

## Introduction

Since its initial publication in 1955, Victor Segalen's *Essay on Exoticism: An Aesthetics of Diversity* has gained increasingly wider acclaim as an important voice in contemporary debates on cultural alterity and has been discussed by such major cultural critics as James Clifford and Tzvetan Todorov.<sup>1</sup> It has also come to serve as a touchstone for postcolonial and Francophone studies, and writers like Edouard Glissant and Abdelkebir Khatibi have seen in the figure of Segalen and in the essay in particular, a critique of conventional exoticism and an attempt to get beyond colonizing attitudes by positing a mechanism for appreciating difference and recognizing difference as an aesthetic value—for being capable, as Segalen writes, of “conceiving otherwise.”<sup>2</sup> The use of two quotations from Segalen's essay—one exalting the importance of diversity and difference and the other decrying diversity's decline—in Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant's manifesto *Eloge de la Créolité/In Praise of Creoleness*, where they appear alongside quotations by Aimé Césaire, Edouard Glissant, and Franz Fanon, attests to a recognition of Segalen's work on exoticism, as well as to his contribution to a contemporary theoretical discourse intent on reconfiguring the relationship between self and other.<sup>3</sup> The essay thus stands as an important link between colonial and postcolonial periods and between colonial and postcolonial critical writing. While contemporary use of Segalen's essay may overlook some of its important historical

biases, there is no question that Segalen's desire to reconfigure typically colonialist-exoticist conceptions and to entertain the possibility of a different kind of cultural politics persists as a force to be reckoned with in current debates.

*Essay on Exoticism* is a crucial document for colonial studies. Though the uncompleted essay is replete with repetitions, internal contradictions, and unsustained assertions, Segalen's intent is nonetheless clear: a desire to critique his contemporaries for their imperialist conceptions of difference and to dissociate himself and his own conception of exoticism from what can more generally be called a romantic-exoticist tradition. This tradition was exemplified for Segalen by the "pseudo-Exot" Pierre Loti, who was popular at the end of the nineteenth century, but stretches back to such earlier nineteenth-century romantic writers as George Sand and Alphonse de Lamartine, who misconstrue the relationship to nature—nature being one type of "exotic" otherness in Segalen's vision—by understanding it merely "as the corollary to their own selves." But if Segalen continually strives to critique narratives of the past, he is no less interested in criticizing his contemporaries: colonial novelists like Marius-Ary Leblond and Emile Nolly, who in his eyes see no problem subsuming the exotic within the colonial, and "impressionistic" travel writers like Jean Ajalbert and Paul Bonnetain, whose work arose alongside the great expansion of France's colonial empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Segalen's attempt to distinguish his understanding of the exotic from theirs is part of his project to strip the very word 'exoticism' of "all its innumerable scoriae, flaws, stains . . . that such continued use by so many mouths, so many prostituting tourist hands have left it with."

Of the other side of the equation, the need to reconstitute and reconfigure an exoticism along different lines, Segalen is keenly aware: if previously colonialist attitudes perverted the capacity to sense out and appreciate the exotic, then an aestheticizing, restorative vision must replace them. If modernity has entailed

an acceleration in the means and modes of travel and thereby an unprecedented intermingling of cultures and peoples, and thus a waning of difference, that process has to be resisted by a renewed appreciation for differences or by an ever finer eye and capacity to experience the ever finer differences which remain intact. If exoticism is apprehended and interpreted vulgarly by the large majority of individuals, authority to speak of it must be limited to the great artist, to the individual possessing a strong individuality: the “Exot.” If the waning of class, gender, and cultural difference in the world points to the decline of exoticism in absolute terms, its essential nature as part and parcel of the conception of the self (the notion that the self is other to the self, which he derives from Jules de Gaultier’s *Le Bovarysme*) has to be recognized and affirmed.

It is important when considering both Segalen’s contribution to postcolonial discourse and to colonial theories of exoticism to note that Segalen’s use of the word “diversity” (*le divers* as he often calls it) does not in itself indicate the kind of intermingling suggested by *métissage* or *créolité*. In the essay, “diversity” does not refer in the first instance to a kind of multiculturalism or to the close coexistence of (cultural, class, or gender) differences. Rather it refers to the existence of absolute (if not essential) differences between peoples and cultures in the world. So that when, for example, Segalen laments the decline of diversity, he is lamenting the breaking down of these differences and their disappearance due to such processes as cultural intermingling, democracy, and feminism. Thus diversity for Segalen is not initially a moral concept; rather, it is an ontological concept to which he accords aesthetic value, as the subtitle of his essay indicates. This is the paradox of Segalen: while current assessments of his writing on exoticism remain aware and critical of his undemocratic remarks regarding feminism and class differences, his frequent elitist stances (e.g., his Nietzschean exaltation of the great man), and his attempt to sidestep historical realities in favor of positing an aesthetics, his work has also been

rightly recognized as struggling to forge a new understanding of alterity relevant to postmodernity.

That the essay was never completed is perhaps an indication that Segalen was not able to smooth out the contradictions of his own reconceptualization of exoticism, and it is tempting to ponder what a final version might have looked like. And yet, it is clear from the text we do have that Segalen always intended the essay to have a fragmentary form. As early as 1908 he imagines sending forth his vision “in the form of short, dense, and nonsymbolic prose pieces.” Later that same year he imagines his text as “a series of Essays, which, in accordance with this spontaneous ‘development’ of ideas, will proceed from the idea of Diversity.” An *essai* in the French tradition going back to Michel de Montaigne is an attempt, a means of putting forth and testing out one’s hypotheses at the very moment that one is making of this test or attempt a textual product called an essay. “This work,” writes Segalen in a 1911 entry, “is not an assertion so much as a search. If I undertake to write it, it is not in order to display fully-formed ideas, but in order to help me think this matter through.” The answer, he emphasizes, is “not known in advance.” Both Segalen’s insistence on the essay-nature of his text and our knowledge of his generally intense preoccupation as a modernist writer with questions of literary form should lead us to think of this text not as a series of fragments which have yet to come together in some coherent fashion but rather as something akin to what a final and aphoristic version might have looked like had Segalen, who died at such an early age, been able to complete his work.

### *Previous Editions*

Segalen published only three works in his lifetime: *Les Immémoriaux* in 1907, *Stèles* in 1912, and *Peintures* in 1916. A portion of *Essay on Exoticism* first appeared in 1955 in two installments of the *Mercure de France*. The entries selected for publication

were chosen by Pierre Jean Jouve and published as “Notes sur l’exotisme.”<sup>4</sup> A complete edition was published as *Essai sur l’exotisme (Notes)* in 1978, more than twenty years later. This text was edited and annotated by Dominique Lelong and introduced by Annie Joly-Segalen. The dated entries were supplemented by portions of Segalen’s correspondence which shed light on his exoticism project, and by several lengthy explanatory-biographical notes inserted between the entries to signal time lapses between entries and to explain Segalen’s activities at the time of their composition.<sup>5</sup> The subsequent 1986 edition, now titled *Essai sur l’exotisme*, is a reprint of the 1978 edition, but eliminates the explanatory notes within the text in favor of a lengthier introduction by Gilles Manceron. This edition also provides the reader with two essays by Segalen on Paul Gauguin and with his short story “Le Maître du Jour.”<sup>6</sup> The text of *Essai sur l’exotisme* in the collected works of Segalen edited by Henry Bouillier follows the format of the 1986 edition, as does this present translation, but it omits the selections from Segalen’s correspondence.<sup>7</sup>

### *A Note on the Translation*

In the interest of providing as faithful a translation as possible, I have reproduced Segalen’s capitalization and emphases, although these are somewhat erratic and inconsistent. (For example, words like “Diversity” or “Exoticism” are often, but not always, capitalized.) I have also had to distinguish in this English text between Segalen’s frequent use of suspension points (three closely spaced periods), indicating interruptions or breaks in thought, and ellipsis points (three periods separated from each other by a space), indicating missing portions of text.

The language of this text is not always inclusive (using “man” for “humankind”) or current (using “native,” say, rather than “indigenous”). But I have kept these terms as part and parcel of Segalen’s time. For this reason I have also retained the older

Wade-Giles romanization system for Chinese words rather than using the *pinyin* system spellings.

This English edition reproduces the typographic strategy present in both the 1978 and 1986 French editions of *Essai sur l'exotisme*, which distinguishes the letters written by Segalen from his entries on exoticism by italicizing them. Segalen's own notes to his entries appear at the bottom of the page, while explanatory notes are to be found at the end of the text. Those notes which have been translated from the French edition of the work, annotated by Lelong, are indicated as such. Otherwise, the endnotes are my own.