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Exoticism or the Translation of Cultural Difference

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Exoticism or the Translation of Cultural Difference

Ernst van Alphen

The “critical dimension of literature and art” is still the most common criteria of aesthetic judgment in Western contemporary aesthetic thought. With the rise of modernist aesthetics, in one way or another, a literary text or art work is supposed to embody a critical point of view. This critical dimension should, however, not be articulated explicitly, because then it becomes propaganda. It should be demonstrated in an indirect way; shown, acted out, but not said. The implied criticism is not necessarily political, social, or existential. It can also be self-referential by the embodiment of a critique on the literary or artistic tradition. But it is the critical position of a work which serves as a touchstone for critics to differentiate between good and bad works, important and insignificant works.

Although this critical dimension is still highly common as criteria of judgement, at the same time it has become impossible or contested as criteria of judgement in an era that is defined by cultural postcolonialism. According to French art critic Bourriaud, the comparatist ideology underlying postcolonialism, especially when it manifests itself as multiculturalism, is paving the way for a complete atomization of references and criteria of aesthetic judgment.^① For, present critical discourse on art and literature is based on the desire for recognition of cultural difference and of the other as other. This complicates critical judgment radically. In the words of Bourriaud:

① Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Radicant*, New York: Lukas & Steinberg, 2009.

If I am a Western white man, for instance, how can I exercise critical judgment on the work of a black Cameroonian woman without the risk of inadvertently imposing on it an outlook corrupted by Eurocentrism? How can a heterosexual critique the work of a gay artist without relaying a dominant perspective? (25)

This impasse results in what he calls an aesthetic *courtesy*: an attitude that consists of refusing to pass critical judgement for fear of ruffling the sensitivity of the other. This courtesy has as perverse effect that European and American scholars and critics view non-western writers and artists as guests to be treated with respect and politeness, but not as "full-fledged actors on the cultural scene in their own right". For the discourse of cultural difference and multiculturalism seems to exclude the possibility that a Chinese writer or artist can be compared to (related to) a Dutch one within a shared theoretical or conceptual space. This is not only so because of the conviction that cultural products should be understood in terms of their cultural specificity, (which makes them incomparable) but also because the repercussions of modern aesthetics are for Western writers and artists not the same as for non-Western writers and artists. Whereas Chinese, Nigerian or Mexican writers are supposed to produce their cultural difference and specificity in their works; Dutch, French or American writers and artists are still judged on the basis of the critical dimension of their work. Different criteria for aesthetic judgment are applied depending on the cultural identity of writer or artist.

As a critique of modernist universalism multiculturalism is in a way a return to pre-modernist classical Western thought. Classical Western thought as well as multiculturalism operate on a logic of membership. A literary text or work of art is thus inevitably explained by the condition or origin of its author. Everyone is located, registered in and locked into the tradition in which s/he was born. The work of a second-generation Chinese immigrant writer, or of a black, gay Afro-American artist will be read through the prism of the bio-political framework that

multiculturalism is. The problem of this framework is, of course, is that it assumes that people are definitely assigned to their cultural, ethnic, geographic or sexual identity. And second, that works of art and literary texts, can be explained and judged by these identities.

The multiculturalists' position seems to imply, however, a new criterion for aesthetic judgment. If each writer and artist should be judged in accord with her/his own culture, it implies that contemporary literature and art should be considered as a conservatory of traditions and identities. (This function to conserve is, in fact, the almost complete opposite of attributing a critical dimension to art and literature.) But the degree of successfulness as conservatory of traditions and identities becomes then the new criteria for critical judgment.

One can of course argue that art's function of being a conservatory, instead of being critical, is critical within the contemporary social economic situation. It is critical of the social production of globalization in which traditions and identities are eradicated in the name of economic efficiency. But this critical dimension of the conservatory position is extremely limited because highly exclusive. The conserved traditions and identities can only be understood and appreciated for what they are by viewers or readers who partake in the same traditions and identities. For, the idea that art works and literary texts should be judged according to the codes of its author's local culture implies the existence of viewers and readers who master each culture's referential field. When the reader/viewer does not master the referential field of the artist's culture, s/he cannot really pass a critical or aesthetic judgement about the work, s/he can only get information from the work. Depending on how plausible one thinks the existence of such a viewer or reader mastering each culture's referential field is, one can come to two different conclusions:

- 1) we should postulate an ideal viewer/reader with the properties of a universal decoder of all cultural traditions and identities (Bouriaud 29);
- 2) we should accept the idea that aesthetic judgment should be

suspended indefinitely.

I know, to put the dilemma as radical and binary as this simplifies the situation. But this binary exposes well the ultimate implications (different as they are) of the cultural determinisms of the multiculturalists' paradigm.

As a way out of this aporia Bourriaud formulates the new challenge of aesthetic judgment as follows:

How can we simultaneously defend the existence of cultural singularities yet oppose the idea of judging works by those singularities, that is to say, refuse to judge them only in keeping with their traditions?
(40)

Bourriaud finds an answer to this question in the notion of translation. We should not just conform to or follow the codes and references of other cultures, but we should harmonize their codes with other codes, by making resonate with a history and with problems born of other cultures. Such a practice is an act of translation because translation implies a mastery of both languages and in the act of translation one denies neither the unspeakable nor possible opacities of meaning, since every translation is inevitable incomplete and leaves behind an irreducible remainder. (30).

Difficult as it is to understand what translation as criteria for aesthetic judgment can mean, Bourriaud provides some examples of cultural practices and artists who succeed well in this (artistic) practice of cultural translation. Thai/Argentinean artist Rikrit Tiravanija, also Bourriaud's prime example in his earlier work about relational aesthetics, has forged connections between conceptual art and the Buddhist tradition. His work would be an exemplary model of formal and historical transcoding. Japanese artist Tsuyoshi Ozawa's has renewed objects from traditional Japanese culture by introducing practices originating in the European Fluxus movement. These two artists do not just accumulate heterogeneous elements in their work, but they aim to make meaningful

connections in "the infinite text of world culture". (39)

Another of his examples is the cultural practice of creolization. Creoleness is the *interactional or transactional aggregate* of Caribbean, European, African, Asian, and Levantine cultural elements, united on the same soil by the yoke of history"^① Creolization produces languages, discourses and objects that are the province of both the familiar and the foreign and that express journey rather than territory. The ingredients that compose these languages and objects do not represent instances of otherness in relation to a dominant culture, but simply elsewhere or other ways. (74) Hierarchical relations between centre and margins are not at stake.

Bouriaud also mentions French writer Victor Segalen as a role model for an aesthetic practice based on making meaningful relations between cultures. In the first two decades of the 20th century Segalen developed a concept that can be seen as a more elaborate and complex version of Bouriaud's idea of aesthetic translation. Segalen's term for this mode of translation is *exoticism*. This is, of course, rather surprising because nowadays exotism has a bad name. And not only nowadays, already in Segalen's days at least for Segalen himself. That is why his writings about exotism should be seen as an effort to reconceptualise the notorious cultural attitude of exoticism.^② Dwelling in the Chinese city Tientsin, on 18 October 1911 he wrote the following about his *Essay on Exoticism*:

I will not conceal it: this book will disappoint most readers. Despite its exotic title, 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

^① Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphaël Confiant, "In Praise of Creoleness," *Callaloo* 13, no. 4 (1990): pp. 891-92.

^② Victor Segalen, *Essay on Exoticism: An Aesthetic of Diversity*. Translated and edited by Yael Schlick. Foreword by Harry Harootunian. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.

the world "Exoticism" calls to mind. Even less so can it be about those writers who gave Exoticism this meaning. For it is in this way that "exoticism" became compromised and bloated. (46)

On 6 May 1913, still in Tientsin, he added to this:

I will not deplore "incomprehensibilities," but on the contrary, praise them to the utmost. Most importantly, the book will not be about budgets and administrations; though the worst curse that could fall upon this book would be for it to be forever dismembered, confused with, perhaps even celebrated in good faith under the rubric "colonial," and classified as colonial literature. (56)

Born in 1878 in Brest, Segalen studied medicine and wrote his thesis about neurotics in contemporary literature. He became interested in the work of painter Paul Gauguin, embarked for Polynesia and arrived in the Marquesas Islands in 1903, just too late to meet Gauguin who had just died. Segalen wrote then a text about his visit to Gauguin's studio in Hiva Oa. In which he also becomes a defender of the "natives" and is critical about the colonial administration. Discovering the Maori civilization at a moment when their extinction was already under way thanks to their colonialization, he wrote extensively about this culture.

After his contact with the Maoris he started to travel incessantly. In 1907 he published a book, titled *The Lapse of Memory*, which portrays the culture of a people, the Maoris, debilitated by colonialization. Upon returning in Paris, he studied Chinese. He participated in an archaeological mission to the "middle kingdom" and after that he stayed frequently for long periods of time in China. In 1912 he published in French a book, titled *Stèles*, which is intensely inspired by his contact with Chinese culture. ^① His capacity for empathy with this culture

① Victor Segalen, *Stèles*. Translated and Annotated by Timothy Billings and Christopher Bush; with a foreword by Haun Saussy. Middletown CT, Wesleyan University Press, 2007.

is so great that, what I have been told, among Chinese readers this book passes today as a book belonging to their own literary corpus. Although written in French it is completely on a Chinese wavelength. How did he do this, and is this really possible? Did he really cancel out the filter or perspective of his French, European frame of thought and was he really able to demonstrate, embody Chinese traditions in an unmediated way? I will dwell on his *Essay on Exoticism* to see how he reflected on the possibility and desirability of establishing meaningful connections between cultures, in this case French and Chinese culture.

In the *Essay on Exoticism* Segalen tried to theorize the experience of diversity and the relation to the other. He envisaged this book as his greatest, most important book. But like Walter Benjamin did in his *Passagenwerk*, he wrote only fragments of this book. He calls these fragments "essays towards An Essay on Exoticism". These fragments were published after his death, a selection of it, made by Pierre Jean Jouve, in 1955, and a complete edition more than twenty years later in 1978.

Segalen considers exoticism to be a "manifestation of diversity" (66) at other moments also "an aesthetics of diversity" (67). He defines "diverse" "everything that until now was called foreign, strange, unexpected, surprising, mysterious, amorous, superhuman, heroic, and even divine, everything that is *Other*" (67). At first sight, such a definition does not seem to be that different from the conventional attitude of exotism. But diversity concerns more than everything that is *Other*: it merges with beauty, everything that is other or different is beautiful:

This is because diversity for some is a specific kind of nourishment for beauty, but, at the same time and to a certain degree diversity merges and subsides within something which is no longer different or homogenous but: Beautiful. (40)

This merging of diversity with the beautiful explains why exotism is a kind of

aesthetics. But the aesthetics of diversity is more specific than the aesthetic principle as such. He argues, for instance, that Ming art is more generally beautiful than K'ang-hi art because it uses less porcelain and is less Chinese. This implies that K'ang-hi art exemplifies convincingly an aesthetics of diversity, whereas Ming art does not, or less so.

Beauty has generalizing elements which appear to obliterate the Beauty of Diversity—which would then be merely material for beauty, not the realization of beauty. (40)

Beauty of Diversity is not just a specific case of beauty; it is in tension with it, because beauty obliterates diversity. When diversity merges with the beautiful it is no longer “different”. This explains why Segalen’s aesthetics of exoticism can ultimately not be understood in terms of beauty and the beautiful. The terms he uses to describe this aesthetics is an aesthetics of the sublime, not of beauty. I will come back to this.

This problematic process of the merging of diversity is also central in Segalen’s dismissive description of contemporaneous authors who excel in exoticism: French author Pierre Loti and Irish/Greek author Patrick Lafcadio Hearn. He calls them pseudo-exots, the “Panderers of the Sensation of Diversity” (29). “The Lotis are mystically drunk with and unconscious of their object. They confuse it with themselves and passionately intermingle with it, ‘drunk with their god!’” (34). Lafcadio Hearn even adopted a Japanese name, and is also known as Koizumi Yakumo.

Loti and Hearn were a kind of cultural cross-dressers and their writing expresses an excessive yearning for identification with the other. Loti is known for his impersonations of “natives”, especially Chinese, and he prefigures in that respect Lawrence who dressed in drag in order to perform as an authentic Arab. Hearn tried desperately to become Japanese and imagined himself to live a Japanese life. He became especially known by his collections of Japanese legends and ghost stories, such as *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things*, the kind of narratives that

fascinate the traditional eroticist mindset intensely.

Such a merging with the desired, idealized other destroys the personality of the merging subject. The real experience of exotism does the exact opposite. It does not lead to merging but to the capacity to discriminate:

The capacity to discriminate is formed through the experience of diversity. Those who are capable of tasting it are strengthened, enhanced, and intensified by the experience. It crushes the others. If it destroys their personality as well, it is because their personality was very weak or made of something other than the true capacity to experience exoticism. (40)

Segalen distinguishes himself from Loti and Hearn by refusing to identify with what is interesting to him. He clarifies, for instance, that his study of Chinese is not motivated by his interest in exoticism, "as the study of Chinese surely represents a world of thought that is as poles apart from my own as I could wish." (29) And in a reflection about diversity in terms of the human, the superhuman and the inhuman, he declares: "Let us not imitate the Chinese ('of the limpid and fine heart') who gave to one of their richest types, in Kiang-Ye, 'that most male of types, more manly than all men—the posthumous nickname of the Inhuman.' " (60).

In order to experience exoticism and diversity one needs a strong individuality. Weak personalities will be crushed in that experience. The experience is namely a kind of rapture which is forceful, violent and manifests itself as shock. It is in this rapture of the subject conceiving its (exotic) object, that the subject recognizes its own difference from itself. In order to describe this moment of differentiation from the "other", Segalen uses the kind of discourse which is also typical for modernity and the shocks caused by modern, metropolitan life. When he argues that only a strong individuality can fully appreciate the wonderful sensation of feeling both what one is and what one is not, he concludes the following:

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. (21)

The sensation of exoticism is in that sense complementary to the one of individualism: Experience of the one implies automatically the experience of the other. This sensation of exoticism is the experience or confrontation with an inability, the inability to comprehend:

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. 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. (21)

But being marked by this "sensing of Diversity" and the recognition of difference, the "knowledge that something is other than one's self", exoticism is the act of a conscious being who, in conceiving himself, can only do so as "other than he is". So, exoticism is ultimately an aesthetic practice of self-discovery. It results in revelatory moments in which the individual self is being disclosed or discovered. In the recognition of his difference from others, "he rejoices in his Diversity", and he sees for the first time himself as other than what he thought he was. The other that he finds in the sensation of exoticism is in himself and is himself. ^① So, one can conclude now that exoticism is a method

① Harry Harootunian, "Foreword: The Exotics of Nowhere", in: Victor Segalen, *Stèles*. Ibid., p. xiii.

of self-discovery by means of a practice which proceeds differentially: through the difference of the Other.

Segalen's use of the discourse of shock is at the same time a discourse which is utterly sensorial. It stresses again and again the impossibility of comprehension, the inability to understand, and the pleasure of sensorial experience and of sensation.

Because of this emphasis on experience, sensation, shock and incomprehension, Segalen's aesthetics of exoticism partakes in an aesthetics of the sublime rather than of the beautiful. In Kant's *Critique of Judgment* draws a distinction between beauty and the sublime by means of qualities that are each other's opposite. Whereas beauty calms, the sublime inspires restlessness and excitement, Beauty results when a super-sensuous Idea manifests itself harmoniously in a material form; the sublime, in contrast, is an experience caused by poorly limited, chaotic, and awe-inspiring phenomena like a furious sea or craggy mountains. Most importantly, whereas beauty is a property of objects, the sublime must be located in both the object and the subject: it is an experience.

Segalen uses consistently terms that define exoticism as an subjective experience instead of as qualities of the exotic object. His aesthetics of exotism is founded on the eliciting of perception, sensation and suggestion. And this elicited experience is awe-inspiring like the sublime: "It should be understood that I mean only one thing, but something immense by this term (Exoticism): the feeling which Diversity stirs in us." (47). His dismissal of colonial bureaucrats is based on the colonial's inability of aesthetic contemplation and of experiencing sublime disharmonies.

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 judgment and renders him deaf to the disharmonies* (or harmonies of Diversity). Neither of these figures can boast a sense of aesthetic contemplation. (35; emphasis in original)

Segalen's aesthetic of exoticism is an aesthetic of the sublime. But there is more to say about it. His main device for encircling exotic diversity is suggestion, not realistic description. The exoticist writers, which he dismisses like Pierre Loti and Lafcadio Hearn pursue their versions of exoticism by means of realistic narration and description. They write stories and novels in a realist mode, comparable to those of the Dutch novelist Louis Couperus. Segalen's reconceptualization of exoticism abandons strikingly the device of realistic description that had impelled so many travellers and tourists to describe the strangeness they had encountered. It are precisely these realist devices that enable writers like Loti and Hearn to concentrate on the exotic Other and to objectify it. The subject of narration and description is displaced onto the object which fascinates. And it is this displacement which enables the total identification and "intermingling" with the idealized exotic object that Segalen abhors in writers like Loti and Hearn. The objectifying effect of these realist devices are the exact opposite of the effects Segalen pursues with his aesthetic.

Segalen intends to elicit suggestion and experience. And instead of an objectification of the other through blind identification, he pursues the experience of self-disclosure. The stakes of his aesthetics are the almost opposite of the realistic enterprise. His aesthetics, or perhaps better poetics, can be understood in terms of the movement which is contemporaneous to the one of realism, namely symbolism. Symbolists like Baudelaire, Laforgue, Mallarmé and Rimbaud wanted words not merely to state or describe, but to suggest. This resulted in a very specific use of metaphor. In symbolist metaphor the relation between the tenor and vehicle (or, compared and *comparé*) is reversed, which means that the image (vehicle, *comparant*) assumes materiality and autonomy and the signified tenor or compared remains hidden. Symbolist poetry speaks of

something or somebody, but this something or somebody remains unclear or hidden. The metaphor replaces the proper term altogether, without being mentioned at all. This how symbolist metaphor suggests instead of states or describes.

This signifying practice based on suggestion is intensified by "correspondences" *between* metaphors. These correspondences result in a system of resonances and correspondences, that in his poem with the title *Correspondences* Baudelaire famously called a "forest of symbols". It is also by means of such a system of correspondences that Segalen tries to realize his aesthetics of Diversity and Exoticism. For, correspondences imply the establishment of a relationship between elements that are different and separate on the basis of something they have nevertheless in common. This establishment of relationships, however, takes place in the sensorial experience of these elements. They are not already there.

It is in a very famous programmatic letter of 1871, written to his high school teacher, that the symbolist writer Rimbaud explains how this sensorial experience of reality is at the same time a self-discovery.

At the present time, I steep myself in debauchery as thoroughly as I can. Why? I want to be a poet, and I am working toward becoming a seer; you will not understand me at all, and I am not sure I could quite explain. The point is to reach the unknown through the unsettling of *all the senses*. The suffering is terrible, but one must be strong; one must be born a poet, and I have recognized myself as being a poet. It is not at all my fault. It is wrong to say, I think: one should say, someone else conceives me in his thoughts. Forgive the pun.

I is another (Je est an autre). ①

① Arthur Rimbaud, "The Unsettling of All the Senses" (1871), in Henri Dorra (ed.), *Symbolist Art Theories*, Berkeley CA, University of California Press, 1994, p. 138.

This programmatic Symbolist text contains all the elements that Segalen will use later to explain his aesthetics of exoticism. First of all, it stresses the necessity of violent sensorial experiences: "the unsettling of all the senses". Second, the sensations caused by this unsettling are far from pleasant or harmonious: like sublime experiences, they are terrifying. "The suffering is terrible". And last but not least, this unsettling of the senses is necessary because this is the most effective way of self-discovery, a self-disclosure via the other: "I is another".

Segalen's affinity with symbolist poetics results in *asymbolist exoticism*. This symbolist exoticism differs radically from the *realistic exoticism* which gave exoticism such a bad name. Symbolist exotism does not pretend to know or understand the exotic object. On the contrary. The inability to comprehend it is stressed again and again. Instead, the subjective involvement in the establishment of a relationship with the exotic object is stressed. It is only in a sensorial experience of this object that a relationship can be established. This relationship is based on difference, not on identity. The result of this process of sensorial experience does not consist of any knowledge or understanding of the exotic other. It results in self-discovery. To use Rimbaud's words: "someone else conceives me". It is only within such a differential relationship that the I can disclose himself, he can only do so as "other than he is".

Although symbolist exoticism cannot be blamed for a naive objectification of the exotic other, it certainly uses the other. It uses it, however, for a differential process of self-discovery. In stead of claiming identity through identification, it is radical difference that is presumed. A radical difference that is terrifying and has the effect of a shock. Such a differential process does not produce any cognitive propositions about the exotic other. For like the sublime, it is unrepresentable. But it locates the exotic other as the *ontological* opposite of what one is oneself: "foreign, strange, unexpected, surprising, mysterious, superhuman, and even divine".

I am not convinced that Segalen's symbolist Exoticism can function as role model for Bouriaud's project of cultural translation. The practice of

cultural translation, which he advocates, is grounded in the conviction that translation implies a mastery of both languages and that in the act of translation one denies neither the unspeakable nor possible opacities of meaning, since every translation is inevitable incomplete and leaves behind an irreducible remainder. (30). Symbolist exoticism, however, does not intend to translate the other culture.

It is used performatively in a process of self-discovery. And this performative processing of the exotic culture, in based on a differential confrontation, instead of to "harmonize their codes with other codes, by making resonate with a history and with problems born of other cultures". (30) The amazing quality of symbolist exoticism is its sincerity: that it does not pretend to represent or know the other culture. But when cultural translation is based on establishing contacts that are experienced as terrifying and result in shock, the translation will be minimal. The resonances and correspondences, which are indeed stimulated, do not harmonize the codes of different cultures, but produce a confrontational shock.