion of western powers into the most distant lands, the effacement of natural borders, the displacement of newly conquered territory and its reckless manipulation for strategic colonial purposes, the ensuing sameness of people, the homogenization and uniformization of cultures, real difference and the truly exotic must have begun to recede, slowly disappearing or becoming more and more subtle, perceived only by the trained eye, not the fake ‘exots’ who only vulgarize culture, and contribute to its folklorization.

Segalen is no less severe in his critique of his contemporaries such as the colonial novelists Marius-Ary

⁵ Victor Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme : Une esthétique du divers*. 22

“Clear the field first of all. Throw overboard everything misused or rancid contained in the word exoticism. Strip it of all its cheap finery: palm tree and camel; tropical helmet; black skins and yellow sun; and, at the same time, get rid of all those who used it with an inane loquaciousness. My study will not be about the Bonnetains or Ajalberts of this world, nor about programs offered by travel agents like Cook, nor about hurried and verbose travellers....What a Herculean task this nauseating sweeping out will be!” (Essay, 18)

Leblond and Emile Nolly, Jean Ajalbert, and Paul Bonnetain, who were, in a way, writers of the French Empire and whose vision was part and parcel of the French colonial enterprise. To set himself apart, Segalen begins by ridding the term of “des scories innombrables, des bavures, des taches, des moisissures qu’un si long usage—tant de bouches, tant de mains prostituées et touristes—lui avaient laissés” (*Essai*, 23). One would hardly expect such a visceral reaction from present-day most militant ecologists and other friends of the Earth, let alone from a man who lived at a time when mass tourism was not as rampant as it is today and when the colonial ethos were not to be questioned. This is how exceptional Segalen was. The violent accusations expressed in such strong terms of outrage as “innumerable scoriae, flaws, stains, molds, prostituting tourist hands” is an indication of the extent of Segalen’s uniqueness in the colonial wilderness of one hundred years ago.

After the necessary ‘spadework’ he makes in vehement terms, Segalen moves on to redefine exoticism which he perceives first and foremost as a sensation; and this sensation “ n’est autre que la notion du différent; la perception du Divers; *la connaissance que quelque chose n’est pas soit même; et le pouvoir d’exotisme, qui n’est que le pouvoir de concevoir autre*” (*Essai*, 23) [Italics added]. It cannot be emphasized enough that Segalen’s voice was unique at a time when Europeans reigned supreme over other peoples’ lands and ratified them with the seal of their own authority and imposed on them the type of prearranged and preconceived representation that suited their interests. Here Segalen goes against the main stream by calling for a different type of representation of alterity, one that accepts ‘the notion of difference, the perception of diversity, and the ability to conceive otherwise’. For Segalen, conceiving otherwise liberates the imagination. He makes an analogy between his conception of the exotic and Jules de Gautier’s notion of Bovaryism, which he defines as such, “tout être qui se conçoit, se conçoit nécessairement autre qu’il n’est” (*Essai*, 24). Segalen’s own definition of Gauthier’s sounds more interesting since Bovaryism has come to mean the continual human need to reinvent oneself, and even to lie to oneself. This analogy leads Segalen to make this definitive conclusion: “Voici un fait: je conçois autre, et sitôt le spectacle est savoureux. Tout l’exotisme est là” (*Essai*, 24).⁶

With his insistence on conceiving otherwise, Segalen proposes a view that runs counter to the usual assimilationist views of ethnology and anthropology that pretend to bring closer the other and familiarize the spectator, the tourist, or even the social scientist with the other’s culture. For Segalen, “l’exotisme n’est donc pas cet état kaleidoscopique du touriste et du spectateur, mais la réaction vive et curieuse au choc d’une individualité forte contre une objectivité dont elle perçoit et déguste la

distance” (*Essai*, 25).⁷ It is an initiation to a secret and distant pleasure that only the privileged few can perceive and savour. Segalen goes on to elaborate on this idea by insisting that “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 aigue et immédiate d’une incompréhensibilité éternelle” (*Essai*, 25).⁸ This may sound like an arrogant and disrespectful attitude and a lack of interest in the other and his culture; but in fact, it is an act of humility and respect vis à vis alterity, especially at the time Segalen was writing when Westerners claimed perfect knowledge and understanding of the other, his land, and his culture, and went on from there to establish authority, both academic and military on the basis of that pretence of knowledge. His singularity is that he makes no pretence to that type of adaptability, familiarization, and knowledge of alterity, and this, he states in very clear terms: “Partons donc de cet aveu d’imperméabilité. Ne nous flattons pas d’assimiler les mœurs, les races, les nations, les autres ; mais au contraire éjouissons nous de ne le pouvoir jamais ; nous réservant ainsi la perdurabilité du plaisir de sentir le divers” (*Essai*, 25).⁹ Segalen’s ‘admission of impenetrability’ is paradoxically an act of humility towards otherness, not the act of appropriation that was the purpose of colonial expeditions. In his attempts to crystallize the exotic in its true, unadulterated, and unmediated form, Segalen is aware that he has to suppress the self and extirpate all subjectivity and all personal, social, and cultural interferences. As Steve Moyer says, “the exotic...in Segalen’s work, is never fully recognized or described by the traveler-writer. The exotic lies, as it must, outside the self.”¹⁰

Khatibi’s highly poetic way of paraphrasing Segalen’s insistence on the inviolability of the integrity of the other is worth quoting here:

*Pas de folklore donc, ni de littérature
coloniale, mais une écriture du Dehors
qui accueille le lieu de l’autre dans mon
langage, dans mon espace*

⁷ “Exoticism is therefore not that kaleidoscopic vision of the tourist or of the mediocre spectator, but the forceful and curious reaction to a shock felt by someone of strong individuality in response to some object whose distance from oneself he alone can perceive and savor. (The sensation of Exoticism and Individualism are *complementary*.” (*Essay*, 21)

⁸ “Exoticism is therefore not an adaptation to something; it is not the perfect comprehension of something outside one’s self that one has managed to embrace fully, but the keen and immediate perception of an eternal incomprehensibility.” (*Essay*, 21)

⁹ “Let us proceed from this admission of impenetrability. Let us not flatter ourselves for assimilating the customs, races, nations, and others who differ from us. On the contrary, let us rejoice in our inability ever to do so, for we thus retain the eternal pleasure of sensing Diversity.” (*Essay*, 21)

¹⁰ Steve Moyer, “The End of Man and the Art of Victor Segalen” *Humanities* (January/February 2010), Volume 31, Number 1, p. 11.

⁶ “Here is a fact: I conceive otherwise, and, immediately, the vision is enticing. All of exoticism lies herein.” (*Essay*, 19)

imaginaire. Différence distante : c'est lorsque l'autre est maintenu, respecté dans sa singularité que je peux être reçu peut-être par lui. Il n'y a aucune transparence absolue, aucune réduction globale. L'autre est toujours lui-même, toujours impenable à la source de son être.¹¹

This act of humility is coupled with an act of distancing of the observing self from the external world, in order to avoid pathetic fallacies, the anthropomorphism of nature, and facile romantic posturing. Segalen continues to surprise us, debunking our normal expectations by expressing vividly original views about old subjects, and by walking an untrodden path, so to speak. For Segalen, “Longtemps l’homme l’anima [nature] de son propre souffle. Il lui prêle ses passions et ses gestes” (*Essai*, 25). By anthropomorphizing nature, the ordinary spectator hollows it out of its real existence, creating it—or recreating it—in his own image, and blunting the true and authentic sensation of the exotic. For, as Segalen reiterates, “le monde extérieur est ce qui se différencie aussitôt de nous” insofar as “le sentiment de la nature n’existait qu’au moment où l’homme sut la concevoir différente de lui” (*Essai*, 25).

Segalen’s views have serious implications pertaining to the question of representation. In the colonial period, early European travellers and ‘pioneering’ settlers described the land they reached in terms, images, and metaphors that they were accustomed to, that their own European environment had accustomed them to; and thus, the new territory on which they were setting foot for the first time was described from within an already existing repertoire. In other words, the new unfamiliar environment is judged by the extent to which it resembles or differs from their own familiar environment they have left behind. Thus, a desert in the Arab Peninsula—to which local population is used—is inclement or even deadly by comparison with their Lake District, and an African bush is described as being wild and treacherous compared to the softness of the countryside in Essex or the neatly trimmed gardens of Versailles. This could lead to the creation of a whole apparatus of justifications for appropriating, conquering, and a will to curb and dominate the so called ‘savage nature’ and its ‘backward and/or violent denizens’.

Segalen is aware of such egotistical sidestepping and quite lucidly charts out his way in a way to avoid all forms of reductionism, and all the excesses of colonial times that he was most likely witnessing around him:

¹¹ Khatibi, 28.

“No folklore then, no colonial literature, but a writing of the Outside which hosts the Other’s location in my language, in my imaginary space. Distant difference: it is when the Other is maintained and respected in his singularity that I may be perhaps received by him. There is no absolute transparency, no overall reduction. The Other is still himself, still unfathomable at the source of his being.” [My trans.]

“Le sage ...discerne qu’il a failli prendre pour un principe de certitude un goût particulier et qu’il a considéré, l’espace d’un instant, sa volonté, comme le centre du monde ; il perçoit avec lucidité l’origine passionnelle de la théorie qui le bouleversa. Par là, il connaît sa relativité... il sait l’endroit précis où elle rompt la chaîne de la causalité pour prendre son point d’appui sur le vouloir...”¹²

These declarations attest to Segalen’s vigilance, carefulness, and ethical uprightness vis à vis the thorny question of Western representation of otherness and its pitfalls, again at a time when vigilance and uprightness were easily pushed aside by colonial concerns and the arrogance, the certainty, and the authority with which the colonial traveller armed himself. Steve Moyer points to this exceptionally lucid and honest approach that Segalen adopted towards his art, an objective and a relativist approach that makes him a true modern:

Segalen’s greatest feat was breaking with the colonial exoticism of such nineteenth-century writer-travelers as Pierre Loti and Rudyard Kipling. Where those authors made no pretence about surrendering Western, or even imperial, values while depicting foreign cultures, Segalen was intensely self-conscious about his depictions of the other in ways that seem especially modern.¹³

Segalen prizes relativity and objectivity, chastening whims and ego trips that confuse authentic causality with mere personal will that conceives personal desire and volition as the centre of the world. Segalen wants the traveller, the original exot to be aware of ‘the passionate origin’ of his views on alterity and its environment to avoid turning them into rationalizations, justifications, and eventually authoritativeness. Again, in his conception of the exotic that he strives to erect as an aesthetic principle, Segalen makes no claim as to its universal validity or absolute pertinence. He insists that this principle originating from within remains only one among many, admitting clearly that he knows that ‘it is no more valid than any other principle, but also that it is no less valid’.

All his entries share one main concern: the celebration of diversity that he keeps hammering out all throughout his essay. Throughout his essay, he revisits more than once the ‘pseudo-exots’ like tourists or even novelists like Pierre Loti, expressing his distaste for their cheapening of the exotic and calling them ‘pimps of the sensation of

¹² *Essai*, 30. “The wise man... recognizes that he almost took a particular liking for something as a principle of certainty, and that in the space of an instant he has conceived *his desire as the center of the universe*; he is all too aware of the passionate origin of the theory which has overwhelmed him. This is how he recognizes its relativity... he knows the precise place where this theory has broken the chain of causality to attain his support by learning on his will (*Essay*, 26)

¹³ Steve Moyer, 11.

diversity'. However, if in one of his earliest entries (August 17, 1908), Segalen begins by demanding a clearing of the field (un déblaiement du terrain); in his entry of January 13, 1909, he becomes bolder by demanding a clearing, or even a sweeping out of the colonizers and the colonial functionaries themselves:

*Déblaiement: le Colon, le
Fonctionnaire colonial.
Ne sont rien moins que des Exotes ! Le
premier surgit avec le désir du
commerce indigène le plus commercial.
Pour lui, le Divers n'existe qu'en tant
qu'il lui servira de moyen de gruger.
Quant à l'autre, la notion même d'une
administration centralisée, de lois
bonnes à tous et qu'il doit appliquer, lui
fausse d'emblée tout jugement, le rend
sourd aux disharmonies (ou harmonies
du Divers).
Par cela même, la littérature coloniale
n'est pas notre fait.¹⁴*

In post-colonial time, such a condemnation of colonial mercantilism and colonial bureaucrats' blindness would sound unexceptional and even commonplace, but placed in its historical context, the context of colonialism, it must have raised quite a few eyebrows as it was surely daring, brave, and uncommon in its severity. Saying in plain terms that colonialists and their cronies were a bunch of crude and voracious swindlers and exploiters when other self-righteous colonial writers like Edith Wharton¹⁵, Walter Harris¹⁶, and others, were chanting the merits and the benefits of the European 'Civilizing Mission' must have been quite an uncommon position to take.

In his essay, which is really more of a journal than an essay, the question of the exotic is really a permanent obsession that he keeps belabouring over and over again. And this clearly shows how strongly he felt about this question. In his entry of April 28, 1910, he returns to tourists and false explorers that he considers "Troupeaux Errants" (roaming herds). Notice the contempt with which he talks about them in this passage: "S'ils étaient au moins sauvages! Mais non, ce sont les plus doux

parmi les bestiaux, les plus faciles à conduire, à museler, à châtrer» (*Essai*, 47). Yet, though they are like domestic animals, they leave in their wake modifications, waste, and damage ("Les modifications qu'ils entraînent avec eux. Leurs dégâts. Leurs rognures"). For example, in China, which was one of the destinations of predilection of Segalen, what these tourists see of the country, its beauty, its mountains and its rivers is "ce qu'un journaliste a vu jadis du baigne: les murs."¹⁷ This ironic reference is obviously made to the Great Wall of China that occults everything else in the country for the false exotics and the false explorers of whom Segalen is contemptuous. One can imagine Segalen shaking his head in disapproval while saying ominously, "À voir ce qu'ils font, ce qu'ils sabotent, on peut être pris d'une grande peur au point de vue de l'exotisme pur" (*Essai*, 47).¹⁸ One wonders what Segalen would have thought of today's mass tourism and its damages in our neoliberal, post-capitalist age in which mass consumerism has turned everything, including culture, into a disposable commodity. It is interesting that Segalen has seen it happen and warned against it before it became a rampant disease.

It is important to note, however, that Segalen could not be really considered a truly committed anti-colonialist. Such a statement may sound provocative considering the fact that he has been quoted several times lashing out at colonials and colonialism. Nonetheless, it needs to be said that one gets the sense from reading his *Essai* that although he did not ascribe to colonialism, he had no direct interest or involvement in politics, and he was too much of an aesthete to be openly a committed opponent of colonialism and devote his life to fighting against it. I will return to this point elsewhere, but suffice it to say at this stage that it transpires from his *Essai* that he was endowed more with an artistic sensibility than he was with a political one; and his awareness was more literary, more artistic than political or ideological. In other words, his condemnation of colonialism is provoked more by the damage that colonialism could do to true exoticism, difference, or what he liked to call "le sentiment du divers". But to Segalen's credit, one should state in clear terms that it was no less a condemnation. And this is what matters for the purpose of this argument. Indeed, the entry dated October 18, 1911 (Tientsin, China) leaves one with the sense that every other concern, be it social or political, is subservient to his imperious concern with the authentic taste of the exotic. He states again that in his *Essai*,

*Il ne peut y être question de tropiques et
de cocotiers, ni de colonies ou d'âmes
nègres, ni de chameaux, ni de vaisseaux,
ni de grandes houles, ni d'odeurs, ni
d'îles enchantées, ni*

¹⁴ *Essai*, 40. "Sweep away: the colonial, the colonial bureaucrat. They are nothing like Exots! The former comes into being with the desire for native trade relations of the most commercial kind. For the colonial, Diversity exists only in so far as it provides him with the means of duping others. As for the colonial bureaucrat, the very notion of a centralized administration and of laws for the good of everyone, which he must enforce, immediately distorts his judgement and renders him deaf to the disharmonies (or harmonies of Diversity) neither of these figures can boast a sense of aesthetic contemplation. For this very reason, "colonial" literature is of no interest to us." (*Essai*, 35)

¹⁵ Edith Wharton, *In Morocco* (Fez: The Moroccan Cultural Studies Centre, 2005)

¹⁶ Walter Harris, *Morocco that Was*. (Great Britain: 1983)

¹⁷ *Essai*, 47. "What a journalist long ago saw of the penal colony: the walls" (*Essai*, 39).

¹⁸ "Seeing what they are like, and what they ruin, one might well be very fearful of them from the point of view of a pure exoticism" (*Essai*, 39).

d'incompréhensions, ni de soulèvements indigènes, ni de néant et de mort, ni de larmes de couleur, ni de pensées jaunes, ni d'étrangetés, ni d'aucune des « saugrenuités » que le mot « Exotisme » enferme dans son acception quotidienne (italics added) [...] Exotisme : qu'il soit bien entendu que je n'entends par là qu'une chose, mais immense : le sentiment que nous avons du Divers. (Essai, 55)¹⁹

Segalen's thought on this issue is referred to as being radical not only because of his call for a thorough 'delousing' (épouillement) of the concept of exoticism, but also because in his attempt to catch the special feeling that diversity can stir in us, in total disregard for all other preoccupations such as 'Negro souls', 'indigenous uprisings' or oriental tears' (Segalen uses the metonymic term 'yellow' for Oriental because he was then in China). He for example declares in a manner that may be misinterpreted as sheer arrogance that "[A] sentir vivement la Chine, je n'ai jamais éprouvé le désir d'être chinois" (Essai, 57).²⁰ His lack of desire to identify, melt with the Chinese and his ostensible disregard for local populations of the colonies in general most likely comes from his artistic obsession with a particular feeling, but, most paradoxically, also from a strange or, let's say, an excessive intellectual integrity: For him, by identifying too much with the indigenous, by romanticizing them, by speaking for them, and representing them, he may end up violating their integrity, misspeaking for them and misrepresenting them. For Segalen, the colonizer ruined the truly exotic, the difference, the diversity and the precious feeling they can stir in true exots, and this is reason enough to condemn colonialism.

Segalen remains first and foremost a true aesthete in search of difference, but this difference he seeks is not the blatant and the obvious one, but difference in resemblance, so to speak, the gradations, the imperceptible shades, the subtleties: "C'est dans la difference que gît tout l'intérêt. Plus la différence est fine, indiscernable, plus s'éveille et s'aiguise le sens du divers" (Essai, 60).²¹ In relation with the problematic of representation, because of his vigilance, his punctiliousness, his endeavour to

perceive gradations, shades, and subtleties in artefacts and in humans, Segalen avoids lumping faceless 'natives' together, dismissing them with facile stereotypes, and in the end misrepresenting otherness altogether, as we have seen in some colonial texts. In fact, Segalen has a revulsion for colonial literature, and he states quite strongly that he would hate to see his *Essai* classified as a colonial text: "le pire des sorts que ce livre ait à craindre soit d'être à jamais dépecé, confondu, peut-être même louangé de bonne foi sous la rubrique 'coloniale', et classé dans la littérature du même nom" (Essai, 66). It is because of this cheap exoticism that " 'colonial' et 'exotic' désignèrent dans un certain rayon de la littérature des valeurs analogues" (Essai, 81). Segalen was aware that exoticism was a synonym for "impressions de pays lointains", climates and foreign races and "trop souvent méemployé par substitution à celui plus compris encore de 'colonial' "(83).²² This is what might be called an early awareness of the stigma attached to colonialism and everything related to it.

Les Immémoriaux is an application of Segalen's theory of the exotic as expressed in his collected notes on the subject looked at earlier. It is through the happy use of an inversed narrative perspective that Segalen realizes in *Les Immémoriaux* his aesthetics of the diverse the main motto of which is "la connaissance que quelque chose n'est pas soi-même...le pouvoir de concevoir autre."²³ Much in keeping with his 'esthétique du divers', Segalen positions his narrator who is himself a Maori as an insider looking out, not an outsider looking in. The outcome of this narrative strategy is that the world view in Segalen's novel is Polynesian-centred, not European-centred. And it is precisely from the originality of this narrative strategy that *Les Immémoriaux* mainly derives its distinctiveness. One can even go so far as to proclaim that the perspective from which this tale of the Maory people is narrated makes it quite an exception in the whole genre of the Western travel literature, let alone the colonial novel the presumed authenticity of which was repeatedly boasted about by colonial writers such as Charles Régismanset and Roland Lebel and their like. In Western travel narratives in general, the narrative voice is always—if not exclusively—that of a European looking at the local culture from above, observing its strangeness or its idiosyncrasies, its exoticism, the essential characteristics of its denizens and evaluating all through western eyes, western standards and values, and most often, arrogantly pontificating about the 'native' culture, and moralizing about it from a Western ethnocentric bias. On the contrary, this time, the equation is upside down, and normal expectations are entirely reversed, as it is the Maori consciousness, not a European one, that is hovering on the scene of the encounter between the Maori people and the intruding Europeans; and the

¹⁹ "It cannot be about such things as the tropics or coconut trees, the colonies or Negro souls, nor about camels, ships, graet waves, scents, spices, or enchanted islands. I t cannot be about misunderstanding and native uprisings, nothingness and death, colored tears, oriental thought, and various oddities, nor about any of the preposterous things that the word "Exoticism" commonly calls to mind [...] Exoticism. It should be understood that I mean only one thing, but something immense by this term: the feeling which Diversity stirs in us" (Essay, 46-47).

²⁰ "While experiencing China profoundly, I have never had the desire to be Chinese" (Essay, 49).

²¹ "All the interest resides in Difference. The finer the difference, the more difficult it is to discern, the greater the awakening and stimulation of the feeling for Diversity" (Essay, 51).

²² "Too often misused by being substituted for that word, which is yet more compromised" (Essay, 68).

²³ "The recognition that something is oher than one's self...The power of perceiving otherwise" (Essay)

weird, the alien, the peculiar, the ludicrous, in short, the other, is, for a change, the white man with his lifestyle, culture, and religion. Maoris view things according to their own understanding, their own mentality, not the European, while Segalen seems to be only transcribing their thoughts, their world vision, interfering as little as possible. For example their references to far-away lands are expressed in abstract and poetic terms (“des terres flottant par-delà le ciel visible” (*Imm*, 31); time is referred to in terms of “lunaisons” (30) instead of mathematical time with its precise days and months; and foreigners’ ships are “iles flottantes” or “iles voyageuses” (60)—And this is not done tongue in cheek to make another culture look exotic or laughable as is the case in general in colonial literature. Here it is the norm, stated with no complex whatsoever. Khatibi lauds this brand of ethnological realism as follows:

Ici éclate l'ironie superbe de Segalen. Térii [the main character] observe le conquérant, s'interroge sur la bizarrerie de ses paroles, de ses actes. Il se fait ethnologue. Mais un ethnologue Qu'aucune ethnologie n'a pu inventer. Ce nouvel ethnologue, qui est perdu sur son île océanique, ignore par exemple l'opposition entre « état de culture » et « état de nature », entre le sacré et le profane, l'écriture et la parole. Bien plus, il s'applique avec sérieux et un certain ravissement de l'esprit une ethnologie de l'ethnologie.²⁴

Because the narrative viewpoint is profoundly rooted in Tahiti and its culture, normality is on the side of the Tahitian, with his coherent social life and his consistent mythology and cosmology; whereas, abnormality is on the side of the Western invaders, sailors and missionaries alike. The Westerners’ usual legitimacy coming from a long history of pre-dominance and unquestioned supremacy of taste is, owing to Segalen’s inversion of narrative viewpoint, questioned, shaken, and removed from its long-held position of superiority. Suddenly, it is Europeans who are laughable.

Moreover, an original and efficient approach to the exotic is at the same time an original and efficient handling of colonialism. The novel is a brilliant anatomy of colonialism, with a ‘before’ and an ‘after’, that is, the pre-colonial times, depicting through the eyes and the consciousness of Térii, the haèrè-po (Térii, The Chanter)

²⁴ Khatibi, 28.

“Here Segalen’s superb irony explodes. Térii observes the conqueror, wonders about his bizarre words and his acts. He makes an ethnologist of himself. But an ethnologist that no ethnology has invented. This new ethnologist, who is lost in his oceanic island, ignores for example the opposition between ‘state of culture’ and ‘state of nature’, between the sacred and the profane, writing and the spoken word. Even more, he applies with a certain rapture of the spirit an ethnology of ethnology. [My trans]

the Maoris’ ancestral life, and the period chronicling the advent of European colonialism and the radical transformations it has brought with it. Yet, Segalen’s intent is clear right at the outset with the novel opening with the capitalized dedication, “AUX MAORI DES TEMPS OUBLIES”²⁵ and the elegiac epigraph “Mon ami...dans quel état mon pays est-il tombé.”²⁶ The novel opens with the significant incantatory and dignified statement that describes the meaningful and physically and spiritually coherent life of the Maori people before the colonial incursion:

Cette nuit-là—comme tant d'autres nuits si nombreuses qu'on n'y pouvait songer sans une confusion – Térii le récitant marchait à pas mesurés, tout au long des parvis inviolables. L'heure était propice à répéter sans trêve, afin de n'en pas omettre un mot, les beaux parler originels: où s'enferment, assurent les maîtres, l'éclosion des mondes, la naissance des étoiles, le façonnage des vivants, les ruts et les monstrueux labeurs des dieux Maori.²⁷

The early arrivals of Europeans on their big ships elicit no more than curiosity but, unsuspecting, they laugh at the weird ways of these “Piritané” with a peculiar tongue. As the narrator says in a detached manner, “On s’égayait des nouveaux-venus; on marquait leurs gestes étroits et la rudesse de leur langage” (*Imm*, 41). The tempo of the narrative is slow and relaxed, and the tone is evocative, reflecting thus the hedonistic lifestyle of the Maori people in pre-colonial times. But, the insidious penetration of the colonizer is all the more ominous precisely because it is announced in the narrator’s unsuspecting comments. The narrator recalls the terrible effect of newly-brought European alcoholic drinks in these terms, “[Q]u’était donc cette ivresse inconnue qui, loin d’apaiser les membres comme l’ivresse du ava maori, pousse au meurtre et rend stupide et fou?”²⁸

Although Segalen fictionalized his material according to his own literary sensibility, he is faithful to his sources which add a touch of ethnographic realism to his novel.

²⁵ “To the Maori of Forgotten times”

²⁶ “My friend!...into what a state my country has fallen! O O-taili! Ahouai! Ahouai.”

²⁷ *Les Immémoriaux*, 9.

“That night—as on many other nights, far too many to be remembered clearly—Térii the chanter was walking slowly and deliberately around the sacred space. Now was an auspicious time for rehearsing endlessly the fine ancient stories, so that nothing would be lost. Stories that, the masters insist, tell of the beginnings of the worlds, the birth of the stars, the shaping of living creatures, the couplings and vast undertakings of the Maori Gods.” (*L of M*, 25)

²⁸ *Les Immémoriaux*, 71.

“What was this unknown intoxication, which, far from calming the limbs as does the intoxication of the ava Maori, incites men to murder, drives them mad and makes them stupid? (*L of M*, 69)

The devastating illnesses, among so many other chronicled transformations in Maori society, are a direct borrowing from Jacques-Antoine Moerenhout who comments, “On eût dit que notre haleine seule infectait l’air pur de ces îles ; car à peine avions-nous passé dans l’une, que le peuple s’y trouvait frappé de fièvres, de dyssentries, et d’autres maux jusqu’alors inconnus, qui le moissonnaient avec une effrayante rapidité.”²⁹ White man’s scourge against which the Maoris had no immunity are related matter-of-factly, almost unsuspectingly, and are endowed with a personalized touch with the enumeration of the different Maori social groups touched by the scourge:

*“Ainsi les souffles nouveaux qui empoisonnaient sans égards, les manants, les possesseurs-de-terre, les arii, se manifestaient injurieux même aux atua !-Contre ces souffles, voici que les conjurations coutumières montraient une impuissance étrange.”*³⁰

As a consequence, the formerly “île heureuse, devant l’angoisse de ses fils, tremblaient dans ses entrailles vertes” (*Imm*, 15), as it is now devastated by dyssentry, smallpox and other formerly unknown diseases. Segalen has relied on his personal experience as a doctor, and has lived the horrific effects of white man’s culture, as he relates in his journal, “sitôt débarqués, le refrain habituel nous chante aux Oeilles: rougeole...phtisie...paresse des habitants, et l’active disparition de familles entières.”³¹ Segalen is, however, careful not to adopt the much bandied about stereotype about the laziness of natives by contrasting the Maoris, who, before the colonial encroachment, were achievers, and even overreachers keen on self-accomplishment, self-realization, capable of heroic acts, and fully involved in the daily life of their community, with the retracted and so-called lazy Maoris of the post encroachment period. The Maoris in this period are not only exhausted and drained of their energy by imported illnesses, but they also find it difficult to relate to a Western work ethics that is not theirs, and they, on top of it, are not motivated by an exploitative capitalist system of production that does not respect their lifestyle and only sucks them bloodless without any worthwhile reward. Unlike the strong tone of the statement in the journal expressing Segalen’s outrage at the sad fate of Maori people, the tone through which such a fate is fictionalized in *Les Immémoriaux* is detached, unassuming, and almost innocent. Yet, this tone of the narration relating the change that has surreptitiously taken place in Maori society is just as effective and poignant. Segalen produces this effect, making the transformation of Maori society credible

without ruining it with false moralizing and without any false pretence of sympathy with the dying culture. The Maori narrator, fully in tune with his environment and confident in its value and appropriateness, has nothing to be apologetic about or to feel inferior about, and speaks about his culture and his people in terms that need not carry the stereotypes, the pre-conceived ideas, and the cultural arrogance that Western authors such as Wharton and Harris, among others, have used us to. When adventurous tribesmen sailing from “des eaux de derrière le firmament visible,” introduce themselves and their island to their Tahitian hosts, they declare “avec orgueil: ‘Notre île se nomme Nombriil-du-Monde.’”³² In colonial literature in general, such confidence, such ethnocentrism is rarely given a voice among indigenous people, the voiceless and the meek subalterns. The colonial experience is rarely viewed, rarely narrated, if ever, from the perspective of a native in Western literature. For example, seeing the crucifixion from their viewpoint, they wonder, in reaction to missionaries’ proselytizing, “quelle faiblesse nourrissait en vérité ce dieu, pour qu’il abandonnât son fils à la colère...d’autres dieux plus forts sans doute ?”³³

The narrator, whose voice at times completely blends with that of Térîi, speaks contemptuously about the strangers and about their ‘femmes blêmes’: “Elles apitoyaient: leurs vêtements incommodes, effrangés par les broussailles, salis de terre rouge, étaient indignes d’épouses de prêtres. Elles ne les dépouillaient jamais, de nuit, ou de jour, non plus qu’elles ne lavaient leurs membres...Vraiment, elles et leurs tané figuraient d’assez pauvres hotes pour la terre Tahiti.”³⁴ For Maori men, these European women possess no charm, with «pieds de chèvres enveloppés de peau d’animaux, et le corps sans grâce et sans ampleur, serré dans des étoffes dures” (36).³⁵ In their self-assuredness, they speak dismissively about white men and their punctiliousness, their curious approach to life, time, and the universe, in opposition to the wisdom, the timelessness and the hedonism of their own life:

Térîi ne cherchait point à dénombrer les saisons depuis lors écoulées ; ni combien de fois on avait crié les adieux au soleil fécondateur.-Les hommes blêmes ont seuls cette manie baroque de compter

³² *Les Immémoriaux*, 53.

“[they declared] Proudly: ‘ our island is called the Navel-of- the World’ ”

³³ *Les Immémoriaux*, 93.

“What weakness really fed this god, so that he abandons his son to the anger...of undoubtedly more powerful gods.”

³⁴ *Les Immémoriaux*, 103.

“The pale women began to sigh. They were a sorry sigh. Their unwieldy clothes, frayed by the bushes and stained with red earth, were unfit for the consorts of priests. They never took them off, by day or night, nor washed their limbs....They and their tane were rather poor guests for the land of Tahiti.” (*L of M*, 93)

³⁵ “These women had feet like goats wrapped up in animal skins and graceless, skinny bodies squeezed tightly into hard cloth.” (*L of M*, 43)

²⁹ Cited by Rosemary Arnaud in “Victor Segalen : Ethnography and ‘Exotisme’ in *Les Immémoriaux*,” A.U.M.L.A: Australian Universities Language and Literature Association, Journal 82 (1994: Nov) 62.

³⁰ *Les Immémoriaux*, 18.

³¹ Victor Segalen, *Journal des Iles* (Papeete-Tahiti : Les Editions du Pacifique, 1978) 49.

avec grand soin, les années enfuies depuis leur naissance....Autant mesurer des milliers de pas sur la peau changeante de la mer...Il suffit de sentir son corps agile, ses membres alertes, ses désirs nombreux, prompts et sûrs, sans s'inquiéter du ciel qui tourne et des lunes qui périssent. (10)

Before they are coerced into accepting missionaries's guilt-ridden Christian teachings, the Maori people were worshipers of pleasure and most of their activities were centred on a celebration of life and its delights, as we are told in this highly poetic passage in which Segalen can hardly hide his own adherence to the Maori celebratory and pleasure-seeking way of life, "[C]ar tout est matière, sous le ciel Tahiti, à jouissances, à délices."³⁶ Puzzling over the 'weird' teachings professed by the missionaries about Jesus' crucifixion, meant as they are taught, to absolve humanity of its sins and the significance of such rituals as the communion, the narrator cannot understand these foreigners who "prétendaient se nourrir de leurs dieux," enjoining that "sous ce firmament, ici, les hommes maori proclament ne manger que du bonheur" (*Imm*, 107).³⁷ The novel, especially the early part describing Maori people and their culture before they are coerced into submission, is rife with comparisons stressing their vitality, their exuberance, and adding more strength by comparing with pride the wholesomeness of their epicurean living with white men's self-consciousness, their tightness, and the scantiness of their living. The narrator over and over mentions the Maori people, admiring "la majesté de leur appétit, l'ampleur de leur soif, la beauté du festin. C'étaient vraiment des Maîtres-de-jouissance: nuls liens, nuls soucis, nuls angoisses."³⁸ The narrator immediately sets the contrast in favor of his people by asking rethorically, "Que figuraient auprès d'eux, les sordides étrangers, les hommes blêmes aux appétits de boucs, aux démarches de crabe, aux voix de filles impubères?" (110).³⁹ It is interesting to note the shift in outlook that will set in immediately after the colonial incursion and the conversion of the Maori people to Christianity, as they begin to chant the merit of the European and his ways and denigrate their ancestral but now forsaken way of life.

Upon his return from his long exile, an exile detailed in Part II of the novel, with its sea peregrinations and adventures, which is an opportunity for Segalen to

complete his description of the heroic and mythic dimensions of the Maori people, Térii finds to his bewilderment an unrecognizably transformed society, completely changed by the now-well established new colonial order and its missionaries. Significantly, Térii, the low-ranking but ambitious haëro-po was banned from his society as a punishment for his unforgivable lapse of memory in the course of an official recitation of the genealogy of his people. Upon his return, the incredulous Térii discovers that his society has changed under the influence of the white man. In an obvious loss of identity, they renounce their names, adopting Christian ones. In the usual destructive process of self-hate instigated by the colonizer, a befitting indigenous name like 'Roométua' is replaced by 'Samuëla', because as the new convert in question says with pride, "c'était un bien villain nom [...] un nom digne des temps ignorants!" (*Imm*, 146). Térii cannot fathom Christianity with all its "interdits" that are stifling his people and their ancestral emancipated living: "Ne pas manger, en ce jour, de repas apprêté, ne pas danser, ni chanter, sauf de bien pauvres péhé, ne pas caresser de femmes; quoi donc aussi?" (160). Noticing all this epistemic violence done to his people, "Térii senti violemment, avec une angoisse, combien les hommes, et leur parlers et leurs usages, et sans doute aussi les secrets désirs de leur entrailles, -- combien tout cela s'était bouleversé au souffle du dieu nouveau."⁴⁰

In this highly important third part of the novel, Segalen realizes a significant process of othering through his narratorial consciousness, as Térii, 'defamiliarized', as it were, with his own culture after his long absence of two decades, is totally at a loss, dumbfounded, and estranged in his old/new environment. Feeling like an alien, "Térii se demanda sans gaîté si la terre Tahiti, n'avait point en même temps que de dieux et de prêtres, changé d'habitants ou de ciel! Il se reprit à errer au hasard, plus indécis que jamais" (155). Because of his estrangement and alienation from both the new European masters and his now-converted compatriots with strange clothes and unfathomable behaviour, they, missionaries and converts alike, undergo through Térii's incredulous eyes an othering that entirely counterpoints the usual othering operated by the usual authoritative Western narrators when they set their impression on 'natives' in their travel narratives. Instead of the usual essentializing and stereotyping of the other of Europe, the European and the Europeanized Maori become the other of old Maori culture. And the effect of this unusual operation of othering has a lasting effect on the reader, used to seeing in colonial fiction 'the good-natured native' benefitting from the European *mission civilisatrice* and the recalcitrant or lazy savage receiving punishment. Because of this radical shift in perspective, the unnaturalness of the drastic change is caught in all its

³⁶ *Les Immémoriaux*, 107.

"For under the Tahiti sky, all is cause for pleasure and delight." (*L of M*, 96)

³⁷ "Under this sky, the Maori claim to eat only happiness." (*L of M*, 96)

³⁸ "The majesty of their appetite, the vastness of their thirst, the splendour of the feast. They were indeed Masters of pleasure and delight: no ties, no cares, no anxieties." (*L of M*, 98)

³⁹ "What were the squalid strangers, the pale men with the appetite of goats, the gait of crabs, and voices like young girls compared with them? (*Essay*, 99).

⁴⁰ *Les Immémoriaux*, 160.

"Térii wondered dully if Tahiti had not changed its sky and its inhabitants along with its gods and priests! He set off again to wander at random, more undecided than ever." (*L of M*, 136)

vividness. Europeans are clumsy, obtrusive, arrogant, and authoritarian, and their 'mimic men' appear now timid, timorous, restrained, and awkward in their maladjustment to the newly acquired ways of the European culture. Gone are the carefree days of pleasure, robustness, and natural vitality, as the Maori females are now prudish, constrained, and even ludicrous. The Maori narrator goes on and on describing the changes of his society; and what emerges every time from his descriptions is the incongruousness of the white invaders, the disruption caused by their presence, the legitimacy and the dignity of the Maori people, and the injustice inflicted upon them. Over and over again, Segalen puts side by side the disappearing cultural ease, its naturalness, and the newly acquired self-consciousness and the artificiality of the imposed Christian morality.

Through Térii's defamiliarizing eyes, the balance is in favour of the Maori, so to speak, not "the pale-skinned foreigners". In other words, it is the European settler who comes across as the other. The distantiation, the defamiliarization, and the ensuing establishment of the native viewpoint as the valid one instead of the usual European one, are reinforced by Segalen's Maori-based lexical register, a register that, by the way, Segalen's narrator never takes the trouble to explain to the reader, who is all throughout at pains understanding a text which is richly peppered with Polynesian vocabulary. This vocabulary of course ends up growing on the reader who catches on the more s/he reads, but this strategy is used by Segalen on purpose, as it is meant to let a culture speak for itself without any apology. Segalen's strategy reminds us of the famous declaration that Wole Soyinka makes in reaction to Senghor's Négritude aesthetics: "A tiger does not proclaim his tigritude; he pounces." This attempt to use a language that is embedded in the Maori environment and imbued with its culture is a reflection of Segalen's aesthetics of the diverse as expressed in his essay. As we recall him saying, "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 aigue et immédiate d'une incompréhensibilité éternelle."⁴¹ His reliance on the principle of distantiation exemplifies his theory of the exotic, a theory dictated above all by the moral duty to keep a people's impenetrability and integrity intact. And in this impressive exigency of writing by which he strictly abides, Segalen remains unparalleled in the literature of the exotic.

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⁴¹*Essai*, 25.

"Exoticism is therefore not an adaptation; not the perfect comprehension of something outside one's self that one has managed to embrace fully within himself, but the keen and immediate perception of an eternal incomprehensibility." (*Essay*, 21)