

INTRODUCTION

Disarmingly heterogeneous and largely posthumous, the work of Victor Segalen (1878–1919) has only gradually revealed its full importance as a major literary and critical expression of Western, indeed transnational, modernity. Segalen belongs to that peculiar category of writer both ahead of his time and yet easily mistakable for one well behind it: although he was, as Henry Bouillier points out, nearly a perfect contemporary of Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918), Segalen’s intellectual universe was comprised of movements and figures that sooner recall the French fin-de-siècle than the avant-gardes of cubism, Orphism, or Dada. Simply put: this is less because Segalen was behind the times than because he was in different places. Whereas Apollinaire was an immigrant associated with a Parisian movement full of immigrants (Picasso, Huidobro, Stein), Segalen began near the “center” (France) and moved into the “periphery” (San Francisco, Tahiti, Ceylon, Djakarta, China, Tibet . . .). A native of Brittany, Segalen never spent a great deal of time in Paris, and after he left Europe for the first time in 1902, at the age of twenty-four, he would return only for relatively brief periods during the remaining seventeen years of his life.

While modernism has traditionally been understood as a centrifugal phenomenon centered in the metropolises of Western Europe and perhaps the United States, the transnational and migratory character of much of the culture of Western modernity is being increasingly recognized.¹ If for much of the past century Segalen’s remove from the Parisian avant-garde, the centrality of exoticism and travel in his work, his penchant for allegory, and his sustained interest in the aesthetic as a problem of cultural difference all seemed to distance him from what seemed most important about, indeed definitive of, modernism, today it is possible for us to recognize in these same features not just a different but an arguably more truly representative modernism

that is geopolitically transnational, culturally hybrid, and epistemologically, ethically, and aesthetically centered around the problem of the other.

What reputation Segalen has had to date has been scattered across disciplines and genres—some may know him as an essayist on Rimbaud or Gauguin, some as an amateur archeologist and sinologist, others as a Debussy collaborator. Many who know only *of* Segalen will imagine him to be a kind of travel writer, but Segalen wrote travel literature only in the sense that we might say Proust wrote an autobiography or Baudelaire recorded Parisian street life. Segalen is not, as some of his contemporaries had hoped, the French Kipling, but more like the Baudelaire or Mallarmé of exoticism. Across four continents, Segalen lived, theorized, and translated into a variety of literary forms many of the same modernist themes, symptoms, and crises these earlier writers registered in terms of the streets of Paris or the imaginative depths of bourgeois interiority. At a time when Soviet critics were developing a theory of defamiliarization as the sine qua non of literariness, Segalen was producing a literature, in the broadest sense, of the lived estrangement of the European subject far from the European metropole.

Just as the full complexity and social-critical force of the major “Symbolist” poets Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé became legible only after the innovations of modern literary criticism, a more responsive reading of Segalen becomes possible now that we have begun to think about literary form in relation, rather than in opposition, to the world-historical event of colonialism. And yet while Segalen’s *Essay on Exoticism* has understandably been of interest to cultural theorists, works such as *Siècles / 古今碑錄* should not be relegated to the category of belles lettres case studies, for they represent the cultural theorist at work in his own medium: an estranged European consciousness encountering the other in, as, and productive of the figural powers of language. The greatness of Segalen’s works is attested to by the fact that they cannot be reduced to examples of a historical moment or of a single critical paradigm; rather than confirm or simply contradict our sense of cultural history, they complicate and enrich it. Among Segalen’s many and diverse literary works, the

one that has been almost universally acknowledged as the most important is *Stèles* / 古今碑錄.

Stèles / 古今碑錄

A work whose very title is erudite, whose genre is ambiguous (the prose poem), a collection of poems about desire, memory, love, war, travel, ancient Chinese history, and the vicissitudes of the self—each headed by a Chinese epigraph in superb calligraphy—*Stèles* / 古今碑錄 is at once immediately attractive and dauntingly complex. Of its author, Borges is reported to have said late in life:

The French talk about Valéry and even the preposterous Pégy with adoration—don't they know that in Victor Segalen they have one of the most intelligent writers of our age, perhaps the only one to have made a fresh synthesis of Western and Eastern aesthetics and philosophy? . . . [D]o not live another month before you have read the entire oeuvre. . . . You can read Segalen in less than a month, but it might take you the rest of your life to begin to understand him.²

The anecdote is emblematic, both in its substance and as anecdote: highest praise from a world-famous author who, it is suggested, has read all of Segalen, and yet there is no reference to him in any of Borges's published works. A doctor, amateur musician, archeologist and sinologist, literary theorist, novelist, poet, librettist, and world traveler, Victor Segalen is a writer who at least until recently has been more known of than known, more read about than read.

A difficult textual history has not helped the spread of his popularity, and for many readers an encounter with Segalen has been further delayed by the readerly challenges his work frequently poses.³ Despite being written about by critics as diverse as Agamben, Baudrillard, Clifford, Todorov, Glissant, Jouve, and Khatibi, only recently has Segalen become the object of sustained scholarly attention. Fewer than twenty books were published on him during the seventy years following his death in 1919; since 1990 more than twenty have appeared, and the con-

tinued proliferation of Segalen studies now seems assured. The relationship between Segalen's works and the critical discourse they call for is unusual if not unique in modern literature. We might heuristically distinguish two sorts of challenges for the reader of *Stèles* / 古今碑錄: on the one hand, there is a wealth of allusions and sources that will be unfamiliar to those who have not studied the Chinese classics and Chinese historiography; on the other hand, readers must confront the very particular hermeneutic universe dramatized by *Stèles* / 古今碑錄.

The former area is of course where notes can be of greatest help. Many readers have found *Stèles* / 古今碑錄 immediately enjoyable and compelling; unlike Pound's *Cantos*, for example, it does not suggest a need for prior initiation: most editions of *Stèles* / 古今碑錄, both in French and in English, have offered little commentary on the French text, and even fewer have addressed the Chinese at the head of each stèle.⁴ Yet without an appropriate critical context, Segalen's works can seem both more obscure and less complex than they truly are. This edition seeks to address these issues not simply by presenting English renditions of the French poems, but by providing intertextual raw material and explanatory notes that we hope will both resolve immediate difficulties and reveal new possibilities. We believe readers of this edition will agree that the full richness, complexity, and subtlety of the poems are revealed only if they are read in the context of Segalen's creative manipulations and reinventions of his largely Chinese sources.

We have not forgotten, however, that much of the appeal of the poems in *Stèles* / 古今碑錄 comes precisely from their deliberate withholding of meaning. At a minimum, each poem is headed by a Chinese epigraph which, Segalen knew full well, most of his readers would be unable to make the slightest sense of, much less fully understand. Aside from any difficulties in the French text, each stèle signals, before it even begins for most readers, a linguistic alterity, a hermeneutic resistance, just as for many readers the opening Greek and Latin epigraph of *The Wasteland* signals "erudite and profound" as much as it conveys a specific message. (Except, of course, for the reader of Chinese—but see Saussy's foreword.) And just as annotations to Eliot's poem hardly answer every question a reader might ask of

it, we must recall that Segalen's use of Chinese sources is often playful or biting ironic, sometimes provocatively "unfaithful," but in any event rarely straightforward. The notes seek not to answer ultimate interpretive questions about the poems, then, but to provide the prerequisite material for future interpretations. To anticipate our discussion of Segalen's aesthetics of the exotic: clarifying the facts of the matter surrounding any given poem can help eliminate its superficial exoticism (the mere fact of the "Chineseness" of the poems, for example), thereby clearing the way for a readerly engagement with the deeper and more complex dynamics of estrangement and recognition that enact Segalen's "aesthetics of the diverse." Nevertheless, we have confined our notes to the back of the edition, both to maintain the aesthetic of the page and to allow for a deferred encounter with the intertextual setting of the poems.

Last but hardly least: Segalen's works are often constituted by silence, dissimulation, absence, and delay. They can be mysterious without necessarily being difficult. They can be allusive without making allusions. As we will discuss in more detail below, Segalen's poems are in many ways in the tradition of French Symbolism, and some readers will be reminded at moments of Mallarmé. Segalen's novel *René Leyjs*, set in China and written at the same time as *Stèles / 古今碑錄*, is often compared to Kafka's *The Castle* or to the *nouveau roman*. The challenges posed by such texts must ultimately be addressed not by consulting notes but through patient attention to syntax and trope, and through a slow restructuring of reading habits. In this sense, Segalen is no different from the majority of other writers called "modernist" who created their own literary dialect, often precisely through translation or emulation of a foreign language or a nonstandard variant of their own.⁵ To provide a fuller context for the particular challenges of *Stèles / 古今碑錄*, we now turn to Segalen's biography and to the intellectual background of his aesthetic project.

Biography

Victor Joseph Ambroise Désiré Ségalen was born 14 January 1878.⁶ (He later chose to drop the acute accent from his family

name to restore its primitive Breton quality.) The prominent theme of most biographical accounts of Segalen's early life is the dominance and religious zeal of his mother. While he would maintain a lifelong interest in religious beliefs and practices, and in mysticism in particular, he would also remain strongly anti-Catholic and, more generally, hostile to any form of religious dogma, as attested to by a number of stèles. It was also early on that Segalen showed signs of restlessness: the recent invention of the bicycle provided him with a means to explore the Breton countryside of which he would remain so fond throughout his life.⁷

After dedicating much of his adolescence to the study of music—the artistic interest most supported by his family—Segalen entered the *Ecole de santé navale* in Bordeaux at the age of twenty, the same year he began to suffer from the nervous condition that would apparently contribute to his early death. Throughout his medical training Segalen pursued literary interests, and by the time he defended his 1902 thesis "Medical Observation among the Naturalist Writers" (from which also emerged the essay "Synaesthesia and the Symbolist School"), he had met such major fin-de-siècle literary figures as Joris-Karl Huysmans, Saint-Pol-Roux, Catulle Mendès, Jules Renard, and Rémy de Gourmont. That same year he departed with the French navy for Tahiti via New York, Niagara Falls, Chicago, and finally San Francisco, where he spent two months convalescing after a near-fatal case of typhoid.⁸ During these months Segalen visited the San Francisco Chinatown, where he purchased ink, an ink stone, a writing brush, and paper, a shopping trip that has taken on prophetic importance in Segalen scholarship. He also spent this time researching Maori history and culture, research that would later provide the materials for his first novel.

Segalen arrived in Tahiti in January of 1903, reaching the Marquesas Islands, where Gauguin had been living, a few months after the painter's death in May. Segalen was able to purchase some of Gauguin's notebooks, seven canvases, and a copy of Mallarmé's "L'Après-midi d'un faune" dedicated to Gauguin by the author. While in Tahiti Segalen also began work on a novel, written from the point of view of a Maori narrator, about the decline of Maori civilization in the face of Western colonization.

Published in 1907 as *Les Immémoriaux*, this early work anticipates, if in an aesthetically less radical form, the major means and motives of his later work: emphases on the almost magical powers of the words of the tribe and on the profound connections among cultural memory, personal identity, and artistic technique (here oral tradition), all framed by an almost ecological ambition to preserve traces of a vanishing world. Related to this time in Tahiti, Segalen would also produce a series of essays on Maori music and culture, as well as on Gauguin. He returned to France in 1905 via Java, Djakarta, Ceylon (where he began learning about Buddhism), and Djibouti (where he interviewed people who had known Rimbaud, about whom he also wrote several essays).

After his return to France, Segalen worked on the libretto *Siddhartha*, for which Debussy was to compose the music; the composer eventually withdrew from the project but was subsequently enthusiastic enough about Segalen's science-fiction short story "Dans un monde sonore" that the composer proposed they collaborate on an opera with Orpheus as the subject—also, alas, never finished.⁹ It was also in 1905 that Segalen met and married his wife, Yvonne Hébert, in 1905; their son, Yvon, was born the following year. By the age of thirty, then, Segalen was a family man, had begun a medical and naval career, traveled widely, and had had some literary success. He had also begun to sketch an aesthetics of exoticism that would find its fullest literary expression in what would become a lifelong fascination with China.

In 1908 Segalen began studying Chinese and by the following year passed an examination that allowed him to travel to China to pursue training as a naval interpreter. Most accounts agree—and Segalen's fictionalized portrait of his life in Beijing in *René Leys* would seem to confirm—that Segalen's duties were light and that he had a great deal of time to pursue a range of sinophilic projects. His family followed and in 1912 his daughter, Annie, who would later become an important editor of Segalen's posthumous publications, was born. Before their return to France in 1913, Segalen would continue to study Chinese (with a heavy emphasis on the classical canon), travel throughout China, be part of an audience with the emperor, work for a special mission fighting plague in Shanhaiguan 山海關, become personal physician to the son of Yuan Shikai 袁世凱 (the first president

of the Republic of China), and undertake a wide range of literary and scholarly works on China, including *Stèles / 古今碑錄*. When he returned to China later that same year he led amateur archeological expeditions that identified the location of the tomb of the famous emperor Qin Shihuang 秦始皇 ("discovered" again in 1974 and excavated beginning in 1979) and made significant finds in Han architecture and statuary.¹⁰ A trip to Tibet was cut short by the outbreak of World War I. Segalen returned to France, serving on the front briefly before succumbing to health problems; he spent the rest of the war doing administrative and medical work. He returned to China for a third time in 1917–1918 to work as a military medical examiner for Chinese workers immigrating to France. In May of 1919, Segalen apparently fell during a long walk in the woods at Huelgoat, Brittany, and badly injured his heel on a broken stalk protruding from the ground; he was found dead two days later with an impromptu tourniquet around his leg and, according to legend, with a watch stopped at noon and an open copy of *Hamlet*. Some at the time believed that it was a suicide covered up by family. He was forty-one.¹¹

Most accounts of Segalen's life tend to move from one symbolically charged moment to the next; rather than attempt to provide an original biography, we have followed convention. We would add, however, that such an approach risks extracting Segalen from history altogether. Segalen indeed occasionally seems obsessed with the solitude of his allegorical Emperor and the problem of the Self, but we know this in part because he wrote so often to his wife and friends. We would also add that his encounter with China did not occur in a timeless borderland where East meets West. The San Francisco Chinatown Segalen reached in 1902 had just seen the founding of the Chinese Telephone Company and cable was being laid from the San Francisco Bay to Hawaii. The World War I-era Chinese immigration that Segalen helped facilitate would result in Paris's having its own Chinatown and, today, the largest Chinese population in Europe. And this is to say nothing of the strong European presence that would have greeted Segalen in China during what was arguably the most significant period of China's own encounter with Western modernity: the year Segalen began studying Chinese in Paris, Lin Shu 林紓 was publishing the prefaces to

his “translations” of *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield* and Lu Xun 魯迅 published “On the Power of Mara Poetry” 魔羅詩力說; Segalen lived a few weeks beyond the events now known as “May Four.”

In sum, if Segalen’s works often present him as a detached observer, a solitary wanderer (we need only think of how uncrowded is the Beijing of *René Lejys!*), and if China remained wildly exotic for many of the recipients of the first edition of *Stèles* / 古今碑錄 in 1912, Segalen’s own travels were also very much a part of an increasingly global and routine circulation of people, goods, and sometimes even ideas. Indeed, it is precisely this circulation that motivated Segalen’s theory of exoticism, which, as we will discuss in a moment, seeks to preserve the Diverse from the leveling effects of globalization. But first we turn to the more immediate context of French literary modernism.