Victor Segalen (1878-1919)

500 words

Physician, musician, archeologist and sinologist, literary theorist, novelist, poet, librettist, and world traveler whose works were largely published after his death, Victor Segalen Segalen has achieved largely belated and fragmentary recognition. Although his life was almost exactly contemporaneous with that of Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918), for example, he was in most respects remote from the Parisian avant-garde, his intellectual touchstones sooner recalling the French *fin-de-siècle* (Joris-Karl Huysmans, Claude Debussy, Paul Gauguin, Rémy de Gourmont, and above all Jules de Gaultier). A native of Brittany, Segalen never spent a great deal of time in Paris and after leaving Europe for the first time in 1902, at the age of twenty-four, he would return only for relatively brief periods during his remaining seventeen years.

After dedicating much of his adolescence to the study of music, Segalen entered the Ecole de santé navale in Bordeaux at the age of twenty, which led to a career as a naval doctor that allowed him to travel the world. First across the Atlantic and the United States to Tahiti, where he arrived just a few months after Gauguin’s death, purchasing some of Gauguin’s notebooks, seven canvases, and a copy of Mallarmé’s “L’après-Midi d’un Faune” dedicated to the painter by the author. While there Segalen began work on a novel, narrated from the point of view of a Maori storyteller, about the devastating effects of French colonialism on Maori culture (published under a pseudonym in 1907 as *Les immémoriaux*). During this time he also produced a series of essays on Maori music and culture, as well as on Gauguin.

He returned to France in 1905 via Java, Djakarta, Ceylon, and Djibouti (where he interviewed people who had known the gun-runner Arthur Rimbaud, about whom he also wrote several essays). After his return to France, Segalen wrote the libretto *Siddhartha*, for which Debussy planned to compose the music. The composer withdrew from the project, but was so enthused by Segalen’s short story “Dans un monde sonore” that he proposed collaborating on an opera with Orpheus as the subject (also never finished).

In 1908 Segalen began studying Chinese and by the next year passed an examination that allowed him to pursue training as a naval interpreter in China, where he would spend much of the rest of his life and whose landscape and classical culture would become the dominant elements of most of his remaining work. Before his first return to France in 1913, Segalen would travel throughout China, be part of an audience with the last emperor, work as part of a special mission fighting plague in Shanhaiguan, become personal physician to Yuan Shikai’s son, and undertake a wide range of literary and scholarly projects. When he returned to China later that same year he led amateur archeological expeditions, making significant finds in Han architecture and statuary. A trip to Tibet was cut short by the outbreak of World War I. Segalen returned to France to serve on the front, briefly, before succumbing to health problems. He returned to China in 1917-18 to work as a military medical examiner for Chinese workers immigrating to France. He died alone in the woods in Brittany, apparently from a riding accident.

*Stèles* (first published in Beijing in 1912 and then in an expanded edition in 1914) is generally considered his major literary work.With a meticulousness worthy of Mallarmé, Segalen obsessively determined every aspect of the book’s first printing, including paper type, ink, the physical dimensions of the book and the quantity of the print run. The work consists of prose poems, each featuring an epigraph in classical Chinese generally taken from the classical canon, but sometimes modified or even invented by Segalen himself.

Other works from the Chinese period include *René Leys*, a novel set in Beijing during the Republican revolution, published posthumously in 1922 and now often compared to Kafka’s *The Castle* or to the *nouveau roman*; *Peintures* (1916), pseudo-exphrastic prose poems based on non-existent Chinese paintings; *Odes*, a collection of poems about Tibet; and a number of scholarly projects, mostly focused on pre-Tang monumental sculpture and architecture.

Although sometimes identified as a “French Kipling,” Segalen programmatically distanced himself from exoticist and colonialist literature. His “Essay on Exoticism,” begun in Java in 1904 and unfinished at the time of his death, represents the fullest critical articulation of the “aesthetic of the diverse” his literary works sought to embody: “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; pith helmet; black skins and yellow sun” (*Œuvres* I, 749). The ideal exoticism, for Segalen, preserves the otherness of the other, “the acute and immediate perception of an eternal incomprehensibility. Let us therefore start from the admission of impenetrability. Let us not flatter ourselves that we assimilate mores, races, nations, others; but on the contrary, let us take pleasure in never being able to do so” (*Œuvres* I, 751). Despite the fact that Segalen’s own political views were often conservative, his essay in many ways anticipates late twentieth-century critiques of exoticism and orientalism and has in fact been praised by a number of contemporary Francophone writers, including Edouard Glissant and Abdelkebir Khatibi.

**References and Further Reading**

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<http://www.steles.org/>



