

Foreword:
The Exotics of Nowhere

Charles Baudelaire defended dandyism as the “best element in human pride,” commending the flaneur’s attempt to “combat and destroy triviality” in the struggle with a social conformism that threatened to install homogeneity everywhere that industrial capitalism had established its regime in the nineteenth century. A half century later, Victor Segalen nominated exoticism as the candidate best suited to protect contemporary life from the relentless banality wrought by the transformation of capitalism into mass-society imperialism and colonialism. This transformation, in his eyes, reached a climax with the Great War and its aftermath. Like Baudelaire, Segalen privileged the poetic. But where Baudelaire, according to Walter Benjamin, employed the “technique of the putsch,” eschewing the armature of allegory, often appearing as a poet willing to support any of the causes pursued by this class, Segalen, recalling the example of Mallarmé and the theory of *poésie pure*, built a “production on . . . (a) basic renunciation of all manifest experiences of . . . class. . . . These difficulties turn . . . poetry into an esoteric poetry.”¹ By contrast, Baudelaire, for the most part, avoided the esoteric, and, even though the experiences refracted through his optic “nowhere derived from the production process, least of all in its advanced form—the industrial process,” his work still bore the imprint of the historical moment in the figures of the “neurasthenic, of the big-city dweller, and of the customer.”² For Segalen, writing in a time when financial capital

already occupied the political economic horizon and imperialist powers competed madly to seize and colonize much of the globe outside of Euro-America, the appeal to exoticism promised to trade the vast unevenness of this moment for the poetic dream of aesthetic diversity and the fantasy of irreparable loss of what never was. Yet this very refusal of reference marked precisely how the poet, now driven by the noble ideal of art for art's sake, confronts language the way "the buyer faces the commodity on the market."³

In his poetic "Essay on Exoticism," an unfinished fragment attesting to the primacy of art in a world now mired in the mediocrity of the masses and an everyday life landlocked in repetitive routine, Segalen looked outwardly to "things," "to the 'external world,' to the Object in its entirety" that speaks and interpellates him, much like Benjamin's (and Marx's) empathic "soul of the commodity," whispering its seductions to a "poor wretch who passes a shop window containing beautiful and expressive things" and seeing in "everyone the buyer in whose hand and house it wants to nestle."⁴ For Segalen, the exoticism he ascribes to things, to the "Object in its entirety," "by an instantaneous, continuous *translation* that would echo one's presence rather than blurt it out bluntly," "will perhaps . . . create a terrain where I feel completely at home." Convinced that such a transformation depended upon the form one employs—what he called "art's reason for being," the act of translating the object and making visible what had remained hidden in a subjectivistic recess mobilized the unredeemed promise of a metaphysics of presence and its authentication of the individual's immediate experience. In this way, Segalen's rewriting of the text of exoticism abandoned the act of realistic description that had impelled so many travelers and tourists in the past to report on the strangeness they had encountered and replaced it with one founded on the eliciting of sensation and "suggestion." It also disdained the performative exoticism of a Pierre Loti or Lafcadio Hearn.

Even before Segalen began to write down the thoughts that would constitute the posthumous *Essay on Exoticism*, an older exoticism was already in practice, stemming from ceaseless overseas exploration and economic expansion and its accompanying search for new sources of raw material, markets, and cheap labor. This exoticism followed the itinerary of capitalism as it migrated around the globe and often masked the violent seizure and colonial expropriation that was at the heart of its law of movement. Segalen had observed that this exoticist practice was based on the prospect of an elsewhere, driven by the novelty of geographic unfamiliarity but exemplified by intrepid travelers/tourists like Pierre Loti, the explorer Richard Burton, and the cultural misfit Lafcadio Hearn. It signified the primacy of the spatial dimension of capitalist expansion at the expense of its temporal workings and thus managed to displace and often efface the baneful effects of the actual deterritorialization and reterritorialization of land, labor, and capital that transformed and destroyed received cultures of reference to make them little more than outposts of Western civilization. This mode of exoticism was entirely committed to spatializing territories into fixed, static, and unchanging landscapes that existed in temporalities outside of modernity: vast, ethnographic museums of alien cultures and peoples who lived in a zone of contemporary noncontemporaneity that would soon disappear before the homogenizing machine of industrial capitalism. Behind this invention of loss was a powerful desire for an elsewhere, located in the then and there that managed to displace the here and now of modernity which itself was already a misrecognition of the reproduction of capitalist accumulation. What exoticism constructed was the loss of something, an immense nostalgia for an experience that never existed and that was now made to appear prior to its narrative.⁵ In this narrative, the old, precapitalist cultures signifying difference and value have been rediscovered precisely in those colonial sites where the violent process of deterritorialization was proceed-

ing unchecked. (Nineteenth-century archaeology was undoubtedly prompted by this desire to penetrate the mystery of temporally lost and spatially distant civilizations.) Moreover, the idea of loss must be grasped within a context that had already privileged exchange value, the ever recurring relativization (and rationalization) of value driving the determination of price and the disappearance of value itself, which usually referred to those qualities that had remained unchanged and unmoved in the evaluation of the true, beautiful, good, and so forth. Exoticism must be seen as an attempt to redress the imbalance between quantity and quality by finding a time and place where the latter still prevailed. It is important to recall that the exotic project was contemporary to all those efforts to address the question of value by Marx and Nietzsche through Simmel. These efforts sought to find some stable grounding against the onslaught of relativization unleashed by the market and exchange. Ultimately, these concerns with defining value appealed to culture itself, unsurprisingly, as the repository for all subsequent claims of immovable and authentic values capable of anchoring experience within a stable identity in the ever-shifting swell of modernity. This was plainly the task that “exots” (the term used by Segalen to designate an earlier generation) like Loti and Hearn set for themselves. It also explains why these writers were encouraged to repress the colonial world which housed the irreducible remainder of difference — eternal and unchanging value (quality) — and why they so often desired union with the putative other that they had reified as alternatives to the mediocrity of modern life. Hearn tried desperately to become Japanese, much like his British contemporary in Kyoto, Ponceby-Fane, who costumed himself in traditional Japanese garb, mastered arcane and archaic Japanese, wrote about imperial mausoleums which he loved to visit and imagined himself living a Japanese life which, in the late Meiji period, was already an anachronism. Loti, another cultural cross-dresser, is best known for his outrageous impersonations of “natives”; he may very well have

prefigured Lawrence's later decision to dress in drag in order to perform as an authentic Arab. With Loti there is an insurmountable yearning for identification with the other—a thinly concealed eroticism which, in the hands of Segalen, becomes a desire for an abstract absolute called the aesthetics of diversity. Yet we must recognize in this fetishistic reunion with the other a discovery of a true self that was not so much a desire to recover a lost identity as it was a crucial and strategic displacement. This strategy of displacement corresponds to exoticism's penchant to repress the historicity that produced the colonial context which constituted the scene of exotic enactment. I am here referring to the displacement of modernity's true other: the industrial worker, whose figure is mapped onto the "native" that inhabits a place that is elsewhere and thus free from—because existing in another temporality and space—the conflict producing uncertainties of class struggle and the division of labor. (This misrecognition of the identity between the industrial worker of Euro-America and the colonized laborer has found its way into postcolonial discourse in all those attempts to psychologize the relationship between colonizer and colonized and locate an alternative modernity born from an anticolonial nationalism derived from uncontaminated native resources.) If, in any case, exots failed to acknowledge an identity between a colonial present and the indeterminate time and place of the other which had become the sublime object of their desire, they also fashioned the native into a figure that embraced all that modernity's real other lacked. Fleeing from the "dangerous and laboring classes," they sought immediate identification with a fictive "native" other, already imbedded in colonized labor, whose activity still echoed the violence of expropriation despite the exoticist effort to repress it by removing the colonial scene from consideration. But what the exots invariably overlooked was that the "native" other, much like the industrial worker, was already being pulled into the vortex of a vast machine of assimilation promoting "imitation" of the kind theo-

rized in Gabriel Tarde's late-nineteenth-century treatise *Les Lois de l'imitation*. Tarde's theory sought to supply a conception of "social tissue" founded on the presumption of lower class imitation of the upper classes as a means to achieve genuine commonality and the guarantee of social solidarity. Yet the fear of social disorder caused by class conflict—addressed earlier by Durkheim—was no less concealed in Tarde's thesis than in the exotic project to displace colonial violence and expropriation by valorizing the native as "other" to capitalism, even though drawn into the productive system. Kipling's short story, "The Man Who Would Be King," reminds us of the misbehavior and disorder caused by the lower classes once they were removed from the industrial city and entered the ranks of the British colonial army to live out the opportunities for fantasy it offered in subjected places like India.

Segalen was sharply dismissive of the earlier generation of exots, calling them "pseudo-Exots . . . the Panderers of the Sensation of Diversity," even though he acknowledged a personal admiration for Kipling and Hearn. "The Lotis," he wrote elsewhere in the text, "are . . . mystically drunk with and unconscious of their object. They confuse it with themselves and passionately intermingle with it, 'drunk with their god!'" They are travelers and mere tourists in space, restlessly visiting one strange place after another before the world runs out of places whose remoteness still offers the promise of mystery, spectators of the spectacle of difference who seek only contrast and comparison and the sensation of having seen lands no (white) man had called upon. Determined to strip the word exoticism of its exclusive and familiar associations with tropicality, vulgar spectatorship, and the regime of geographic adventure, Segalen was persuaded that exoticism was as dependent upon the dimension of time as it was upon space. The earlier exotics had privileged space over temporality in their touristic (and voyeuristic) desire to travel to an elsewhere. In Segalen's rewriting of the space of exoticism, an indeterminate nowhere allows

the exoticist to travel in time, in history. By the same measure, Segalen discounted the “colonial, the colonial bureaucrat” who has no other goal but the desire for native trade and commercial relations. Moreover, the bureaucrat’s main task is to execute and enforce laws which, accordingly, “render him deaf to the *disharmonies* (or harmonies of Diversity).” Both the colonial and the bureaucrat have failed to reach a level of “aesthetic contemplation.” For this reason, Segalen reasoned, colonial literature held no interest for exoticism.

In fact, his conception of exoticism was emptied of considerations of space or place and, as such, the desired elsewhere of the “pseudo-Exots.” Although Segalen acknowledged that he had written an essay on exoticism, he advised that it “cannot be about such things as the tropics or coconut trees, the colonies or Negro souls, nor about camels, ships, great waves, scents, spices, or enchanted islands. It cannot be about misunderstandings 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.” Rather, it is about time—“Going back: history. An escape from the contemptible and petty present. The elsewheres and the bygone days.” But, he added, it is also about the future to come. Marked by a recognition of difference, the “perception of Diversity,” and the “knowledge that something is other than one’s self,” exoticism is the act of the conscious being who, in conceiving of himself, can only do so as “*other* than he is.” In this revelatory moment of self-discovery, when the conscious individual sees himself in a true light and thus other than what he thought he was, he “rejoices in his Diversity,” in the recognition of his difference from others. The other that the individual ultimately finds is in himself and is himself. By bringing otherness back to the present and back to one’s place and reinstating its manifestation in the autonomous artist rather than in the wage laborer, now fused to the amorphous figure of the “people,” Segalen disclosed a lived history despite—and perhaps because

of—the absence of any reference to the circumstances that produced it and the bearers of its tradition. By bringing the mystery once associated with an elsewhere back to one’s own time and place, his essay prefigured the later surrealist discovery of the mystery in the everyday.

For Segalen return and self-discovery meant a reunion with one’s home. But home was not place but rather a temporality, an “epoch,” the “pleasure of living in a particular epoch in relation to others.” But such a temporal existence can be realized only by the individual since the experience of exoticism is only “*singular*, individualistic,” never associated with “plurality,” the masses, or what Heidegger later called “them.” It means also freedom from the object that is felt or being described. Unlike earlier exoticists, fixed on and indeed enslaved by the object and racing for identification with it, Segalen confessed that he never desired to be Chinese. Exoticism promised the recovery of an “original purity,” which meant rejoining the lost “feeling of experiencing the purity and intensity of Diversity.” In its rejection of a tedious, mediocre, and endless present, exoticism in his sense resembled Bovaryism—the quest to escape the banality and boredom of everyday life where yesterday, today, and tomorrow are indistinguishable. What would redeem the banality and conformism of everyday life was art or what he called “creative error,” an existence that produced diversity and recognized the need to valorize its different forms. For Segalen, the difference and diversity observed earlier in the colonial scene was now brought back home to “stir” him anew and to put into practice this aesthetic in a life that was already in the process of being flattened and crushed into a shapeless sameness. “If,” he warned, “the homogenous prevails in the deepest reality, nothing prevents one from believing in its eventual triumph over sensory reality. . . . The way will be cleared for the Kingdom of the Lukewarm; that moment of viscous mush without inequalities, falls, or reboundings, was prefigured grotesquely by the disappearance of ethnographic diversity.”

The earlier exoticists encountered a world that still offered the prospect of an elsewhere uncontaminated by industrial capitalism and thus an escape from the proletarian other to a sanctuary occupied by a native other not yet drawn into the devastatingly disruptive whirlpool of the division of labor. But Segalen was writing on the eve of the Great War and thus from a temporal perspective that already reflected the intense competitive expansion of Euro-America in Africa and Asia. All that was left of the exoticists' dream was an indeterminate elsewhere of difference situated either in the past or the future which only the poet and the dreamer would be able to imagine. These imaginaries of past and future promised to deliver the poet from the present and the incipient regime of mass politics and culture. "There used to be a considerable distance between the Tsar and the muzhik—" Segalen observed, "the Son of Heaven and the people, despite the paternal theory: ancient courts, the small courts of Germany, or the princely cities of Italy were some of Diversity's beautiful tools. The rule of the people brings with it the same customs, the same functions everywhere." With this perception, he was already providing testimony to the emerging shape of mass society and consumer culture where quality and value were vanishing under the weight of quantity and the regime of sameness and mere sensation and where the "mysterious within, the mysterious, which is the quivering approach, the extraordinary scent of Diversity" has been effaced by the war. It is interesting to note that Segalen, who privileged the poetic fragment in his *Essay*, later turned to the novelistic form with the publication of his narrative, *René Leys*, which tried to capture the enormity of China's diversity—its vast otherness and unfathomable mystery. But it was precisely this sense of the mysterious associated with diversity that he brought home on the eve of the war and which became the reconstituted vocation of exoticism. Not too many years later Walter Benjamin, as already suggested, would detect in the everyday at its most ordinary precisely the mystery Segalen had brought back from China but failed to

grasp: the new vocation of the creative artists, that is, difference—the strange, unexpected, surprises—“everything that is *Other*.” Aesthetics was another word for diversity. Elsewhere, Segalen worried over the manifest “Wearing Down” of exoticism announced by “everything we call Progress.” If Pierre Loti still lived in a society that offered the ethnographic diversity of an elsewhere and thus an escape route from the “laws of applied physics; mechanical modes of travel making people confront each other,” and the horror of intermingling them, “mixing them up without making them fight each other,” it also caused an undeniable weakening of religion, prompting Segalen to ask: “where is the mystery?—Where are the distances?”

It was this rewriting of the text of exoticism to underscore the project of realizing authentic difference that reinforced the formation of modernism and the autonomy of art as the best defense against the leveling of mass culture and politics. We know that Segalen’s encounter with China’s vastness and the staggering spectacle of its diversity confounded his own capacity to envisage the totality.⁶ This encounter also supplies an explanation for the fragmentary, incomplete nature of his essay on exoticism and its privileging of poetry. In his later novel, *René Leys*, we learn that China’s remoteness exceeds the quest’s promise to reach the heart of diversity and the center of mystery itself. But the essay on exoticism had already brought him back to a home which, unstable and unfixed even though familiar, would lead to a doubling consisting of the identification of the singular self with the other and thus to a destabilization of the subject itself. This was precisely the problem modernism would undertake to address in the succeeding years between the wars and in the progressive capitalist transformation of the globe. While we can locate a genealogical kinship between Roland Barthes’s later *Empire of Signs* and the attenuated nostalgia performed by Simon Leys (Pierre Ryckman) in *Chinese Shadows*, the sign of an afterlife of the text on exoticism was expressed first by the Japanese writer Tanizaki Junichiro, who probably

had never read Segalen. A modernist who lived through the accelerated capitalist modernization that Japan witnessed in the interwar period and who faced the prospect of mass culture and the rapid disappearance of difference, Tanizaki exoticized an indeterminate, precapitalist past and its endangered aesthetic endowment to create an exoticism within rather than without and elsewhere. In his melancholic *In'ei raisan* (Praising Shadows), Tanizaki, like other contemporaries, appealed to the difference of Japan's premodern aesthetic sensibility as a figure of radical otherness capable of still haunting and animating the modern self and as a reminder of how modern life was threatening to destroy all diversity. Like Segalen, Tanizaki believed in the necessity of an autonomous art and thus culture as the only fortification against the assault of commodification and the regime of the ever-new in the ever-same because it was the repository of true and unchanging value. Tanizaki's modernist exoticism saw in ancient Japan a timeless aesthetic order based upon the ceaseless play and gradations of light and dark and the production of "shadows" that constituted an optic through which the Japanese grasped their world. Modern machine civilization brought excessive "illumination," both in the shape of "reason's light" and the incandescent light bulb that irradiated everything so sharply that it managed to destroy the subtle and nuanced grades of light and dark—difference—generated by the world of shadows.

The quality that we call beauty, however, must always grow from the realities of life, and our ancestors, forced to live in dark rooms, presently came to discover beauty in shadows, ultimately to guide shadows towards beauty's end. And so it has come to be that the beauty of a Japanese room depends on a variation of shadows, heavy shadows against light shadows—it has nothing else. . . . The hue (of the walls) may differ from room to room but the degree of difference will be ever so slight; not so much a difference in color as in shade, a difference that will seem to exist only

in the mood of the viewer. And from these delicate differences in the hue of the walls, the shadows in each room take on a tinge peculiarly their own.⁷

What Tanizaki sought to restore with this ironic celebration of a past that already had passed into the imagination was a reunion of art and life itself, a program already figured in Segalen's *Essay on Exoticism*.

But the imprint of Segalen's exoticism is more directly visible in Roland Barthes's *Empire of Signs* (1970), perhaps its true "after-image." When Segalen severed exoticism from the specific site of colonialism and its historic circumstances to explore the unsteady relationship between self and other that concluded in inverting the former into the latter, he opened up the way for subsequent efforts to envision a place of otherness and difference capable of putting into question the claims of the sovereign self imagined in the "West." This was undoubtedly the program pursued by Roland Barthes in his widely read *Empire of Signs*, which actually carried Segalen's exoticism of nowhere to a new level of criticism in a time of decolonization (but not yet postcoloniality). Barthes openly acknowledged an intention to "imagine a fictive nation" for the purpose of forming a system of features he will call Japan. His interest is in locating the "possibility of difference" as a condition of beginning the difficult task of writing a "history of our obscurity" and making manifest the "density of our narcissism."⁸ His "dream" is to "discover certain unsuspected positions of the subject in utterances," and then to imagine writing that is without a subject, a center, and thus intends no meaning whatsoever. Yet to make this move Barthes must rethink the otherness of his own cultural endowment, which can only be envisioned in terms of the claims associated with Western centeredness and subjectivity.

Finally, the echoes of Segalen's exoticism are audible in the construction of a reverse critique by the sinologist and art historian Simon Leys. Leys, who self-consciously chose the last name of Segalen's hero René Leys, directed his critique against

the French intellectuals of *Tel Quel* (Barthes, Kristeva, etc.) who, in the 1970s, unashamedly and unblushingly embraced a Maoism pledged to destroy a China he knew and loved. “Exoticism is not dead,” writes Leys, who saw in the contemporary voyaging of French intellectuals to Maoist China a replay of Pierre Loti’s turn of the century “dreamy Asiatic dilly-dallying.”

Today, if we are to believe a recent article in the *Le Monde*, the aesthetes of *Tel Quel* seem to have found again in China the exquisite secrets of Madame Chrysantheme’s patron. We know that the campaign against Confucius and Lin Piao has already caused blood to flow; a friend, an English Sinologist . . . told me the names of the first batch of people executed in this campaign was posted on the walls. . . . But Roland Barthes, confronted with such posters, would no doubt see only calligraphy ‘with a grand lyrical movement, elegant and willowy,’ and the enigma of those graceful hieroglyphics would not bother him much — now that he has discovered how ridiculous we are when we think that our intellectual talk is always to try to find meaning.⁹

Here, Leys appeals to Lu Xun’s earlier observation that Chinese civilization was “nothing but a vaunted banquet of human flesh to be devoured by the rich and powerful” and warned that foreigners who praise the Chinese know nothing. But Lu Xun was also protesting against a particular cultural endowment that behaved “cannibalistically,” a kind of prescient anthropophagy Chinese practiced on themselves. For Leys, in any case, this fashionable Maoism was reminiscent of an earlier passion for *chinoiserie* in Europe — a “new exoticism based, like the earlier ones, on ignorance and imagination.” In its place, Leys offers precisely the exoticism of the dream world constructed by the Sinologist who, presumably, is in the position to know. His dismissal of Barthes’s unknowing admiration for calligraphy already announces the conceit of sinology which, since its beginning, has been based upon an acquisition of Chinese as

the primary and necessary condition of grasping the totality of the civilization figured by its writing system. But this world is as much a Western fantasy and dream work of desire as the one it supposes to correct, a timeless, unified cultural domain, founded on a presumed (but never articulated) holism—what Leys calls a “monolithic whole”—that owes more to its Mandarin custodians than it does to “scientific” research. It also runs the risk of being as contemptuous of the Chinese as those intellectuals he wishes to excoriate. Driven by an unconquerable nostalgia for what might have been and fueled by anger provoked by the destruction of the phantasmagoric vision imagined by sinology, Leys’s intervention resembles the response of people like Tanizaki who contemplated an aesthetic arcadia in the modern ruins of the twentieth century. It is well to remember that Tanizaki was witnessing and contemplating in the late 1920s the disappearance of the last traces of cultural difference that marked Japanese life before the advent of modernity. Where Leys differed was in writing at a distance—spatial and cultural—from the sublime object of his desire that could only render his own intervention as a form of resentment against history and its challenge to unchanging value. While we can agree with his desire to hold intellectuals accountable to standards of knowledge when they make pronouncements, we must also juxtapose this critique with an impulse that claims for itself the right to have opinions that are neither certified nor fettered by the fetish of specialized expertise and which thus manage to call attention to the spurious and often equally untenable goal of maintaining an ahistorical and exotic fantasy image of cultural value such knowledge is made to serve. Such a move was not only consistent with a certain understanding of Maoism but redolent of Segalen’s great program to rethink exoticism by bringing it home. We are indeed fortunate to have this thoughtful translation of Segalen’s text on exoticism to remind us once again of this great unfinished project.

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