

## Fables of China. Frontier Fables, Fables of Radical Exoticism: Segalen, Michaux, Butor

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*Segalen, Michaux and Butor visited and wrote about China. Three of their works are here commented upon because they offer a paradoxical image of China: although its reality is not denied, China can be described as kind of absent object. This paradox cannot be disassociated from the specific vision of Otherness which China imposes according to these Westerners. Consequently, Segalen, Michaux and Butor do not construe cultural comparisons and refuse to focus upon cultural differences.*

Here three literary fables provide the occasion for some ideas about the recognition and use of frontiers: Victor Segalen's *Peintures* (1916), Henri Michaux's *Un Barbare en Asie* (1928), and Michel Butor's *Boomerang* (1988).

These fables show us ways of describing, of discerning, the *other*, particularly involving China as seen from a Western perspective. They all involve a paradox: to identify a country as foreign implies a frontier but one which has already been crossed.

This paradox does not imply playing a game, voluntarily or not, of misrepresentation. Inescapable frontiers do not require harping on an obligatory confrontation of cultural identities. Nothing is to be gained by conventional accounts of reciprocal strangeness. These perspectives are banal commonplaces that tell us nothing about the uses of a frontier, once that line has been crossed.

These three works make best sense when considered as *fables*, even though they do not explicitly evoke that category of literature. *Peintures* evokes imaginary Chinese paintings. *Un Barbare en Asie* recounts a voyage to Asia and in particular China. *Boomerang* brings together travel accounts, stories, and descriptions related to the Orient, among other destinations. One calls them *fables* because an implicit argument emerges from their imaginative explorations and travel accounts, one that becomes clear through the play of intertextualities.

Concerning *Peintures*, I find that the pictures involved are imaginary yet nonetheless plausible and

lifelike. So I feel obliged to conclude that these pictures as narrated both are and are not about what they depict. Their appearance lures us to imagine what their source must be. One must add, of course, that Segalen knows that source.

If I say that *Un Barbare en Asie* is among other things the account of travel in China, I must also say, following Michaux's text literally, that this story tells essentially the way the Chinese tell stories, paint, sing, and symbolize. This remark echoes the text itself based on stories, poems, paintings, all of which agree on the impossibility of translation. "A Chinese poem cannot be translated. One does not find in paintings, in poems, or in the theater, that lifelike fleshiness of the Europeans. A Chinese poem points to things but what it points to is not the most important thing. They do not evoke vivid presences, in fact they flee them, sometimes fail even to suggest them. As Michaux himself says, one must *deduce* from *indirections* the landscape and its atmosphere." [*Un barbare en Asie*, p 161] To tell the China story, in a certain sense, amounts to telling no story, or, more precisely, to bring together the symbols that dictate those deductions. Giving a realistic account of China, then, boils down to offering the image of China — an image which is actually missing from the text. Michaux, as the barbarian in China, realizes that what he calls Chinese identity is simply an effect of representation, the indirect evocation of China in this book. In *Un barbare en Asie*, China itself is recognized only in the image the observer gives of it.

If I say that *Boomerang* is a voyage text, particularly but not exclusively involving Asia, I must add that there can be no travel tales, nor descriptions of landscapes, nor explorations of exotic identities, without quoting descriptions and tales which are already available. Therefore, in Butor's terms, this book is a kind of carnival. One must understand: every new piece of writing about the foreign is bifocal: no new description of the foreign can be disassociated from pre-existing descriptions; but these two entities do not mutually condition or modify each other. Following a remark of Butor, the person who sees is simultaneously a seer and a voyeur. That means he perceives but also he exercises an overview of everything that has already been seen

and already said. The eye can see only through this double focus. Foreign places and people seem infinitely repetitive, familiar yet different. The traveler who seeks to see and to describe must always presume a similarity that is already perceptible.

These three fables follow a single line: The foreign – China – is available. It is the site on the basis of which one can undertake to describe faithfully the images and the atmospheres of China. The foreign is in some sense familiar because it allows a discourse of recognition. But the evocation of this foreign which is familiar – and even “known” as directly attested in the accounts of Segalen and Michaux – never stops implying the deconstruction of this spectacle, this appearance of familiarity. This is why Chinese realities call forth a bifocal text. Segalen gives us, in *Peintures*, a way of allegorizing China but this allegory leads to no explicit characterization.

This approach suggests at first an ethical portrait of Europeans (the French) in China, in the Orient. By his stories, by his descriptions, the writer offers a double perspective. He implies the recognition of the foreign in itself, for its own sake. Nonetheless he gives a literary setting to that recognition. In *Peintures*, this is accomplished by organizing the scenic imagination. In *Un Barbare en Asie*, it is accomplished by spectacularly organizing the accounts of China. China is identifiable only indirectly by its signs. In *Boomerang*, this double perspective is accomplished through the double vision of a bifocal text. Such situations amount to presuming, in evoking the foreign, a site, a site of the other which writing at once designs and discovers in itself. That’s the way writing designates the unalterable *otherness* of what it denotes.

In other works, such as Butor’s *Répertoires* or Segalen’s *Stèles*, this site can be explicitly thematic. This thematic is inextricably linked to the full-bodied visibility of the foreign setting which, as the visitor finally realizes, excludes him. Because, to call this site full-bodied is simply a way of specifying how thoroughly this site is taken over by the power of writing and hence loses its *otherness* and richness as an alien place. One can never imagine writing as embedded in a foreign setting.

Quite the contrary, to recognize and situate the foreign in an explicitly literary setting involves a conscious recognition of ambiguity. This recognition engages that sort of literary practice that depends on a breaking of communication. The writer who, knowing China, talks about China, is not addressing China. And if China is taken to be the addressee it can only be as a hypothetical presence which cannot, in the fictional moment, be understood as present. The fables of Segalen, Michaux and Butor all make clear that there can only be recognition of otherness in the labeling of

the other as foreign. The result is a special status for China and Asia in *Peintures*, *Un Barbare en Asie*, and *Boomerang*. *Otherness* in this writing is not contained by its subject; it grows away from what it seems to possess. *Foreignness* is read as objective in the very moment at which it escapes from all possessiveness by writing. This writing is always, therefore, performative. In *Peintures* this phenomenon emerges figuratively in the fluidity of these imagined paintings. In *Un barbare en Asie* it shows up in the strangeness that accompanies the act of voyaging. In *Boomerang* it is supported by the play of intertextuality: writing that interchanges only with itself and with other manifestations of writing. There is one additional consequence: this kind of writing knows itself to be partial and subjected to a constant game of echoes. It is none other than the regrouping and reiteration of the signs for China elaborated into whole volumes of writing.

Another way of putting it is that the frontier you have passed over is an unchangeable one. To write about China is simultaneously to recognize its image as elusive and to acknowledge that writing can only construe a literary setting. Segalen, Michaux and Butor are all aware that they remain prisoners of this image that they use to stand in for China, for the Orient. They are also fully aware that to write thus is to refuse to give closure to this image. Hence these French fables of China come across playing up China, the Orient, as enigmas. Here “enigma” does not imply a mystery that calls for a solution but refers to an image of the foreign which can only serve as an emblem which nonetheless distances itself from that foreignness. All apparent referents turn out to be negative. This ploy is spelled out explicitly by Segalen in *Peintures*:

Even the oldest and most classic of paintings in the Empire of calligraphy and literature never permit stopping which would amount to maintaining ignorance. But before showing its colors each one has already produced its own gloss: the margins are covered up under an elegant style, by descriptions, commentaries, lyrical enthusiasms. It wraps itself in an envelope of words. Thus these “paintings,” as promised in my dedication, are purely “literary” and imaginary as well. [*Peintures*, p 11]

This Segalenian imaginary seems to mime a gesture of China giving us its paintings, already the gesture of a gloss. Painting, in this China, is recognizable from what is not painting. For a European to recognize Chinese painting is once again to entertain a duality, and to give a literary image – *Peintures* – that neither reveals nor hides that painting. Similarly Michaux speaks of the interplay of negative reference by evoking Chinese theatrical spectacle: “. . . The actor seems to represent something to himself, but then a sort of magnetism takes over made from the desire to feel what is absent.” This boils down to a kind of mimicry that excludes all mimesis. This vision fits with the gesture of writing in *Un barbare en*

*Asie*: China can be identified only as reproduced by the observer and by being referred back to him.

These notions - of the inflexible frontier and the interplay of mimetic perspectives that grows out of negative reference - carry with them in *Peintures*, *Un barbare en Asie*, and *Boomerang*, an original lesson. However foreign to China and to the Orient these may be, the writings of these Westerners, these French fables, claim to follow the way the *other* - the Chinese - goes. Segalen, in placing *Peintures* under the sign of unreality, suggests that the writer (or the reader-spectator) of these paintings can no longer remain fully himself. Michaux, in entitling his evocation of the Orient as *Un barbare en Asie* makes it explicit that he exists only, at least for the time of this voyage, through the perspectives that originate from the other. Butor works more subtly through the textual interplay between public and personal. In *Boomerang* he indicates that his life disappears from his own awareness because it takes place in otherness, in the signs and spectacles of the other. If there is no solution to this foreignness, if the frontier remains unchangeable, and if, in literature, one can only mime the discourse and the spectacle of the other, therein resides nonetheless a paradoxical transparency, that which emerges from the rehearsal and transcription of *otherness*. One can formulate it with some precision: it is not given to Segalen, to Michaux or to Butor to discover *otherness*, Chinese or Oriental, in any direct fashion. That *otherness* in and of itself could only be the object of some kind of dream state, as is suggested in *Peintures*. So that *otherness* appears as a symbolic manifestation that is for all three, Segalen, Michaux and Butor, a kind of game - a world-game that is at the same time occidental and oriental. Hence, to recognize China or the Orient is not so much to recognize cultural similarities and differences that can be pinned down by Western mediation, but more to recognize the symbolic game of words, the mimicking that proclaims the impossibility of any mediation of *otherness*.

In addition, Segalen, Michaux and Butor render their spectacles of China and the Orient under the ironic banner of appearances. Such is the case even when Segalen underlines about Chinese paintings their literalness. Such is the case even when Michaux remarks that in China "nothing is absolute, no principles, no *a priori* presumptions." [*Un barbare en Asie*, p 166] Such is the case even when Butor remarks more generally that all perceptions and all expressions are bifocal. China and the Orient blend in with that equivocal figure that they give of themselves and that the traveler picks up and repeats in the artifice of his writing and through which he projects his own singularity. His own singularity implies presenting himself as the person who transcribes freely these spectacles and who recognizes the sovereignty and authority of the other precisely because he is the one who delivers these ironic appearances. To complete the

underlying argumentation of the fables called *Peintures*, *Un barbare en Asie*, and *Boomerang*, we might say that their evocations of China and the Orient are self-deconstructing. But this deconstruction can be read as indicating the anamorphosis (in the sense of distorting reflexion) of the *other*, of that being who lives in the irony of appearances. As fables of China and the Orient, these works show Western visitors at the moment of realizing that the representation, the portrait given of China, of the Orient, proposes the deformation of something that itself cannot be seen. Thus Segalen does not see Chinese paintings. Thus Michaux does not see the object of Chinese drama, of Chinese poetry. Nonetheless what Segalen and Michaux say about painting, about plays, about Chinese poetry, implies - as Segalen remarks explicitly - that these evocations of objects which cannot be seen do not forbid a kind of recognition.

Thus we come to the final implication of these fables as paradox. The frontier cannot be modified. But it does not exclude a shared symbolic game which makes apparent a common language of reference. This emergence marks the radical exoticism which precludes any approach that is either universalist or comparative to *otherness*, to China or to the Orient. This emergence must be understood doubly: China and the Orient make *otherness* manifest, but China and the Orient are also manifest appearances, which are also those of the Western writer. The situation expresses itself in two movements, in a recognition of its actual form and also in a recognition of its play of self-referentiality, which in its turn can only reflect the observer and point back to him. These two movements allow us to recognize that evidently China and the Western witness are at the same time separated and yet linked by a reciprocal strangeness. Speaking of Laozi, Michaux drew on such an insight into the invisibility of the outsider. "... [Laozi] lived among the lions and the lions did not realize that he was a human. They saw nothing foreign about him." [*Un barbare en Asie*, p 186.] Here resides the fable of the beneficial equivocation of the frontier. In the image of the frontier which is crossed yet nonetheless remains unchanged lies the paradox of a China, an Orient, that remain other yet which do not require of the Westerner to identify that otherness, to systematically describe that difference. The lack of formulating these differences blocks any move into comparisons or contrasts. On the other hand, otherness is not lost: though the lions may not identify the man as a man, the man knows the lions are lions. This lack of symmetry means that there cannot be a good use of difference, and that recognizing *otherness* - and this is the implication of the reference to lions - takes away any temptation to think of the *other* - the Chinese - as committed to introspection or to think of them as manifesting a thought-out identity. Such is radical exoticism. Such is the only game left for the Western witness: because he cannot any longer impose his own identity, because he cannot enter into the

comparing of identities, it is left to him to tell the secret of experiencing the Orient — there where I can never be myself and I can watch, imagine or write only on the basis of evidence that comes from somewhere else. The positive side of the equivocal frontier reemerges: China, the Orient, only becomes a familiar site because there, between the native and the European, resides a transparency without reciprocity. The proof of the *other* only comes from something that is not me and by which I know that I cannot understand myself as other than I am.

In this happily equivocal understanding of frontiers, we move beyond the simplicity of pure thought that presupposes the recognition and comparison of differences. So much for thinking and comparing of cultures between universalism and relativism. Experiencing and writing about China and the Orient grow out of a shared present: that of the *other* and that of the witness. This writing about China and the Orient makes sense in the extent to which it can make out of this shared present its own representation. History only matters, as we know from Segalen, because its witnesses partake of that same present. The fables of Segalen, of Michaux, of Butor, are — one is obliged to repeat — literary fables. They make us think in the manner that literature has to justify itself in the West, in the way it can be responded to as writing. What we call literature we are supposed, by more or less common accord, to be able to recognize as such. This recognition, particularly in any refusal of a symbolic or symbolist mode of literature — in that mode, literature manifests the enigma of self and of the other — identifies literature as inescapably artificial, as a linguistic *otherness*. If literature contains or is seen as inescapably containing an *otherness* in discourse, this is what the fables of Segalen, of Michaux and of Butor recognize in China and in the Orient. What writing like this tries to show of China and the Orient, in this game of frontiers and *otherness*, can serve as one way of characterizing Western writing and in particular contemporary Western fiction.

(Translated by J. G. Blair)

#### About the author:

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#### An Important Book in Comparative studies of China and the West: *Divination and Prediction in Early China and Ancient Greece* by Lisa Raphals

Several books comparing ancient Greece and ancient China have been published in English over the last dozen years, involving such authors/editors as Geoffrey Lloyd and Nathan Sivin or Steven Shankman and Stephen W. Durrant. Prominent among them is Lisa Raphals, who now in 2013 has gone beyond her earlier books *with Divination and Prediction in Early China and Ancient Greece* from Cambridge University Press. This ambitious title is fully justified by her meticulous multidisciplinary explorations of this vast and vastly important field. In both traditions divination was a major preoccupation and indeed the human drive to invent ways to predict the future remains with us today. In order to situate this fresh examination of the evidence, Lisa Raphals necessarily reassesses the trends in the relevant 20th-century scholarship, sometimes political, sometimes more diffusely cultural, that have affected received views of these time-honored practices. This depth of vision allows her to explore multiple perspectives on such practices in our own time as well as during the first millennium BCE. In China the *Yijing* and its predecessor the *Zhouyi* are the most resonant texts but the author shows how broadly the Chinese cultivated arts of divination. In Greece as well, there were multiple avenues of approach to unclocking the future. The range of scholarship concerning both civilizations is impressive. This book is large, as befits its aspirations. It aims at the rare status of a definitive overview. It is likely to succeed.