TRANSLINGUAL ADAPTATIONS: ASIAN WORKS IN LATE NINETEENTH-
AND EARLY TWENTIETH- CENTURY FRENCH LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This dissertation rethinks an important genre of world literature overlooked by previous scholars, namely, creative adaptations of Eastern works by Western authors based on received translations. Specifically, my dissertation focuses on how three major nineteenth- and twentieth-century French authors—Théophile Gautier, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Victor Segalen—adapted Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan works into mainstream French literature. In a broader sense, my work reads these adaptations as significant contributions to world literature.

My approach consists of closely comparing the adaptations with the previous translations on which Gautier, Mallarmé, and Segalen based their retellings, and against the source works in Chinese, Sanskrit, and Tibetan. In so doing, I tease out examples of truncation, addition, paraphrase, annotation, and unintentional misreading that befell these Asian works as they traveled across time, space, and cultural spheres.

The first chapter traces how the vernacular romance “Heying Lou,” by Chinese writer Li Yu, morphed into Théophile Gautier’s novella “Le Pavillon sur l’eau.” The original story, first rendered into English by John Francis Davis under the name “The Shadow in the Water,” was then further translated into French by Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat under the title “L’Ombre dans l’eau,” upon which Gautier later based his “Le Pavillon sur l’eau.”
By teasing out each author’s input in this multilayered transmission, I reveal how Gautier at once converged with and diverged from Li Yu by intentionally misinterpreting China and unwittingly recovering some important narrative traits of the “Heying Lou” lost in previous translations.

The second chapter deals with Mallarmé’s retelling of the Nalopākhyānam episode of the Sanskrit epic Mahābhārata. Mallarmé based his Nala et Damayantî on Mary Summer’s adaptation of the same name, which in turn vulgarized the French Sanskritist Émile Burnouf’s translation of the Nalopākhyānam titled Nala épisode du Mahābhārata. Indeed, when adapting Burnouf’s literalist translation, Summer embraced an assimilative approach while injecting much Orientalist cliché. For instance, she eroticized Damayantî’s body and wishfully smoothed out what she thought to be disjointed cuts between scenes in the Sanskrit original. Her systematic recourse to abridgement not only revamped the internal structures of the story, but also weakened the character Damayantî’s image as a fully empowered Indian woman who possessed wits, volition, and rationality. Mallarmé’s poetic license, in contrast, enabled him to go beyond received norms of nineteenth-century popular narratives pertaining to the Orient. First, he singled out elements in the Nalopākhyānam that directly resonated with his own poetic agenda. Second, he relinquished Summer’s pseudorealism, mitigated many Orientalist trappings, and switched to a more symbolic treatment of plot details. Finally, Mallarmé adopted a prose style reminiscent of classical Sanskrit, owing notably to his pursuit of condensation and syntactic ellipsis, his poetics of suggestion, and his tendency to multiply nominal appositives at the expense of finite verbs. In short, although Mallarmé’s stylistic idiosyncrasies are not easy to digest, by “Sanskritizing” his phraseology, so to speak, he effectively transmuted the
Nalopākhyānam into a fresh narrative consisting of evocative, highly aestheticized, and rapidly shifting images.

The third chapter examines how Segalen interpolated snippets of Chinese classics into his prose poem titled Stèles, while the fourth studies Segalen’s recasting of a small portion of the Tibetan classic Padma bka’ thang in his long poem Thibet. These last two chapters counteract Segalen’s image as a progressive modernist writer invested in East-West intercultural dialogue. By delving deeply into the way Segalen reworked his primary sources both in Stèles and in Thibet, I show that (1) Segalen’s Orientalism was not always his own, but often replicated and amplified that of previous translators; (2) Segalen was not a post-Mallarméan modernist, and his literary stance was not at all revolutionary; and (3) Segalen remained a cultural imperialist at heart who was keen to forge a pedantic, self-centered, and metaphoric Orient that had no room for concrete realities. More specifically, his authorial subjectivity either negated or superimposed itself on his Chinese sources in Stèles, while in Thibet, his ego went so far as to impersonate a valiant male French explorer embarking on the journey of conquering a female Tibet. Although the abstruse intertextuality underpinning Segalen’s Orientalism has thus far spared him from criticism directed at less recondite writers such as Pierre Loti, his appropriation of Chinese ideographs and Tibetan prosody belies a continuation of the Romantic poets’ fancy for the East. Although these foreign elements may indicate Segalen’s inclusiveness for some critics, in reality they function more as marketing gimmicks for readers barely able to verify their authenticity.
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A project with this scope inevitably relies on the help of many people who over the past few years read, criticized, and encouraged my work. Assembling a list of acknowledgements makes me realize how fortunate I was.

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Translingual Adaptations: Asian Works in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-century French Literature

**Introduction**

Current scholarship on East-West cross-cultural representation vacillates between two competing premises. For Edward Said, Western appropriation of Eastern culture, especially Middle Eastern, was a problematic act of imperialism. On the other hand, under a more inclusive view of world literature, David Damrosch has argued that non-Western works can become world literature provided that their scope and depth are enhanced through translation. Finding both stances simultaneously illuminating and reductive, I have engaged in this study with this unsettled debate by jointly using these two theoretical frameworks to yield unexpected results. Furthermore, my investigation focuses not just on translations, but on an important genre of world literature overlooked by previous scholars, namely, creative adaptations by Western authors based on received translations of Eastern works.

Indeed, the adoption of Eastern literary works into the Western cultural sphere—through repeated translation and adaptation—raises pressing questions about provincialism and worldliness, canon and periphery, tradition and modernity, clichéd Orientalism and ethical multiculturalism. Taking into account the stakes at play in the flows of literary data from three Asian localities to France, this study probes from a fresh perspective how non-Western national literatures have become world literature by gaining, retaining, or losing their literary agency and aesthetic originalities.
Moreover, believing that mining common ground between Western and Asian literatures does not sacrifice the imperative of honoring the periphery, and that only textual evidence can warrant theoretical assumptions, I pay close attention to the relevant Asian languages in which the works were initially written; thus, my thesis cycles through considerable close reading in Chinese, Tibetan, and Sanskrit.

All the adaptations under scrutiny here are thoroughly assimilated pieces of French literature. I have done my best to sort out sophisticated multiculturalism from clichéd Orientalism using close textual comparison as my primary mode of reading. Based on my findings, I argue that authors Théophile Gautier and Stéphane Mallarmé were giving their sources their due, whereas Victor Segalen was not. This is because, unlike Segalen, both Gautier and Mallarmé displayed a tendency to go beyond or play with, and not merely write within, the conventions of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century exotic narratives where Orientalism prevailed.

This study is organized into two parts. The first two chapters focus on bona fide rewriters—Gautier and Mallarmé—both of whom partially recovered the original pieces’ literary agency, lost in preexisting translations, by reinventing aesthetic features reminiscent of those of their Asian sources. Thus, Li Yu’s “Heying lou” as well as the Nalopākhyānam episode of the Mahābhārata became world literature, with their scope and range enhanced not so much through translation per se, but through Gautier’s and Mallarmé’s innovative input. Nuances of genre notwithstanding, the first two chapters may resonate with Damrosch’s view on world literature as a body of texts that gain in translation, since Gautier’s and Mallarmé’s adaptations can
be seen as a continuation of previous translations. In contrast, I offer as a counterexample, in chapters 3 and 4, Segalen’s appropriation of Chinese and Tibetan sources. I argue that these sources morphed into world literature not by gaining, but by losing, their literary agency and aesthetic patterns alike. In the case of both Stèles and Thibet, their stylistic losses were compensated for not by an increase in range or textual multiplicity, but eventually by ideological considerations that elevated Segalen’s mode of expression into what Damrosch would frame as “windows on the world.” More specifically, Segalen borrowed snippets rather than organic narratives from the Li Ji, the Shi Jing, and the Padma bka’ thang, incorporating them as dangling trinkets into his otherwise run-of-the-mill French narrative, scarcely of revolutionary import. Moreover, he either programmatically ridiculed his Asian sources or unwittingly blew up previous translators’ error-ridden interpretations and ideological biases. Most notably, Segalen’s strategy of rewriting invariably put his French superego on the pedestal.

This investigation further shows that many translation theories apply poorly to adaptations, where the rewriter’s poetic license has a larger say than faithfulness per se in the value of their retellings. For example, Gautier, by tossing in a host of Chinese loanwords patterned after Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat’s philological footnotes, inventively combined both assimilative and source-oriented translation strategies when romanticizing a China of his own coinage, thus shattering the line between domestication and foreignization upheld by recent scholars of translation. In addition, the author’s linguistic ability was less a determining factor in adaptation than in
translation. Meanwhile, although Mallarmé knew no Sanskrit, his daring prose style recalls epic Sanskrit; indeed, he unwittingly “Sanskritized” his phraseology, owing notably to his pursuit of condensation and syntactic ellipsis, his poetics of suggestion, and his tendency to multiply punctuation marks, participles, and nominal appositives at the expense of finite verbs. In contrast, Segalen, who knew no Tibetan but read Chinese, adopted a mode of expression that remained unabashedly French. In other words, Segalen was Orientalist in the sense suggested by Said, not because of the Asian works he chose to adapt, but because the way he chose to adapt them.

Accordingly, this study attempts to answer a baffling question: if Segalen was engaging very superficially with Asian literary pieces by treating them as fancy gimmicks, why has he thus far garnered more recognition than Gautier and Mallarmé as a path-breaking author who bridged Asian and Western literary traditions? This question may befuddle a comparatist who peruses within the modality of close reading by valorizing texts as aesthetic objects. Yet, as evidenced by the recent findings of cultural studies, the reception of literary works in a foreign context often hinges less on their aesthetic value than on parameters such the language in which these works were written, their translatability, the ideology of the target audience and how well these works fit into it, scholarly promotions, and so forth. Indeed, Segalen’s strategies of rewriting—prioritizing the direct impact of visual and prosodic patterns over the content of his foreign sources—has elicited accolades from scholars who assume that he understood Asia deeply. These critical voices have thus undoubtedly promoted Segalen into a figurehead of East-West interactions despite his attested lack
of interest in Asian realities. Not surprisingly, most scholars have taken little interest in ascertaining whether Segalen truly understood Asia as long as his *chinoiserie* offers a prime example of the “West’s hegemonic hold on global modernism.”

In this regard, my investigation not only maps out the textual genesis of four well-polished French adaptations of Asian literary works, but also debunks the ideological progressiveness attributed to Segalen by dissecting his adaptation programs in parallel with those of Gautier and Mallarmé. Indeed, although borrowing snippets from alien cultures may appear to foster a form of East-West cultural dialogue, such appropriation can be very problematic. To illustrate this bluntly, let us imagine a “vanguard” French poet who goes to the United States on a mission funded by the French Naval Force, and there he publishes some poems in which he laments the impossibility of attaining to Uncle Sam’s spiritual heights. Furthermore, his poems are all printed in the shape of the Statue of Liberty and decorated with maxims of Lincoln and Emerson, set side by side with a wealth of supposedly Native American tattoos (of which, by the way, he himself has crafted a large portion of these psychedelic images). Would any American critic call him a great poet *à l’américaine* who has opened the door for cross-cultural understanding while championing the urgency of diversity?

To pursue the matter further, during the drafting of this study I was at some point intrigued by Segalen’s positive reception in China. Not very hybrid nor very silent, China is full of agency in its rapport with the still dominant West, and Chinese

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critics do not shy from tagging Western writers either as “sinophilic” or as “sinophobic.” Segalen’s posthumous success in contemporary China indeed offers us a prime example of such a taxonomy, and particularly of how sinophilia can be fabricated depending on shifting political demands. While many Western critics have dubbed Segalen a modernist author who single-handedly forged a new category of “Sino-French literature,” Chinese scholars have been no less gleeful about Segalen’s “sympathy” for China while pointing out, in apparent contradiction, his evident lack of proficiency in the Chinese language. Currently, this posthumously crystallized sinophilia ascribed to Segalen has evolved into a consensus owing to cultural events, conferences, and translation projects where France and China have found fertile ground for mutual understanding.

One hypothesis to explain such an unprecedented cultural phenomenon is that since the rediscovery of Segalen by Henri Bouillier in the 1960s, Segalen scholarship in the West has been propelled by an urge to react to Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. Eager to single out benevolent French Orientalists to serve as a foil to Renan, Lamartine, or Flaubert, critics such as Édouard Glissant, Abdelkebir Khatibi, and Yvonne Hsieh have lionized Segalen as the flagbearer of a humane Orientalism. Similarly, Chinese comparatists must have been no less exultant when they ran into Segalen in the 1980s. A veritable tsunami of translations and papers has been

published in China ever since, drawing notably on *Stèles*, while eschewing potentially politically sensitive pieces such as *Thibet*.

My thesis engages with the ongoing apotheosis of Segalen by telling the other side of the story. I show that his “understanding” of and “sympathy” for China is merely a posthumous critical construct. Moreover, I argue that in respect of his Orientalism, Segalen is less progressive than Mallarmé and Gautier. That said, his putative sinophilia is very politically correct by today’s standards, especially when viewed in parallel with Paul Claudel’s and Pierre Loti’s writings. Focused on a bygone, pedantic, and self-centered China, Segalen in fact cares little about, and thereby appears less patronizing toward, Chinese realities. As the old saying goes, in the monarchy of the blind, the one-eyed man is king; thus, the time has come to sanctify Segalen as the “one-eyed humanist” and jettison all the other “blind” cultural imperialists!

Last but not least, despite my willingness to embrace cultural studies, I do see myself as a comparatist, if not a philologist in the traditional sense, who relies on close reading to value literary texts as aesthetic objects. To reiterate, this study deals with, from the position of the periphery, how non-Western national literatures have become world literature. Accordingly, I accompany my close reading in French and English with meticulously parsed passages in Chinese, Tibetan, and Sanskrit. I have also avoided drawing exclusively on critical theory. In my opinion, without textual evidence, attributing ideologies haphazardly to bridging writers in the name of postcolonial hybridity or global modernism is a fallacious, if not malicious, critical
Doubtlessly, most of the linguistic data provided in this dissertation will be hard to devour, but they are indispensable. Indeed, when analyzing an author sanctified for his inventive use of intertextuality—which epitomizes his “modernity,” if he ever was a “modernist”—textual evidence should not be out of place. Yet the sad reality is, why should one bother to learn Tibetan or Sanskrit when all one needs to do is sprinkle a magic drop of Pascale Casanova’s struggle-for-prestige-in-Paris panacea or Emily Apter’s politics-of-untranslatability recipe? In our era, critical theory exempts the urgency to immerse oneself in the languages and cultures of the other. As it turns out, the only thing a tongue-tied scholarship cherishes is its inability to read across languages deeply and its dismissal of the language acquisition imperative. Accordingly, if primary sources are not worth jostling with, then one surely gets more inspiration diddling with FIFA soccer video games while musing on Derrida’s maxims. But now perhaps it is time to overhaul the primacy of theory by returning the floor to the texts, especially those written in minor languages.

All this is not to say that the insightful approaches to world literature set forth by previous scholars are anathema to me. On the contrary, I am deeply indebted to Damrosch and Said for providing me the theoretical umbrellas for this examination. After all, my work seeks merely to shed light on some literary pieces encompassing a broad spectrum of genres, including epic, hagiography, and novella, initially written in Chinese, Sanskrit, and Tibetan and later adapted into mainstream French literature. Needless to say, these French retellings, spanning the late nineteenth through early
twentieth centuries, were literary products of the early waves of globalization. Currently, thousands of Asian works are being read, translated, and adapted into the Western cultural sphere, while myriad Western works are circulating in the opposite direction to Asian readers. Since creative adaptations based on received translations is a phenomenon warranted by, and contingent upon, the ongoing process of globalization,⁵ I have tried my best to let all the texts in movement speak for themselves, and to this very fact I am satisfied.

⁵ Rebecca Walkowitz’s rectification of Damrosch’s world-literature-gains-in-translation theory, based on the textual genesis of global English novels, is not very relevant here. The original Asian pieces included in this study were never intended to be read beyond their originating context, let alone translated for a homogenizing, global Anglo-Saxon literary market. See Rebecca Walkowitz, Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).
Where Théophile Gautier meets Li Yu: mining divergence and common ground from the “Heying lou” to “Le Pavillon sur l'eau”

This chapter traces how the vernacular tale “Heying lou” 合影楼 by Chinese writer Li Yu 李渔 (1610-1680) morphed into Théophile Gautier’s (1811-1872) novella “Le Pavillon sur l’eau.”¹ The original story was first rendered into English by John Francis Davis (1795-1890) under the name “The Shadow in the Water,”² then this English rendition was further translated into French by Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat (1788-1832) under the title “L'Ombre dans l'eau,”³ upon which Gautier later based his “Le Pavillon sur l’eau.”

By teasing out each author’s input in this multilayered transmission,⁴ I show how Li Yu’s discursive originalities, translation strategies favored by sinologists, and Gautier’s poetic license were at stake in a previously understudied transfer of literary data between seventeenth-century China, nineteenth-century England and France. I credit Gautier—who did not even know Chinese—with the merit of promoting Li Yu’s “Heying lou” into a compelling work of world literature. I argue that Gautier jointly used domestication and foreignization when poeticizing, aestheticizing, and romanticizing a China of his own coinage. In accordance with French mores and aesthetics, he replaced the polygamous happy ending of the “Heying lou” with a

² John Francis Davis, trans., Chinese Novels (London: John Murray, 1822), 51–106.
⁴ Pierre Kaser was the first scholar to point out that Gautier’s “Le Pavillon sur l’eau” sprang ultimately from Li Yu’s “Heying lou” (see http://kaser.hypotheses.org/64) without, however, delving very deeply into this fascinating textual migration in his article posted online in 2012.
monogamous one by interpolating dream visions, onomastics, and a fortune-telling Buddhist monk. Although these newly-added conceits may seem domesticating at first sight, they either already existed in the “Heying lou” or were borrowed from another Chinese novel tilted the Yu jiao li, thus may also be considered foreignizing. Concurrently, Gautier patently foreignized his prose style by incorporating a host of Chinese loanwords in his adaptation. In so doing, he both programmatically assimilated the “Heying lou” to target-language norms and inadvertently recovered singularities of Li Yu’s original tale lost in Davis’s and Rémusat’s utilitarian translations.

Gautier’s “Le Pavillon sur l’eau” and Li Yu’s “Heying lou” are drastically different narratives. As David Damrosch notes, “all works are subject to manipulation and even deformation in their foreign reception.” Yet “works become world literature when they gain on balance in translation, stylistic losses offset by an expansion in depth as they increase their range.” Indeed, the transmission of the “Heying lou” into “Le Pavillon sur l’eau” vividly illustrates how national literature becomes world literature by travelling across literary boundaries. To be sure, let us first trace the journey of “Heying lou” from its seventeenth-century Chinese context.

*Li Yu's “Heying lou”*

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6 Ibid., 289.
Straddling two dynasties, the Chinese playwright, publisher, and raconteur Li Yu has long been a maverick figure for literary critics and historians alike. Not only is he the presumed author of the erotic opus Rou putuan 肉蒲团 or The Carnal Prayer Mat, but he is also renowned for his casual essays reflecting on a vast array of topics such as travel, architecture, gastronomy, and botany. For historians, Li Yu’s literary world mirrors the social upheavals occurring during China’s transition from the Ming dynasty to Manchu rule. Spanning developments from urbanization and commercialization to technological progress, these social changes heavily affected people’s views on money, mores, and even sexuality.

Equally noticeable is Li Yu’s personal trajectory: owing to social instabilities and perhaps the shift in dynasties, he did not follow the traditional path of Confucian scholars by entering the state bureaucracy through the imperial examination, but instead made his living by writing for the market.

Doubtlessly, his artistic idiosyncrasies and the social environment of seventeenth-century China combined to make Li Yu’s vernacular fictions unabashedly audacious and engrossing.

Li Yu’s “Heying lou” 合影楼 (The pavilion of merged reflections) is the opening tale of his Shi’er lou 十二楼 (The twelve pavilions) collection and arguably

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7 We should credit a great part of Li Yu’s visibility in the West to Patrick Hanan’s English translations and scholarly comments.
9 Due to social and economic transformations, the civil service exam became extremely competitive in Li Yu’s time. Accordingly, many late Ming scholars turned to professional writing, editing, and publishing even before the fall of the Ming dynasty. This is also the case with another famous late Ming writer Feng Menlong 馮夢龍 (1574-1646).
the archetype of Gautier’s “Le Pavillon sur l’eau.” Published in 1658 by the time Li Yu left Hangzhou for Nanjing, the Shi’er lou epitomizes many facets of Li Yu’s literary stance. It contains twelve tales, each presenting a uniquely styled lou (pavilion, tower, or kiosk) as a narrative space for bawdy farce, hedonist pursuits, and idyllic charms. Generally speaking, the “Heying lou” can be called a caizi jiaren xiaoshuo (scholar-beauty romance) of “geometrical innovation.” The epithet caizi jiaren refers to a genre of Chinese popular novels that became extremely popular during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. In a typical caizi jiaren story, a gifted handsome youth and a beautiful lady undergo numerous vicissitudes but always overcome all sorts of obstacles and get married. In this sense, the romance is, in its most common outline, propelled by the prospect of a happy ending. The “Heying lou” was written to this formula, albeit with some nuances. This is because Li Yu was very consciously playing with the caizi jiaren genre but not writing within it.

Since the “Heying lou” is relatively unfamiliar material for anyone not a specialist of late Ming and early Qing Chinese vernacular literature, it may help to provide a summary. The story is divided into three chapters. The first starts with a

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10 For the English translation of the Shi’erlou, see Li Yu, Twelve Towers: Short Stories, trans. Nathan K. Mao (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1979). Despite omitting a few details, Mao proves quite a literalist translator. Accordingly, here I choose to accompany the Chinese citations with Mao’s translation whenever it is available.

11 I have borrowed the definition of the “Heying lou” as “a romantic comedy of geometrical design” from Patrick Hanan. See Patrick Hanan, Invention of Li Yu (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 86.

12 For the Chinese text, see Li Yu, Shi’er lou (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 2012), 1–16.
song lyric known as a *ci* 词 (lyric meter) titled *Yu Meiren* 虞美人,” which self-reflexively comments on the theme of the story. The narrator then notes, in a playful and hyperbolic tone, that not even the Prince Yama or the Jade Emperor can stop men and women from approaching each other once they fall prey to desire. Given the force of human love, Li Yu evokes radical sexual segregation as the best way to forestall unwanted romance, and he quotes the famous Confucian maxim “男女授受不親” (Males and females shall not allow their hands to touch in giving or receiving anything), and the Taoist adage “不見可欲，使心不亂” (Not showing what is likely to excite desires is the way to keep minds from disorder). The narrator then cites the romantic vicissitudes that befell two household names of vernacular literature, namely Li Yaoshi 李藥師 and Cui Qianniu 崔千牛. Brimming with cultural references, the prologue of the “Heying lou” professes a dire caveat against the dangers of liaisons between youngsters of the opposite sex. Yet Li Yu’s words cannot be taken at face value since it is evident that he keeps endorsing romance while paying lip service to the contrary. As one example of Li Yu’s patent insincerity, the narrators warrants: “我今日這回小說,總是要使齊家之人知道防微杜漸,非但不可露型,亦且不可露影,不是單闡風情,又替才子佳人辟出壹條相思之路也” (the story I shall relate today is intended to remind family leaders of suppressing the evil in the bud: reflections should be kept out of sight, not to mention the body. I am

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13 *Ci* is a form of lyric poetry in China. Unlike regulated verse, *ci* rests upon lines of variable lengths, and each *ci* follows a template known as *cipai* 词牌, indicating not the topic but rather its rhyme, tempo, and rhythmic and tonal patterns.
not intent on recounting a romance, let alone exploring a new pathway for lovesick scholars and comely maidens to follow).  

Following the prologue, the narrator introduces the main characters of the story, namely Inspector Tu 屠觀察 and his brother-in-law Superintendent Guan 管提舉. Both are retired officials living during the Zhizheng 至正 reign (1341-1370) of the Yuan dynasty. Having married twin sisters, they live together in a family residence located in Guangdong province. Yet while Tu is a romantic scholar, his brother-in-law Guan is a Confucian prude, and this incompatibility of dispositions causes their friendship to sour. Not surprisingly, shortly after their parents-in-law pass away, the once-united family splits into two separate households and high walls are erected along the boundary.

This separation, however, is not seamless. In the middle of their mansion are two pavilions standing on either side of a small pond, the east pavilion is given to Guan while the west one goes to Tu. But although the water’s depth makes it difficult to erect a wall of separation across the pond, tormented by thoughts that his brother-in-law will peep at his womenfolk, Guan builds, at great expense, a stone curtain by laying its foundation on pillars standing deep in the water. This costly screen, however, has its own limits, as from one pavilion one can still see the reflections of the other through the interstices between supporting pillars.

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14 Li Yu, Shi’er lou, 2.
15 Both Guancha and Tiju are official positions in the Chinese bureaucracy.
16 Zhiyuan is the reign name of Kublai Khan during the second half of his rule of China.
When the two brothers-in-law still lived together, Mrs. Tu gave birth to a son named Zhensheng 珍生 while Mrs. Guan gave birth to a daughter named Yujuan 玉娟, and as infants the two were raised together indiscriminately. Indeed, both youngsters looked so alike that it was hard even for their mothers to tell them apart. After the two families separated, Zhensheng once tried to visit his cousin Yujuan, but Guan forbade this.

Yet later on a sweltering windless summer day, while both Zhensheng and Yujuan are refreshing themselves at their waterfront pavilions, they notice each other’s reflections on the surface of the unperturbed water. Zhensheng is so thrilled that he proposes to marry Yujuan, whose smile assures him. This encounter marks the beginning of a romance as the two cousins start communicating via whispers, hand signs, and their reflections in the water.

In the second chapter of the “Heying lou,” Zhensheng, no longer content with talking to Yujuan’s reflection, has the audacity to swim across the pond to surprise her. But frightened by the lad’s sudden presence, Yujuan instantly flees. Afterwards she explains to Zhensheng that she fears her father and begs him not to sneak up on her again. The two adolescents agree to write poems and send their verses across the pond using lotus leaves. During this platonic relationship, Yujuan promises marriage to Zhensheng. Their liaison lasts six months, and Zhensheng collects his poems in a volume entitled the Heying bian 合影编 (The compilation of the fusion of reflections).

17 The narrator comments on this delightful event with a seven-syllable quatrain, which is not found in Davis’s translation.
Upon discovering his son’s thoughts, Tu decides to intervene. He first seeks assistance from Lu Ziyou 路子由—a trusted friend who is neither a romantic nor a conservative—to propose to Guan a marriage between Zhensheng and Yujuan. But Guan refuses. Tu thus considers Lu’s adoptive daughter Jinyun 锦云 as an alternative bride for his son. Since Jinyun’s and Zhensheng’s eight characters match perfectly, the marriage agreement is concluded. Yet this terribly afflicts Zhensheng, who soon falls ill and threatens his father with suicide if the union is not rescinded. Caught in a dilemma, Tu begs Lu to relinquish the engagement. This in turn torments Jinyun; feeling rejected by her fiancé, she also becomes sick. This vicious circle of unhappy events ultimately prompts Lu to conceive a ploy through which Zhensheng will end up marrying both Yujuan and Jinyun, following the model of Emperor Shun 大舜 who married Emperor Yao 帝堯’s two daughters Ehuang 娥皇 and Nüying 女英.

The third chapter of the “Heying lou” opens with Guan blocking up the spaces between the stone pillars and prohibiting his daughter from sitting alone at the pavilion. Yujuan, for her part, suffers greatly, her pain compounded by gossip that Zhensheng is about to marry Jinyun. Shortly, she also starts to languish. Zhensheng shares her frustration since he suspects Yujuan of complying with her father’s despotic will. This mutual misunderstanding only exacerbates Zhensheng’s remorse and resentment towards Yujuan.

In the meantime, Lu is in action. He first tells Guan that he has recently adopted a male successor who intends to claim the hand of Yujuan, but carefully
conceals the suitor’s identity. Guan happily accepts Lu’s proposal. Then Lu tells Guan that his adoptive daughter Jinyun is about to marry Zhensheng. The trick is skillfully executed, and the two weddings are convened on the same date. It is only when Zhensheng appears with his two beautiful brides and bows in front of him that Guan realizes he has been duped. For Yujuan’s fiancé, namely Lu’s male successor, is none other than Zhensheng, who also happens to be the bridegroom of Jinyun.

In view of the circumstances, Guan grudgingly relinquishes his stubbornness and agrees to reconcile with Tu; the two families are reunited. The two pavilions, now connected by an arched bridge and re-baptized “The pavilion of merged reflections” or “Heying lou” 合影楼, are now home to Zhensheng’s two consorts. Later, to everyone’s delight, Zhensheng passes the imperial examination and is eventually promoted to the position of Academician Expositor-in-waiting 侍講.18

In an appendix, Li Yu explains that the story is based on a handwritten copy by a certain Hu. He also makes it clear that, in a self-reflexive tone, all twelve pavilions in the Shi’er lou are merely “pavilions in the air.” The story also comes with an epilogue in which the critic Du Jun 杜濬 (1611-1687), also known as Du Yuhuang 杜於皇19 comments on the tale’s originality. For him, numerous legends and nonofficial annals relate how people have fallen in love with figures in paintings, whereas very few writers since the famous Yuan dynasty playwright Guan Hanqing

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18 In the Chinese bureaucratic system, Sijiang 侍講 is a fourth or fifth rank official in charge of explicating, revising, and editing the Confucian classics.
19 The literary critic Du Jun is referred to in the epilogue of the “Heying lou” as Du Yuhuang 杜於皇. To be precise, Yuhuang is his zi 字 or courtesy name. It was a common practice for a male adult in premodern China to replace his given name with his courtesy name when he turned twenty.
關漢卿 (1241?-1320?) have explored reflections as a means to enable love
encounters.

*The domesticating translations of sinologists—Davis and Rémusat*

A close look at Davis’s English translation of the “Heying lou” published in 1822
under the title “The Shadow in the Water” reveals that he jettisons many self-reflexive
digressions in Li Yu’s text, which is replete with circumlocutions and cultural
references. In addition, he turns most of the poetic dialogues between characters into
plain prose. Consequently, Davis muffles the narrative voice that so vividly expresses
Li Yu’s personality in Chinese.20 Furthermore, like many contemporaneous European
translators of Chinese vernacular fictions,21 Davis shows absolutely no biographical
interest in Li Yu and we simply do not know who wrote the “Heying lou” from what
Davis tells us in *Chinese Novels*. This dismissal of Li Yu’s authorship along with the
“Heying lou’s” literary singularities is followed by the subsequent French translator
Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat. In effect, Rémusat goes as far as suggesting his translation
be read as an ethnographic depiction of Chinese mores in lieu of literature per se.

Indeed, Li Yu’s stories are brimming with the narrator’s witty and pedantic
digressions in the form of quotations, comments, and allusions that are culturally
embedded and difficult to translate. In his analysis of the *Shi’er lou*, Patrick Hanan
notes that Li Yu’s stories are “full of discursive dialogue and monologue.”22 This is

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20 Abridgements of poetry are not uncommon in Western translations of Chinese
novels, this is the case for example with Arthur Waley’s rendering of the *Xi you ji* 西
Unicorn, 1984).


22 Hanan, *Invention of Li Yu*, 76.
because Li Yu’s narrator would comment reflexively and lavishly, often in a humorous tone, on the plot. This constant display of authorial subjectivity and self-reflexivity even forms “an essential element of Li Yu’s art.”23 Regrettably, neither the discursiveness nor the self-reflexivity in the “Heying lou” have survived in Davis’s translation. Despite all this, at a time of rising British commercial interest in China, Davis’s translations of Chinese vernacular literature (including a retranslation of the famous romantic piece *Hao qiu zhuan* 好逑傳 in 1829) brought him much recognition.24 Starting from an employee of the East India Company, Davis was then promoted to the president of East India Company in Canton, and finally appointed Governor of Hong Kong (1844-1848) and Chief Superintendent of British Trade in China.25

Specifically, Davis crosses out the work’s prologue and epilogue, chapter titles, most poetic interludes, the narrator’s self-reflexive comments on the plot, and several long-winded [pseudo]-moralistic homilies. For instance, the “Heying lou” opens with, as mentioned above, a *ci* 詞, followed by an introduction in which Li Yu self-reflexively describes the overwhelming power of human love while emphasizing ironically the urgency of premarital sexual segregation. Yet Davis simply omits these introductory lines and starts “The Shadow in the Water” outright with the main plot. Another instance of erasure occurs when Zhensheng swims across the pond and tries

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23 Ibid., 31.
24 Before rendering the “Heying lou,” Davis had already published in 1816 a translation of another short story of Li Yu’s *Shi’er lou* collection, namely the “Sanyu lou” 三與樓, which was soon rendered into French by Antoine Bruguière de Sorsum in 1819.
sneaking up on Yujuan, and she is so frightened that she instantly flees, at this critical juncture Li Yu’s narrator self-reflexively comments: “看官，要曉得這番舉動，還是提舉公家法森嚴，閨門謹飭的效驗：不然，就有真賊實犯的事做將出來，這段奸情不但在影似之間而已了” (Dear reader, it must be pointed out that Yujuan’s reaction was a corollary of the puritanical discipline of the Guan family. Otherwise, some real misdeeds would have occurred, and their immoral rendezvous would not have been limited to reflections). 26

Davis, however, prefers not to render this voice-over. In addition to outright deletion, Davis also constantly simplifies Li Yu’s language, as in his translation of one of Zhensheng’s love poems to Yujuan. The original, a seven-syllable quatrain, reads as follows:

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借春雖愛影横斜
到底如看夢裏花
但得冰肌親玉骨
莫將短問韶華
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(Although one longs for undulant reflections in springtime,
It remains like watching flowers in a dream.
If I could only touch thy white skin and feel thy jade-like bones,
It would matter not whether my life were long or short.) 27

Davis’s paraphrase goes as, “their present mode of communication was nothing more than gathering flowers in a dream; and that they must endeavor to make it more unfettered, as well as more intimate for the future.” 28

27 Li Yu, *Shi’er lou*, 7.
28 Li Yu, *Twelve Towers*, 5-6. Unless otherwise noted, subsequent translations of the “Heying lou” will also be Mao’s, although in some cases I shall be altering them slightly.
Another example may suffice to illustrate how Davis removes cultural singularities from the “Heying lou” by turning Li Yu’s idiomatic circumlocutions into his uninspiring running prose. In the note Zhensheng sends to YuJuan asking her to marry him, he writes:

其字雲：“家範固嚴，杞憂亦甚。既杜桑間之約，當從冰上之言。所慮吳越相銜，朱陳難合，尚俟徐覘動靜，巧覓機緣。但求一字之貞，便矢終身之義。”

(His note reads, “Your family rules are strict and the worries of the man of Qi are proportionately great [“The Man of Qi” was a man full of worries]. If we stop the “Sangjian” meetings [A place noted for profligacy and promiscuity], then you must accept my proposal of marriage. You worry about the state of Wu and Yue [Two rival feudal states; in present day Jiangsu and Zhejiang] being so hostile, and the feud of the families of Zhu and Chen [A village in Jiangsu. Residents were named either Zhu or Chen], but let us just wait. As for now, give me one true word, and I will remain forever yours.”)  

As the many philological notes in brackets provided by the modern-day translator Nathan Mao show, this succinct note of Zhensheng, loaded with idioms and cultural references, necessitates much clarification for a Western reader. Aware of this prerequisite, Davis reformulates the foregoing passage as follows, “Ching-seng... wrote back a formal proposal of marriage, in which “he bewailed the unhappy circumstances which at present opposed their union; but advised that they should wait to see how things turned out, and seize some more favorable opportunity. He only

29 Davis, Chinese Novels, 68.
30 Li Yu, Shi’er lou, 7.
31 Li Yu, Twelve Towers, 6. All the Wade Giles spellings in Mao’s translation have been switched over to pinyin.
32 Spelled erroneously as “favourable” in Davis’s text.
stayed for one word in reply, to render inviolable their contract for life.”

Evidently, Davis not only crosses out all the culturally embedded idioms, but also turns the direct speech in the original into reported speech. Although this reconfiguration perhaps made the passage less disconcerting for a nineteenth-century British reader, it also entails the loss of some important narrative effects of the “Heying lou.”

Finally, Davis removes the story’s appendix, in which Li Yu cites the source of the story and self-reflexively reminds his reader of the fictional nature of his pavilions. This appendix is followed by an epilogue in which the literary critic Du Jun comments on the story’s inventiveness. And Davis justifies this deletion as “the conclusion, which in the original consists merely of a further conversation, repeating what the reader already knows, has been a little curtailed in the translation.”

These examples should suffice to show how Davis’s domesticated translation exorcises many discursive peculiarities of the “Heying lou.” To reiterate, Li Yu plays with his audience by not making his liberal views too explicit. The fact that the “Heying lou” seesaws between stiff moral and unbridled romance, extolling the latter while paying lip service to the former, doubtlessly constitutes the story’s primordial imperative. Davis domesticates this dynamic by removing most of Li Yu’s humorous, tongue-in-cheek, and self-reflexive digressions on the Confucian morality. Furthermore, he eschews Li Yu’s flowery language. To make his translation more appealing to the nineteenth-century British readership, Davis even adds in the epigraph of his translation a farfetched parallel between the “Heying lou” and Ovid’s

33 Davis, Chinese Novels, 69.
34 Ibid., 106.
“Pyramus and Thisbe.” As a result, the “Heying lou” has not only lost its authorship, but also its frame of cultural references.

As a renowned sinologist, Rémusat allegedly had devoted five years to learn Chinese. His appointment as the first Chair of Sinology at the Collège de France in 1814 attested to his conversancy with this language. In this regard, despite his inability to procure the Chinese text and the fact that he relied solely on Davis’s rendition, Rémusat inferred that Davis had truncated much information when translating the “Heying lou.” As an Orientalist who deemed vernacular fictions to be faithful *tableaux de mœurs chinois* “portraits of Chinese mores” on which rested the sole utility of making such translations, Rémusat disagreed with Davis’s reductive translation approach. Owing both to Davis’s initial abridgement and his dismissal of the “Heying lou” as a literary work in its own right, Rémusat’s ensuing French translation, “L’Ombre dans l’eau” is equally lacking in discursiveness, self-reflexivity, and authorship, thus unavoidably swerving from Li Yu’s original tale.

*Mining divergence between Gautier and Li Yu*

“Heying lou,” which has thus far gone through much maneuvering with Davis and Rémusat in forms of truncations and paraphrases, seems to have continued to suffer this fate with Gautier in 1846. Unlike Davis and Rémusat who prioritized social and

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35 Davis, *Chinese Novels*, 51. According to Rémusat, “Le sujet offre quelque analogie avec celui de Pyrame et Thisbé, comme M. Davis l’indique par une citation d’Ovide; mais il n’offre point de catastrophe funeste” (The theme bears some resemblance to that of Pyramus and Thisebé, as Mr. Davis points out through a quote of Ovid; but it [the “Heying lou”] presents no fatal ending). See Rémusat, “Sur quelques nouvelles traduites du chinois,” *Mélanges Asiatiques ou choix de morceau de critique et de mémoires* (Paris: Librairie Orientale de Donpey-Dupré, 1826), 339.

36 Ibid., 336.
ethnographic data over the literary value of their Chinese sources, Gautier was not a
sinologist per se but a late romantic writer fascinated by some fantastic oriental
localities. In effect, Gautier’s project of writing “Chinese novels” goes back to as
early as January 1840 when he advised in a letter to Samuel-Henri Berthoud—the
chief editor of Musée des familles—that he was about to compose a Chinese story
titled “Yeu-tseu” or “La fille de Hang.” Yet this project never came to fruition,
meanwhile, Gautier’s limited exposure to Chinese culture by the year 1846—mainly
mediated through the works of French sinologists—was about to be reified by his tour
on board of a Chinese junk docked in London in 1849, and his visits of Charles de
Montigny’s collection of Chinese objects displayed at the Exposition Universelle of
Paris in 1855 and the pavilion of China at the Exposition Universelle in 1867. As is
often noted, in 1863, Gautier even hired a Chinese man in exile in Paris named
Ting-Tun-Ling 丁敦齡 to tutor his daughter Judith Chinese.

Regardless, in 1846, Gautier’s removal from Chinese realities has furnished
him with much poetic license when revising Rémusat’s “L’Ombre dans l’eau.” Once

37 We must remember that Gautier is the author of a wide range of exotic fictions
such as Une nuit de Cléopatre (1838), la Mille et Deuxième Nuit (1842), Le Roman de
la Momie (1857), Avatar (1857), among others. As China is concerned, in his famous
poem “Chinoiserie” published in 1835, Gautier declares that “celle que j’aime, à
présent, est en Chine.” See Marc Chadourne, “Le Parnasse à l’école de la Chine,”
38 Théophile Gautier, Correspondance Générale, ed. Claudine Lacoste-Veyssere, 2
39 Alain Guyot, “Un pas de trois mille lieux: Gautier face à la Chine, au péril
des valeurs,” in Représentations de l’individu en Chine et en Europe francophone:
Écritures en miroir, ed. Michel Viegnes and Jean Rime (Neuchâtel: Alphil, 2016),
177–86.
40 Ting Tun-Ling, however, was accused of plagiarism and various misconducts while
in residence at Gautier’s house. See Qian Zhongshu 钱钟书, Tan yi lu 谈艺录
again, works become world literature when they gain in translation, but most likely in translations à la Gautier rather than à la Rémusat or Davis. To illustrate this point, let us first scrutinize how Gautier reshuffles the storyline of the “Heying lou.”

First and foremost, in Gautier’s rendition there is no place for Lu Ziyou—the deft matchmaker whose trickery leads to a happy ending in the “Heying lou.” Neither can we find Lu’s adopted daughter Jinyun. This deletion may in some way be justified in that the last part of the “Heying lou” would be garbled and confusing for a French audience. Instead, in Gautier’s adaptation, oneiric prophecies and an anonymous Buddhist monk have replaced the resourceful matchmaker Lu and his daughter Jinyun. This tweak may have resulted from Gautier’s disapproval of, or at least ambivalence toward, the polygamy that sanctions the trio marriage between Zhensheng, Yujuan, and Jinyun. Indeed, there is much to say about the cultural difference at stake in Gautier’s adaptation program pertaining to Chinese marital arrangements.

In the “Heying lou,” the narrator explains that Inspector Tu and Superintendent Guan were “一門之婿” (sons-in-law of the same family), “只因內族無子，先後贅在家中” (because that family had no heir, they stayed in the family residence after marrying one after another two twin sisters).

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42 My own reading experience indicates that even a modern Chinese reader unfamiliar with the marital practices in Li Yu’s time would have a hard time following the niceties of Lu’s stratagem and the manifold Chinese appellations pertaining to kinship in the “Heying lou.” Evidently for Rémusat, the ending of the “Heying lou” is the story’s weak point. See Rémusat, “Sur quelques nouvelles traduites du chinois,” 341.

43 Li Yu, *Shi’er lou*, 2.
l’eau,” Rémusat recounts this matrilocal arrangement as “Ils avaient épousé les deux sœurs, et, comme leur beau-père n’avait pas de fils, ils demeuraient tous les deux dans sa famille” (They had married two sisters and both of them remained in their father-in-law’s family because the latter had no son). Yet Gautier understates such unusual arrangement—which is a key element in the Chinese original—with a succinct and unspecified “parenté éloignée” (remote kinship) between Tu and Guan.

Similarly, in Li Yu’s tale, Jinyun is content to be married to Zhensheng as a second wife; this would certainly shock many nineteenth-century French readers as incongruous, if not outright anti-romantic. In sum, matrilocal residence and polygamy—a recurrent theme in Asian literatures—are at odds with nineteenth-century French views of romantic love. Examples are legion. We may quote Gérard de Nerval who, in 1935, comments on the Sanskrit drama Le Chariot d’enfant in which the Brahman Chārudatta, already married and father of a young son, takes as his second and legitimate wife the courtesan Vasantasenā. In Nerval’s opinion, such ménage à trois “choque nos mœurs et nos idées, quoi qu’il soit bien plus délicatement amené que dans le roman chinois d’Iu-Kiao-li” (shocks our manners and ideas, even though [it is] much more delicately brought forth than in the Chinese novel Iu-Kiao-li). As a side note, the Iu-Kiao-Li 娉桃 (henceforth the Yu jiao

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Yu jiao li\(^\text{46}\) is a famous late Ming vernacular fiction translated into French by Rémusat in 1826 under the title *Iu-Kiao-Li ou Les deux cousines* from which many late Romantic writers including Gautier drew their Chinese inspirations.\(^\text{47}\) In fact, Rémusat’s French translation of the *Yu jiao li* has wielded tremendous influence in nineteenth-century Europe. In addition to Gautier, it has most noticeably provided a specimen for elderly Goethe’s cosmopolitan view of world literature.\(^\text{48}\) In the preface to his translation of the *Yu jiao li*, Rémusat calls the happy ending based on polygamy so characteristic of Chinese stories “un moyen facile de contenter tout le monde” (a cheap means to satisfy everyone). He goes so far as to suggest, in an ironical ton, that a *ménage à trois* of sorts would make unnecessary the tears shed by Corinne and Oswald in Madame de Staël’s *Corinne ou L’Italie* (1807).\(^\text{49}\)

Despite his well-known liaison with Eugénie Fort and Carlotta Grisi, and his portrayal of an infamous love triangle between the chevalier d’Albert, his mistress Rosette and a dashing woman disguised as a man in *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835), Gautier was by no means an overt advocate of polygamy either a proponent of matrilocal residence. That said, there is evidence that Gautier was drawn by outlandish forms of human love. Apart from *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, in his novella “Laquelle des deux” published in 1833, Gautier relates the plight of a man who,

\(^{46}\) *Yu jiao li* is the book title’s spelling in the most commonly used Pinyin system.


falling in love with two twin sisters, is forced to relinquish his sentiment due to the impossibility of marrying them both. In other words, what Gautier explores is not polygamy per se but the ban of polygamy. Most interestingly, the male protagonist of “Laquelle des deux” confesses in the end his “desire to be Chinese” after reading Rémusat’s translation of the *Yu jiao li*—presumably “le plus beau roman du monde” (the most beautiful novel of the world) in which “le bachelier es lettres See-Yeoupe, déjà amoureux de la première cousine, devient derechef amoureux de l’autre cousine” (the bachelor of letters Su Youbai, already in love with the first cousin, falls in love once again with the other cousin), and eventually marries both cousin sisters.50 Evidently, although at some point polygamy might have intrigued Gautier, like Rémusat and Nerval, he never accepted it as a sound solution to the complexities of romantic relationships. Put another way, if both polygamous households and matrilocal residence are in keeping with how romance was conceived in seventeenth-century China, for Gautier, romantic love was less about marital arrangement per se than about a proto-“art-for-art’s sake” portrayal of romance in terms of hermaphroditic fancies, interchangeable identities, and the ideal beauty of women unfettered by quotidian obligations.

As for Li Yu, throughout his life, he was not shy of flaunting the mutual affection between his wife and his concubine—a fact noted and praised by his friends.51 His first play *The Fragrant Companion* 憐香伴 (1651) relates the story of

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51 Chang and Chang, *Crisis and Transformation*, 69–70.
a wife and a concubine who share their love for their common husband without jealousy. This play is even regarded as celebrating female homosexuality in the patrilineal Chinese society. That said, although The Fragrant Companion bears some similarities to Mademoiselle de Maupin—both are bold stories capable of upending the audience’s expectations, for Gautier, a romantic fiction cannot entirely be written to Li Yu’s formula, which often revolves around polygamy and is usually driven by a melodramatic imperative of happy ending.

In light of Gautier’s repudiation of polygamy, the replacement of a Chinese ménage à trois with a monogamous happy ending via dream visions, onomastics, and fortune-tellers is all the more noteworthy. Such tweaks may result from a project of domestication at first sight, yet odds are also high, as Jean Richer points out, that Gautier is de facto foreignizing his retelling by emulating the Yu jiao li’s profuse use of dream visions, onomastics and fortune-telling as plausible narrative devices. Specifically, in the Yu jiao li, the two cousin sisters are respectively named “Mengli” 夢梨 (dream pear) and “Hongyu” 红玉 (red jade). Mengli is given the name because during the parturition her mother has dreamed of “pear flowers.” Likewise, “la nuit de sa naissance” (on the eve of her birth), Hongyu’s father has dreamed of “un personnage divin qui lui faisait don d'un morceau de jaspe du rouge le plus vif et éclatant comme le soleil” (a divine figure who gifted him a piece of jasper of the brightest redness shining as the sun). Rémusat explains in a footnote that “le Jaspe (Jade) est pour les Chinois l’emblème de la pureté, de l'excellence, de la perfection au

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52 Rémusat, Iu-Kiao-Li ou Les deux cousines, 3:149.
physique et au moral” (Jasper (Jade) is for the Chinese a symbol of purity, excellence,
and perfection in both physical and moral terms).\textsuperscript{53} Equally noteworthy, in the
seventeenth chapter of \textit{Yu jiao li}, the scholar Su Youbai meets the fortune-teller Sai
Shenxian 賽神仙 (the one who surpasses deities) who, versed in the reading of
trigrams, foretells his happy union with both Mengli and Hongyu.\textsuperscript{54} These fanciful
conceits of the \textit{Yu jiao li} spanning dream visions, onomastics, and fortune-telling have
doubtlessly inspired Gautier; he even compiles a list of Chinese idioms and cultural
references extracted from the \textit{Yu jiao li} including the symbolic meaning of Mengli’s
and Hongyu’s names.\textsuperscript{55}

With that said, Gautier’s interpolation of onomastics and dream visions in “Le
Pavillon sur l’eau” may also have sprung from a note on Chinese names tossed in by
Davis and a succinct dialogue in the “Heying lou” per se, with or without explicit
reference to the \textit{Yu jiao li}. After hoodwinking Guan, Lu tells the befuddled father that
人生一夢耳 (life is just a dream) and urges him to bring his “dream” to a happy
conclusion. Arguably, this detail may have inspired Gautier.\textsuperscript{56}

Either way, now the plotline of “Le Pavillon sur l’eau” revolves around Mrs.
Tu’s and Mrs. Guan’s oneiric omens and a Buddhist monk who interprets such dream
visions. At first sight, this extra layer of mysticism cannot be hailed as altogether

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 1:86–7.
\textsuperscript{54} Rémusat does not render the name of the fortune-teller in full, simply calling him a
\textsuperscript{55} Richer recovered Gautier’s notes on the \textit{Yu jiao li} from Spoelberch de Lovenjoul’s
\textsuperscript{56} It must be reminded that in Li Yu’s original, the matchmaker Lu uses the simile of
“life as a dream” only as an excuse for his trickery, whereas in “Le Pavillon sur
l’eau,” dream visions become the overarching narrative thread.
original to Gautier, since dream visions pervade late Romantic fictions and even earlier works of French literature. Such is the case with the *Roman de la Rose* or Racine’s *Athalie*. Yet despite the myriad similar enterprises, Gautier’s confection of oneiric prophecy in “Le Pavillon sur l’eau” bears its own peculiarities, as he artfully associates Mrs. Guan’s and Mrs. Tu’s dream visions with the etymological meaning of their children’s names in Chinese:

Mme Tou et Mme Kouan, préoccupées sans doute de ces idées de mariage, continuaient dans leurs rêves de nuit leurs pensées de jour. — Un des songes qu’elles firent les frappa particulièrement. Mme Kouan rêva qu’elle voyait sur la poitrine de son fils Tchin-Sing une pierre de jaspe si merveilleusement polie, qu’elle jetais des rayons comme une escarboucle; de son côté Mme Tou rêva que sa fille portait au cou une perle du plus bel orient et d’une valeur inestimable.57

(Mrs. Tu and Mrs. Guan, probably preoccupied with these ideas of marriage, perpetuated in their dreams thoughts of the day. One of the dreams struck them in particular. Mrs. Guan dreamed that she saw on Zhensheng’s chest a perfectly polished jasper, giving off rays like a garnet. For her part, Mrs. Tu dreamed of her daughter wearing around her neck an invaluable pearl the most beautiful of the Orient.)

Gautier informs us earlier in his story that the two protagonists’ names, Zhensheng and Yujuan, respectively denote “la perle” (the pearl) and “le jaspe” (the jasper) in Chinese. Thus in the foregoing excerpt, a careful reader may promptly establish the correlation between “une pierre de jaspe si merveilleusement polie” (a perfectly polished jasper stone) and Yujuan. Likewise, he or she would understand “une perle du plus bel orient” (a pearl most beautiful of the Orient) as alluding to Zhensheng.

In fact, both Gautier’s “pearl” and “jade” originate from a footnote initially inserted by Davis in his English translation of the “Heying lou.”\textsuperscript{58} Leaving aside the haphazard spellings adopted by Davis, Rémusat, and Gautier, the given names of the two protagonists, namely Zhensheng 珍生 and Yujuan 玉娟, literally mean “born out of treasure” and “lovely jade” in Chinese.\textsuperscript{59} Indeed, Ming-Qing vernacular authors including Li Yu often use names to create puns or riddles (in which the components of individual characters are broken apart), thus imparting their narratives with either a mythical backstory or additional allusions.\textsuperscript{60} Although Li Yu’s intended audience was probably aware of the resonances of character names, such overtone is very tangential to the plotline in the “Heying lou.” But here Gautier’s poetic license turns a casual play on word of Chinese onomastics into the overarching thread of his retelling.

Specifically, when Davis’ interprets Li Yu’s words “辨不出誰珍誰玉” (one cannot tell who is Zhen and who is Yu), he reminds his reader that zhen “珍” and yu “玉” are not merely name initials, but also encapsulate a hidden meaning of “pearl”

\textsuperscript{58} Davis, \textit{Chinese Novels}, 56–57.
\textsuperscript{59} Davis interprets “Zhensheng” as meaning “pearl.” In classic Chinese the word designating “pearl” is \textit{zhu} 珠, as attested by the famous idiom 買櫝還珠 (literally, buy the wooden case and return the pearl). Although in modern Chinese, the most-commonly used word for “pearl” is \textit{zhenzhu} 珍珠, yet the first character zhen 珍 functions in this case merely as a qualifier meaning “precious.” Accordingly, a more accurate rendering of “Zhensheng” would be “born out of treasure” rather than “pearl.”
\textsuperscript{60} A famous example of such onomastic play can be found in the classic \textit{Dream of the Red Chamber} in which the name of the main family Jia 賈 is a homophone of the character 假, meaning false or fictitious. Likewise, another family has the patronym \textit{Zhen} 甄, which is a homophone of the character 真, meaning either real or authentic.
and “gem.” In so doing, Davis makes explicit two tangentially relevant Chinese references for his British readers. As for Rémuat, he reproduces Davis’s exegesis, turning merely “the pearl” and “the gem” into “la perle” and “le jaspe.” Yet Gautier makes much use of this interpretation of Chinese names by ascribing a mystic meaning to this pairing of two gemstones, and in “Le Pavillon sur l’eau,” the prophesied union between “la perle” and “le jaspe” eventually supplants the mundane marriage between Zhensheng and Yujuan.

Let us momentarily focus on Gautier’s version. Although both Mrs. Guan and Mrs. Tu interpret their oneiric visions of “le jaspe” and “la perle” as auspices of their children’s upcoming marriages, yet tormented by the uncertainty of their guesses, they go to consult, “chacune de son côté,” a Buddhist monk. The monk, or “le bonze du temple de Fô,” as Gautier puts it in a slightly disparaging tone, gives the two women the following instruction: “Le bonze répondit à M’ree Tou qu’il fallait le jaspe à la perle, et à M’ree Kouan qu’il fallait la perle au jaspe: que leur union seule pourrait terminer toutes les difficultés” (The bonze replied to Mrs. Tu that the pearl needed [to be paired with] the jasper and to Mrs. Guan that the jasper needed [to be paired with] the pearl: and that only their union could put an end to all these difficulties). It must be pointed out that Li Yu is reputed for his skepticism toward popular religion on rational grounds. He does from time to time mention supernatural beings,

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63 Chang and Chang, *Crisis and Transformation*, 278.
fortune-tellers and Buddhist monks in the *Shi’er lou*, but only to discredit them.\(^{64}\) In short, supernatural beings, Buddhist monks and fortune-tellers are not trustworthy characters in Li Yu’s rationalist world; they resemble more farcical manipulators. However, Gautier’s poetic license reverses such stigma.

The prophesied “jade-pearl” match now prefigures the highlight of “Le Pavillon sur l’eau,” which takes place when Zhensheng and Yujuan, after meeting each other through reflections, start to exchange poems, enclosing their verses in petals and leaves of water lilies floating across the pond. Given the symbolic overtone ascribed by Gautier to Zhensheng’s and Yujuan’s names as representing respectively “la perle” and “le jaspe,” it is no coincidence that Gautier would describe, with great verve, the two adolescents’ excitement at the discovery of their correspondents’ signatures:

Ce qui la frappa surtout, c’était le nom de Tchin-Sing. Elle avait trop souvent entendu sa mère parler du rêve de la perle pour n’être pas frappée de cette coïncidence; aussi ne douta-t-elle pas un instant que Tchin-Sing ne fût l’époux que le ciel lui destinait.

... En lisant la signature du billet, Tchin-Sing ne put retenir une exclamation de surprise “Le Jaspe!” N’est-ce pas la pierre précieuse que ma mère voyait en songe étinceler sur ma poitrine comme une escarboucle! ... Décidément il

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\(^{64}\) This is the case with the “Xiayi lou” 夏宜樓 (The agreeable summer pavilion) in which the hero uses his powerful telescope to dupe the girl into believing that he is an omniscient superman. At the end of story, Li Yu self-reflexively comments that “the worship of the Taoist and Buddhist deities amounts to worshiping one’s own mind. It is not as if there really are such things as immortals and bodhisattvas.” See Hanan, *Invention of Li Yu*, 79. Similarly, in the “Fuyun lou” 拂雲樓 (The Cloudscraper pavilion), the fortune-teller gives dream interpretations to the maid’s advantage once having received her bribery.
faut que je me présente dans cette maison; car c’est là qu’habite l’ épouse prophétisée par les esprits nocturnes.65

(What struck her most was the name Zhensheng. She had heard her mother evoking the pearl so often that she couldn’t help being struck with this coincidence; also she never doubted even for a moment that Zhensheng was the husband that heaven intended for her.

. . . .

Upon reading the note’s signature, Zhensheng could not restrain an exclamation of surprise—“the jasper”! Isn’t it the precious stone my mother saw in her dream sparkling on my chest like a garnet! . . . Certainly, I must present myself to that house, since my spouse prophesied by nocturnal spirits lives there.)

Thrilled by this delightful revelation, Zhensheng and Yujuan tell their mothers of what has happened to them. Now having their dream visions confirmed, the two women seek again advice from the monk. This time, the latter kindly agrees to mediate between Tu and Guan. Unlike in the “Heying lou,” the two patriarchs immediately reconcile in “Le Pavillon sur l’eau,” and Zhensheng and Yujuan are allowed to live together without further hindrance.

Evidently, Gautier’s story encapsulates a structural substitution, as the trio marriage between Zhensheng, Yujuan, and Jinyun morphs into, for the sake of Zhensheng’s and Yujuan’s putative names, a mystic and predestined union between “la perle” and “le jaspe” in the “Le Pavillon sur l’eau.” Despite a near-contradiction, Gautier is simultaneously domesticating and foreignizing the plotline of the “Heying lou,” by replacing the polygamous happy ending with a monogamous one using dream visions, onomastics, and a fortune-telling Buddhist monk. However much

65 Ibid., 358.
French they may appear at first sight, such newly-added conceits are undoubtedly Chinese—borrowed either from the “Heying lou” per se or from the *Yu jiao li*.

At times, Gautier’s assimilative program can be more outright. This is the case when he draws repeatedly on French stereotypes about China, some of which are anachronistic, such as “la cangue” (Chinese pillory), “la Grande Muraille” (the Great Wall), “les pieds des Chinoises” (the foot binding practiced by Chinese women), and quite expectably “l’opium.” This overflow of *chinoiserie* perfectly reflects China’s clichéd image in nineteenth-century Europe.

Another striking example of Gautier’s domestication scheme occurs when Zhensheng sees Yujuan for the first time. In Li Yu’s text, Zhensheng is a hasty teenager in his budding love, yet under the pen of Gautier, Zhensheng morphs into a chivalrous gallant who blows his dream lover a kiss “full of grace and passion.” More exactly, in Li Yu’s text, Zhensheng, upon seeing Yujuan’s reflection, stretches out his arms to scoop it up from the water. This very image—romantic enough for the Chinese—seems too blatant for Gautier who appears to understand romance differently. In “Le Pavillon sur l’eau,” there is simply no place for such a down-to-earth, vulgar, and spicy scene so characteristic of Li Yu, who is reputed to

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66 Henri David points out that the mention of opium must be an anachronism, as Rémusat’s translation starts with the time frame “under the reign of an emperor of the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368).” In fact, though Chinese started using opium for medical purposes as early as the seventh century, not until the mid-nineteenth century did its recreational use become a widespread phenomenon. See David, “Théophile Gautier: Le Pavillon sur l’eau (concluded),” 655.

67 Davis’s translation already attenuates the bawdy tone of Li Yu’s wording, as he deletes the word “受用,” meaning “to enjoy.”
have used plebeianism to address his market.\textsuperscript{68} It seems that, as evidenced by his treatment of a pivotal scene of “Le Pavillon sur l’eau,” Gautier is staging what he would like China to be—refined and almost otherworldly—rather than what China really was in Li Yu’s time.

Gautier’s inventiveness can move even further when he contrives a scene readily reminiscent of a parody of gothic fictions. This is the case with Zhensheng’s father, who menaces his son by invoking the haunted castles, monsters, and genies of the Middle Ages:

Mauvais sujet, s’écriait le vieillard, si tu persistes dans ton entêtement, je prierai le magistrat qu’il te fasse enfermer dans cette forteresse occupée par les barbares d’Europe, d’où l’on ne découvre que des roches battues par la mer, des montagnes coiffées de nuages, et des eaux noires sillonnées par ces monstrueuses inventions des mauvais génies, qui marchent avec des roues et vomissent une fumée fétide. Là, tu auras le temps de réfléchir et de t’amender!\textsuperscript{69}

(Worthless troublemaker, yelled the old man, if you persist in your stubbornness, I will ask the magistrate to lock you into this fortress occupied by the barbarians of Europe where one can only find rocks hit by the sea, mountains capped with clouds and black waters furrowed by these monstrous inventions of evil spirits walking with wheels and vomiting foul smoke. There, you will have time to think and amend yourself!)

Zhensheng’s father scolds his son because he stubbornly rejects all the marriages proposed to him, evoking such trite European motifs as the “forteresse” (fortress), “mauvais genies” (evil spirits), and “fumée fétide” (foul smoke). As long as we know we are not reading a parody of E. T. A. Hoffmann nor a tongue-in-cheek medieval

\textsuperscript{68} Chang and Chang, \textit{Crisis and Transformation}, 172.
\textsuperscript{69} Gautier, “Le Pavillon sur l’eau,” 357.
fairytale, but a supposedly Chinese novella, we may even be amused by Gautier’s wizardry. For this passage also speaks against this self-satisfied Eurocentric worldview that held sway in Gautier’s day. As Henri David notes, like many other Romantic and late Romantic writers Gautier never hides his hostility toward the industrialization of Europe, and the “monstrous inventions walking with wheels and vomiting foul smoke” are doubtlessly an ill-veiled allusion to steam locomotives.

Alternatively for Jean-Claude Fizaine, by barbares d’Europe “barbarians of Europe,” here Gautier is insinuating the British, since in 1846 French elites’ view of China was inevitably shaped by the cession of Hongkong to the United Kingdom following the first Opium War in 1842. Regardless, as L. Cassandra Hamrick incisively points out, Gautier’s musings on the dichotomy opposing barbarism to civilization often uses China as an exemplar while eschewing political immediacies in favor of his own aesthetic sophistications. Here Gautier is apparently mocking “barbarians of Europe” through the prism of a wrathful “Chinaman.” This sarcastic revamp is very intriguing, given that Gautier approves of China’s reluctance to embrace modernity on grounds of his own nostalgia for France in its preindustrial good old days.

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74 The nostalgia for preindustrial Europe is a recurrent trope in nineteenth-century Romantic writings. For example, this is how Gérard de Nerval’s narrator feels when
**Gautier the foreignizer**

Contrary to his half-assimilative half-source-oriented approach when revising Li Yu’s plot, Gautier’s prose style in “Le Pavillon sur l’eau” is unambiguously foreignized. This is because he borrows many recondite Chinese expressions from Rémusat’s philological footnotes. In this respect, Fizaine adds that the late Romantic rewriter was indeed very mindful of “problèmes techniques de la traduction” (technical problems of translation) and that he approved of Stanislas Julien’s approach while discrediting Rémusat’s domesticating method as overly “attaché à la doctrine classique des belles infidèles” (adhered to the classic doctrine of unfaithful beauties). Specifically, for sinologists like Rémusat, using explanatory notes often means that proverbs, cultural references, and collocations in Chinese are stumbling blocks not straightforwardly amenable to French. Yet, Rémusat’s ordeal seems to become Gautier’s delight when Gautier reworks a battery of footnotes from the sinologist’s translation of the *Yu jiao li* 玉嬌梨 into his own lexicon in “Le Pavillon sur l’eau.” In this respect, Gautier’s taste for the untranslatable and the culturally alien suggests that he does not merely write within the boundary of domesticating Orientalism, but also plays with it and perhaps even speaks against it.

As scholars amply document, Gautier takes the liberty of borrowing Chinese terms not just from “L’Ombre dans l’eau” per se, but also from Rémusat’s translation his beloved Sylvie in the eponymous novella “Sylvie” abandons handweaving laces and instead produces machine-made gloves.

of the *Yu jiao li* as well as from various stories in Rémusat’s *Contes chinois*. Gautier’s borrowing from the Chinese concerns mostly proper nouns and idiomatic expressions. And some of these terms are rarefied. Even for a well-versed bilingual reader, Gautier’s newly-coined “Chinese” idiolect can be baffling. A succinct excerpt illustrates this point:


(Until then, she had thought that the earth did not contain a man created for her, and she often had wished to have at her disposal one of the horses of Fergana that run one thousand miles a day to search for him in imaginary spaces. She imagined that she was unmatchable in this world and she would never know the gentleness of the union of teals. Never, she thought, will I offer duckweed and pondweed to the altar of the ancestors, and I will enter alone among the mulberry and elm trees.)

This paragraph relates how Yujuan has ardently resisted the idea of marriage until she sees Zhensheng’s reflection in the water, which instantly seizes her mind. In this short passage, Gautier tosses in four calques from Chinese idioms. First “les chevaux de l’eau (concluded),” 647–68; Richer, *Études et recherches*, 124–54; Fizaine, “Le Pavillon sur l’eau—Notice et Note sur le Texte,” 1:1535–1547.

77 In addition to the “Heying lou,” *Contes chinois* also covers two other short stories from Li Yu’s *Shi’er lou* collection, namely “Les Trois étages consacrés” 三與樓 and “Les Deux jumelles” 奪錦樓—a story ending with a happy *ménage à trois* as well. Notably, *Contes chinois* also features stories drawn from the late Ming dynasty collection *Jingu qiguan* 今古奇觀 such as “Les Tendres époux” 宋金郎團圓破氈笠; “L’Héroïsme de la piété filiale” 蔡小姐忍辱報仇; and “La Matrone du pays de Soung” 莊子休鼓盆成大道.

Fargana.” This is culled from Rémusat’s note on a set phrase in the *Yu jiao li*, “vous avez là un coursier capable de parcourir mille milles” (you have a horse capable of travelling one thousand miles), which in turn goes back to “老先生有此千裏駒” (you have a horse capable of travelling one thousand li) in the Chinese original. In fact, when glossing on the Chinese term *qianli ju* “千裏駒” (a horse [that runs] one thousand li), Rémusat traces the epithet all the way back to its etymology as “[les] chevaux de Fargana, qui sont issus d’un cheval céleste, et qu’on reconnaît à ce qu’ils suent le sang” (the horses of Ferghana that are bred from a celestial horse, and they are noted for sweating blood). It seems unlikely, however, that a nineteenth-century nonspecialist French reader would know anything about the Silk Road Hellenistic kingdom of Fargana or Ferghana and its famous “汗血寶馬” (blood-bleeding heavenly horses). So Gautier intentionally uses a loanword that makes sense only for sinologists. Similarly, “la douceur de l’union des sarcelles” (the gentleness of the union of teals) is culled from Rémusat’s rendering of an interlude verse in the *Yu jiao li* that reads as “Le vulgaire seul ignore toujours les douceurs de l’union des sarcelles” (only the vulgar always ignores the gentleness of the union of teals), which in turn reads as “大都愚不識關雎” in the Chinese original. Rémusat explains in a footnote that *guan ju* “關雎” is the name of an emblematic bird that gives title to a famous poem in the *Shi Jing* or *Book of Poetry*. For Rémusat, this iconographic bird is known for its conjugal fidelity, and accordingly “l’union des

80 For the Chinese text, I have chosen the Qing dynasty edition by [Di’an shanren 蒼岸山人?], see *Yu jiao li* (Beijing: Zhongguo jingji chubanshe, 2010), 21.
sarcelles” (the union of teals) denotes a stable and blissful marriage. Yet, because of
the lack of an equivalent in French, this bird so cherished by Chinese poets is
relegated to the unprepossessing “sarcelle” in French—a vulgar and generic name for
wild ducks that may readily distract a French reader unfamiliar with the Shi Jing.

The next example of a calque is the equally disconcerting act of “[consacrer] la
dentille d’eau et l’alisma sur l’autel des ancêtres” ([offering] duckweed and
pondweed to the altar of the ancestors). This phrase is modeled, once again, on a
sentence in the Yu jiao li, namely “欲求為蘋藻主.”83 In addition to rendering it
literally as “j’aspirais à devenir possesseur de la lentille d’eau et de l’alisma” (I
aspired to become the owner of the duckweed and pondweed),84 Rémusat explains
that “蘋藻,” pronounced as pin and fan,85 first appeared in the Shi Jing as two types
of ritual plants that Chinese maidens offered to the ancestral temples before getting
married. It is evident that by “je ne consacrerais jamais la lentille d’eau et l’alisma sur
l’autel des ancêtres” (I will never offer duckweed and pondweed to the altar of the
ancestors), Gautier means that Yujuan has made a provocative vow of celibacy.
Unfortunately, once turned into French as “la lentille d’eau” (the duckweed) and
“l’alisma” (the pondweed), the culturally charged diction “蘋藻” has lost all its
semantic relevance. As for the last calque—“j’entrerai seule parmi les mûriers et les
ornes” (I will enter alone among the mulberry and elm trees), this hybrid phrasing à la
Gautier once again originates from a footnote in Rémusat’s translation of the Yu jiao li.

83 Ibid., 164.
84 Rémusat, Ju-Kiao-Li ou Les deux cousins, 4:10.
85 The two characters should be transliterated as ping and zao in the modern Pinyin
system, thus reflecting how they are pronounced in Mandarin, and not in Cantonese.
For Rémusat, “桑榆” or “les mûriers et les ormes” are “les arbres que l’on plante au-dessus des sépultures” (trees that are planted over graves). Thus by “j’entrerai seule parmi les mûriers et les ormes,” Gautier seems to suggest that Yujuan refuses to get married before she dies. That said, most French readers will have a hard time following Gautier’s lexical inventiveness. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that both ping zao “蘋藻” and sang yu “桑榆” are high-end cultural references used only by the Chinese literati. Thus, recasting these quaint idioms into French only adds an extra dose of abstruseness to Gautier’s text.

Likewise, the opening paragraph of “Le Pavillon sur l’eau” is decidedly foreignized. It reads, “Dans la province de Canton, à quelque li de la ville. . . . Tou avait occupé de hautes fonctions scientifiques. Il était hanlin et lettré de la Chambre de jaspe” (In the province of Canton, several li away from the town. . . . Tou had assumed high scientific positions. He was hanlin and scholar of the Jasper Chamber). One may ask, how many French readers nonspecialist of China can possibly make sense of li and hanlin as phonetic transliterations of the Chinese words “裏” and “翰林”—the former being a traditional Chinese unit of distance while the latter being the official name of Chinese imperial academy, not to mention the bizarre “Chambre de jaspe” (Jasper Chamber) patterned after the Chinese word “玉堂”—a redundant epithet of the hanlin academy?

86 Di’an shanren, Yu jiao li, 59.
I offer the above examples for their heuristic value only, for I can spot similar loanwords on practically every paragraph of “Le Pavillon sur l’eau.” In sum, Gautier’s prose style deviates from the standard French, and more specifically, from the regime of fluency and easy readability. In so doing, he is not just exoticizing but truly foreignizing his adaptation. His bilingual creativity accidentally restores to some extent the myriad of Chinese references and proverbs pervading Li Yu’s “Heying lou” yet lost in Davis’s “The Shadow in the Water.” Put another way, Gautier’s foreignized language reminds us of Li Yu’s idiolect, even though the late Romantic rewriter might never have heard of his Chinese counterpart and knew practically nothing about the Chinese language per se.

**Domesticating or foreignizing?**

When remodeling a Chinese story, Gautier opts for a hybrid strategy of rewriting. On one hand, he domesticates, and to a lesser extent, foreignizes, the original plotline by adding dream visions, Chinese clichés, and groovy motifs of Western literature. He removes moralist digressions from the romance, strips away the key image of “reflection” from the title “Le Pavillon sur l’eau,” and crafts a symbolic union between the “pearl” and the “jade” based on Davis’s onomastic exegesis. All these free-ranging edits may suggest Gautier’s recreation be called gross misinterpretation. That said, on the other hand, Gautier heavily foreignizes his prose style by importing a host of loanwords from Rémusat’s philological footnotes, which incidentally recover Li Yu’s flowery language lost in previous translations.
In other words, Gautier’s adaptation strategy vacillates between domestication and foreignization. This contrast has been first theorized by Lawrence Venuti, drawing notably on Friedrich Schleiermacher’s advocacy for foreignized translation as simultaneously promoting German universalism and counteracting French cultural ascendancy. For Venuti, domestication refers to “an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, bring the author back home” while foreignization is “an ethnodeviant pressure on those values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad.”

For Schleiermacher, and less explicitly so for Venuti, “French exemplifies those languages that are ‘captives of too strict a bond of classical expression outside of which all is reprehensible,’ especially the innovations and deviations introduced by foreignizing translation.”

There is much to say about both Venuti’s and Schleiermacher’s radical stances and I choose to wade into the debate under Gautier’s aegis. First, in contrast to Schleiermacher’s claim, nineteenth-century French publishers and readers, however much chauvinist they were, may not have been so rigid as to impose complete domestication on every single piece of imported literature. There is always a leeway warranting a certain dose of foreign register and thereby allowing the translator to voice his discursive singularity. Indeed, Gautier both submits and resists to the pressure of domestication. By simultaneously inscribing French elements into the

90 Cited by Venuti. Ibid., 108.
“Heying lou” and foreignizing his lexicon, Gautier runs afoul of the conventional practice of Orientalism by highlighting both the original narrative’s cultural alterity and his own agency as a creative rewriter, if not translator per se.\(^{91}\)

Moreover, although Venuti’s politically-minded case studies are often elucidating, unlike the translators under scrutiny in *The Translator’s Invisibility*, Gautier displays an ideological agenda that is not so one-sided. “Le Pavillon sur l’eau” attests to the fuzzy boundary between gross misinterpretation and artful reinvention. It also offers a case study that challenges the scholarly piety of clichéd Orientalism as against ethical multiculturalism since the two competing stances can go hand in hand perfectly well. Specifically, if the sheer idiosyncrasy of Gautier’s lexicon merely indicates a “Parnassian inclination toward exhaustive descriptions of artifacts” aiming at creating a “local color,”\(^{92}\) it also unwittingly shatters the rule of transparency and easy readability in nineteenth-century France’s self-centered reception of Eastern literatures.

*Mining common ground from the “Heying lou” to “Le Pavillon sur l’eau”*

Although the Davis—Rémusat—Gautier translations may induce critics to produce a detailed account of errors, I have so far refrained from apportioning blame to any of the three translators. What I want to emphasize is that despite the unavoidable assimilation of the “Heying lou,” Gautier also foreignizes his lexicon, and his

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\(^{91}\) It must be reminded that as a prolific contributor to some most influential journals and newspapers of his time such as *Le Musée des familles*, *La Presse*, and *Le Moniteur Universel* and as the would-be chief editor of *Revue de Paris*, Gautier in 1846 was by no means a marginalized storyteller struggling for recognition in the literary field.

domestication of a polygamous happy ending in conformity with French aesthetics paradoxically relies on Chinese narrative conceits. Evidently, there is no demarcation line between domestication and foreignization in Gautier’s translation theory; he uses whatever method that fits into his program of poeticizing, aestheticizing, and romanticizing China. The ambiguity of Gautier’s adaptation strategy notwithstanding, his retelling of the “Heying lou” also partially and unwittingly restores Li Yu’s self-reflexivity, flowery prose style, and above all, literary agency lost in Davis’s and Rémusat’s utilitarian translations.

Gautier’s adaptation ends up doing justice to the “Heying lou” insofar as the Chinese tale becomes a full-fledged work of world literature in the sense of Damrosch—with its stylistic singularities and a traceable trajectory of transmission. Despite his gross misinterpretations, Gautier should be wholeheartedly thanked for having promoted Rémusat’s rendering of the “Heying lou” from a marginal item of the sinological archive into a well-polished piece of world literature. Such promotion—however much Orientalist and unintentional it may appear, adds much nuances to our understanding of cross-cultural representation and translation theory alike.

Despite the glaring discrepancies between the “Heying lou” and “Le Pavillon sur l’eau,” we do see similarities, convergence, and overlap of aesthetic patterns. Both Li Yu and Gautier strive to go beyond, in their own capacities, the literary conventions in their respective contexts. To be precise, one overarching principle that runs through Li Yu’s thought is his firm belief in primacy and novelty, which goes hand in hand
with his repudiation of literary orthodoxy. Li Yu’s championing of the market-driven vernacular storytelling against conventionalized classicism, his idea of literature as an ingenuous craft, his exploration of bold subject matters such as homosexuality, castration, and western technology, his hedonist sense of humor against the Confucian prescription on frugality are all evidence of his nonconformist stance. Likewise, Gautier’s outcry against the “Classicist stronghold” in the famous battle of Hernani in 1830 attests to, in a striking way, his affinity with Li Yu in their shared nonconformity towards established norms.

To reiterate, for the Chinese critic Du Jun, Li Yu’s inventiveness lies in his avoidance of such “惡套” (trite themes) as “畫兒中受寵” (falling in love in pictures), drawing instead on a plot of “影兒裏情郎” (lovers in reflections)—a narrative device that no one had explored since the famous Yuan dynasty playwright Guan Hanqing. In other words, Li Yu’s employment of reflections as facilitating romance was very refreshing for his contemporaries, so was the geometric design of two juxtaposing pavilions. The “Heying lou” stands out from similar Chinese vernacular fictions owing precisely to its use of this novel narrative setting. Likewise, if Gautier’s young Théodore saw his Angéla stepping out of wall paintings in La Cafetière (1831), some fifteen years later the same author dabbled with water reflections as the departing point for the forbidden love in “Le Pavillon sur l’eau.” This shift from the pictorial to reflections demonstrates that Gautier, like Li Yu, was constantly exploring new

93 Chang and Chang, Crisis and Transformation, 162–177.
94 Li Yu, Shi’er lou, 16.
95 Li Yu’s fondness of gardens and pavilions reflects the development of urban culture in late Ming and early Qing China.
narrative possibilities. Thus, what appears to have grabbed Gautier’s interest in adapting Rémusat’s “L’Ombre dans l’eau” is perhaps not so much the Chinese morals and marital arrangements, but the narrative newness, the exotic settings, and the romantic idea that reflections in the water can serve as a pathway for forbidden love.

Equally noteworthy is both Gautier’s and Li Yu’s self-conscious reflexivity and their embrace of a proto-“art-for-art’s sake” attitude toward the morality. For Li Yu, his “Heying lou” is just one of the twelve castles in the air “空中樓閣” (pavilions in the air), while for Gautier, Zhensheng and Yujuan’s happiness is as illusory and transient as their reflections in the water. In the last paragraph of “Le Pavillon sur l’eau,” Gautier writes: “Les noces se firent; la perle et le jaspe purent enfin se parler autrement que par l’intermédiaire d’un reflet. —En furent-ils plus heureux? c’est ce que nous n’oserions affirmer; car le bonheur n’est souvent qu’une ombre dans l’eau” (The wedding was held; the pearl and the jasper were finally able to talk to each other without using reflection as the intermediary. —Were they happier [because of this]? This is what we dare not say; because happiness is often merely a reflection in the water). 96

Such self-reflexivity highlights Gautier’s genius as a rewriter. By comparing Zhensheng and Yujuan’s happy ending to a reflection in the water, he not only draws our attention to the transient, illusory, and disconcerting nature of human love in general, but also elicits metatextual thoughts on the vapid morals of Romantic fiction.

Quite unexpectedly and developing a different trajectory, Gautier’s final comment thus echoes Li Yu’s definition of his pavilions as fantasized edifices.

As far as moral discourses are concerned, Li Yu mocks in the “Heying lou,” by pretending to uphold the Confucian morality, a puritan father’s futile attempts to preserve his daughter’s chastity; he thus trivializes the Confucian morality by consciously playing with it.97 Likewise, Gautier explores the joy of recasting a Chinese tale by detaching himself from Chinese realities and by further dismissing Li Yu’s halfhearted moralist formulations. In so doing, Li Yu’s idea of storytelling as “巧” (an ingenuous narrative craft) rather than a means to promote Confucian orthodoxy is followed by Gautier’s proto-“art-for-art’s sake” stance, which allegedly separates him from many of his Romantic and late Romantic peers.98

Li Yu speaks to Gautier in one way or another. For at least some remnants of Li Yu’s aesthetic originalities have survived Davis’s and, to a lesser extent, Rémuat’s truncations in Gautier’s “Le Pavillon sur l’eau.” The metamorphosis of the “Heying lou” into “Le Pavillon sur l’eau” thus provides a vivid example of how national literature becomes world literature when authors of different traditions take delight in

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97 See Fu Xiaoli, “A research on the novel Twelve Houses by Li Yu,” Journal of Sichuan College of Education, 26 (2010): 58-61. In his preface to the Shi’er lou, Du Jun suggests that Li Yu’s aim is to “以通俗語言鼓吹經傳” (preach classics using vernacular language) and “以入情啼笑接引頑癡” (enlighten stubborn fools with laughter). However, Du Jun’s assertion is not very well grounded, and we should not take too much stock in such moralistic extrapolation. It was a common practice for Chinese literati to emphasize on grandiose moral principles when prefacing their friends’ books.

98 Gautier is outspoken in his rejection of morals, as evidenced by the famous foreword in his epistolary novel Mademoiselle de Maupin (1835).
contributing to the multiplicity of a literary text by making it travel beyond its culture of origin.
The *Nalopākhyānam*’s odyssey to the land of Mallarmé

I believe that no one managed better than Mallarmé, by light touches and immersions, to get at the literary metamorphosis created by the Oriental Renaissance.

—Raymond Schwab

Although many scholars have studied Stéphane Mallarmé’s adaptation of the *Nala* episode (Sanskrit: *Nalopākhyānam*) of the *Mahābhārata*, no one has yet examined his retelling against both the previous translations on which he based his adaptation and the Sanskrit original. This chapter brings insights into the way a small portion of a Sanskrit epic became world literature via multiple recasting. By tracing Mallarmé’s *Nala et Damayantî* all the way back to its originating context, I seek to map out the significance of such a cross-cultural transmission and the extent to which Mallarmé’s retelling of the *Nalopākhyānam* fits into the landscape of late nineteenth-century French literature.

As many scholars have pointed out, Mallarmé’s *Nala et Damayantî* is based on Mary Summer’s adaptation of the same name, which in turn vulgarizes the French Sanskritist Émile Burnouf’s translation of the *Nalopākhyānam* titled *Nala épisode*...

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When adapting Burnouf’s literalist translation, Summer embraces an assimilative approach and injects much Orientalist cliché. For instance, she eroticizes Damayantī’s body and wishfully smoothes out what she thinks to be disjointed cuts between scenes in the Sanskrit original; moreover, her systematic recourse to abridgement not only revamps the internal structures of the story, but also weakens Damayantī’s image as a fully empowered Indian woman endowed with intelligence, volition, and rationality. Mallarmé’s poetic license, in contrast, enables him to go beyond received norms of nineteenth-century popular narratives pertaining to the Orient. First, he singles out elements in the *Nalopākhyānam* directly resonating with his own poetic agenda—such is the case with the imagery of white whirlwind of women and swans, the gesture of dice throwing, and Nala’s loss of free will. Second, he relinquishes Summer’s pseudo-realism, mitigates many Orientalist trappings, and switches over to a more symbolic treatment of plot details. Finally, Mallarmé adopts a prose style reminiscent of Classical Sanskrit, owing notably to his pursuit of condensation and syntactic ellipsis, his poetics of suggestion, and his tendency to multiply punctuation marks, participles, and nominal appositives at the expense of finite verbs.

In short, although Mallarmé’s stylistic idiosyncrasies are not always gentle to digest, by “Sanskritizing” his phraseology, so to speak, he effectively transmutes the *Nalopākhyānam* into a fresh narrative shot through with evocative, highly aestheticized, and rapidly shifting images.

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**Why the Nalopākhyānam?**

Mallarmé’s *Contes indiens*—which features *Nala et Damayantî*—is a selective adaptation of four stories, all extracted from Summer’s *Contes et légendes de l’Inde ancienne*. As Jacques Scherer has pointed out, Mallarmé’s personal grammar is particularly bold in *Contes indiens*. Moreover, as the last piece in both Summer’s and Mallarmé’s compilations, *Nala et Damayantî* stands out from other Indian pieces for two reasons. First, when reworking Summer’s *Nala et Damayantî*, Mallarmé is well aware of the story’s sacred origin insofar as he is unable to get away from the remembrance of Hindu divinities. This haunting recollection accounts for the relatively light, yet markedly careful, edits wrought by Mallarmé upon *Nala et Damayantî*. Second, as early as 1819 the *Nalopākhyānam* had already been introduced to European readers—long before it was brought to Mallarmé’s attention—when the German scholar, Franz Bopp, culled this episode from the massive bulk of the *Mahābhārata* and rendered a widely circulated Latin translation of it.

In nineteenth-century France, the *Nalopākhyānam* was by no means an unknown piece of foreign literature. Alphonse de Lamartine, for instance, retold the

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7 “J’ai accordé à la Dernière mode et aux *Contes indiens* une place qu’on pourra juger disproportionné avec l’importance de ces ouvrages : c’est que Mallarmé, qui n’a signé aucun de ces deux livres, s’y sent plus libre et y est particulièrement hardi.” See Scherer, *Grammaire de Mallarmé*, 12.

story in the first volume of the literary monthly *Cours familier de littérature* in 1856, not to mention that, in India, the *Nalopākhyānam* is perhaps, with the *Bhagavadgītā*,

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9 Indeed, Europe rediscovered India as well as the Sanskrit language from the eighteenth century onward, while the rise of Orientalism in the first half of the nineteenth century coincided with the advent of Romanticism, both of which radically reshaped the frontiers of Europe’s literary imagination. In this period, several soon-to-be famous pieces, including “Shakuntala,” “Nala,” and the “Abduction of Draupadi” from the *Mahābhārata*, were introduced to the general public in France. More precisely, in 1832, Jules Declève published his prose translation of the *Nalopākhyānam* in *Revue de Paris* 37 (1832): 65–75, based on Colebrooke’s studies on Sanskrit literature. Lamartine’s retelling of the *Nalopākhyānam* was based on an earlier version published by the Indologist Ferdinand Eckstein in various issues of the periodical *Le Catholique* (vol. 7, no. 21, September 1827, 439–74; vol. 8, no. 22, October 1827, 114–34; vol. 8, no. 23, November 1827, 255–78; vol. 9, no. 25, January 1828, 6–19; vol. 10, no. 28, April 1828, 5–20; and no. 29, May 1828, 233–48). For more detailed discussions on Lamartine’s borrowings from Eckstein, see Nicolas Burtin, *Un semeur d'idées au temps de la Restauration: le baron d'Eckstein* (Paris: Éditions de Boccard, 1931), 184–85. Indeed, following his defeat in the 1848 presidential election, Lamartine retreated from politics and dedicated himself entirely to literary criticism. From 1856 to 1869, he published volumes on various literary topics in forms of monthly *entretiens* in *Cours familier de littérature*. Admittedly, India was given a prominent position in Lamartine’s imaginings of world literature. Take, for example, the three hundred or so pages devoted to India in the first volume of *Cours familier de littérature* in 1856. The third *entretien* introduces *Philosophie et littérature de l’Inde primitive*, and the fourth guides the reader through *Les Indes poétiques* using extracts from the two best-known Sanskrit epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahābhārata*. It is precisely in section 25 of the fourth *entretien* that Lamartine gives an overview of the *Nalopākhyānam*, drawing upon Eckstein’s earlier version. Lamartine’s survey of Indian literature in the opening volume of *Cours familier de littérature* readily recalls his lasting interest in the Orient, possibly leading back to his two earlier travelogues, namely, his *Voyage en Orient* (1835) and his *Nouveau Voyage en Orient* (1850). Lamartine’s Orientalist stance has been studied by Edward Said, for whom the writer’s 1833 journey to the Near East is a “realization of his propensity for tendentious analogy” between the Orient and the West. Cf. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 178. Said’s criticism of Larmartine holds partly true for the poet’s adaptation of the *Nalopākhyānam*, especially when Lamartine calls the Himalayas *ces Alpes de l’Inde*, describes Nala as *plus doux que l’Achille d’Homère*, draws a far-fetched analogy between the *hamsa* birds and *les colombes grecques de Vénus*, and compares Nala’s wrathful silence when refusing to wager Damayanti in response to Puṣkara’s proposal to Job’s lamentations (to name only a few examples). See Alphonse de Lamartine, *Cours familier de littérature*, vol. 1, *entretiens* I to VI (1856), 288–320. [http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k29469m?rk=42918;4](http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k29469m?rk=42918;4)
One of the best-known episodes of the *Mahābhārata*, as attested by the myriad versions it inspired in both Sanskrit and later vernaculars.\(^\text{10}\)

One of many digressive episodes embroidered on the *Mahābhārata*, despite its considerable length the *Nalopākhyaṇam* does not have much to do with the epic’s basic narrative, namely, the great battle between the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas. The story is recounted by the sage Bṛhadāśva to Yudhiṣṭhira during the Pāṇḍavas’ exile in the Kāmyaka forest. Yudhiṣṭhira is bemoaning his wretched lot in gambling his kingdom away to his Kaurava cousin Duryodhana. Upon hearing Yudhiṣṭhira’s complaint, Bṛhadāśva relates to him, with a view to giving him hope, the tribulations of Nala, whose misfortunes supposedly far eclipsed those of Yudhiṣṭhira.

It comes as no surprise there are many parallels between Nala’s trajectory and that of Yudhiṣṭhira in this mise en abyme—from Damayantī’s and Draupadī’s *svayamvara* bridegroom choices to the fact that both Nala and Yudhiṣṭhira play dice with a kinsman and lose their kingdoms, prompting their exile in the forest, followed by their wives. Moreover, both Nala and the Pāṇḍavas, headed by Yudhiṣṭhira, toil incognito at a court, untamed by the chains of menial drudgery, and they also triumph in the end. That said, as van Buitenen convincingly points out, the emphasis of the *Nala* story is wholly different from that of the *Mahābhārata*:

Nala’s dicing is not as organic as to his story as Yudhiṣṭhira’s is to his. He could have come to the same grief without the dicing. Nala hardly pauses in the forest; that Damayantī does is literally inspired: it gives the author an opportunity to indulge in a favorite literary art form, the Lament. . . . The

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emphasis [of the Nala story], it was pointed out to me, is on the theme of *viraha*, love in separation; and indeed the story seems to be one of the earliest examples of that theme so beloved of the later writers of *kāvya* poetry.\(^{11}\)

According to van Buitenen, unlike the *Mahābhārata*, the *Nalopākhyānam* highlights the characters’ femininity. Indeed, it is Damayantī who leads the parade in the story; Nala merely complies with her stratagems, extols her virtues, and benefits from the bold initiatives she makes. In the *Nalopākhyānam*, the finesse of the human psyche is illustrated by a sharp contrast: Nala’s love for Damayantī is repressed, whereas Damayantī’s devotion to Nala is laudatorily spelled out. In so doing, Nala, with his severely curtailed agency, seems to serve as a foil to the heroic Damayantī, who exercises her free will at all costs. This is how van Buitenen describes Damayantī’s femininity:

In spite of its traditional name, it is much more the story of Damayantī than of Nala. The entire concatenation of events is treated strictly from a woman’s point of view. From the beginning Damayantī is the center of attention. . . . There is the romantic message of the wild geese, Nala’s discomfiture at having to act as the Gods’ go-between, Damayantī’s composure when Nala appears in the *sérail*. Her bridegroom choice is the only free one we have so far encountered. . . . There are no less than five, identically appearing, suitors. Her trueness prevails upon the Gods to reveal themselves. He and she are happily married and have both a boy and a girl. As an additional womanly feature, Nala is given a talent to cook.

Disaster strikes! After many happy years Nala is obsessed. What to do? Safeguard the children! Nala loses all and is in the end denuded; Damayantī, unwittingly, helps to dress him. Damayantī is deserted, but reluctantly so, and all for her own good. She is a good wife, praising Nala in her misery, killing her male savior. Nala is quickly given a good home (where he never sets eye on another woman), Damayantī’s hardships are protracted and pathetic. All initiative comes from her side: her father sends brahmins to spy her out: she is discovered, and behold, her mistress is her aunt! She conspires with her

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 183.
mother. Nala is found out through romantic poetry. To smoke him out she embarks on a plan of unheard-of boldness: a second bridegroom choice! The reunion is moving. Meanwhile, though in hiding, Nala has been a paragon of constancy.

It is profitless to speculate whether the story was written by a woman, but it is fair to assume that it is written for women. What would be the occasion for such a composition? The Nala story is not the usual pativrata type; it is not simply in praise of the dutiful wife, it is in praise of womankind.  

The Nalopākhyānam comprises twenty-six chapters. The Sanskrit author uses a strictly versified language couched upon the typical śloka meter of Classical Sanskrit, which evolved from the anusṭubh meter of the Ṛgveda. Yet since the French translator Burnouf did not take the trouble to render a metrical translation, nor did Summer or Mallarmé attempt a “metric adaptation” by reversifying Burnouf’s running prose, we will not delve further into this aspect of the Sanskrit text.

A synopsis

12 Ibid., 183–84.
13 As Walter Harding Maurer’s definition goes, “The śloka meter consists of four quarter-verses or pādas of eight syllables each, arranged into stanzas of two lines, each, therefore, containing two pādas.” According to Maurer, the most common metric pattern of the śloka meter can be illustrated as . . . | . . . | . . . | . . . | . . . | with the dot (,) representing a syllable of indeterminate length, the breve (‘) a short syllable, and the horizontal line (‘) a long syllable. See Maurer, The Sanskrit Language: An Introductory Grammar and Reader (New York: Routledge, 2009), 380–81.
14 All translations from the Sanskrit in this chapter are my own unless otherwise noted. Since Burnouf does not indicate the Sanskrit source on which he based his French translation published in 1856, I have taken the Sanskrit text presented in this chapter from a contemporaneous source, namely, Monier Williams and Henry Hart Milman’s English-Sanskrit bilingual edition of the Nalopākhyānam published in 1860. The Sanskrit text prepared by Williams and Milman, however, presents many lexical variations and sandhi resolutions inexisten in the widely circulated Critical Edition of the Mahābhārata (also dubbed the Poona edition). See Nalopākhyānam. Story of Nala, an episode of the Mahābhārata, the Sanskrit text with a copious vocabulary, grammatical analysis and introduction, trans. Monier Williams and Henry Hart Milman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1860). During the drafting of this chapter, I have benefited from the insightful clarifications made by Joseph Larose and Guy St. Amant. Needless to say, all remaining mistakes are my own.
Since the *Nalopākhyānam* is relatively complex work, it may help to provide a plot summary here.\(^{15}\)

The first chapter of the *Nalopākhyānam* introduces the two main characters, namely Nala, the king of Nīṣadha, and Damayantī, the daughter of Bhīma, king of Vidarbha. Nala and Damayantī fall in love with each other without ever seeing one another. One day, in a wood, Nala comes across a flock of haṁsa swans. When he seizes one of them, the swan assumes a human voice, begging Nala not to kill him and promising him to serve as his go-between to Damayantī. He then releases the swan, who immediately flies to Vidarbha, and there the bird messenger meets Damayantī who also reveals her love for Nala.

Chapter II opens with a depiction of Damayantī’s lovesickness. Taking her torment as indicating her readiness for marriage, Bhīma organizes a *svayaṁvara*—the “self-choice” bridegroom selection ceremony in which Damayantī will choose her husband among an assembly of suitors. The event attracts kings from all over the world, including Nala. Meanwhile, two sages—Nārada and Parvata—ascend to Indra’s abode. Nārada tells Indra that the kṣatriya kings are all hastening to Damayantī’s forthcoming *svayaṁvara*. Attracted by the event, Indra, along with three other primary gods—Agni, Varuna, and Yama—immediately rushes out to the *svayaṁvara*.

\(^{15}\) The synopsis provided here might be too cursory for those who wish to tap more deeply into the original story, thus I have enclosed a detailed plot summary in the appendix with selections of the Sanskrit text and English translations.
The gods meet Nala on their way to Vidarbha. After they stop him, Indra tricks him into accepting a task against his will, namely, to bring word to Damayantī that the gods have come specifically for her. Despite his initial unwillingness, Nala ends up complying with this demand. He is then transported all at once to Damayantī’s inner chambers. The princess reacts to Nala’s sudden advent with grace and equanimity. When asked by her, Nala mechanically reveals his name, repeats the god’s message, and phlegmatically exhorts her to marry one of the gods. Damayantī, however, is unflinching in her choice of Nala, saying that she will elect him in the presence of her divine suitors. She even goes so far as to threaten Nala with suicide if her advances are rejected.

Nala then reports Damayantī’s plan to the gods. On the appointed date of the svayaṁvara, the four gods all take on the physical aspect of Nala. Unable to discern which is he, Damayantī petitions the gods to point him out to her by virtue of the very truth that she had already chosen him after hearing the swan’s words. The gods indulge their supplicant and Damayantī chooses Nala by throwing an extremely brilliant garland onto his shoulder. The gods then bless their union, and each one bestows on Nala two supernatural gifts, totalling eight.

The demons Kali and Dvāpara, however, arrive late to the svayaṁvara. When informed by Indra that Damayantī has selected a mortal, Kali, enraged, says he will punish Damayantī. The gods then praise Nala’s virtues and curse Kali. Yet despite the gods’ objection, Kali asks Dvāpara to take possession of the dice, while he himself will dwell within Nala and ruin his happy lot.
After waiting twelve years, Kali eventually takes possession of Nala, who is then induced to begin a game of dice with his brother Puṣkara. Possessed by Kali, Nala loses his wealth while remaining unresponsive to Damayantī’s exhortations.

Chapter VIII gives a thorough description of Damayantī’s use of her wits in safeguarding her twin children. Specifically, Damayantī entrusts Vārṣṇeya—Nala’s charioteer—with the task of bringing her twin children to her father Bhīma’s kingdom of Vidarbha. Vārṣṇeya complies with Damayantī’s instructions, and after accomplishing the mission, continues on his way to Ayodhyā. There he enters the service of King Ṛtuparṇa as his charioteer.

Meanwhile, the gambling goes on, and Nala is bereft of his kingdom. At the end, Nala relinquishes his wealth and leaves his palace with Damayantī. They wander three days and three nights, feeding only on water and no one giving them hospitality. Dejected and abashed, Nala hints at letting Damayantī return to Vidarbha alone by pointing the way out to her. But Damayantī is terrified by Nala’s scheme. Nala then reassures her, saying that he has no desire to leave her. Sharing a single garment, the couple eventually arrives at a forest cabin, where Damayantī falls asleep. Under Kali’s influence, Nala severs the robe in two with a knife he finds in a corner of the cabin and goes away.

Chapter XI opens with Damayantī waking up alone in the wilderness. Deserted by Nala, she curses Kali, running hither and thither searching for her missing husband. Wandering around the forest, Damayantī falls prey to a serpent. Fortunately, a hunter arrives and kills the snake. Yet enthralled by Damayantī’s beauty,
her savior makes bold advances toward her. Damayantī, filled with anger, curses the hunter who falls to the ground like a tree burnt by fire.

In chapter XII, Damayantī navigates her passage through forests haunted by ferocious animals. Eventually, she mourns her misfortune in long-winded monologue of dismay from the top of a rock. Almost maddened, she ends up querying the mountains for Nala’s whereabouts. Then reaching a hermitage, she recounts her plight to the hermits there, who promise her a beautiful future and then vanish. Passing by an Aśoka tree, she inquires of it Nala’s whereabouts, and eventually comes upon a caravan. Shocked by Damayantī’s miserable appearance while amazed by her glowing elegance, the caravan leader asks her to reveal her identity. Damayantī relates what has befallen her and then joins the caravan.

In chapter XIII, a herd of wild elephants tramples the caravan, and the survivors blame Damayantī for bringing them misfortune. Damayantī, ashamed, runs off from them. She then continues on her route to the city of Cedi, where the king’s mother gives her shelter and assigns her as an attendant to her daughter Sunandā.

In chapter XIV, the narrative zooms in again on Nala. After deserting Damayantī, Nala comes upon a jungle fire and hears someone calling his name. Stepping into the fire, he finds the serpent king Karkoṭaka. Nala takes the snake out of the fire, who then tells him to expect a boon, yet then unexpectedly bites him. Karkoṭaka’s venom not only deforms Nala’s appearance, but also causes Kali to suffer from inside Nala’s limbs. Karkoṭaka then instructs Nala to disguise himself as an ugly charioteer under the name of Vāhuka and go to King Ṛtuparna in Ayodhyā, who is
skilled in the art of dice. There he should learn how to throw dice from Ṛṣurṣeṇa and teach him the skills of horse riding in turn. Karkoṭaka also gives Nala a magic garment, telling him that he can recover his stately form at any time by putting it on.

In chapter XV, Nala arrives in Ayodhyā and enters the service of Ṛṣurṣeṇa owing to his mastery of horse riding as well as his culinary skills. He is then appointed as the inspector of royal stables, with Jīvala and Vāraṇsēya as his subordinates.16

By the end of chapter XV, both Nala and Damayantī have settled down in their new shelters. In chapter XVI, Bhīma, anxious about his daughter’s whereabouts, sends to the city of Cedi a Brahman named Sudeva, who recognizes Damayantī among Sunandā’s servants. Approaching her, he informs her of Bhīma’s mandate to bring her home and reveals to Sunandā Damayantī’s identity. Damayantī then asks for an escort back to Vidarbha and the royal mother sends her home in a palanquin.

Once back in Vidarbha, Damayantī recovers her prestige. Yet disturbed by thoughts of Nala, Damayantī devises a series of stratagems and subterfuges to bring him back to her. Specifically, when Bhīma decides to send out Brahmans in search of his missing son-in-law, Damayantī instructs the messengers to recite in all directions a coded speech, which is in fact a riddle meticulously composed by her in a way that it both reflects her innermost pain and will move Nala to take pity on her.

16 Here we should remember that after handing Nala and Damayantī’s twins over to Bhīma, Nala’s one-time equerry Vāraṇsēya continued on his way to Ayodhyā and joined Ṛṣurṣeṇa’s retinue.
In chapter XVIII, a Brahman named Parṇāda returns with heartening news. He tells Damayantī that at Ṛtuparṇa’s court in Ayodhyā he met a charioteer named Vāhuka. After listening to Damayantī’s riddle, Vāhuka had groaned in anguish and extolled Damayantī’s virtues.

After hearing Parṇāda’s report, Damayantī sends the Brahman Sudeva to Ayodhyā to let the king Ṛtuparṇa know that she will hold a second svayaṁvara. But she also gives Ṛtuparṇa only one day to make it there, hoping such short notice will prompt him to order Vāhuka—whom now she suspects to be Nala—to take the reins.

Chapter XIX opens with Sudeva’s arrival in Ayodhyā. The news of the svayaṁvara plunges Nala into anguish, yet he is certain that Damayantī will not remarry because she already had children. Nala then consents to go. Along with the charioteer Vārṣṇeya, Nala sets out with the fastest horses, driving Ṛtuparṇa to Vidarbha. The astounding speed of the chariot convinces Vārṣṇeya that this Vāhuka with deformed limbs must indeed be Nala in disguise.

On the road, Ṛtuparṇa sees a Vibhītaka tree whose nuts are used in dice games. Counting its nuts and leaves, he announces the number to Vāhuka. Despite having been ordered by Ṛtuparṇa not to interrupt the journey, Vāhuka stops the chariot and counts the nuts and leaves himself and gets exactly the same number. Amazed by Ṛtuparṇa’s calculating skill, Vāhuka then offers to exchange his knowledge of horsemanship for Ṛtuparṇa’s knowledge of dice counting. Ṛtuparṇa kindly agrees, and Vāhuka obtains what he has been longing for, namely, the “heart of the dice.”
As soon as Nala grows skillful in dice, Kali exits from his body, vomits out Karkoṭaka’s poison, and resumes his original form. Suppressing his anger, Nala pardons Kali. Now liberated from Kali’s influence, Nala joyfully carries on his ride.\textsuperscript{17}

In chapter XXI, the king Ṛtuparna, Vārṣṇeya, and Nala under the aspect of Vāhuka arrive in Vidarbha. Ascending to the rooftop of the palace, Damayantī beholds their approach. Not seeing Nala, she sends her handmaid Keśini to make inquiries to Vāhuka, whom she suspects to be her missing husband.

The following chapters XXII through XXIV mark the most compelling episode of the \textit{Nalopākhyānam}, namely, the scenes of reunion. Following Damayantī’s instructions, Keśini first asks Vāhuka/Nala the purpose of his visit and then recites to Vāhuka/Nala Damayantī’s riddle speech and urges him to repeat what he had said to the Brahman Sudeva. Vāhuka/Nala, in a choked voice, complies. After hearing Keśini’s report, Damayantī further launches a series of investigations only to find out that Vāhuka is indeed his missing husband.

Damayantī then has Vāhuka/Nala ushered into her room. She implicitly accuses him for having abandoned her. Facing her indictment, Vāhuka/Nala mounts an apology for his innocence. Then Damayantī begs for his pardon and invokes the gods to testify her loyalty to him. Her speech startles and moves the heavenly beings, who comply with her request.

\textsuperscript{17} Here it is interesting to note that Kali’s affliction was instigated by Damayantī’s curse and not by that of the gods. Kali’s confession once again gives credit to Damayantī’s role in the \textit{Nalopākhyānam} as a fully empowered character acting as Nala’s de facto protector.
Thereafter, Nala’s doubts melt away. Then, putting on the vest given him by the serpent king Karkoṭaka, he resumes his proper form. In chapter XXVI, Nala returns to Niṣadha, challenges his brother Puṣkara to a throw of dice, and gains back his lost kingdom in one go. Only afterward does Nala bring Damayantī back to Niṣadha, and the *Nalopākhyānam* thus draws to a joyful close.

**Burnouf’s translation**

Although I have tried thus far to let the Sanskrit text speak for itself, I do fear that a cumbersome synopsis may miss its mark by lingering over plot details. Indeed, after ploughing through a plot summary highlighting Damayantī’s intelligence, volition, humility, and rationality, perhaps it is time to turn from the Sanskrit and look at some basic questions we should address before going into Summer’s and Mallarmé’s retellings of the *Nalopākhyānam*.

First, who was Émile Burnouf, and what exactly, if anything, did he have to say about the *Nalopākhyānam* from the perspective of a literary translator or Indologist? As a leading French Orientalist who had decisive and lasting impact on the development of Indology and Orientalism alike in nineteenth-century Europe, Burnouf (1827–1901) specialized in areas spanning Hellenistic philosophy, Sanskrit philology, and Aryanism. Assuming various academic positions, such as principal of the French School at Athens from 1867 to 1875, he sought to bridge Hindu thought with European philosophical canons. Yet he was also notorious for fabricating a racial hierarchy that placed the so-called Aryan people on top.18

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18 One should not, however, confound Émile Burnouf with his cousin Eugène Burnouf (1801–1852), another eminent French Orientalist who made significant
In the foreword to his translation of the *Nalopākhyānam*, Burnouf bills the story as one of the finest gems of Sanskrit literature, writing:

L’histoire de Nala est d’une composition irréprochable : à peine y a-t-il une phrase que l’on en pût ôter sans nuire au récit ; et d’ailleurs le lecteur n’y désire rien de plus que ce qu’il y trouve. (The story of Nala is of an irreproachable composition: one can barely remove a sentence without harming the narrative. In addition, the reader wants no more than what he or she finds there.)

Below is how he warrants his accolades:

Le lecteur sera frappé également de plusieurs traits de mœurs ou touchants, ou pleins d’intérêts : le rôle si noble de la femme dans la société indienne, l’amour tout moderne de Damayantî pour Nala, le choix de l’époux, la scène du jeu, et plus loin, l’habileté pleine de charme et de tendresse avec laquelle Damayantî retrouve et reconnaît son époux.

Burnouf’s notes chime with those of van Buitenen. Both commentators highlight the story’s femininity. For Burnouf, this femininity is reflected in the noble role of women in Indian society, Damayantī’s “modern love” for Nala, and her shrewd skills in spying him out and bringing him home, among others.

Burnouf also turns up his nose at Bopp’s Latin rendition, labeling it as “faite pour les commerçants,” “barbare,” and “moins claire que le sanskrit,” since it mechanically reproduces the word order, cases, numbers, and modes of the Sanskrit contributions to the deciphering of Avesta manuscripts written in the Old Persian cuneiform, and who is also renowned for authoring the first direct translation from Sanskrit of the *Lotus Sūtra* (Sanskrit, *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra*).

By 1856, after an untold number of translations were made into major European languages, the *Nalopākhyānam* had lost much of its currency among Sanskritists. For example, Max Müller criticizes Burnouf as “the last man to waste his life on mere Nalas and Sakuntalās.” See Max Müller, *India, what can it teach us?* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1883), 116.


Ibid., x.
words. In contrast, Burnouf claims to have followed the Sanskrit text closely without sacrificing “la pureté de la langue française.”

Even by today’s standards, Burnouf should be wholeheartedly thanked for fulfilling his promises. Indeed, despite some minor and very occasional inaccuracies, Burnouf renders the Sanskrit verse of the *Nalopākhyānam* into very readable French prose. That said, this translation remains overall very literal, containing many hangovers from the Sanskrit. For instance, in the opening lines of chapter V, the Sanskrit text describes how the kings of the earth rushed to Damayantī’s *svayainvara* following Bhīma’s announcement:

$tac$ $chrutvā$ $pṛthivīpālāḥ$ $sarve$ $ṛcchhayapīḏitāḥ$
$tvaritāḥ$ $samupājagmur$ $damayantīm$ $abhūpsavaḥ$

(Having heard this, all the lords of the earth, they whose passions were oppressed, hastened, went forth together, desirous of obtaining Damayantī.)

Burnouf’s rendering reads: “A cette nouvelle, tous les gardiens de la terre pressés par l’amour arrivèrent en hâte, recherchant Damayantī.”

Sanskrit shows a marked proclivity for participles at the expense of finite verbs. As marked in bold, here we have only one finite verb “samupājagmuḥ.”

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22 Ibid., xii.
23 Robert P. Goldman shrewdly describes the prevalence of verbal adjectives in Sanskrit as follows: “Despite its possession of a rich and complex system of verbal conjugations, or perhaps because of this, Sanskrit shows a marked proclivity for nominalization—the substitution of nominal forms for finite verbal forms. This is done through the use of a variety of declinable and indeclinable words, which are derived from the verbal roots. Perhaps the most versatile and useful of these words are the participles.” See Robert P. Goldman and Sally J. Sutherland Goldman, *Devavanipravesika: An Introduction to the Sanskrit Language* (Berkeley: Institute for South Asia Studies, 1999), 176–77.
This conjugated verb is sandwiched by four participles, namely, the gerund “śrutvā” (written as “chṛtvā” owing to sandhi application), meaning “having heard”; the past passive participle “pīḍitāḥ” in the bahuvrihi compound “ḥṛcchayapīḍitāḥ,” meaning “they whose passions were oppressed”; the past passive participle of the causative “tvaritāḥ” (though without causative meaning), denoting “hastened”; and finally the adjective “abhīpsavāḥ” derived from the desiderative root “abhīpsa,” meaning “[they] who [were] desirous of obtaining [Damayantī].”

Thus, a literal translation of this couplet would be something like, “Having heard this, all the lords of the earth, they whose passions were oppressed, hastened, went forth together, desirous of obtaining Damayantī.” Of course, this is a very garbled sentence in English. Knowing that calques from Sanskrit would be detrimental to his French prose style, Burnouf patterned his own translation after the Sanskrit word order while turning adverbially the gerund “śrutvā” and the past passive participle “tvaritāḥ” into prepositional phrases with the same meaning—namely, “A cette nouvelle” and “en hâte”—and by supplanting the somehow redundant desiderative adjective “abhīpsavāḥ” with a present participle “recherchant.” In a nutshell, despite a suave, exotic flavor, Burnouf’s wording is both faithful and fluid, preserving both the original word order and the key feature of the Sanskrit phraseology, that is to say, its extreme frugality in use of finite verbs governed by the proclivity for participial clauses and other nominal constructions.

24 “Samupājagmuḥ” is written as “samupājagmur” owing to sandhi changes. It is the third person plural perfect of the root “gam” preceded by two prefixes, “sam” and “upa,” meaning “[they] went forth together.”
Another example will suffice to illustrate Burnouf’s effort to convey the linguistic singularities of Sanskrit without compromising the legibility of his French prose. As mentioned earlier, Kali arrives late to Damayantī’s svayāṁvara. When informed by Indra that Damayantī has married Nala, Kali, enraged, says he will ruin the couple’s happiness. The gods retort by praising Nala’s virtues as follows:

. . . nityam trptā grhe yasya devā yañeṣu dharmataḥ
ahimsānirato yaśa ca satyavādi dṛḍhavrataḥ
yasmin satyaṁ dhṛtir dānanāṁ tapaḥ śaucaṁ damāḥ śamaḥ . . .

. . . [he] at whose house, in compliance with the dharma, the gods are always satiated with offerings, he who is devoted to Ahiṁsā [harmlessness], truth-speaking, firm in his vow, he in whom truth, constancy, generosity, austerity, self-control, and equanimity [are found]. . .

Burnouf provides the following translation:

. . . dans la maison duquel les dieux sont justement rassasiés par les sacrifices ; Nala, dévoué à la clémence, véridique, fidèle à ses vœux, en qui la probité, la constance, la libéralité, la dévotion, la pureté, la tempérance, la patience sont à l’épreuve, . . .

Here, the gods’ encomium to Nala epitomizes the tendency of Sanskrit authors to pile up qualifiers whenever possible. Admittedly, such enumeration was meaning-bearing and stylistically preferred in epic Sanskrit. Yet reproducing clusters of qualifiers word-for-word in French runs the risk of clogging the flow of the sentences.

This passage revolves around a relative-correlative construction led by “yasya” (he whose), “yah” (he), and “yasmin” (he in whom), which has no equivalent in French. Furthermore, the last line, “yasmin satyaṁ dhṛtir dānanāṁ tapaḥ śaucaṁ

25 Burnouf, Nala épisode du Mahâbhârata, 30.
damaḥ śamaḥ,” remains elliptical because of the omission of the predicate. That said, we may guess from the context that it means something close to “He in whom truth, constancy, generosity, austerity, self-control, and equanimity [are to be encountered].” To circumvent a jerky rendition, Burnouf on one hand follows the relative-correlative construction and Sanskrit nominal cases using “duquel” (of which one) and “en qui” (in whom) to render “yasya” and “yasmin;” on the other, he pointedly adds a predicate “sont à l’épreuve” to help his reader fathom what is implied in this very complex sentence. All these maneuvers attest to Burnouf’s effort in bridging the linguistic gaps between French and Sanskrit.

Despite its qualities, however, Burnouf’s translation also contains a phalanx of lexical repetitions that undoubtedly diminish the literary value of his prose. For example, having been released by Nala, the swan messenger flies to Vidarbha, where the flock of birds meets the cheerful Damayantī and her jubilant companions. Here Burnouf’s translation reads:

Les cygnes s’envolèrent donc et allèrent dans les Vidarbhas ; arrivés à la ville, ils s’abattirent devant Damayanti qui les aperçut aussitôt. Elle admira d’abord la belle forme de ces oiseaux, et entourée de ses amies, elle les poursuivit pour les saisir : ils se dispersèrent dans le parc de tous côtés ; les jeunes filles se dispersèrent en les poursuivant. L’oiseau que poursuivait Damayanti prit une voix humaine et lui dit.26

Here Burnouf’s word choice is jarringly redundant. As highlighted in bold, Burnouf repeats three times “poursuivre” and twice “se disperser,” whereas the corresponding Sanskrit dictions exhibit much more variation. More precisely, three different Sanskrit,

26 Ibid., 15.
namely, “upacakrame,” “samupādravan,” and “samupādhāvat” have been invariably rendered by Burnouf into “poursuivre.” Although semantically it would be persnickety to say these Sanskrit verbs have noticeable nuances, yet stylistically speaking, these synonyms avoid the unnecessary repetition that characterizes Burnouf’s phraseology.

In the same vein, Burnouf translates the finite verb “visasṛpuḥ” (the third person plural perfect of the root “visasṛp,” meaning “[they] spread out”) and the adverbial phrase “ekaikaśas,” meaning “one by one,” indiscriminately into “se dispersèrent” in French. While it may be a quibble, one must regret that Burnouf has failed to polish his French translation to a certain degree of consummation, despite the fact he has meticulously followed the Sanskrit text and makes a painstaking effort to bridge the linguistic incommensurability between two remotely connected languages.

**Summer’s adaptation**

I have thus far provided much close reading in Sanskrit, not to overpower a nonspecialist, but in so doing to give one a basic sense of how this difficult classical language works. Nineteenth-century French writers would have felt an urge for revision if a slightly wooden translation such as Burnouf’s were presented them. This is at least what Summer has done—she has not only truncated many culturally alien tropes and supposedly superfluous passages, but also reframed the thread of the original narrative.
Before proceeding with a seemingly interminable philological investigation, let us cool down our overheated critical minds and imagine for a moment a twenty-first-century Parisian film studio.

Let us call it Eastern Mystics Pictures, established in 2000 with a generous grant from the Jean-François Champollion foundation. Its director—Mme. Marie-Thérèse de Vendeuvre—a wealthy heiress and Paris-based patron of the arts with a pronounced interest in films d’auteur pertaining to the East, has launched a call for proposals for the studio’s annual project-funding competition. This year’s theme is “Love in the Time of the Mughals.” The proposal submitted by a French expatriate living in India eventually emerges as the committee’s top choice from a huge pool of dossiers. The applicant—a Paris-born, slightly disenfranchised, chronically non-tenured lecturer of Comparative Literature at the University of Pondicherry—has proposed a riveting screenplay based on the manuscript of a fifteenth-century Tamil romance he himself discovered in the temple ruins of Tamil Nadu. Yet the jury members of the selection committee have concluded that although this script presents some potential, its outlandish characters, grotesque moralities, and nonprogressive soteriology seemingly patterned after an archaic Tamil folklore may hardly appeal to twenty-first-century French moviegoers. Eastern Mystics Pictures has thus commissioned two famous playwrights, very different in style, to rework this initial screenplay independently. The first has crafted a Hollywood adaptation with all the clichés one could possibly associate with India—from sensuous belly dancing to cows strolling down filthy streets, from slumdogs living in shacks to the endless cycle of
honor killings. The second rewriter—a poet renowned for his arcane verses and his advocacy of the Post-Neo-Futurist movement, has presented a very different narrative. Specifically, the Tamil narrative becomes elliptical and drifty. There is a royal couple in love, there are convoluted rivalries between mortals and gods, there is a plot somewhere, but its chronology is very hard to follow. The second rewriter further dismisses all tangible Indian realities and focuses instead on some hermetic metaphysical issues. It goes without saying that critics from *Cahiers du Cinéma* unanimously downplay the first adaptation as a clichéd melodrama while lauding the second—the rough read—for bringing forth a refreshing aesthetic against the established norms of exotic narratives. But both versions, and this is more to the point, are as non-Indian as they can possibly get.

Like many analogies, especially hypothetical ones, this one may be far-fetched and must be taken with a grain of salt, but at least it conveys my general view of both Summer’s and Mallarmé’s retellings of the *Nalopākhyānam*. Knowing no Sanskrit, Mallarmé ventured to craft an original story out of Summer’s supposedly “defective” and “cloying” adaptation, which in turn drew upon Burnouf’s translation of the original text. No literary work could possibly avoid assimilation and remain intact after such a meandering trajectory.

So far so good. One may further ask, who was Mary Summer? Did she know any Sanskrit? What did she have to say about the *Nalopākhyānam* to justify her choice of adaptation? A few biographical notes may be helpful. Mary Summer (1842–1902) was in fact the pen name of the wife of the famous French Orientalist
Philippe Édouard Foucaux (1811–1894). Together with her husband—a renowned scholar of Sanskrit and Tibetan—she co-authored a steady stream of vulgarized works on Buddhism and Eastern literature, such as *Les Religieuses bouddhistes, depuis Sâkya-Mouni jusqu’à nos jours* (1873); *Histoire du Bouddha Sâkya-Mouni depuis sa naissance jusqu’à nos jours* (1874); *Contes et légendes de l’Inde ancienne* (1878); and *Les Héroïnes de Kâlidâsa et les Héroïnes de Shakespeare* (1879). Indeed, not knowing Sanskrit or Tibetan per se but certainly aided by her husband, Summer belongs to the category of authors who adapt scholarly translations to the popular taste of their times. Accordingly, her retellings cater to an audience much broader than a coterie of classically learned and university-trained specialists.²⁷ Foucaux, in his introduction to *Contes et légendes de l’Inde ancienne*, straightforwardly delineates the purpose of Summer’s adaptations:

Le petit recueil que publie aujourd’hui Mᵐᵉ Mary Summer étant destiné à donner aux lecteurs européens une idée des contes indiens, sa tâche était de conserver le fond des récits en allégeant le style ; en un mot, de faire pour ces contes ce que Galland avait fait avec bonheur pour les Mille et une nuits. Mᵐᵉ Mary Summer nous semble avoir atteint ce but, et nous croyons que ses lecteurs seront de notre avis. (The little collection published today by Mrs. Mary Summer is intended to give European readers an idea of Indian tales, her task was to retain the essence of stories by lightening the style; in a word, to do for these tales what Galland had joyfully done for the *Thousand and One Nights*. Mrs. Mary Summer seems to have achieved this goal, and we believe her readers will agree with us.)²⁸

²⁷ For instance, in his preface to *Histoire du Bouddha Sâkya-Mouni depuis sa naissance jusqu’à nos jours*, Foucaux praises Summer’s merits as follows: “Mary Summer a pensé, avec raison, que le fondateur d’une religion, qui compte plus de trois cents millions de sectateurs, méritait que le récit des événements de sa vie fût mis à la portée de tous les lecteurs français, au lieu de rester confiné dans le domaine de la science. (Mary Summer has sensibly thought that the life story of the founder of a religion that has more than three hundred million followers should be made available to all French readers, instead of remaining confined to the field of science.)”
²⁸ Summer, *Contes et légendes*, x.
Foucaux and Summer were certainly ambitious in comparing their project of rewriting to Antoine Galland’s translation of *One Thousand and One Nights*. It is not clear whether by “conserver le fond des récits en allégeant le style,” Foucaux is referring to Galland’s obliteration of erotic passages and all the poetry from his Arabic source. Yet, as we will see, Summer does not shy from inventing mawkish scenes of Oriental obscenities that cannot be found in the Sanskrit original. The fallacy of her aesthetic claims notwithstanding, Summer does supply her readers with “an idea of Indian tales” by writing within the precinct of the exotic narratives of her era where Orientalism prevailed. In so doing, she undoubtedly contributed to the widespread nineteenth-century vogue for a romanticized India. Here I would like to suggest some hints in that direction drawing specifically on her adaptation of *Nala et Damayantî*.

First, Summer refines Burnouf’s language, strips it of its lexical redundancy, and tosses in many picturesque imageries of her own invention. Once again, take for example Damayantî’s first encounter with the *haṁsa* birds:

Entourée de ses nombreuses compagnes, Damayantî folâtrait dans les jardins du sérail. C’était au printemps ; les arbres venaient de renouveler leur parure et se couvraient de pousses d’un vert tendre ; les gazons étaient émaillés de fleurs fraîchement écloses. Tout à coup la princesse aperçut une volée d’oiseaux qui s’abattaient sur les bocages en lignes si serrées que l’air en était obscurci. L’agréable divertissement de donner la chasse à toute cette bande emplumée ! Les belles rieuses de se mettre aussitôt à courir ; c’est un vrai tourbillon ; femmes et cygnes sont confondus ; on ne distingue rien que des cols qui se penchent ; mais les malicieux oiseaux savent se dérober coquettement et fatiguer leurs charmantes adversaires. Dans cette course folle, Damayantî se montre la plus ardente. Le cygne qu’elle poursuit s’arrête enfin, et, s’élançant sur l’épaule arrondie de la jeune fille, lui murmure à l’oreille : 29

29 Ibid., 117.
One need not hold a PhD degree in French to notice Summer’s edits of embellishment. Unlike Burnouf’s fixation with “poursuivre” and “se disperser,” Summer’s palette of word choices is elegantly varied, and her inventiveness is fertile. Images such as spring meadow flowers, flocks of birds flying in lines, a whirlpool of women and birds intermingled, and swans teasing “coquettishly” their charming chasers are not to be found in the corresponding Sanskrit passage, which is terse, unadorned, and simple in style. Thus, we are left with the impression that Summer has overly enriched Burnouf’s lexical paucity by eloquently fleshing out an imagined scenery. Indeed, Summer’s stage-setting techniques had a direct influence on Mallarmé, who would further trim down the *Nalopākhyānam* to a series of highly aestheticized scenes.

In addition to a purely linguistic and scenographic embellishment, Summer is also keen to season the *Nalopākhyānam* with an extra dose of sensuality. One example might be helpful. When saved by a hunter from the mouth of a hungry snake, Damayantī thanks her savior in a soothing tone. Here the Sanskrit text describes Damayantī’s physical aspect as follows:

. . .clothed in half a garment, she whose breasts and buttocks [were] large (*tāṃ ardhavastraśaṁvītāṁ pīnāśronipayodharām*), she whose limbs [were] unblemished and very delicate, she whose face resembled the full moon (*sukumārānavadyāṅgīṁ pūrṇacandranibhānanām*), she whose eyelashes and eyes [were] curved, then, the one sweetly speaking (*arālapaksmanayanāṁ tathā madhurabhāṣiṇīm*).

Burnouf’s translation reads: “Cette femme couverte de la moitié d’un vêtement, son sein et ses jambes arrondies, ses beaux membres si délicats, son visage brillant
comme la pleine lune, ses yeux aux cils recourbés, sa voix si douce.”

Despite a potentially arousing tone in the Sanskrit text, this listing of Damayantī’s physical characteristics through a series of *bahuvrīhi* compounds remains unstressed and formulaic. We have here a typical portrait of Indian beauties since, as in many premodern agricultural or pastoral societies, plump women were often favored in ancient India for their reproductive advantages and thus considered physically attractive. Yet mentioning Damayantī’s chest and hips per se does not mean the Sanskrit narrator seeks to make her a modern-day sex symbol. Such description is merely written to a certain formula.

Summer’s approach of featuring Damayantī, however, veers from the glamorous to the voluptuous. The princess is pictured as sexually seductive, owing to her “weakness” and the “disorder of her clothes.” Titillating imaginings accrue to Damayantī’s body, such as her “bare breast thrillingly sticking up” and her curved eyelashes “languishingly rising.” At the same time, Summer edits out culturally embedded and thus untranslatable tropes, such as Damayantī’s full-moon-shaped cheek: “Sa faiblesse et le désordre de ses vêtements la rendent bien séduisante ; les perfections de son corps se révèlent sous les haillons ; son sein nu se soulève tout palpitant ; ses beaux cils recourbés se lèvent languissamment et sa voix devient plus douce encore en remerciant son libérateur.”

Indeed, reinvented by Summer, Damayantī first appears literally in a *sérail* when Nala is transported there by the gods to serve as their go-between:

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30 Burnouf, *Nala épisode*, 41–42.
31 Summer, *Contes et légendes*, 132.
Et, par la puissance du dieu, Nala se trouva à l’instant transporté dans l’intérieur du sérail. Le jeune homme resta quelques minutes étourdi d’un voyage si rapide.

C’était l’heure du repos ; les femmes de Damayantî s’empressaient encore autour d’elle. Les lampes venaient de s’éteindre et les œils-de-bœuf laissaient pénétrer librement la fraîcheur du soir. La vierge royale était étendue sur une couche de soie et de duvet de cygne, aussi légère que les nuées qui flottent dans l’air après les pluies d’automne. Les rayons de la lune caressaient doucement la gerbe dénouée d’une chevelure incomparable ; les prunelles étaient cachées sous les pointes vacillantes des cils noirs et les deux grands yeux, fermés au milieu de cette tête charmante, semblaient un lotus dans la corolle duquel se serait endormie une abeille. Les lèvres brillaient comme des rubis ; rien n’avait encore terni leur rougeur éclatante, et la bouche d’un vainqueur ne leur avait jamais fait sentir son avide pression. Le pâle contour des joues ressemblait au bouton du Tchampaka avant qu’il ne soit devenu vermeil. Quelques gouttes de sueur glissaient çà et là sur les épaules, sur les bras et sur le sein que soulevait le feu de la jeunesse. Le corps souple reposait dans une attitude languissante et négligée.\footnote{Ibid., 120–21.}

Here, Summer’s voyeuristic fantasies are patently Orientalist. In the Sanskrit text, Damayantî is seated rather than lying “languishingly” on a bed made of silk and fluffy swan down,\footnote{Once again, “languissante” is repeated here. Few adjectives can match this mawkish word’s evocative power in ridiculing the debauchery of the imagined Orient. Many years later, in \textit{La Chanson de Jacky}, Jacques Brel would still imagine himself becoming a “gouverneur de tripot” in Macau, where he is surrounded by “femmes languissantes.”} both materials customarily associated with sensual gratification and so enhancing the visual impact of Damayantî’s suggestive pose. Damayantî is thus placed in a dark, secluded, fantasy world of forbidden sexuality. She is relaxing, a drizzle must have just sprinkled the \textit{sérail} with the freshness of autumn, and the shadowy sultry chamber is illuminated only by an \textit{œil-de-boeuf} window. Here a nineteenth-century French reader is invited to drool over an Oriental beauty’s chest, hair, pupils, eyelashes, pale cheek, and lips of dazzling redness thus far untouched by...
the avid pressure of any conqueror. Since we are in India and it must be hot there, even in an autumn night, Damayantī is duly sweating, and the drops of sweat run trickling down her shoulders, her arms, and most notably, her gorgeous breast, stimulating “the fire of youth.” Puffing and panting with excitement, Damayantī’s body—the object of Orientalist fantasies—has thrust itself into set pieces of soft porn in sync with Summer’s purple prose.

In the Sanskrit text, no sooner has Nala appeared in the inner chamber than Damayantī’s maids “sprang from the seats; overpowered by [Nala’s] luster (āsanebhyaḥ samutpetus tejasā tasya dharsitāḥ), they praised Nala,” while Damayantī is composedly and gracefully “smiling at him, addressing [Nala] with a smile at first (athaināṁ smayamāṇaṁ tu smitapūrvābhāṣinī).” By contrast, in Summer’s version, the women of the sérail “avaient jeté un cri en apercevant un homme; on avait précipitamment rallumé les lampes (had screamed when they saw a man, and hastily lit up the lamps).” Meanwhile, “au bruit qui se faisait autour d’elle, Damayantī rouvrit les yeux et aperçut celui qu’elle avait encore vu qu’en rêve. Elle se souleva toute rougissante (awakened by the noise around her, Damayantī opened her eyes and saw the one she had seen only in dreams. She rose up and blushed).”34 Apparently, Summer’s Damayantī has servants who have come to grips with French manners, since a French lady would certainly scream at the sight of a male intruder in her bedroom. Moreover, Damayantī’s smile and composure are at odds with the

34 Summer, Contes et légendes de l’Inde ancienne, 121.
stereotypes of timid Oriental women! This is very likely the reason that Summer teaches her how to blush properly.

Let us now look closely at how Damayantī’s beauty and charisma are presented in the Sanskrit text. As included in the above synopsis, two passages—one in the first chapter, the other in the third—pertain directly to Damayantī’s appearance:

athā tāṁ vayasi prāpte dāśīnāṁ samalaṁkṛtām
śataṁ śataṁ sakhīnāṁca paryupāsac chaĉīm iva
tatra sma bhṛjate bhaimī sarvābharaṇabhūṣitā
sakhīmadhye ’navadyāṅgī vidyut saudāmini yathā
atīva rūpasampannā śrīrivāyatalocanā
da deveśu na yakṣeṣu tādgrūpavati kvacit
mānusevapi cânyesu dṛṣṭapūrvā na ca śrutā
cittapramāthinī bālā devānāmpī sundarī

. . .
dadarśa tatra vaidarbhīṁ sakhūgaṇasamāvṛtām
dedīpyamāṇāṁ vapuṣā śriyā ca varavarṇīṁ
atīva sukūmārāṁ suvarṇīṁ suśrūgamāṁ
ākṣipantīṁ iva prabhāṁ śaśinaḥ svena tejasā

(When she had attained the coming-of-age, thus one hundred well-adorned female servants and companions attended upon [her] as [around] Śacī, the wife of Indra. Among them truly shines Bhīma’s daughter, decorated with all sorts of ornaments, in the midst of female companions, the one whose limbs [were] unblemished, just as the lightning born out of a raincloud. Endowed with extreme beauty, like the long-eyed Śrī [Lakṣmī], not among the gods, not among Yakṣas, [is] such beauty anywhere, [not even] among human beings, and among other beings, not seen neither heard [of] before. A mind-agitating, comely damsel, even for the gods.

. . . .

There [he] saw the princess of Vaidarbha surrounded by a group of female companions, intensely blazing with beauty and splendor, [whose] color was fair, [whose] limbs were extremely delicate, [whose] waist was slender, [whose] eyes were beautiful, as if putting to shame the light of the moon by her own brilliance.)

As always, Burnouf’s rendering turns out to be very literalist:
Devenue grande, elle eut autour d’elle, comme Çatchi, cent servantes bien parées et cent amies. Au milieu d’elles brillait la fille de Bhima, ornée de toutes les parures ; ses beaux membres étaient brillants comme l’éclair ; elle était d’une beauté admirable et telle que Çri aux longs yeux. Ni parmi les hommes, ni ailleurs on n’avait jamais vu ni entendu nommer une femme aussi belle ; elle troublait l’âme des dieux même par sa beauté.  

Là il vit la fille des Vidarbhas entourée de la foule de ses amies, brillante de beauté, excellente parmi les femmes ; il vit ses membres délicats, sa taille légère, ses beaux yeux, elle éclipsait la lumière de la lune par son éclat.

The Sanskrit text carries a matrix of hyperboles, turns of phrase, and idioms not so accomandated in Summer’s glossary catering for a readership of popular literature. For example, “unblemished limbs just as lightning born out of raincloud” is certainly a stunning imagery employed idiomatically by Sanskrit poets, and less so by French writers. Following Monier Williams, “Beautiful women are often compared to lightning in Hindu poetry, which, as the forerunner of the rainy season, is regarded as an object of desire and admiration.” Here we go, what a forceful simile when Damayantī is analogized to “vidyut saudāminī”? To be precise, “vidyut” (lightning) and “saudāminī” (raincloud?) vividly convey the image of a mighty princess, which

36 Ibid., 21.
37 *Nalopâkhyānam*, 295.
38 Monier interprets “saudāminī” as “a name of lightning.” Cf. *Nalopâkhyānam*, 324. Maurer, however, thinks “saudāminī” to be a scribal error: “Although सौदामिनी is the reading of the critical text, this form, strictly speaking, is grammatically incorrect. It should be सौदामनी, as it is the feminine सौदामन ‘pertaining to or derived from a raincloud,’ a secondary derivative from सुदाम ‘a raincloud’, formed with the suffix -अ accompanied by the vṛddhi of the initial syllable. The feminine of these derivatives in -अ is made by changing -अ to -ई. On the other hand, -ईन्, formed on सौदाम (final -अ being dropped before the appendage of -ईन्). There is no such word, however, and it is very likely that the correct form सौदामनी was altered by a misunderstanding (or scribal carelessness sufficiently often repeated to have become the predominant reading in the MSS). सुदाम, from which सौदाम is derived, is a
is at odds with that of a languishing sleeping beauty assigned to her by Summer. That said, nineteenth-century literary greats, unlike Summer, do see correlations between feminine beauty and the flashes and strikes of lightning during a hurricane or monsoon season thunderstorm. This is the case with Charles Baudelaire who compares in his famous sonnet À une Passante the eyes of passer-by to “ciel livide où germe l’ouragan (pale sky where tempest germinates)” and her “fugitive beauté (fleeting beauty)” to “un éclair... puis la nuit! (a lightning flash... then night).”³⁹

Another example of cultural incommensurability here is the bahuvrīhi compound “śrīrivāyatalocanā,” which can be parsed as “Śrī iva āyatau locanau yasya sā,” literally meaning, “she whose eyes are lengthened as Śrī [an epithet of Lakṣmī—the goddess of prosperity and beauty and wife of Viṣṇu].” We do not know the extent to which elongated, if not yet slanted, eyes fit into nineteenth-century French aesthetics, but Śrī was surely not an evocative proper noun for French readers unfamiliar with Hindu deities. Not surprisingly, Summer favors an assimilative strategy, supplanting this culturally alien trope with a pseudo-Indian-inspired lotus simile that paints too tame a scene:

Les prunelles étaient cachées sous les pointes vacillantes des cils noirs et les deux grands yeux, fermés au milieu de cette tête charmante, semblaient un lotus dans la corolle duquel se serait endormie une abeille. (The pupils were hidden under the flickering points of black eyelashes, and the two large eyes,

closed in the middle of this charming head, looked like a lotus in the corolla of which a bee would have fallen asleep.)

Helas, the tribute paid to Damayanți’s divine beauty by the Sanskrit narrator, is totally gone. Now languishingly resting on a bed of fluffy velvet, she becomes a harem hostess subjected to the male gaze of some indiscreet French readers.

Apart from eroticization, Summer also wishfully flattens what she thinks to be disjointed cuts between scenes in the Sanskrit original. This rewriting strategy not only dissolves the narrative glue of the Sanskrit original, but also results in many added transitional phrases as well as explanatory notes. Here I content myself with some of the most striking cases. First, in the Nalopākhyānam, Nala’s obsession with dice is presented unexpectedly in the opening lines through an enumeration of his attributes, mostly positive:

brahmanyo vedavic chūro niṣadheṣu mahīpatiḥ
akṣapriyaḥ satyavādi mahān aksauhinīpatiḥ
īpsito varanārīnām udāraḥ sāmyatendriyaḥ
rakṣitā dhanvināṃ śreṣṭhaḥ sākṣād iva manuḥ svayaṃ

(Friendly to Brahmans, Veda-knowing hero, great lord among the Niṣadhans, fond of dice, truth-speaking, general of a complete army. The noble one, desired by excellent women, senses of organ under control, protector, best of archers, like Manu himself before the eyes.)

Burnouf’s translation reads as follows:

Ce héros, qui honorait les brahmanes et connaissait la Sainte-Ecriture, gouvernait dans les Nichadhas. Il aimait bien le jeu de dés ; il était véridique ; il commandait à une grande armée. Désiré de toutes les nobles dames, ce prince excellent, maître de ses sens, gardien habile à lancer la flèche, était pareil à Manou lui-même.40

40 Burnouf, Nala épisode, 13.
This popping up of Nala’s gambling addiction (akṣapriyāḥ) amid his multifarious virtues does not sit well with Summer. What she has done instead is to add a note of backstory:

Une seule tache venait ternir ce soleil de perfections : Nala était possédé par la passion du jeu ; son royaume, ses sujets, il eût tout engagé sur un coup de dés. Heureusement les dieux qui le protégeaient lui avaient épargné jusque-là pareille faute. (A single stain came to tarnish this sun of perfections: Nala was possessed by the passion for the gambling—his kingdom, his subjects, he would have wagered all of them in a dice throw. Fortunately, the gods who protected him had spared him so far from committing this fault.)

This cursory digression goes hand in hand with another added linking phrase prefiguring Nala’s possession by Kali: “La cuirasse de vertus qui enveloppait Nala avait un défaut; le roi était joueur; nous le savons déjà. Ce fut par ce côté faible que s’introduisit l’ennemi. (The cuirass of virtues that enveloped Nala had a defect; the king was a gambler, which we already know. It was through this weak point that the enemy entered [him].)”

To compare, in the Sanskrit text Kali waits twelve years before eventually taking possession of Nala, “having urinated and having performed the ablution at twilight, king of Niṣadha, not having purified the dirt of his two feet (kṛtvā mūtram upasprṣya saṁdhyām anvāsta naiṣadhah, akṛtvā pādayoḥ śaucaṁ tatraināṁ kalir āviśat).” Indeed, since Nala’s union with Damayantī has been sanctioned by the

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41 Summer, Contes et légendes, 115.
42 Some tacit references are worthy of note here. As pointed out by Alf Hiltebeitel, twelve years evokes “in miniature the twelve thousand years of a Kali yuga (including twilights), and the twelve-year exile of the Pāṇḍavas and their twelve-month period incognito, during each of which Duryodhana—Kali incarnate—plots their destruction.” See Alf Hiltebeitel, Rethinking the Mahabharata: A Reader’s Guide to
gods, Kali cannot forthrightly nullify such a divine endorsement unless he can justify his attack on Nala on a theological basis. Nala’s failure to wash up his feet after urinating and before his twilight rituals, however much minor this mistake may appear, is understood as violating his covenant with the gods and thus gives Kali the go-ahead to his mischievous possession.

Evidently, this underlying logic has escaped Summer. In her eyes, the protagonist’s vices and virtues cannot be presented indiscriminately, and the reader should be reminded of the coming of Nala’s downfall ahead of time. In other words, the chain of events must be chronologically articulated and easy to follow.

In this regard, another example might suffice to pinpoint Summer’s assimilative approach. In the Nalopākhyānam, after falling in love with Damayantī without even seeing her, Nala behaves in a slightly disconcerting manner:

tayor adṛṣṭakāmo 'bhūc cṛṇvatoḥ satatam guṇān  
anyonyaṃ prati kaunteya sa vyavardhata hṛcchayaḥ  
asāknuvan nalaḥ kāmaṁ tadā dhārayitum hṛdā  
antaḥpurasamāpasthe vana āste rahogataḥ  
sa dadaśa tato haṃśān jātarūpapariprakṛdān  
vane vicaratām teṣām ekaṃ jagrāha pakṣinam

(Thus, without even having seen each other, there was a desire of the two to constantly hear the qualities of the other, and thereby their sentiment increased. Nala, unable to bear, then, the desire in [his] heart, in the wood near to the women’s quarters, he [remains], concealed. Then, he saw swans whose garment is gold in the wood; of those wandering [swans], [he] seized one bird.)

Ils s’aimèrent sans se voir : en entendant vanter toujours les qualités l’un de l’autre, leur désir croissait toujours. Nala, ne pouvant plus supporter dans son cœur un tel amour, part en secret et va s’asseoir dans le parc voisin de the Education of the Dharma King (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 224.
The Sanskrit sentence “antaḥpurasamīpasthe vana āste raho gataḥ” causes much confusion here. Grammatically, “antaḥpurasamīpasthe” is the locative neuter singular of a genitive tatpuruṣa compound in agreement with “vana”—standing for “vane” (in the forest) by sandhi. “Antaḥpurasamīpasthe” can be parsed into “antaḥpura” (gynaeceum), “samīpa” (vicinity), and “sthe” (situated), meaning “situated in the vicinity of a gynaeceum.” The Sanskrit text, however, does not specify which gynaeceum is at stake here. Thus, one is left with the impression that Nala, unable to hold his desire for Damayanṭī, sneaks into a wood next to the female apartments of his own palace. But this interpretation is not very logical because, first, as king, he does not need to stalk, and second, since he is in love with Damayanṭī, approaching his own women folk would not help much appease his anguished heart. Alternatively, one may understand “antaḥpurasamīpasthe vana āste raho gataḥ” as, “Nala, [unable to hold his desire for Damayanṭī], stays concealed in a wood situated in the vicinity of the women’s quarters of Bhīma palace [where Damayanṭī supposedly dwells].” This interpretation is equally problematic, however, because first the distance to cover from Nala’s kingdom Niśadhā to Vidarbha would be considerable, and no textual evidence supports such travel, and second, since the swan seized by Nala in that wood promises to fly to Vidarbha to tell Damayanṭī that he loves her, we are almost certain that this wood must be near the gynaeceum of Nala’s own palace.

43 Burnouf, Nala épisode, 15.
Burnouf’s translation reads as “[Nala] part en secret et va s’asseoir dans le parc voisin de l’appartement des femmes,” which is not particularly elucidating. Maybe this baffling “antaḥpurasamīpasthe vana” (a wood situated next to a gynaeceum) is just an insignificant locale haphazardly tossed in by a careless narrator. That said, it cannot be passed over quite so benignly since Summer is seemingly at pains to make sense of Nala’s self-exile in an unidentifiable forest near to a befuddling harem. She thus radically rewrites this unprepossessing sentence in Sanskrit as follows:

Sous prétexte de chasser, le roi s’enfonçait au plus épais des bois mais son arc et ses javelots restaient inutiles ; les cygnes, les oies, les gazelles passaient impunément devant lui : le gibier n’a rien à craindre d’un homme véritablement épris. Un jour, pourtant, hasard ou fantaisie, au milieu d’un groupe d’oiseaux voyageurs, Nala attrapa un beau cygne, et il se disposait à l’emporter. Quelle ne fut pas sa surprise lorsque l’habitant des air, prenant une voix humaine, lui dit . . . 44

Summer thereby comes up with a specious reasoning for Nala’s outing in the forest. To dispel his moody reverie, Nala goes hunting—doubtlessly a fashionable activity for the nobility and upper bourgeoisie in nineteenth-century France. Moreover, Summer’s treatment of the hunting motif somehow recalls the legend of Saint-Julian the Hospitaller, especially Julian’s fortuitous and pathetic foray into the forest prior to his fulfilment of the parricide prophecy. In Gustave Flaubert’s later recasting of this Old French prose legend, Julian literally loses the power to harm even a partridge, as

if he were haunted by the ghosts of all the animals he has slaughtered before.45 Regardless, in this safari scene à la française invented by Summer, there is no need for the troubling harem to show up. But Nala, lovesick, is deprived of the power to kill, and so, without asking for it, his much-needed supernatural assistance comes about in the form of a swan messenger.

Similar cases of recasting attest to Summer’s aim of bringing the *Nalopākhyānam* into line with familiar patterns of French storytelling. For instance, even nowadays, a French reader may have trouble envisioning the crazed eyes of a lady in love as “meditatively” gazing upward—very likely with her eyeballs rolled up to the sky. Yet this is exactly the Sanskrit turn of phrase depicting Damayantī’s torment: “[She whose] gaze was upward, became engaged in meditation, looking maniac (ūrdhvadṛṣṭir dhyānaparā babhūvonmattadarśanā).” Burnouf’s rendering reproduces this odd imagery: “Elle levait les yeux comme dans la méditation ; sa raison semblait égarée.”46 Although there might be an esoteric yoga position that requires its practitioners to fix their eyes upward, as if absorbed in meditation, Summer still prefers to avoid the comic effect of such a pose. When zoned out in her thoughts of Nala, Summer’s Damayantī has a different pair of eyes: “Ses yeux brillent d’un feu étrange et semblent s’allonger sous le cercle bistré qui les entoure. (Her eyes emit a strange fire and seem to lie beneath the brown circle surrounding them.)” Arguably, these are the eyes a longing French lady should have, since dark circles or

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46 Burnouf, *Nala épisode*, 17.
bags under the eyes are evidence of the sleepless nights one spends without one’s lover. Meditation is of no help, at least in Summer’s understanding.

When it comes to Summer’s edits, one cannot get around looking at her systematic use of abridgement and deletion, which not only reframes the narrative thread of the story but also considerably weakens Damayantī’s image as a fully empowered woman, thus reducing the Nalopākhyānam to a formulaic linear “once upon a time” fairytale with cardboard characters. For example, Summer edits out the entire dialogue between the two sages, Nārada and Parvata, and Indra in the second chapter. Specifically, Indra asks the sages why the earthly king has never come to his palace, while “this indestructible realm [Indra’s abode] for them is like what the desire cow is for me (ayam loko’ksyasteśāṃ yatheva mama kāmadhuk).” Nārada tells him this is because the kings are all hastening to Damayantī’s forthcoming svayaṁvara. Upon hearing Nārada’s report, Indra, along with three other primary gods—Agni, Varuna, and Yama—rushes out for the svayaṁvara. If translated literally, a nineteenth-century French reader must find Indra’s speech hilarious—if not lascivious—as the “kāmadhuk” (literally, desire cow or cow of kāma) conjures up the udders of a gorgeous bovine companion which, when milked by Indra, appeases his cravings. Indeed, the Hindu gods—like their Greek counterparts—appear libidinous in their pursuit of beauteous mortals. But there is a deeper undertone at play here, namely, that Indra assumes that all Kshatriya kings should be hastening to reach his indestructible and desire-gratifying abode instead of heading to a mortal beauty’s husband-selection ceremony, yet the opposite takes place. In any event, it is by no
means superfluous or tangential to the plotline that four primary Hindu gods deign to take part in Damayantī’s *svayamvara* along with mortal rulers who are not even their equal. This episode, narrated with light humor, underscores Damayantī’s irresistible appeal and the impossibility of Nala’s endeavor.

Similarly, we know that in the *Nalopākhyānam*, the gods withdraw from the competition by willingly giving Damayantī away to Nala. Not only do they bless the bridegroom with eight supernatural gifts, but they also curse Kali, who is threatening to punish Damayantī. In other words, there is a demarcation line between the protective gods headed by Indra and the evil wrongdoer Kali. Yet Summer must have found such differentiation troublesome in that it blurs, if not dismantles, a clear-cut hero/villain dynamic. Instead she writes, at the end of Damayantī’s *svayamvara*: “Les dieux confus s’enfuirent en riant ironiquement. (The gods, confused, ran away, sneering ironically.)”47 The eight supernatural gifts the gods bestow on Nala are not mentioned at all. In so doing, Summer casts in the role of chastiser both Kali and the wrathful gods, literally “defeated by Nala in the *svayamvara*.” As a result, the triangular relationships between gods, Kali, and the royal couple have been simplified by Summer into a straightforward antagonism between humans and malevolent supernatural powers.

In keeping with this major tweak, Summer performs a series of plot contrivances. For example, in chapter XIII, after the wild elephants trample the

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47 Summer, *Contes et légendes*, 126.
caravan, the survivors conduct a witch-hunt against Damayantī. Although successfully escaping the scene, Damayantī feels pangs of remorse and moans painfully:

ahō mamopari vidheḥ samṛambho dāruṇo mahān
nānumubadhāti kuśalaṁ kasyedaṁ karaṇaḥ phalam
na smarāmyaśubhaṁ kiṃcit kṛtaṁ kasyacid anvapi
karaṇaḥ manasā vācā kasyedaṁ karaṇaḥ phalam
nūnaṁ janmāntarakṛtaṁ pāpam āpatitaṁ mahat

(Alas, the great dreadful anger of fate [is] above me, welfare does not follow; from which karma [is] this fruit? I do not even remember doing any minute evil deed to anyone through action, thought, [or] speech; from which karma [is] this fruit? A great sin committed in other births, now befallen [me].)

Ah! la colère terrible du destin est sur moi ! Le bonheur ne dure pas ; de quoi recueilli-je le fruit ? Je ne me souviens pas d’avoir fait le moindre mal à personne en action, ni en pensée, ni en parole; de quoi recueilli-je le fruit ? J’ai donc commis quelque grande faute dans une vie antérieure ; car je suis parvenue au comble de la misère.48

Revolving around karmic retribution and rebirth, Damayantī’s introspection reverberates with two of the most distinctive strands of Brahmanic discourse. She ends up attributing her plight to an egregious sin committed by her—yet unknown to her—in her previous lives. There may be doubts regarding the nineteenth-century general French public’s familiarity with karmic law—a concept that appears to get in the way of Summer’s attempt to reconstruct the narrative. And so she strips it away.

Now worried about the retaliation of vindictive gods, Summer’s Damayantī soliloquizes: “Quelle faute ai-je donc commise pour être en butte à tant de misères ? Serait-ce une vengeance des dieux que j’ai refusés de choisir pour épouser

48 Burnouf, Nala épisode, 56.
Nala? (What fault did I commit to deserve so much misery? Would it be a revenge from the gods refused by me when choosing to marry Nala?)”

Likewise, in the recognition scenes of the *Nalopākhyānam* there is a lengthy postponement of Nala’s reunion with Damayantī, which is marked by tests and concealed motivations. One key episode is when Damayantī smartly induces Vāhuka/Nala to signal his numinous abilities. As soon as her servant Keśini observes Vāhuka’s unusual behaviors, Damayantī concludes that he must be Nala in disguise—discernment unquestionably owing to her knowledge of the eight gifts given to her missing husband by the gods. Yet in Summer’s version, since Nala has received no divine gifts from the gods “defeated by him,” there is no reason for such a riveting recognition process to take place. Therefore, Summer does not take the trouble to mention it.

More precisely, Damayantī asks Keśini to take note of how Vāhuka, deprived of fire and water, would cook for his master Ṛtuparṇa. Keśini returns with a list of oddities she has observed of Vāhuka, such as a low entrance gate automatically rising as he approaches it, jars naturally filled with water, Vāhuka’s igniting of a fistful of grass just by holding it toward the sun, and the way he increases the fragrance and freshness of flowers by crushing them with his hands, among others. These wonders ascribed to Vāhuka/Nala are certainly not red herrings meant merely to lend the story some mystic aura. Remember that when Nala is chosen by Damayantī at the *svayaminvāra*, to bless the royal couple Indra bestows on him an excellent and noble gait (*gatiṅcānuttamāṃ śubhām*). Agni gifts him with self-existence whenever he asks
for it (agnirātmabhavam prādād yatra vāñchatī naiṣadhah), and Varuna grants him
the appearance of water whenever he desires (apāṁpatirapāṁbhāvam yatra vāñchatī
naiṣadhah) and a matchlessly fragrant garland (srajaṁcottamagandhādyāṁ). These
gifts are of vital narrative importance, for the fact that Vāhuka performs such wonders
attests to him being the recipient of the divine gifts previously granted Nala. In other
words, Damayantī manages to authenticate her missing husband because she knows
how to read the signs Nala has been enabled to manifest. Specifically, “an excellent
noble gait” means he does not need to bow his head when passing through a low
entrance, “the self-existence of Agni [the god of fire]” means he can procure fire as he
wishes, Varuna’s gift allows him to conjure water whenever he needs it, and “a
matchless fragrant garland” accounts for the enhanced fragrance of the flowers he
squeezes with his hands. Also remember how Nala saves the serpent king Karkoṭaka,
literally by stepping into the jungle fire and removing Karkoṭaka from it. Indeed,
however evasive this detail may seem, it is the same “excellent noble gait” offered by
Indra that prevents Nala from getting burnt by the fire.

Evidently, the Sanskrit author[s] was by no means a fanciful, superstitious, or
irrational storyteller readily discredited by a nineteenth-century French mind. As in
detective fiction, the planting of clues and subsequent solutions in the
Nalopākhyānam attest to the maturity, if not yet modernity, of Sanskrit storytelling
techniques!

Regrettably, Summer’s deletions have removed the narrative of its plot
intricacy and many surprising twists. Notably, Damayantī’s intelligence, discernment,
and levelheadedness as a proactive woman who gives, exchanges, and reads signs and who senses, tests, and recognizes her man are now gone.\(^49\) This metamorphosis operates in perfect tandem with the sexualization of her body and the abridgement of her long-winded laments when wandering alone through the forest. In short, Damayantī—fully empowered in the Sanskrit original—has now become a soulless Oriental Barbie doll designed specifically for the popular literature market of nineteenth-century France.

**Mallarmé’s retelling**

Retrospectively examining the *Nalopākhyaṇam*’s journeying to France, everyone will agree that however much force Burnouf and Summer have enlisted, it is with the master of the Rue de Rome that the story finally takes off, gaining scholarly traction ever since the posthumous publication of *Contes indiens* in 1927. A brief flashback may be helpful here. One day around 1892, when Dr. Edmond Fournier was with Mallarmé at the home of Méry Laurent, he came across Summer’s *Contes et légendes de l’Inde ancienne* and skimmed it. Despite the charm of these Indian stories, Fournier deplored Summer’s literary style, and so Méry Laurent proposed they should be written anew by Mallarmé, who, delightfully agreeing, took the volume with him.

\(^{49}\) Indeed, Wendy Doniger has drawn striking similarities between Damayantī and Penelope in their respective abilities to recognize their missing husbands. See Wendy Doniger, *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 135–72. In a similar vein, Hiltebeitel is surely correct that “Damayantī and Penelope are not figures through which something feminine is signified (land, prosperity, the prize or cause of war, etc.) but semiotically talented woman who give, exchange, and read signs. That is, they are women who sense, know, and test their men by being signifiers themselves.” See Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahabharata*, 235.
and worked out four adaptations in his own manner. Mallarmé’s exercise of stylistic improvement as pertaining to *Contes indiens* was notably examined by Claude Cuénot in 1938 and more recently in 1975 by Guy Laflèche. According to Gérard Genette, Cuénot’s and Laflèche’s studies converge to show that

Mallarmé shortens Summer’s tale a little (by one-sixth)—his work is therefore secondarily a reduction—but he also enriches the lexicon (by one-tenth), reducing the “stylistic” vocabulary (grammatical words, verbs of high frequency) and augmenting the “thematic” vocabulary (nouns and adjectives); he nominalizes nominal syntagmas and epithetizes relatives; he multiplies nominal sentences and reduces the total number of sentences by logically combining two or more of Summer’s sentences. All of this, as one might expect, contributes to a richer and more “artistic,” even if not quite yet “Mallarméan,” style of writing.

While Cuénot and Laflèche should be wholeheartedly thanked for their insights into Mallarmé’s stylistic improvement, there is still much to be said about his editing strategies in relation not just to Summer’s stylistically “defective” tales, but also to Burnouf’s rendition as well as to the Sanskrit original.

As Henri Mondor notes, in his correspondence with Dr. Fournier, who commissioned him with the rewriting project on behalf of Méry Laurent, Mallarmé states that too many “fioritures” (embellishments) would “démériter” (discredit) the Hindu gods. Moreover, he admits that when adapting the *Nalopākhyānam*, he was overwhelmed by the memory of the Sanskrit original:

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50 Undoubtedly, by the time Summer’s *Contes et légendes de l’Inde ancienne* reached Méry Laurent, the Parisian demimondaine was certainly not a wretched kṣatriya king living in exile in a desolate forest lamenting his misfortune. Indeed, Claude Cuéno asserts that Summer’s translation was brought to the attention of Méry Laurent in either 1882 or 1893.


The fact that Mallarmé compares embellishing the “sacred poem” of *Nalopākhyānam* to beautifying Homer’s works explains the relatively light editing he performs on this famous episode of the *Mahābhārata*. But his edits, done “avec le plus grand soin” (with the greatest care), do reveal many previously overlooked aspects of his poetic agenda.

Here are my arguments: if Summer assimilates the *Nalopākhyānam* into a typical nineteenth-century Orientalist narrative by substantively simplifying its plotline, eroticizing the heroine, editing out all culturally imbedded imageries, and reconfiguring the logic of many passages unclear to her, Mallarmé turns away from Summer’s approach. Instead, without worrying much about the established norms of popular storytelling of his time, Mallarmé takes great liberty in twisting Summer’s uninspiring language and in reworking several key passages of his choice. Unlike Summer, Mallarmé appears to understand Sanskrit without knowing it, thereby

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53 Based on the poet’s correspondance with Fournier, Laflèche restores the chronological order in which Mallamé adapts the four Indian stories in *Contes indiens*, which is *La Fausse Vieille, Nala et Damayantî, le Mort vivant*, and *Le Portrait Enchanté*. Laflèche also points out that Mallarmé reiterates three times his caution against overly altering the second story *Nala et Damayantî*. Cf. Laflèche, *Mallarmé*, 10.
transforming the *Nalopākhyānam* into a chain of evocative, highly aestheticized, and rapidly shifting images.

**Nala the gambler throwing “un coup de dés”**

For anyone with basic knowledge of Mallarmé’s poetic development late in his life, she or he cannot ignore the thematic parallels between Mallarmé’s *Nala et Damayantî* and his famous free-verse poem *Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard* published in 1897. When reworking Summer’s adaptation of the *Nalopākhyānam*, Mallarmé cast light on themes such as the inescapable calamity triggered by a dice throw, used as an exemplar to bear on the fortuity of human exertion. Evidently, there is something more than coincidental here. To gain insight into Mallarmé’s stylistic originalities and the way he brought Summer’s *Nala et Damayantî* into line with his own poetic agenda, let us start with the scenario depicting Nala’s downfall punctuated by desperate dice throws:

Tout bonheur ne fait qu’écarter peu de jours l’angoisse, il ne la détruit pas : un génie malfaisant, nommé Kali, lui aussi, soupirait pour la princesse, il jura de se venger. La cuirasse de vertu enveloppant Nala cache un défaut, le roi est joueur : passionnément, à tout, son royaume, les cités, les sujets, engager sur un coup de dés ! Il accepte une partie que propose son frère Poushkara. Kali s’insinue en lui, l’envahit et commande. La chance tourne contre le roi, souriant et presque indifférent d’abord : son or, brut ou monnayé, ses chars, ses attelages radieux, tout, jusqu’à ses bijoux et des vêtements, il les perd successivement. Les dés, en retombant, marquent par un bruit strident, leur inimitié envers Nala : son désespoir les lance dans l’espace comme on montre le poing, toujours ils le trahissent. Le joueur s’obstine, tremble, chancelle ; fiévreux de ne manger trois jours et le coin des paupières brûlé par l’insomnie. Cris, des, ministres, du peuple, qui veulent pénétrer chez le souverain et l’arracher à la lutte insensée : tous forcent les portes, figés au seuil ; devant le roi qui n’a plus à perdre que son royaume. Damayantî paraît. Le malheureux, dans son délire, n’entend ni les remontrances de ses conseillers ni la supplication de celle qui pouvait tout sur son cœur. Ses yeux hagards, dardant
les dés, il les invoque, les menace et, tant qu’un enjeu restera, sa main crispée agite la ruine.\textsuperscript{54}

One need only run through Mary Summer’s translation to notice Mallarmé’s visible stylistic improvement:

Le génie malfaisant, nommé Kali avait, lui aussi, soupiré pour la princesse. En apprenant son mariage, il fut saisi d’une colère terrible et jura de se venger. La cuirasse de vertus qui enveloppait Nala avait un défaut ; le roi était joueur; nous le savons déjà. Ce fut par ce côté faible que s’introduisit l’ennemi. Il entra dans le corps du prince qui, plus que jamais, fut possédé de la passion du jeu. Il accepta avec empressément une partie de dés que vint lui proposait son frère Poushkara. Tous deux engagent le jeu, calmes, presque indifférents ; ce n’est d’abord qu’un passe-temps agréable, les dés sont agités d’une main joyeuse et un égal espoir anime les adversaires. Mais Kali est là qui veille ; la chance tourne vite contre le roi : son or brut ou monnayé, ses chars, ses attelages, ses bijoux, ses vêtements, il perd tout, successivement. A chaque coup les dés retombent avec un bruit strident, marquant leur inimitié contre Nala, on sent que c’est le désespoir qui les lance dans l’espace ; le joueur s’obstine. Il tremble, il chancelle, depuis trois jours il n’a pris aucune nourriture et l’insomnie rougit les angles de ses paupières. On entend des cris au dehors : ce sont les ministres et le peuple qui veulent pénétrer auprès de leur souverain pour l’arracher à une lutte insensée. Ils forcent les portes et arrivent au moment où Nala n’a plus à perdre que son royaume. Dans son délire le malheureux n’entend ni les remontrances de ses conseillers, ni les supplications de celle qui eut tant de pouvoir sur son cœur. Ses yeux hagards ne voient que les dés, il les menace, il les invoque, il espère toujours, et, tant qu’il lui restera un enjeu, sa main crispée agitera les instruments de sa ruine.\textsuperscript{55}

Let us then look at how Mallarmé culls three dispersed predicates from Summer’s text and merges them into one sentence:

Ce fut par ce côté faible que s’introduisit l’ennemi. Il entra dans le corps du prince qui, plus que jamais, fut possédé de la passion du jeu. . . Mais Kali est là qui veille. (Summer)

Kali s’insinue en lui, l’envahit et commande. (Mallarmé)

\textsuperscript{54} Mallarmé, \textit{Œuvres complètes}, 2:921–22.  
In his pursuit of condensation, Mallarmé not only edits out redundant linking phrases such as “en apprenant son mariage, il fut saisi d’une colère terrible,” “ce fut par ce côté faible que,” and “plus que jamais,” but also lines up Kali’s actions, namely “s’insinue,” “entra,” and “veille” in a threefold, linear, escalating present tense predicate. This condensation relieves the original passage of wordy subordinate clauses coordinated by “qui” and “que”; it also renders the phrasing phonetically catchy with an alliteration of the vowel “i” in “Kali s’insinue en lui, l’envahit.” Concomitantly, as “entra” and “fut possédé” are synthesized into “envahit,” the copula “fut” is automatically dropped.

Equally noticeable is Mallarmé’s recourse to a myriad of nominalization techniques. To point out one very subtle example: from what Summer writes—“À chaque coup les dés retombent avec un bruit strident, marquant leur inimitié contre Nala”—we know that what matters here is that the dice are personified as being hostile to Nala, this very enmity conveyed by the sound of the dice hitting the table. Yet, what truly captures our attention is a sound-generating mechanism rather than the horrible sound per se, whose salience is reduced by its grammatical position at the end of the main clause. Mallarmé instead turns the finite verb “retombent” into a gérondif in apposition to “les dés.” In the reworded sentence— “les dés, en retombant, marquent par un bruit strident, leur inimitié envers Nala,” the purveyor of hostility is no longer encapsulated in an adverbial complement “avec un bruit strident” followed by a subordinate clause, but instead is directly assumed by the subject of the sentence, namely “les dés,” which becomes the center of focus.
Similarly, Mallarmé trims down the reported speech “on sent que c’est le désespoir qui les lance dans l’espace” into “son désespoir les lance dans l’espace,” this modification simultaneously foregrounding Nala’s “désespoir” and rendering the sentence more concise. Occasionally, Mallarmé pushes the potential of nominalization to its limits. Here is one striking example:

Le joueur s’obstine. Il tremble, il chancelle, depuis trois jours, il n’a pris aucune nourriture et l’insomnie rougit les angles de ses paupières. (Summer)

Le joueur s’obstine, tremble, chancelle ; fiévreux de ne manger trois jours et le coin des paupières brûlé par l’insomnie. (Mallarmé)

Evidently, “il” finds no place in Mallarmé’s idiosyncratic phrasing. As marked in bold, the first two “il” in Summer’s text are crossed out simply because they are reprising the same subject. Mallarmé further substitutes the third “il” with the adjective “fiévreux,” which assumes the function of a participle. The nominalization process is typically Mallarméan here. In lieu of repeating “l’insomnie rougit les angles,” as we find in Summer’s version, Mallarmé switches the syntactic positions of “l’insomnie” and “les paupières” using the past participle “brûlé.” In the reconstructed phrase “le coin des paupières brûlé par l’insomnie,” Nala’s eyelids, instead of his insomnia (a relatively abstract state of being), are accentuated. Although Mallarmé’s maneuver brings forth a vivid snapshot of a pathological gambler, “fiévreux de ne pas manger trois jours” is certainly not a common turn of phrase in French. A banal way of putting the same idea may be “[il était] fiévreux [au point] de ne pas avoir mangé [pendant] trois jours.” But this would be too spelled out for a poet craving condensation and
suggestiveness, and who, to use Huysmans’s words, relishes the “moelles condensées en de sévères et fortes phrase (marrow condensed into strong and severe sentences).”

“Tout bonheur ne fait qu’écarter peu de jours l’angoisse, il ne la détruit pas” is an equally noteworthy sentence invented by Mallarmé. This axiomatic statement places an emphasis on anguish, which arguably the conjugal enjoyment of mundane contingencies cannot subdue. “Angoisse” here recalls Mallarmé’s sonnet Angoisse, in which the poet bemoans the corruption of his nobility: “car le Vice, rongeant ma native noblesse, m’a comme toi marqué de stérilité.” It also reminds us of the enigmatic capitalized “l’Angoisse” in his Sonnet en–yx. Moreover, “Angoisse” here seems to reiterate a turn-of-the-century Symbolist key word that also features in Rimbaud’s Illuminations. In short, one cannot fail to notice the lexical overlap between Mallarmé’s Nala et Damayantî and his poem Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard. Below is an arresting sampling:

1. “Kali s’insinue en lui, l’envahit et commande” / “Une insinuation simple au silence” . . . “envahit le chef”
2. “souriant et presque indifférent” / “indifféremment mais autant”
3. “Les dés, en retombant” / “la sienne par avance retombée d’un mal à dresser le vol”
4. “comme on montre le poing” / “jadis il empoignait la barre” and “au poing qui l’étreindrait”
5. “Le joueur s’obstine, tremble et chancelle” / “ainsi que le fantôme d’un geste chancelera”

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57 I owe these comparisons to Mary Shaw, who offers an insightful reading of Un coup de dés and notes Mallarmé’s addition of a ritual ballet to Summer’s version of Le mort vivant. See Mary Shaw, Performance in the Texts of Mallarmé: The Passage from Art to Ritual (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 171-183; 68.
If “indifférent,” “chancelle,” and “retombent” already exist in Summer’s text, “s’insinue,” “envahit,” and “le poing” hail outright from Mallarmé’s inventiveness. The imagery of the fist is particularly noteworthy since it not only freezes Nala’s gesture at its most expressive juncture, but also parallels with the illusory agency of the “Maître” who, in Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard, enters into a desperate struggle with the thunderstorm when the shipwreck is imminent.

Mallarmé dramatizes the dice throw through an artfully contrived phrase, namely, “le roi est joueur : passionnément, à tout, son royaume, les cités, les sujets, engager sur un coup de dés !” The incantatory prosody of this exclamation leaves no discerning reader indifferent. Indeed, apart from his penchant for nominal constructions, Mallarmé also evinces a tendency to break down sentences into syntactic constituents and then arrange them in a word order different from the default subject-verb-object type of French. In so doing, he has unwittingly wrought an idiolect analogous to Sanskrit—a highly inflected classical language with a proclivity for nominalization and much flexibility in word order. More precisely, Mallarmé respects no syntactic orderliness here: the adverb “passionnément” is grammatically ascribed to the infinitive “engager,” whereas the adverbial phrase “à tout” functions as the complement of the preceding clause “le roi est joueur.” Such chiasmus interrupts the flow of the language and cultivates some semantic ambiguities. Most strikingly, occupying the last slot of a cumulative series of noun phrases, “engager sur un coup de dés,” shorn of a subject pronoun, becomes nominalized as well. The
nominalization process also retroactively affects the two preceding constituents “passionnément” and “à tout.”

Unquestionably, Mallarmé’s recasting is both graphic and spectatorial—presented in a series of close-up views with the dice at the center. Mallarmé, however, may not know that the pivotal imagery of rolling dice is mentioned only tangentially in the Nalopākhyānam—surely enhanced by Summer to give the story some extra drama. By contrast, the Sanskrit original mentions only in passing the word “die/dice” (akṣa):

\[
gatvā puṣkaram āhedam ehi dīvya nalena vai 
akṣadyūte nalaṁ jetā bhavān hi sahito mayā
\]

(Having gone to Puṣkara, [Kali] said this, “Come, just play with Nala in the dice game, you will conquer Nala, aided by me!”)

\[
\ldots 
\text{tam akṣamadasarṅmatatāṁ suhṛdāṁ na tu kaścana} 
nivāraṇe ’bhavac chakto dīvyamānām arindamaṁ
\]

(He [Nala], exulted by his passion for the dice, not any one of his friends was able in preventing the gaming-minded tamer of enemies.)

\[
\ldots 
damayantī punar veśma vrīḍitā praviveśa ha niśāmya satataṁ cākṣān puṇyaślokaparāṁmukhān
\]

(Damayantī, ashamed, entered the palace again, having observed the dice constantly hostile to Puṇyaśloka [Nala].)

\[
\ldots 
yathā ca puṣkarasyākṣāḥ patanti vaśavartinaḥ 
tathā viparyayaścāpi nalasyākṣeṣu drśyate
\]

(As the dice acting according to the will of Puṣkara fall down; and the misfortune of Nala in dice is seen [by Damayantī].)

\[
\ldots 
utpatantaḥ khagā vākyam etad āhus tato nalaṁ 
dṛṣṭvā digvāsasair bhūmāu sthitāṁ dīnāṁ adhomukham 
vayam akṣāḥ sudurbuddhe tava vāso jihīrṣavaḥ
\]
(The birds hovering above then said this speech to Nala, having seen him naked, miserably standing on the ground, with [his] face lowered downward, “We are **dice**, O foolish one, wishing to rob your clothing.”)\(^{58}\)

Given the considerable length of the corresponding passage in Sanskrit, these five sporadic occurrences barely live up to the grandiosity of the dicing scene in Mallarmé’s text, driving the reader to picture a spectacular venue, the tremor of Nala’s fist, his swollen reddish eyelids, and the indecent luxuries he wagers as if there were no tomorrow.

Moreover, in the wake of Summer’s initial truncation, the **śakuna** birds incarnating as dice who mock Nala by robbing him of his clothes after he and Damayantī are chased from the town no longer appear in Mallarmé’s retelling. This symbolic incident explains why Nala ends up sharing a single robe with his wife and how he eventually abandons her by severing their common garment in two.

Thus, evidently the way Mallarmé dramatizes and poeticizes the imagery of the dice throw has little to do with the **Nalopākhyānam**, which puts emphasis less on the gesture of dice rolling per se than on the act of gambling that induces Nala into deserting Damayantī.

**Nala’s loss of “free will”**

\(^{58}\) Burnouf’s translation goes as follows: “Puis il alla trouver Puchkara, frère de Nala et lui dit : ‘viens jouer aux dés avec ton frère, je t’aiderai et tu gagneras . . .’ bientôt la fureur du jeu le saisit et aucun de ses amis n’eut la force de l’en arracher . . . Damayanti pleine de pudeur se retira de nouveau dans son appartement. Quand elle vit que les dés lui étaient toujours contraires . . . et tandis que les dés de Puchkara tournent à son gré, la chance contraire est toujours contre Nala . . . En s’envolant, ils parlèrent ainsi à Nala, qu’ils voyaient nu sur la terre, misérable, la tête baissée : ‘Nous sommes des dés, insensé ; nous voulions ton vêtement . . .’” Burnouf, *Nala épisode*, 30–35.
One may wonder, is there any rationale behind Mallarmé’s decisions about what to retain and what to drop? Here I would like to offer a case study for its heuristic value only. As already discussed, in his *Nala et Damayantî*, Mallarmé celebrates the imagery of “un coup de dés” as part of his poetic agenda to reflect on happenstance. As scholars have often noted, “le hasard” is a central theme of Mallarmé’s literary world. Coincidentally, the key narrative framework of the *Nalopākhyānam* revolves around the telling contrast between Nala’s lack of agency and Damayantî’s ability to exercise her “free will (libre arbitre)” fully. This is the case when, accused by Damayantî for having forsaken her in the forest, Nala insists he did so not of his own volition: “Attends pour me juger ! s’écrie Nala, devant ces paroles oubliant son rôle. ‘Si j’ai perdu aux dés mon royaume et te délaissai, sache qu’une malédiction m’accablait, possédé que je fus du méchant démon Kali ; mais toi, avec ton libre arbitre, toi, que rien n’aveuglait, tu as voulu briser nos liens.’”

This excerpt is a verbatim reproduction of Summer’s words. It is striking how Nala singles out Damayantî’s “libre arbitre.” But this loaded diction cannot be found in the Sanskrit text, which simply says that Damayantî’s second *svayainvara* was “practiced according to her own inclinations, as she wishes, a suitable match for herself (*svairavyttā yathākāmam anurūpam ivātmanah*).” Admittedly, Summer has introduced a metaphysical concept that incidentally resonates with Mallarmé’s envisioning of a volitionless tragic hero struggling with his demise, just as with the fate of the “Maître” in *Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard*. Put another way,

60 Summer, *Contes et légendes*, 146–47.
what Mallarmé’s Nala highlights here is that he has no “free will,” either in his
decision to abandon Damayantī or in his stubbornness to ruin himself in dicing.
Indeed, by “free will,” Mallarmé here is very likely alluding to what he
counters as an atheist absolute—a concept embedded in the nineteenth-century
Romantic and secular aspiration to raise art to the status of religion, in forms of an
immanent divine premised on uncertainty and eventually ritualized through art.61

Arguably, the undertone of “free will” is only scantily available in the Sanskrit
original. Made more explicit by Summer, the dichotomy between Nala’s loss of
volition and Damayantī’s gain in free will fits perfectly into Mallarmé’s philosophical
take on overcoming the vagaries of chance through art and literature. As one may
expect, Mallarmé keeps the phrase “libre arbitre” tossed in by Summer while
removing many others that do not speak particularly to him.

To compare, Burnouf’s Nala states that it is not his fault he left Damayantī to
fend for herself in the wilderness: “Si j’ai perdu mon royaume, ce n’est pas ma faute ;
c’est celle de Kali, c’est lui aussi qui m’a entraîné loin de toi.”62 In the corresponding
Sanskrit verse, Nala says, “that my kingdom was lost, I myself [was] not the doer; that
was done by Kali, O timid one, that I forsook you (mama rājyaṁ pranaśtaṁ yan
nāhaṁ tat kṛtavān svayam, kalinā tat kṛtaṁ bhīru yac ca tvāṁ aham atyajam).” Here
the idea of “free will” is only implied. Specifically, the Sanskrit masculine singular
nominal “kṛtavān,” derived from “kṛta-vat,” denotes “a possessor of a deed.” The

61 There might even be in *Un coup de dés* an undecidable and secretly encoded
number, intentionally hidden by Mallarmé to make its discovery compellingly
uncertain. See Quentin Meillassoux, *Le Nombre et la sirène. Un déchiffrage du Coup
negation in “nāhaṁ tat kṛtavān svayam” (I myself not the possessor of the deed) hints at the limitations of human exertion, as evidenced by Nala’s loss of agency when inhabited by Kali.

**Orientalism revised**

Summer eroticizes Damayantī’s body in conformity with the expectations of her nineteenth-century French readers. Drawing on Summer’s adaptation, Mallarmé is not totally immune from Orientalist prejudices. That said, he at times refuses to follow Summer’s lead unthinkingly into portraying Damayantī’s femininity in an overly eroticized and pseudo-realistic way. The following are some telling examples.

Abandoned by Nala, Damayantī wanders alone in the forest, where she falls prey to a hungry snake. Although she narrowly escapes being devoured in a last-minute rescue, her savior—a hunter, enthralled and aroused by her beauty—attempts to employ force on her. Devoted to Nala, Damayantī curses the hunter, who immediately perishes. The Sanskrit text says:

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damayantī tu duḥkhārta patirājyavinākrta
atīṭavāpathe kāle śaśāpīnaṁruśānvita
yathā‘haṁ niṣadhād anyarī manasāpi na cintaye
tathāyāṁ patatāṁ kṣudraḥ parāsur mṛgajīvanaḥ
uktamātṛu tu vacane tayā sa mṛgajīvanaḥ
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63 Invoking Said’s “strategic location,” Virginie Pouzet-Duzet concludes that Summer places herself in a “position of power” vis-à-vis an objectified otherness. This is evidenced by Summer’s eurocentric assertions in the ending notes of her adaptations: “faisant la part de l’exagération orientale, il faut reconnaître que la légende de Nala et Damayantī est pleine de sentiment et de grandeur. . . . Que le public ne s’y trompe pas et que les maris d’Occident n’envient pas trop le sort des maris d’Orient ; ces modèles d’affection conjugale existent surtout dans les poèmes. . . . L’abbé Dubois affirme n’avoir pas rencontré pendant vingt-cinq ans de ministère, à travers ses péripéties dans l’Inde, un seul ménage véritablement heureux. La mode européenne est décidément la meilleure, et mieux vaut encore la galanterie chevaleresque du moyen âge que l’égoïsme brutal qui réduit les femmes à la condition d’esclaves.” See Summer, *Contes et légendes*, 151–52; Pouzet-Duzet, “Not a book of one’s own.”
vyasuḥ papāta medinīyām agnidagdha iva drumaḥ

(Damayantī, distressed and bereaved of her lord and kingdom, deeming the time for speech had gone—filled with anger, cursed the hunter, “since surely I think about nobody other than Nala in the mind, let this wicked hunter fall lifeless!” As soon as these single words were pronounced by her, the hunter fell to the ground like a tree burnt by fire.)

Damayanti, pleine de tristesse, privée de la royauté et de son époux, vit qu’il n’était plus temps de parler, et elle le maudit dans sa colère : “Comme il est vrai que, même en pensée, je ne désire aucun autre que Nala, qu’ainsi tombe mort le vil chasseur.” A ces seules paroles, le chasseur tomba à terre comme un arbre brûlé.64

The Sanskrit text, imbued with poignant soliloquies, exalted eulogies, and prolonged digressions, portrays Damayantī as a distraught yet resolute princess who survives a staggering concatenation of perils. Undoubtedly, when Damayantī curses the huntsman (śaśāpainaṁ) after the time for speech has expired (atītavākpathe kale), she is no longer a defenseless target for random predators, but a fully empowered woman heroically tackling her mishap.65 Yet the deadliness of Damayantī’s curse may strike a French reader as abrupt and even unthinkable.66 Instead, Summer writes, “[Damayantī] d’un geste, repousse violemment l’audacieux (with a gesture, violently pushed away the audacious hunter).” Seemingly, Summer, unconvinced by the fatal

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64 Ibid., 41–42.
65 It is worth noting that “the curse” is a vital narrative component of the Mahābhārata. A curse can sometimes change the course of the story. For instance, even Krṣṇa had to comply with Gāndhārī’s curse after the deadly Kurukshetra battle. Cf. John Smith, The Mahābhārata (Penguin Books, 2009), 46.
66 One may wonder, if Damayantī’s curse was powerful enough to kill a hunter who had effortlessly annihilated a boa, why did she not curse the snake in the first place? Maybe it is because the snake was not intent on raping her, whereas the hunter was. In other words, Damayantī’s revenge is triggered by a fear of being dishonored. That said, it also could be that a curse is generally directed toward human beings and not toward animals.
blow of Damayanti’s wrathful curse, supplants here a speech act with a more tangible physical counterattack. This is not to say that she categorically rejects all fairytale scenarios. Indeed, to justify the peripeteia, Summer even conjures divine intervention: “Damayanti devine la pensée qui trouble le chasseur ; d’un geste, elle repousse violemment l’audacieux qui, roule à l’instant sur le sol, pour ne plus se relever, tel qu’un arbre fracassé par la foudre. Comme toujours, les dieux étaient venus en aide à leur protégée.”

In truth, Damayanti’s sudden gain of vigor is at odds with the anguishing femininity that reverberates in many Orientalist literatures. Plausibility seems to be Summer’s creed, and rape must be a physically violent and terrifying act. As one may expect, Summer depicts Damayanti’s dramatic turnabout according to her understanding of how a French woman would react under similar circumstances. Despite all this, Summer must be thanked for at least not having Damayanti pinned down by the villain with her legs kicking in the air, displaying her black stocking as she struggles beneath him.

Noticeably, Mallarmé does not approve Summer’s anachronistic pseudo-realism. There is no need to specify the corporal movement in Mallarmé’s symbolic world, as Damayanti “lance à peine un geste (barely makes a gesture)” and the huntsman falls to the ground: “Bras ouverts, approche l’homme ; mais elle, douée d’une autorité inconnue, lance à peine un geste, que l’audacieux roule de son long à terre, comme un arbre étendu par la foudre. Les dieux étaient venus en aide à leur

67 Summer, *Contes et légendes*, 132.
protégée.” Thus, when Mallarmé restores Damayanti’s symbolic potency, he unwittingly attenuates Summer’s Orientalist fixation with confining Damayanti’s femininity to the mannerisms of the real world.

Another example may illustrate how Mallarmé simultaneously replicates and mitigates Summer’s Orientalism. We know that the most sensual depiction of Damayanti in Summer’s text is when she directs the reader’s gaze to the drops of sweat trickling down Damayanti’s breast, supposedly “stimulating the fire of youth”—“Quelques gouttes de sueur glissaient çà et là sur les épaules, sur les bras et sur le sein que soulevait le feu de la jeunesse.” Mallarmé’s version reads, “Quelques gouttes de sueur, ingénument glissé, perlent aux bras, aux épaules ; au sein, que soulève l’avenir.” Although there is still something enticing in the air, Mallarmé’s wording is much less cloying. More precisely, he likens “the drops of sweat” to an “ingenuously slipped necklace,” which is not devoid of originality. Second and more importantly, “soulever l’avenir”—an obscure collocation coined by Mallarmé that cannot be found in any major French dictionary—forces readers to make an adjustment in their interpretational vertigo and to halt, at least momentarily, their Orientalist fantasies.

Despite all these discrepancies, it would be overly enthusiastic to say that Mallarmé thoroughly rectifies Summer’s Orientalism, which markedly suppresses Damayanti’s salience as a fearless, staunch, and faithful wife taking matters into her own hands. As we will see, Mallarmé’s creativity is primarily linguistic. Bereft of

68 Mallarmé, Œuvres complètes, 2:924.
69 Ibid., 2:919.
substantiating ethnographic data, Mallarmé’s Nala et Damayantî is intended, when
read lightly in Méry Laurent’s salon, to be appreciated for its stylistic novelties and
not so much for its ideological progressiveness.

Mallarmé the Sanskrit poet

In recent years, scholars have pointed out the startling affinities between Sanskrit and
Mallarmé’s phraseology in Contes Indiens. Yet there is still much to say about this
unexpected convergence, especially in a more philologically vigorous form. To avoid
hasty conclusions, let us parse the following passage from the Nalopākhyānam,
corresponding to the first paragraph of Mallarmé’s Nala et Damayantî:

(Then those haṁsas “te tu haṁsāḥ” having flown up together “samutpatya/” they went to Vidarbhā “vidarabhān agamaṁś/” form there “tataḥ/” having gone to the city of Vidarbha “vidarbanagaraṁ gatvā/” to Damayantī’s vicinity “damayantīs tadāntike/” alighted these birds “nipetus te garumantāḥ/” and she saw these geese “sā dadarśa ca tān khagān/” She “sā/” those magically shaped ones “tān adbhutarūpān/” just having seen “vai drṣṭvā/” [she who was]

70 For example, according to Visuvalingam, “Il nous semble que le texte de Mallarmé est d’une certaine manière plus proche de la version sanskrite dans le sens où les procédures d’écriture de Mallarmé donnent à la phrase une concision étonnante, laquelle caractérise la langue sanskrite. Plus intéressant encore, comme le remarque Laflèche (1975: 124), la nominalisation est l’instrument de la concision mallarméenne. Scherer (1977: 107) note aussi qu’un autre procédé de nominalisation est la substantivation de l’adjectif. Or la nominalisation est aussi très importante en sanskrit. Cette concision donne une cohésion au conte qui ne se trouvait pas dans Summer.” See Visuvalingam, “Divagation indienne : les Contes indiens de Mallarmé–Esquisse de poétique comparée.”
surrounded by troops of companions “sakhigaṇāvṛtā” thrilled “ḥṛṣṭā” hurrying to grasp the birds “grahītuṁ khagamāṁs tvaramāṇā” [she] approached “upacakrame/” Thereafter the swans dispersed “atha haṃsā visasṛpuḥ/” everywhere in the grove of women “sarvataḥ pramadāvane/” One by one “ekaikaśas tādā/” the young ladies to those swans ran up “kanyās tān haṃsān samupādravan/” Then Damayantī “damayantī tu/” the swan to whom [she] ran up “yaṃ haṃsāṃ samupādhāvad/” in the proximity “antike/” he “sa/” having assumed a human voice “mānuśīṁ giraṁ kṛtvā/” spoke to Damayantī “damayantīṁ athābravīt/”)71

When translated word-for-word from Sanskrit to English with all the thought groups duly separated with slashes, this passage recalls Mallarmé’s prose style:

> Damayantī, entourée de compagnes nombreuses, folâtrait dans les jardins du sérail. Un printemps, les arbres renouvelant une parure de vert tendre ou émeraude, et le gazon, de fleurs. Tout à coup la princesse aperçoit une volée d’oiseaux, s’abattant sur le bosquet, en lignes serrées, jusqu’à obscurcir l’air. Agréable jeu, elle pense, que donner la chasse à tant de plumes et de courir, les belles rieuses, toutes, c’est un autre blanc tourbillon. Femmes et cygnes ici confondus, des cols se courbent ou s’enlacent, rivalisent, mais aux malins oiseaux l’art de coquettement se dérober et fatiguer leurs charmantes adversaires. Damayantī se montre la plus ardente à cette course folle. Le cygne poursuivi s’arrête, et liant l’épaule ronde de la jeune fille, lui murmure: . . . 72

The opening lines of Mallarmé’s _Nala et Damayantî_ put an emphasis on stunning imageries such as “une parure de vert tendre,” “fleurs,” “une volée d’oiseaux,” “un autre blanc tourbillon,” “des cols se courbent ou s’enlacent.” Strikingly, these words also appear in the poet’s famous piece _L’après-midi d’un faune_ where greenery, flowers, embraced swans, and women are confused:

71 I have reconstructed the punctuation in this verbatim English translation by marking the semantic pauses between thought groups in the Sanskrit verses. When rendering the excerpt, I have also tried my best to respect the initial word order. That said, it must be reminded that the rhythms of the English prose have very little to do with those of the Sanskrit original, which is strictly versified. But by displaying the different levels of syntactic subordination, this English rendering should at least reflect how the passage was understood by Brahmins when recited in Sanskrit.

72 Mallarmé, _Œuvres complètes_, 2: 917.
Par le talent ; quand, sur l’or glauque de lointaines
Verdures dédiant leur vigne à des fontaines,
Ondoe une blancheur animale au repos :
Et qu’au prélude lent où naissent les pipeaux,
Ce vol de cygnes, non ! de naïades se sauve
Ou plonge…
... J’accours ; quand, à mes pieds, s’entrejoignent (meurtries
De la langueur goûtée à ce mal d’être deux)
Des dormeuses parmi leurs seuls bras hasardeux ;
Je les ravis, sans les désenlacer, et vole
A ce massif, haï par l’ombrage frivole,
De roses tarissant tout parfum au soleil,
Où notre ébat au jour consumé soit pareil.  

In conformity with his treatment of Nala’s “dice throws” and loss of “free will,” here Mallarmé enhances a picture, or more precisely, a series of aestheticized and rapidly shifting images that speak particularly to him. Moreover, by virtue of his contorted syntax, he even appears to understand Sanskrit without actually knowing it.

In this respect, Claude Cuénot is certainly correct that “Mallarmé aime interrompre le discours, à le couper en parenthèses—l’aboutissement est le fameux poème en prose, Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard (Mallarmé likes to interrupt the speech, to chop it into parentheses—[a process] that culminates in the famous prose poem Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard).”  

73 Once again, I would like to thank Mary Shaw for pointing out this overlap to me. For L’après-midi d’un faune, see Mallarmé, Œuvres complètes.
74 Cuéno’s comment reads as follows: “Une première lecture courante nous révèle la tendance à condenser la phrase, en supprimant tout ce qui est tant soit peu superflu, — la tendance à l’inclusion (Mallarmé aime interrompre le discours, à le couper en parenthèses) — L’aboutissement est le fameux poème en prose, Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard, — le désir de bouleverser l’ordre des mots, soit pour créer la surprise et remettre en valeur ‘les mots de la tribu,’ soit pour calquer l’ordre psychologique réel, soit simplement pour le plaisir de changer, — l’effort pour juxtaposer et non subordonner (le poète escamote les relatifs quand il le peut), — la haine du verbe, réduit à des passés simples et à des présents ou à des formes
who taps even more deeply into the generative mechanism of Mallarmé’s phraseology as pertaining to *Contes Indiens*, notes two major tendencies:

d’une part, l’évitement du verbe conjugué, qui favorise la dimension évocatrice et descriptive de son écriture, aux dépens de sa dimension strictement narrative. D’autre part, la construction syntaxique de sa phrase, généralement uni-verbale, par emboîtements successifs, d’où résulte la multiplication des incidentes sur plusieurs niveaux. Ce choix syntaxique procède d’une recherche de la condensation maximale. (On one hand, the avoidance of finite verbs favors the evocative and descriptive dimension of his writing at the expense of its strictly narrative function; on the other, the syntactic construction of his sentences, generally based on a single verb and a series of nesting arrangements, results in the multiplication of *phrases incidentes* inserted and encapsulated at different levels. This syntactic choice stems from Mallarmé’s search for the maximum condensation.)

Following the path started by Cuénot and Brocquet, I offer to survey Mallarmé’s aversion to finite verbs through a series of close comparissons:

C’était au printemps; les arbres *venaient* de renouveler leur parure et *se couvraient* de pousses d’un vert tendre; les gazons *étaient* émaillées de fleurs fraîchement écloses. (Summer)

Un printemps, les arbres *renouvelant* une parure de vert tendre ou émeraude, et le gazon, de fleurs. (Mallarmé)

nominales, tandis que le verbe *être* tend à disparaître régulièrement, comme si certaines catégories linguistiques étaient frappées d’interdit, — l’horreur de la multiplicité et du signe de la multiplicité, le pluriel (n’oublions pas l’idéalisme de Mallarmé, qui s’efforce de retrouver l’idée stable dans les symboles mobiles de la réalité), — l’extension de sens des mots-ouïls très vagues comme la préposition à et bien d’autres tendances encore. La ponctuation mériterait à elle seule un travail à part, car le poète bouleverse les notions traditionnelles et utilise la ponctuation comme signe des mouvements réels de la pensée, ou comme des procédés de notation musicale, analogues aux soupirs, demi-soupirs, etc… Contentons-nous pour l’instant des remarques que n’importe quel lecteur peut faire, les deux textes en main.” Cf. Cuénot, “L’Origine des *Contes indiens* de Mallarmé,” 123–24.


76 Summer, *Contes et légendes*, 132.

Here, Mallarmé has crafted an elongated noun phrase bereft of finite verbs, whereas four conjugated verbs—all in *imparfait* (marked in bold)—appear in Summer’s initial sentence. We first notice the dropping of the copula “être,” as “C’était au printemps” becomes “Un printemps” and “les gazons étaient émaillées de fleurs fraîchement écloses” shrinks into “et le gazon, de fleurs.” Then “se couvraient” is erased because the action semantically overlaps with the preceding finite verb “venaient de renouveler,” which has been turned by Mallarmé into the present participle “renouvelant.”

The same nominalization process is repeated as Mallarmé revises the double-layered relative clause “qui s’abattaient sur les bocages en lignes si serrés que l’air en était obscurci” into an independent clause by replacing “qui s’abattaient” with the present participle “s’abattant,” and by supplanting “que l’air en était obscurci” with the infinitive phrase “jusqu’à obscurcir l’air”:

Tout à coup la princesse aperçut une volée d’oiseaux qui s’abattaient sur les bocages en lignes si serrées que l’air en était obscurci. (Summer)

Tout à coup la princesse aperçoit une volée d’oiseaux, s’abattant sur le bosquet en lignes serrées jusqu’à obscurcir l’air. (Mallarmé)

Separated by a comma, now the nominalized clause “s’abattant sur le bosquet en lignes serrées jusqu’à obscurcir l’air” is in apposition with the direct object of the main clause, “une volée d’oiseaux.” Such a revamp pictures “a flock of birds” at the

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center of its focus. Most importantly, the two instances of present participle added by Mallarmé parallel, to a considerable extent, the original phraseology of the Sanskrit text: “Then those haṁsas, having flown up together, they went to Vidarbhā, from there, having gone to the city of Vidarbha, to Damayantī’s vicinity, alighted these birds . . .” As highlighted in bold, the two gerunds—“having flown up together” (samutpatya) and “having gone to” (gatvā)—go hand in hand with the subject, namely, “these haṁsas birds” (te haṁsāḥ/ te garutmantaḥ), mentioned twice at both the beginning and the end of the excerpt. In Sanskrit, the gerund—an invariable participle—is ubiquitous; it is often used adverbially, as a coreferentially constrained clause, dependent on another verb phrase expressing a preceding or simultaneous action with a possible causality. In this way, gerunds can mark successive dependent clauses resulting in “a complex sentence with only one finite verb or its syntactic equivalent.”79 Needless to say, such usage is specific to Sanskrit and thereby not very amenable to French, in that the perfect active participle—the would-be equivalent of a Sanskrit gerund—is much less profusely employed in French.

Take, for example, the last sentence of the Sanskrit passage quoted above: “he [the swan], having assumed a human voice, spoke to Damayantī (sa mānuṣīṁ giram kṛtvā damayantīṁ athābravīt).” It would sound pedantic, if not awkward, to render the gerund “kṛtvā” into “ayant fait,” “ayant pris,” or even “eut pris,” and expectably in his

79 Goldman gives a vivid example of a complex sentence in Sanskrit that carries six gerunds and one finite verb at the end. A literal translation of this sentence reads: “Having seen his grandchildren, having left his family, having gone to the forest, having sat down near a tree, having subdued his senses, and having meditated on the highest, a man obtains liberation.” See Goldman, Devavanipravesika, 194.
translation, Burnouf simply juxtaposes two finite verbs in *passé simple*—“L’oiseau que poursuivait Damayanti prit une voix humaine et lui dit.”

In comparison, Summer takes a greater liberty not only in shifting the timeframe of the scenario from past to present, but also in adding a participial phrase picturing the swan jumping up to Damayantī’s shoulder. To compare:

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sa mānuṣīṁ girāṁ kṛtvā damayantīṁ athābravīṁ
(He/ having assumed a human voice/ spoke to Damayantī:)

L’oiseau que poursuivait Damayanti prit une voix humaine et lui dit : (Burnouf)

Le cygne qu’elle poursuivit s’arrête enfin, et, s’élançant sur l’épaule arrondie de la jeune fille, lui murmure à l’oreille : (Summer)

Le cygne poursuivi s’arrête, et liant l’épaule ronde de la jeune fille, lui murmure : (Mallarmé)
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When read side by side with Burnouf’s translation, Summer’s phrasing proves to be much closer to the Sanskrit, which may explain why Mallarmé’s ensuing edits are restrained. Specifically, he trims down the relative clause “qu’elle poursuivit” into a past participle “poursuivi” qualifying “le cygne.” In so doing, he removes redundancy in Summer’s wording, as we can infer from the context that the swan chaser can be nobody other than Damayantī. Most noticeably, Mallarmé retains the participial phrase forged by Summer, only turning “s’élançant” into a more concise active form of “liant.” Given that present participles in French can assume syntactic functions very similar to gerunds in Sanskrit, here we have a prime example of Mallarmé approving Summer’s phraseology when it inadvertently echoes the Sanskrit original!

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There are even more striking analogies between Mallarmé’s personal grammar and features of Sanskrit. Below is a very typical complex sentence in Sanskrit culled from the same excerpt cited above:

\[
\begin{align*}
sā tān adbhutarūpān vai dṛṣṭvā sakhigaṇāvṛtā \\
hṛṣṭā grahītuṃ khagamāṃs tvaramāṇopacakrame
\end{align*}
\]

(She/ those magically shaped ones/ just having seen/ [she who was] surrounded by troops of companions/ thrilled/ hurrying to grasp the birds/ approached/ . . .)

Owing to the structural modification initiated by Summer,\(^{81}\) this time Mallarmé fails to recuperate the lost Sanskrit syntax, which would otherwise be striking to a French reader with Sanskrit’s possibility of inserting, between a preposed personal pronoun “sā” (she) and a final conjugated verb “upacakrame” (approached), a concatenation of participial phrases and nominal compounds. Indeed, this extremely fragmentary and thus very complex Sanskrit sentence prioritizes apposition over subordination. It contains four nominal constituents in apposition: in addition to the bahuvrīhi compound “[she who was] surrounded by troops of companions” (sakhigaṇāvṛtā), we also find three participial phrases, resting respectively on the gerund “having seen” (dṛṣṭvā), the past passive participle “thrilled” (hṛṣṭā), and the present active participle (tvaramāṇā) “hurrying.”

Such phraseology is surely not a monopoly of Sanskrit; indeed, it can be fundamentally Mallarméan. To cite, on only a heuristic basis, Mallarmé’s trademark

\(^{81}\) Burnouf’s translation reads, “. . . Damayanti qui les aperçut aussitôt. Elle admira d’abord la belle forme de ces oiseaux, et entourée de ses amies, elle les poursuivit pour les saisir. . . .” Summer goes even further by extrapolating many imagined twists and turns that cannot be found in the original.
propensity to multiply nominal appositives—including but not limited to participial phrases—as epitomized by the following extract from *Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard*: “LE MAÎTRE/ hors d’anciens calculs/ où la manœuvre avec l’âge/ oubliée/ surgi/ inférant/ jadis il empoignait la barre/ de cette configuration . . .”\(^8^2\)

As often noted, this poem indeed is a single distended sentence of its title—printed in larger font, scattered and spanning several pages—by inserting relative clauses, adverbial phrases, and nominal appositives—printed in smaller font—into the space between different constituents of the poem’s title, duly broken down.\(^8^3\) Moreover, this process of enclosing parenthetic expressions encompasses several scales, creating thus a very Mallarméan tree structure for its later interpreters.

Instances of adding participial clauses and nominal appositives at the expense of conjugated verbs are aplenty in Mallarmé’s *Nala et Damayantî*. To point out one of them:

**Repos**, éventails *agités* par les femmes de Damayantî, autour d’elle ; les lampes *éteintes*, la fraîcheur du soir *inonde* librement chaque ouverture. (Mallarmé)

**C’était** l’heure du repos ; les femmes de Damayantî *s’empressaient* encore autour d’elle. Les lampes *venaient de s’étendre* et les œils-de-bœuf *laissaient* pénétrer librement la fraîcheur du soir. (Summer)

There is no need to reiterate that this harem picture of Damayantî lying languishingly on a velvet bed surrounded by her servants has been fictionalized by Summer. But what I want to insist on is that, linguistically, Mallarmé’s idiolect once again

\(^8^2\) For practical reasons, I have replaced the typographical space with slashes.  
\(^8^3\) See Scherer, *Grammaire de Mallarmé*, 195.
converges with the Sanskrit. As highlighted in bold, there is only one postposed finite verb in the sentence reworked by Mallarmé against four in Summer’s initial version. Indeed, Mallarmé crosses out the copula “était” in accordance with the common practice of omitting copulas in Sanskrit. Furthermore, two separate sentences, namely, “les femmes de Damayantî s’empressaient encore autour d’elle” and “Les lampes venaient de s’éteindre,” have been turned into dependent participial clauses in apposition with the nominalized “Repos.” In so doing, the image of Damayanî taking a rest has been considerably enhanced.

There is much to say about these edits insofar as they may help us fathom the origin of Mallarmé’s “understanding” of Classical Sanskrit. In this respect, Scherer notes that “[in Mallarmé’s writings] le participle est employé absolument avec un nom en apposition (the participle is used absolutely and in apposition with a noun),” which, according to Scherer, turns out to be “a usage derived from the use of the absolute ablative in Latin.” Noteworthily, Scherer offers an ample array of Mallarmé’s alleged Latinisms as evidenced by the somewhat baffling “fui” (past participle of “fuir”) in his famous verse, “Victorieusement fui le suicide beau.” Scherer’s sampling also includes three examples from Contes indiens. In Le Portrait enchanté, Mallarmé writes “Le matin, faites ses prières et ses ablutions, il s’approcha de sa nourrice,” meaning “Le matin, il fait ses prières et ses ablutions [ensuite] il s’approcha de sa nourrice.” Likewise, in Le Mort vivant, the sentence “Un cri, cependant, en la voyant d’elle-même advancer, mutine et le désordre réparé de sa toilette virginal” most likely means “Un cri, cependant, en la voyant d’elle-même advancer, mutine et
répare le désordre de sa toilette virginale.” Similar usage of participial clauses can be found in Nala et Damayantî, as in “Un mois consacré aux plaisirs, le héros prit congé de Bhima,” which denotes “le héros consacrait un mois aux plaisirs, [ensuite] il prit congé de Bhima.”

Mallarmé’s use of participial clauses as a substitute for finite verbs readily recalls the ubiquity of the past passive participle, present participle (both active and passive), and gerund employed adverbially, and abundantly, in Sanskrit. In this regard, Brocquet singles out two similar instances of participles used absolutely in Le Portrait enchanté, covering both present and past participles: “pâlissante, contre la vasque d’un jet d’eau qui se taisait parmi l’air, Soundari attendait, défaillait,” and “un gémissement, échappé comme à un luth plaintif, attesta deux lèvres humaines.”

That said, contrary to Scherer’s view, these participial clauses used adverbially by Mallarmé bear more resemblance to Sanskrit than to Latin. This is because Latin authors used finite verbs profusely, whereas in both Mallarmé’s writings and Classical Sanskrit, we note the visible frugality of conjugated verbs in relation to verbal adjectives. Doubtlessly, Mallarmé’s hatred of finite verbs, so to speak, attests to his fixation with condensation and syntactic ellipsis. By replacing conjugated verbs with participial clauses, he logically combines two or more of Summer’s sentences into a

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85 According to Mauer, in Sanskrit, the participial or adjectival use of the past passive adjective is very common, “much commoner than in current English, which tends to shy away from these participial constructions in favor of other modes of expression.” See Maurer, The Sanskrit Language, 90.
single elongated sentence, thus significantly reducing the use of copula, subject
pronoun, and connectors.

Driven by his pursuit of condensation and ellipses, Mallarmé’s Sanskrit-inflected idiolect surely has nothing to do with Sanskrit per se. Yet this unlikely and, on the face of it, baffling convergence between Mallarmé and Sanskrit poets is not an isolated case. Richard Serrano has convincingly shown, for example, that some of Mallarmé’s poetic strategies resemble very much those adopted by Tang Chinese poets.87

The captivating rapprochement between Mallarmé and Asian literary traditions invites an inevitable question: How can Mallarmé write across drastically different languages without knowing them? For Brocquet, the conundrum might be answered from a bigger picture perspective. More precisely, despite the colossal variety of languages, syntactic possibilities offered by any given language remain limited. Therefore, if an author strives to violate, or simply circumvent, conventional patterns of his or her own language by following a specific set of editing strategies, he or she is likely to create new patterns alien to the speakers of that language but common in

87 Richard Serrano suggests that in Las de l’amer repos, “Mallarmé accomplishes a breathtaking de-appropriation of Chinese objects, a stripping away of chinoiserie to the originating gestures of these sources.” At the end, nothingness rules over an ostensible profusion of chimerical references. Serrano also shows that Mallarmé’s use of Chinese objects elevates him above some putative sinologists, such as Judith Gautier, who “saw China as a land, if not savage and ridiculous, to populate with their own imaginings and even with themselves.” See Richard Serrano, Neither a Borrower: Forging Traditions in French, Chinese and Arabic Poetry (Oxford: Legenda, 2002), 218. Although it remains hard to ascertain where the literary connectedness between Mallarmé and Tang poets initially originates—either from spontaneous revelation or cross-cultural telepathy—it is obvious that Mallarmé’s Symbolist approach to the Orient goes far beyond a normative and reductive appropriation.
other languages. Brocquet also posits that iconoclast writers have the highest inclination to such border-crossings because

le travail littéraire, en élargissant le champs de ces possibilités, en recherchant, en radicalisant et en systématisant des variations possibles mais inusuelles, risque fort de rencontrer et d’adopter des caractéristiques bien attestées dans tel ou tel autre idiome. (Literary enterprises, by widening the range of these possibilities, by seeking, radicalizing, and systematizing feasible yet unusual variations, are likely to come across and thus adopt attested characteristics of different languages.)

Put another way, it is by pushing the malleability of the French language to its limits that Mallarmé surprises us with the commensurability between two remotely connected languages.

**Mallarmé the imagist**

Now, leaving behind the Sanskrit for a short while, let us appreciate Mallarmé’s editing strategies that transform the *Nalopākhyānam* into a chain of evocative, highly aestheticized, and rapidly shifting images.

As has often been noted, Mallarmé dislikes verbs, and his elliptical prose style “is not verbal but nominal in nature.” Through a careful study of Mallarmé’s manuscripts, Scherer casts light on how the poet, when reworking a paragraph in his prose poem *Réminiscence*, reduced the total number of verbs from twelve in the first draft to six in the final version. Likewise, Norman Paxton notes a very long

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88 Many thanks to Brocquet, with whom I have been actively engaged in conversation during the drafting of this chapter.
91 Ibid., 126.
sentence of fifty-five words that carries only one finite verb.\textsuperscript{92} Evidently, under the imperative of condensation, verbs and verbal constructions give the floor to nouns and adjectives (including participles) in Mallarmé’s personal grammar. For example, in \textit{Nala et Damayantî}, he writes, “Par la puissance du dieu, Nala se trouve transorté à l’instant parmi les glaces du sérail : vertigineux, ébloui,” meaning, “Par la puissance du dieu, Nala se trouve transorté à l’instant parmi les glaces du sérail, il resta ébloui d’un voyage si vertigineux.”\textsuperscript{93} Similarly, the second part of the sentence “Damayantî ouvre les yeux et regarde celui qu’elle avait encore vu qu’en rêve : debout, toute rougissante” conveys the meaning of “Elle se souleva toute rougissante” as we find in Summer’s text. Bolder edits of this type can be illustrated by the following comparison:

La voici qui approche d’un ermitage : des anachorètes, sereins, y vivent dans la contemplation divine. \textit{Son histoire : et cette prière}. . . . (Mallarmé)

Après toutes sortes de mauvaises rencontres, elle arrive auprès d’un hermitage. Là, de paisibles anachorètes vivent dans la contemplation des choses divines. \textit{La princesse leur conte son histoire et fini en leur adressant cette prière}. . . . (Summer)

In large part, the primacy of nominal constructions over verbs facilitates the display of juxtaposed and not-so-syntactically articulated poetic images. Meanwhile, the pictoriality and suggestiveness of Mallarmé’s language can also be credited to the fact that he often starts a new paragraph with an eye-catching image, frozen through a

\textsuperscript{92} Norman Paxton, \textit{The development of Mallarmé’s prose style} (Geneva: Droz, 1968), 52.

\textsuperscript{93} I have conjectured this interpretation based on Summer’s original sentence that reads: “Et, par la puissance du dieu, Nala se trouva à l’instant transporté dans l’intérieur du sérail. Le jeune homme resta quelques minutes étourdi d’un voyage si rapide.” See Summer, \textit{Contes et légendes}, 120.
well-constructed sentence bearing most of the features undergirding his idiosyncratic prose style. The syntactic salience of this image—conveyed often through a noun or noun phrase and placed at the head of a new paragraph—has strong impact on the reader. Here is a sampling of some initial paragraph sentences in Mallarmé’s *Nala et Damayantî*:

Damayantî, entourée de compagnes nombreuses, folâtrait dans les jardins du sérial.

Le cygne, secouant sa neige, disparaît, la vierge reste frappée au cœur ;

Grand émoi au ciel et sur la terre, parmi les dieux et les rois : quiconque a le droit d’aspirer à la main de Damayantî se dirige vers la capitale du Vidarbha.

Repos, éventails agités par les femmes de Damayantî, autour d’elle ; les lampes éteintes, la fraîcheur du soir inonde librement chaque ouverture.

Un cri, jeté par les femmes du sérial, devant un homme les lampes précipitamment rallumées : la colère s’évanouit à l’aspect de Nala : . . .

Nala, épuisé par l’effort ; il y a des missions pénibles à remplir.

Noces immédiates, magnifiques, on célébra le sacrifice du cheval, toutes les offrandes d’usage exhalèrent leur parfum aux divinités ;

Profanation devant quoi recula le Démon qui trouble Nala : l’infortuné, sans répondre, arrache ses parures, les jette dédaigneusement aux pieds de son adversaire, s’enfuit.

Une cabane ; déserte, elle se présenta sur la route . . .

Une liane prodigieuse se balance, mue d’aucun vent et dans le calice qu’elle laisse pendre gemmé d’une sombre pierrerie.

La voici qui approche d’un ermitage : des anachorètes, sereins, y vivent dans la contemplation divine. Son histoire : et cette prière : . . .

Un lac parfumé de lotus, on y campe le soir, parmi l’abondance de toute chose bonne à la vie, bois à se chauffer, sources à se désaltérer ;
Joies du départ, fêtes du retour, en vain ; rien ne distrait l’épouse, qui pleure, seule, toutes ses larmes.

Candide, profonde inspiration ! aux bras déjà tendus par le frère et la sœur, un cri spontané, déchirant, irrésistible a jailli de Nala.

Mallarmé’s phraseology is purposely fragmentary owing to his lavish use of commas, colons, semicolons, and parentheses. The inventive use of punctuation marks also attests to his fixation with syntactic ellipsis and his pursuit of a more suggestive language. To reiterate, Mallarmé replaces many finite verbs with nominal constructions. This nominalization strategy in turn intensifies the evocative power and graphic dimension of his language. More crucially, driven by his yearnings for maximum condensation, Mallarmé logically combines two or more of Summer’s sentences into one by multiplying appositives, participial clauses, and elongated noun phrases.

Because it would be redundant to parse all these examples thoroughly, I content myself with one of them, in which Mallarmé, by means of syntactic maneuvering, visualizes and enlivens a yell:

Cependant, les femmes du sérail avaient jeté un cri en apercevant un homme ; on avait précipitamment rallumé les lampes ; la colère de ces demoiselles s’évanouit à l’aspect de Nala . . . (Summer)

Un cri, jeté par les femmes du sérail, devant un homme les lampes précipitamment rallumées : la colère s’évanouit à l’aspect de Nala : . . . (Mallarmé)

For instance, in the verb-free sentence parsed above, namely, “Un printemps, les arbres renouvelant une parure de vert tendre ou émeraude, et le gazon, de fleurs,” the comma interjected between “le gazon” and “de fleurs” replaces the present participle “renouvelant,” which should be repeated if a less elliptic sentence were formulated. See Scherer, Grammaire de Mallarmé, 210.
Summer’s phraseology centers on a chain of actions conveyed through three finite verbs: “avaient jeté,” “avaient précipitamment rallumé,” and “s’évanouit.” Mallarmé reshuffles the word order, switching the emphasis of the sentence over to the nominal syntagma “Un cri,” which is placed at the start of the reworded sentence and isolated from the following constituents by a comma. Moreover, he transforms the two independent clauses—“les femmes du sérail avaient jeté un cri” and “on avaient précipitamment rallumé les lampes”—into appositives of the preposed subject “un cri.” Now used adverbially, the participial clause “jeté par les femmes du sérail” and the prepositional clause “devant un homme les lampes précipitamment rallumées” form with “un cri” an elongated noun phrase. In so doing, Mallarmé brings under the spotlight a sudden shriek that passes somewhat muffled in Summer’s original phrasing.

Furthermore, with the artfully added semicolon, here we have an abrupt shift of focus from the scream to the prompt dissipation of anger. Such cut between scenes is typically Mallarméan, often starting with an elongated noun phrase such as “Grand émoi au ciel et sur la terre, parmi les dieux et les rois,” “Nala, épuisé par l’effort,” “Noces immédiates, magnifiques,” “Profanation devant quoi recula le Démon qui trouble Nala,” “La voici qui approche d’un ermitage,” “Joies du départ, fêtes du retour, en vain,” and “Candide, profonde inspiration,” among others. Blown up by its syntactic dispositions, this first image thrown out abruptly will then switch over, aided by a punctuation mark, to a sentence with finite verbs where the true action takes
place. Admittedly, such shifting, when repeated regularly, presents to the reader a series of shifting images with dazzling tinctures.95

Indeed, Mallarmé’s proclivity for “Imagism” and his predilection for abrupt cuts between scenes can operate on various narrative levels. As conjectured by Scherer and Cuénot, Mallarmé may even have borrowed his montage techniques from theater.96 Here is one example:

La voilà désormais à l’abri de tout danger. Revenons à Nala que nous avons laissé au comble du désespoir.

Peu après avoir quitté Damayantî il vit devant lui une forêt embrasée ; chose étrange, du milieu des flammes une voix criait : “Nala ! Nala !” Le héros entre résolument au cœur de l’incendie et aussitôt un énorme serpent bleu lui dit : . . . (Summer)

“Nala ! Nala !” crie au cocher une voix pareille à celle qui l’appella dans la forêt embrasée ; mais il doit rester sourd à ce nom, il se souvient de son engagement quand le serpent bleu, tiré par lui de l’incendie, le fit changer de formes, altérant en membres difformes et grêles ses fiers bras et sa vaste poitrine, pour un résultat béni et disant : . . . (Mallarmé)

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95 As an anecdote, I was backpacking in Patagonia at the writing of the last installment of this chapter. One day it struck me as a coincidence that like Mallarmé, my Lonely Planet guidebook would often start the entry on a tourist destination in Patagonia with a pictorial sentence heavy in appositives, nominal constructions, and surprising punctuations. To cite only a few examples: “A pastel wash of corrugated-tin houses shoulder to shoulder, this once dull fishing port on seno Última Esperanza has become the hub of Gore-Tex clad travelers headed to the continent’s number-one national park” (Puerto Natales); “Soaring almost vertically more than 2000m above the Patagonian steppe, the granite pillars of Torres del Paine dominate the landscape of what might be South America’s finest national park” (Parque Nacional Torres del Paine); “Reluctantly shared by Argentina and Chile, the ‘land of fire’ really is the end of the world” (Tierra del Fuego); “Lago Nahuel Huapi, a glacial relic over 100km long, is the centerpiece of this gorgeous national park” (Parque Nacional Nahuel Huapi); “Hippies rejoice: there’s a must-see destination for you in Argentina and it’s called El Bolsón” (El Bolsón). See Regis St. Louis et al., Lonely Planet: South America on a Shoestring, 10th ed. (Oakland, CA: Lonely Planet, 2010). This is not to say that Mallarmé’s Nala et Damayantî espouses a commercially viable Orientalism in the spirit of modern-day travel writers, but that his phraseology and mise en scène techniques can also on occasion be very reader friendly.

Many commentators, including Cuénot, have singled out the permutations performed by Mallarmé in the above passage. Evidently for Mallarmé, there is no need to frame his characters. On the contrary, in chapter XIV of the *Nalopākhyānam*, as well as in Burnouf’s and Summer’s translations, the corresponding passage is linear in that Nala, having deserted Damayantī, comes upon the serpent king Karkoṭaka trapped in a jungle fire. Nala saves the serpent king, who unexpectedly bites his savior, the venom then transforming Nala into the ugly charioteer Vāhuka.

In Mallarmé’s version, “le cocher”—as marked in bold—springs out of the blue. Only later will a discerning reader realize that here Nala is addressed by the king Ṛṇa, who orders Nala to drive him to Damayantī’s second svayāṁvara. The reader will also understand that the king’s voice reminds Nala of the “blue snake” who has transformed him into the charioteer Vāhuka some time ago. Indeed, Nala’s metamorphosis is narrated in an artfully contrived flashback, resting on this magic sentence “il se souvient de son engagement quand le serpent bleu,” which readily recalls, albeit anachronistically, the opening line of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Be that as it may, thanks to his inventive montage, Mallarmé the imagist once again captures a yell—this time uttered not by a troop of harem women but by a serpent king trapped in a distant forest on fire.

**Conclusion**

India as a topos at the core of Mallarmé’s Orientalist imaginings offers him fertile terrain to carry out his most daring literary experiment and challenge the established
norms of popular storytelling. Although Mallarmé’s *Nala et Damayantî* is a narrative mangled beyond recognition when read against the Sanskrit original, there are instances of adaptations with less wild edits. In 1880, Mallarmé published *Les Dieux Antiques*, drawing upon George W. Cox’s *The Mythology of the Aryan Nations*, which was a compilation of Max Müller’s various publications. Yet, Mallarmé was not an archeologist of world religions, and the chapters on Hindu deities in *Les Dieux Antiques* inform us less of his mastery of the subject matter than of his expertise in stylistic improvement. As Bertrand Marchal puts it, in Mallarmé’s retelling, “les interventions en apparence les plus anodines du traducteur peuvent cacher en fait des retournements radicaux (the seemingly most trivial tweaks by Mallarmé could hide radical reversals).”

Mallarmé’s Orientalism is certainly not Asiatic; it emerges out of self-consciously esoteric literary contexts of nineteenth-century France as this period saw a growing body of French literati engrossed in Sanskrit. The trend may have started with the Romantics such as Chateaubriand, who wrote in his *Mémoires d’outre-tombe* that “si l’on fût tombé dans un bon jour, on aurait pu deiser à table en sanscrit (if one had happened on a good day, one might have chatted at table in sanscrit).”

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97 Bertrand Marchal enumerates passages in *Les Dieux Antiques* that are borrowed directly from *The Mythology of the Aryan Nations*. Interestingly, although Cox systematically quotes Max Müller’s name, Mallarmé removes all indications of Müller’s authorship. Mallarmé also carefully replaces the word “God” that appears in Müller’s and Cox’s texts with “divinité.” Marchal also sheds light on Mallarmé’s linguistic insufficiency as he translates “to deceive” as “décévoir” and confuses “to bury” with “to burn.” See Bertrand Marchal, *La Religion de Mallarmé* (Paris: José Corti, 1988), 144–46.

98 Ibid., 139.
Sanskrit).” To use Schwab’s term, “the arrival of India in Europe coincided with the birth of Romanticism.” Landing on well-prepared ground for the Oriental renaissance, India enriched the index and horizons of French writers, from Hugo to Leconte de Lisle, who became “troubled,” “tempted,” or even “answered” by India.

As a concluding remark, Mallarmé’s retelling of the *Nalopākhyānam* coincided with a decisive moment of the nineteenth-century French men of letters’ ever-growing infatuation with India, which after the detour of the Parnassians and early Symbolists, was about to return to its Romantic and mystic origins. By escaping received frameworks of nineteenth-century Orientalist narratives, Mallarmé’s *Nala et Damayantî* stands out as a rare site that simultaneously betrays, echoes, and even enriches the Orient by promoting a famous piece of Sanskrit literature into world literature.

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100 Schwab, *Oriental Renaissance*, 225.
101 According to Schwab, the “Oriental Renaissance” followed a cumulative, yet cyclical trajectory. He draws attention to “the poetry,” which, despite its “gratuitous appearances,” was “led toward an impenetrable element dominated by India. After the detour of the Parnassians and the Symbolists, the Renaissance returned to the mystical ‘primitive’ of the Romantics.” Schwab, *Oriental Renaissance*, 424.
Stèles: a paradigm of humane Orientalism?

Since the 1960s, we see the French naval doctor, archaeologist, poet, novelist and literary theorist Victor Segalen’s posthumous emergence as an author embodying a more benevolent form of East-West encounters than that described by Edward Said. Critics often portray him as a revolutionary writer who opens “the door to the valid study of comparative literature between East and West”1 by single-handedly forging a new category of “Sino-French literature”2 while raising “la question de la diversité du monde” and fighting against “l’exotisme comme forme complaisante de la colonisation.”3 Owing to his theory of diversity, his reflections on the self and the other, and his China-inspired bilingual prose poems Stèles, Segalen is widely considered a progressive modernist writer and thus different from other China-inspired French authors contemporary to him such as Paul Claudel and Saint-John Perse, not to mention Pierre Loti.

As is often noted, this progressiveness is reflected in Stèles, which stands out for its editorial formatting recalling the shape of Chinese steles (“standing stones” or “inscribed tablets”)—an exoticism amplified by the Chinese characters at the top right corner of each stèle. Thanks to the philological investigation by Henri Bouillier—the late-day editor of Segalen’s Œuvres Complètes who rescued the author from oblivion in the 1960s, we know that thirty-six of Stèles’s sixty-four poems draw direct

2 Yvonne Hsieh, Victor Segalen’s literary encounter with China: Chinese moulds, Western thoughts (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 262.
inspiration from authentic Chinese sources including legends, anecdotes, historical and literary texts. That said, critics have come to agree that Segalen’s allusions to the Chinese world are often brief and elusive in Stèles. This is because after beginning his poems with a Chinese reference, Segalen would quickly switch from the “Chinese Empire” over to his own “empire” and radically transform “the original source to his personal sentiments.”

Thus, one may ask, is Segalen merely superficially engaging with China to the exclusion of China itself? If this is the case, how progressive can he be? While many critics view Segalen’s use of bilingualism and intertextuality in Stèles as attesting to a modernist’s creativity, others note the problematic relationship between Segalen’s French mode of expression and his Chinese references. For Qin Haiying, “Stèles itself is lacking in any of the savor of Chinese poetry.” She defines Segalen’s poetic as “a continuation of the Symbolist tradition, which rests on a Western metaphysical mode of writing” and recalls “Bible-style verse remodeled and made popular by Paul Claudel.” This definition echoes Richard Serrano’s view that “Segalen’s attempts to

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5 “. . . bing meiyou Zhongguo shiwei’er.” See Che Jinshan and Qin Haiying trans., Bei (Stèles) (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2009), 11. All unattributed translations from Chinese in this chapter are mine.
6 Ibid., 11.
7 Ibid., 165.
borrow from Chinese forms while disregarding Chinese content only emphasize the essentially reactionary nature of his poetics.”

To pursue this debate further, this chapter taps deeply into the thus far understudied Orientalism in Segalen’s poetics as evidenced by the way he rewrites his Chinese sources in the *Stèles*. In so doing, I debunk Segalen’s image as a progressive modernist writer of East-West intercultural dialogue. More precisely, instead of recycling a scattered body of past scholarship that uncritically credits Segalen with the virtue of understanding and falling in love with Chinese culture, I show how Segalen’s French ego negates, parodies, and superimposes Western imageries onto his Chinese sources in four *stèles*, namely “De la composition,” “Supplique,” “Vampire,” and “Écrit avec du sang.” By stripping off the pedantic veneer underpinning Segalen’s mode of expression, I show that Segalen’s Orientalism is not always his own but often replicates and amplifies that of previous translators—mostly French Jesuits. In short, *Stèles* is not only a continuance of the Symbolist tradition drawing on a type of Bible-inked verse initially forged by Paul Claudel, but also a furtherance of the Orientalist lenses of French Jesuits whose translations of Chinese classics had directly inspired Segalen.

Concurrently, I contend that the Chinese epigraphs in *Stèles* are in reality a recondite expression of the Romantic and Parnassian poets’ fancy for the exotic East; they are marketing gimmicks for Segalen’s Western readers who could barely verify their authenticity. Last, I argue that Segalen is not a post-Mallarmé modernist and his

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literary stance is not at all revolutionary. This is partly because his strategy of rewriting removes the characteristics of Classical Chinese which would otherwise echo Mallarmé’s modernist prescription on narrative impersonality.

Evidently, Segalen remains a Eurocentric author who is keen to forge an Orient so replete with pedantic references that it has no room for concrete realities—this studied obliqueness of Segalen’s prose style has thus far spared him from criticism directed at more accessible authors such as Pierre Loti.

In short, this chapter shows that Segalen’s appropriation of Chinese sources does not neatly fit the ideological progressiveness attributed to him by modern-day critics. These latter, either out of their inability to read Chinese or an urge to add nuances to Said’s critique of cultural imperialism, have mistakenly sanctified an author whose Orientalism resembles, rather than corrects that of Renan, Lamartine, Flaubert, Claudel, and Loti.

Segalen’s enrichment of “poor and dry” Chinese sources

There is evidence—however much it may be doubted by the poet’s unconditional partisans, that Segalen seldom consult his Chinese sources in their original form but instead relies on French missionaries’ translations edited in bilingual format.10

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Therefore, instead of setting up Segalen’s poetic grace in an aprioristic opposition to the inherent “poverty” of his unmediated Chinese raw material, it makes more sense to posit, in contrast, an ideological convergence between the Jesuit translators’ renderings of Chinese classics and Segalen’s much-acclaimed Sino-French poetics.

In one of his letters to Jules de Gaultier, Segalen claims that none of his steles are faithful translations, although a few may be roughly called adaptations.11 In this respect, Bouillier confirms that thirty-six of the Stèles have indisputable Chinese sources,12 yet Segalen “s’est inspiré des textes sans cesser de les trahir.” In Bouillier’s eyes, this joyful betrayal of Chinese sources partakes of Segalen’s symbolic transfer from “les chroniques de l’Empire de Chine” to “les chroniques de l’Empire de soi.” Indeed, Segalen’s Chinese sources hail mostly from Séraphin Couvreur’s translations of the Li Ji (禮記) and the Shi Jing (詩經), as well as from Léon Wieger’s compilation of Textes historiques.”13 Clearly, the intertextuality we find in Stèles relies on previous French translations of Chinese texts mostly by two Jesuit missionaries—Wieger and Couvreur. Segalen’s debt to them—as corroborated by Bouillier’s meticulous investigation, seems to indicate a rewriter’s intention to improve some stylistically failed previous translations. In this respect, Bouillier lavishes esteem on Segalen:

Cet ouvrage (Textes historiques) en trois volumes publié en Chine par la Mission catholique en 1903 est une copieuse anthologie de tous les textes

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12 Ibid., 28.
13 Ibid., 29.
Here Bouillier hazards an assumption that Segalen crafts an original masterpiece out of otherwise mediocre Chinese material. For Bouillier what matters in Segalen’s borrowings from China is neither Wieger’s “prejudice” nor the “poverty” of the Chinese texts per se, but that Segalen “surpasses” China’s ancient history by grasping “the allusion, the possible ellipsis, and the ineffable allegory” scattered in Wieger’s defective rendition of Chinese anthologies. Yet this fundamentally Orientalist apology for Segalen’s transformative genius should not be taken very seriously. Indeed, calling Wieger’s translation unnourishing to any aesthetic ambition is one thing; applying this critique to Segalen’s Chinese sources in general is something altogether different. Bouillier’s assumption of Segalen’s literary superiority over the Chinese is not grounded, this is not only because Bouillier himself knows no Chinese but also because some of Segalen’s sources, such as the *Shi Jing* (詩經), are by no means tedious historiographical accounts but the founding canon of Chinese poetry. As a rule,

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14 Ibid., 28–29.
an adaptation not always enriches the original, but sometimes impoverishes it. Segalen’s Orientalism takes place exactly in such impoverishing adaptations.

“De la composition” and Segalen’s “Allégorie”

In the stèle “De la composition,” Segalen extols an obscure “Allégorie” through a repartee and a Chinese-inked French prose dotted with references to both Western and Chinese literary works. Although Segalen redefines here the word “allégorie” he stumbles upon in Couvreur’s note on Chinese poetics that eventually refers back to the xing 興 of the Shi Jing 詩經, he trumpets in fact a mode of expression of his own that has nothing to do with China. Indeed, what Couvreur terms “allégorie”—a diction that seems to have initially captivated Segalen, is a very sloppy translation of the Chinese poetic device xing that has no exact equivalent in Western nomenclature. Segalen amplifies this misinterpretation by putting on the pedestal his own “allégorie” while deprecating both Couvreur and the Chinese poetics rendered by the latter. Put another way, Segalen uses the Shi Jing merely as a disposable foil to supposedly superior French poetics of which he acts as the spokesperson par excellence. This stance exhibits Orientalist assumptions about the East as inferior and essentially different from the West.

As Bouillier notes, Segalen adorns himself with the mask of another culture only to multiply the allusions, the suggestions and the symbols indispensable to his

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“conception allégorique de la poésie.” This idiosyncratic mode of poetic expression often couches upon a threefold bipartite structure:

Un grand nombre de stèles. . . reposent sur une composition bipartite. On peut distinguer en gros dans ce type de composition trois aspects différents qui répondent à trois fonctions différentes du poème. La première est d’opposer deux attitudes, deux sentiments et deux idées. . . . La deuxième structure bipartite procède en revanche à une élimination radicale du premier volet. . . . Le troisième type de structure bipartite remplit une fonction plus profonde. La forme est ici au service de l’intention spirituelle. Elle met en valeur le procédé capital de Segalen qui est l’allégorie. La stèle inédite De la Composition, que le poète a laissée de côté, probablement parce qu’elle était trop explicite, illumine en exposant la nature de l’allégorie le rôle même de la poésie. L’allégorie est prise ici dans un sens très large et proche de l’étymologie. Elle consiste à dire autre chose, faute de pouvoir exprimer directement l’essentiel.

There is much to say about this commentary. Bouillier suggests that “allégorie” forms the bedrock of Segalen’s poetics. Supposedly, this “allégorie” consists in a juxtaposition of two opposing stances in which the latter nullifies the former, and this very negation enables Segalen to leap from the literal to the “essential.” What Bouillier does not say but implies is that Segalen’s “allégorie” presupposes a hierarchy between the literal Chinese and the essential French, with the Chinese occupying the lower stratum of significance.

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16 Bouillier, Œuvres Complètes, 2:29.
17 Ibid., 24–25.
18 In his preface to the English critical edition of the Stèles, Haun Saussy suggests that the whole of Stèles “be read as exhibiting a double plot of negation and materiality.” See Billings and Bush, Stèles/古今碑錄, xxxii. This view is shared by Marie Dollé for whom the negation in Stèles sets Segalen in the lineage of Rimbaud and Mallarmé, owing to their common interest in “defining the poetry by what it is not.” See Marie Dollé, “Éloge de la négation,” Écritures poétiques du moi dans Stèles et Équipée de Victor Segalen, ed. Didier Alexandre and Pierre Brunel, (Paris: Klincksieck, 2000), 116.
But why “allégorie,” instead of “métaphore” or “parabole”? We know that allegory is an extremely charged term in Christian scholarship and it readily reminds us of the four layers of meanings used by medieval Bible commentators.¹⁹ Even Bouillier seems not particularly comfortable with his own word choice as he states that “L’allégorie est prise ici dans un sens très large et proche de l’étymologie.” But this note is barely of any help unless you know what on earth is the exact etymology of “allégorie”—one can expect that most of Bouillier’s readers do not. That said, such clarification makes less blatant Bouillier’s disdain for the Chinese when paying tribute to Segalen’s superior “spiritual intention.” Despite his prevarication, Bouillier does help us understand one thing—“allégorie” is at core of Segalen’s poetics and he may have in mind the idea of “surpassing” the Chinese when referring to “allégorie.”

Indeed, Segalen discloses in his draft notes of “De la composition” that he draws his “Allégorie” from Couvreur’s commentary on the Chinese poetic devices used in the Cheu King,²⁰ or the Shi Jing 詩經.²¹ It is thus useful to briefly survey the corresponding passage in Couvreur’s text:

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¹⁹ Arguably, French writers of the early twentieth-century knew much better their Bible than the Shi Jing. Tamine surmises that Segalen culls “l’allégorie” from the biblical exegesis. See Tamine, “Poétique ou rhétorique,” 93.

²⁰ Parallel to Couvreur’s translation of the Shi Jing, Bouillier also posits that Segalen may have modeled his “allégorie” on another Chinese stylistic device mentioned by Léon Wieger on page 449 (Chapter 27) of his translation of the Taoist classic 莊子 Tchoung–tseu (Zhuang zi). See Bouillier, Œuvres Complètes, 2:17. However, this borrowing is not very likely, though there might be something in the air. For Bouillier, the Chinese term that had inspired Segalen is yu yan. It is mentioned in a passage of the Zhuangzi that reads, “De mes paroles, beaucoup sont des allégories... . J’ai employé des allégories empruntées aux objets extérieurs, pour faire comprendre des choses abstraites.” Léon Wieger trans., Les pères du système taoiste. Lao–tseu, Lie–tseu, Tchouang–tseu, Tome II (Hien Hien: Imprimerie de Hien Hien, 1913), 448–449. This French passage is a very liberal translation of the original Chinese, “寓言十九，藉外論之.” The sentence in turn is an abbreviation of “寓言十九，重言十
Composition littéraire et versification du Cheu King [Shi Jing]
Dans la composition poétique on distingue trois éléments : la description ou simple narration 賦 fóu [fu], la similitude ou la comparaison 興 xìng et l’allégorie 比 pi [bi].

La première partie d’une similitude ou comparaison s’appelle 興意 xìng i idée empruntée, 借映 tsié ing lumière ou image empruntée, 客意 k’ò i idée étrangère au sujet. La seconde partie, qui est l’application de la première au sujet traité, se nomme 正意 tchēng i ou 轉正 tchouen tchēng idée qui se rapporte ou revient directement au sujet, 主意 tchou i idée propre au sujet.

七, 尋言日出, 和以天倪。寓言十九, 藉外論之,” which can be found in the Chinese text on page 448, chapter 27 of Wieger’s bilingual translation. We can render “寓言十九, 藉外論之” word-by-word as, “allusive/words (phrases, sentences?)/ ten/nine; Borrow/outside/argue/it (them?)”

This mishmash of words is befuddling, as it lacks not only connectives, but also subject and predicate. Wieger adds a narrator explaining that he has employed “allegories borrowed from exterior objects” for a specific purpose, namely, “make known some abstract things.” Concurrently, Wieger replaces the figurative numerals “nine tenth” with a qualifier “many” and turns the pronoun zhi into a more explicit “abstract things.” We must regret that because of the absence of segmentation between words, compounded by the polysemy of most its characters, this sentence poses egregious difficulty even for someone versed in Classical Chinese. It is hard to say with certainty, for instance, what the genderless and numberless pronoun zhi refers to (my argument/arguments? allegory/allegories? itself/themselves?). Likewise, one wonders what yu yan means, as this term is composed of two monosyllabic characters, each carrying multiple meanings. Specifically, yu yan may refer to a form of “cryptic words” or “decoded message” accessible only by Taoist initiates, but it can also mean, more generally, any “allusive,” “allegorical,” or “metaphorical” language uttered by a literate Chinese. Not surprisingly, Wieger’s translation of yu yan lacks consistency. He first paraphrases it into “verbe et mots” in the title of chapter 27, yet a few lines further he brackets yu yan with “allégories.” Such randomness indicates that Zhuangzi’s legacy in Segalen’s “allégorie” is very unlikely.


21 There was no standard transliteration scheme for Chinese characters in Couvreur’s time, but scholars worldwide now commonly accept the pinyin system, which results in Shi Jing and not Cheu King.

22 “Pi” is transliterated as “bi” according to the pinyin system. Idem for “fu,” which Couvreur renders as “fou.”
L’allégorie est une similitude dont l’application n’est pas exprimée, et comme une fable dont la moralité doit être devinée par le lecteur. L’application ainsi laissée à la sagacité des commentateurs n’est pas toujours exempte de difficulté. En plus d’un endroit, après maintes conjectures, elle reste incertaine ou obscure.23

Here Couvreur glosses on the canonic trio of *fu*, *bi*, and *xing*, which is believed to have inspired Western modernist poets such as Ezra Pound.24 Couvreur likens the Chinese “allégorie” to “the morality of a fable” that is not fully expressed, which poses great difficulty of interpretation to the reader. However, the ordering of the three Chinese terms is slightly off in Couvreur’s entry. Arguably, *xing* should not be paired with *la comparaison*, and *bi*(pi) is mistakenly coupled with “allégorie.” In other words, the trio *fou, xing, bi*(pi) as we find in Couvreur’s note is a scribal error misrepresenting the set phrase *fou, bi, xing* 賦比興 used by Chinese literary theorists.25 In his draft notes of “De la composition,” Segalen addresses this mismatch by swapping the positions of *xing* and *bi*(pi):

Couvreur dit: Descript. 賦
Simil. 興
Allég. 比

Moi je dis: 賦 descript.
比 pi compar.

For Segalen, “allégorie” refers to xing 興, not bi 比. This correction is meritorious and Segalen is well aware of his merit. The structure of the stele “De la composition” has taken its shape in this schematic dialogue where Segalen bluntly refutes Couvreur. Yet in “De la composition,” Segalen’s self-assuredness goes perhaps too far as it strikes us as almost arrogant:

**De la composition**

Le Maître dit:
Dans la sage composition, distinguez trois modes: descriptif, similaire et allégorique.
La description enclôt un geste comme un contour; enferme la couleur sous le reflet juste; la parole dans l’écho servile et mesuré. Pratiquez la Description; n’en faites qu’un bon usage.
La Comparaison veut une part étrangère et l’autre familière qui s’en explique et s’en revêt. Elle est d’un emploi précieux.
Enfin l’Allégorie: lumière empruntée, image oblique, regard dérobé, commentaire incertain. Un pinceau prudent se risque peu jusqu’à l’allégorie.

Moi je dis:
La Description tue le geste comme un air glacé tue le souffle. La couleur est morte qui reflète et n’éclaire point. Négligez la description et sa main-d’œuvre.
La Ressemblance est faite pour les sots: deux égale deux, et le ciel est un pot d’azur, et la sagesse une mer de mérites et l’amour un plant de haricot grimpant. N’usagez pas plus les similitudes.
Mais pour l’Allégorie, —oh! tous les possibles sont permis: voici la peau qu’on assouplit, le parfum qui réveille, le son magique roulant ses fanfares jusqu’aux échos des nues,
Voici, d’un seul coup—sans grossière machines—deux profonds volets (créneaux) qui s’ébrasent, et, le temps d’un mot, ouvrent les Marches d’arrière-monde.27

As outlined in his draft notes, “De la composition” is divided into two stanzas: the first portrays an anonymous “Maître” stipulating the usage of three poetic devices while the second carries Segalen’s retort to the “Maître’s” ordinance. The “Maître” impersonates here a Chinese or supposedly Chinese dogma that Segalen rejects. Moreover, the predominance of imperative formulations such as “négligez” and “n’usagez pas,” aided by an alternation of pros and cons, eloquently bans “description” and “ressemblance” while extolling an “allégorie” of Segalen’s own coinage, which is capable of opening, in one go and without “crude devices,” the frontiers of Nietzsche’s “arrière-monde.”

In the last verse of the first stanza, the “Maître” fleshes out his view on “Allégorie” by enumerating four determiner-free noun groups, namely “lumière empruntée,” “image oblique,” “regard dérobé,” and “commentaire incertain.” Ironically, here Segalen borrows his “borrowed light” from Couvreur’s rendition of the Chinese term Tsie ing [jie ying] “借映.” Similarly, by “uncertain commentary,” Segalen reiterates the Jesuit’s emphasis on the interpretative difficulties caused by xing. Through the omission of predicates, articles, and connectives in “lumière empruntée,” “image oblique,” “regard dérobé,” and “commentaire incertain,” Segalen’s phraseology conveys a rhythmic regularity, which evinces a specious Chinese flavor.28 Yet this does not mean Segalen approves what he apes, or more

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28 Segalen’s listing of poetic images recalls the Chinese stylistic device known as Pai bi 排比. In this regard, Qin Haiying notes: “. . . the language of Stèles echoes the cursory, compact nature and syntactic characteristics of Classical Chinese. Segalen makes an intensive use of short, elliptic, parallel and enumerative phrases. His recourse to idiosyncratic punctuations turns the multi-layered and highly logical complex sentences of the French poetic language into simple sentences. That said, this
precisely, parodies. As the “Maître” gives the floor to Segalen’s narrator in the second stanza, the latter harshly ridicules Couvreur’s take on the trio *fu-bi-xing* through an inflated prose fraught with intertextual references. More precisely, Segalen’s exhortation to disregard the “main-d’œuvre” of description recalls Huysmans’s disdain for Zola’s “chapelle” and “honorables ouvriers.” Likewise, both “tue le geste” and “le ciel est un pot d’azur” may allude to Mallarmé—the first recalls the drowning Master’s “fantôme d’un geste” nullified by the cosmos in *Un coup de dés* while the second is reminiscent of *Azur* in which the narrator, caught between “dead sky” and “triumphing Azure,” compares his “cervelle vidée” to “le pot de fard gisant au pied d’un mur.”

When it comes to the use of *Resssemblance*, Mallarmé is not the sole instigator of mawkish tropes. Segalen also jeers at the “haricot grimpant” that pervades the *Shi Jing* and the equally cloying “mer de sagesse”—a recurrent epithet in Buddhist literature. The deprecation of “description” and “ressemblance” only underscores Segalen’s predilection for “Allégorie,” in which “tous les possibles sont permis.” This hyperbole à la Dostoevsky is followed by a Symbolist synesthesia, as the brew of sensual imageries including “la peau qu’on assouplit,” “le parfum qui réveille,” and “le son magique” recalls Baudelaire’s temple with living columns.

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30 Contrary to Shapiro’s assertion, “la sagesse une mer de mérites” is more likely a reference to Buddhism than to the *Book of Isaiah*. Comparing Buddha’s wisdom to the depth and breadth of the ocean is commonplace in China. For instance, the landmark Buddhist temple of the Summer Palace in Beijing is named the “Hall of the Sea of Wisdom.”
31 Tamine, “Poétique ou rhétorique,” 93.
Evidently, Segalen’s “allégorie” bans the lowly detestable description and resemblance à la chinoise or even à la Mallarmé.

As sketched above, Bouillier credits “De la composition” with the virtue of promoting allegory as Segalen’s primary mode of poetic expression. If we were to admit “allégorie” as the locus classicus of Segalen’s poetics, it is useful to rethink the poet’s famous motto, “le transfert de l’empire de Chine à l’empire de soi-même est constant.” Regarding “De la composition,” in addition to the typographical space between the two stanzas that facilitates such transfer, the pronom tonique “moi” in “Moi je dis” is equally noteworthy. As the narrator alternately approves and disparages the “Maître” in a defiant tone, Segalen’s authorial subjectivity gradually supersedes either Couvreur or inter alia the Chinese world mediated by the latter.

Doubtlessly, in “De la composition,” the Shi Jing merely serves as a foil to supposedly superior French poetics of which Segalen promotes himself as the spokesperson. This suggests that borrowing snippets from the Shi Jing does not attest to Segalen admiration for China. To further understand Segalen’s take on his Chinese sources, let us scrutinize some telling discrepancies between Segalen’s “allégorie” and xing in the Shi Jing.

**Segalen’s “allégorie” and xing in the Shi Jing**

By today’s standards, Couvreur’s translation of the Shi Jing is not very acceptable. For instance, he should have done more in contextualizing the use of xing in the Shi

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32 Gilles Manceron, *Trahison fidèles*, 106. Billings and Bush show that this transfer “often occurs in the transition between stanzas. . . . indicat[ing] an intellectual movement comparable to the turn of a sonnet.” Billings and Bush, *Stèles* 古今碑錄, 190.
**Jing** through footnotes, examples, and quotations, rather than bracketing it hastily with “allégorie.” One may thus question Couvreur’s word choice as intent on immediate intelligibility for his French readers. Thus, what Segalen draws on in “De la composition” is not a Chinese concept per se, but a corrupted French coinage.

In “De la composition,” Segalen’s “allégorie” relies on negation and dichotomy, whereas *xing* in the poems of the *Shi Jing* explores implicit parallel between two related tropes, however much this relatedness may appear elusive for a reader unfamiliar with the social context in which these poems were written. Whenever *xing* is employed, it is the conceptual concordance rather than the insurmountable semantic gap that sanctions the juxtaposition of two different imageries. Therefore, Segalen “allégorie,” characterized by a scenario of “negation,” bears very little resemblance to *xing* in the *Shi Jing*. This discrepancy is compounded by Segalen’s French superego that speaks explicitly against his Chinese reference, whereas most poems in the *Shi Jing* do not even provide such narrative voice, let alone a negative vocal one.

In short, *xing* is meant to be descriptive and heuristic, but most Western translators are not at ease with the systematic retreat of the narrator and the dropping

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33 James Legge explains that when *xing* employed, “the allusive lines convey a meaning harmonizing with those which follow, where an English poet would begin the verses with *Like* or *As.*” See James Legge’s introduction to “The Shih King or Book of Poetry,” *The Sacred Books of the East,* vol. 3, ed. Max Müller. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), 279. But this model of referential reading can be frustrating due to the lack of affinity between the signifying and the signified. Therefore, two domains of little relevance “are sometimes made to communicate.” See Haun Saussy, *The Problem of a Chinese Aesthetic* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 132–148.
of subject pronouns in the *Shi Jing*. Take for instance the first stanza of the famous poem *Jiu mu*:

> 樛木
> 南有樛木、葛藟纍之。
> 樂只君子、福履綏之.\(^{34}\)

Despite its lack of grace, a verbatim translation seems necessary here to help us grasp the working mechanism of *xing* in *Jiu mu*:

South/ there are/ trees with dropping branches
Creepers/ surround/ them
Happy/ zhi [exclamatory particle]/ the lord
Fortune and blessings/ soothe/ him

Let us compare Arthur Waley’s oft-cited translation that reads:

In the south is a tree with dropping boughs;
The cloth-creeper binds it.
Oh, happy is our lord;
Blessings and boons secure him!\(^{35}\)

The founder of modern Sinology James Legge offers a slightly different rendition:

In the south are the trees whose branches are bent,
And droop in such fashion that o’er their extent
All the dolichos’ creepers fast cling
See our *princely* lady, from whom we have got
Rejoicing that’s endless! May her happy lot
And her honors repose ever bring!\(^{36}\)

\(^{34}\) See [http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/23873](http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/23873)


Jiu mu suppresses the narrative subjectivity insofar as the shift from the vegetal world in the first couplet to the human realm in the second operates without any triggering element. Indeed, the ellipsis of narrator in Classical Chinese is common, especially in regulated verses.\(^{37}\) Yet this syntactic feature makes xing hard to translate. For instance, here Waley adds a possessive determiner “our” in the third line of his translation, though he could have avoided such maneuver by rendering jun zi 君子 literally as “the lord,” “a lord,” or simply “lord.” Certainly, this “our” fulfills a diegetic function, as it introduces a perceptive center from which “we” observe the “creepers” and the same “we” praise “our happy lord.” This recasting flattens the leap from the “creeper” to the “lord.” For the same reason, Legge may have realized that he could not make the opening lines of Jiu mu sound pleasant in English without adding some degree of narrative subjectivity. In his rendering, Legge not only adds a pronoun “we” that goes hand in hand with the determiner “our,” but also engineers an imperative mood that helps the reader switch from “dolichos creepers” to the “princely lady’s happy lot.”

Segalen’s ego goes much further. In “De la composition,” the narrator ushers himself into the scene through a grandiose locution “Moi je dis.” This pompous subjectivity, popping up on practically every page of Stèles, runs afoul of the rule of

\(^{37}\) See François Cheng, Chinese Poetic Writing, trans. Donald A. Riggs and Jerome P. Seaton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 24. “Regulated verse” is a development within the Chinese poetic tradition that emerged in the Northern and Southern dynasties and started to hold sway in the Tang dynasty. The “regulated verse” has a strict control of its rhyme, tonal profile, and rhythmic pattern. It also tends to require parallelisms within interior couplets. The rhyme of the “regulated verse,” placed on the even lines, is generally invariable.
implicitness in \textit{xing}. Indeed, “De la composition” merely indicates a poetic stance in favor of the Segalen’s French ego that, \textit{alas}, relegates the \textit{Shi Jing} to “poor and dry” material that one should duly “surpass.”

For Pauline Yu, while the Chinese exegetes of \textit{xing} always demonstrate the truth of a specific historic context pertaining to the concrete, non-transcendental world, the Western allegorists often attempt to prove a deeper philosophical, religious, and metaphysical truth.\textsuperscript{38} Evidently, Segalen, just like Couvreur, is a Western allegorist donning in Chinese garb. The homage to Nietzsche’s “arrière-monde” denotes Segalen’s aspiration for a higher plane of experience that one can never achieve with \textit{xing}. Things would become even more evident in the following \textit{stèle}.

\textit{The “soul”}

One may ask, does Segalen intentionally enhance the Orientalist overtone of his predecessor’s hastily coined “allégorie” because this word is right up his alley? Alternatively, is he simply a hapless rewriter sidetracked by Couvreur’s defective translation? When faced with such questions that critics of Orientalism so much enjoy asking, we are often baffled. However, evidence gleaned from the stele “Supplique” seems to indicate that Segalen advisedly amplifies Couvreur’s errors. This is because Segalen, just as Couvreur, has a fixation with the transcendental layer of meaning unavailable in the Chinese original. Accordingly, they are not shy of westernizing the Chinese and both demonstrate the proclivity to elevate the word 心 “heart” in the

\textsuperscript{38} Yu, \textit{The Reading of Imagery}, 44–83.
As in “De la composition,” Segalen conjures up a specious Chinese feel through a series of exotic imageries at the end of the first stanza. “Rouges linges nuptiaux” recall a typical Chinese bridal chamber, while “chants et sacrifices” give off an air of pagan festivity. Like “De la composition,” “Supplique” follows a bipartite pattern, with the second stanza overriding the first. We thus first have a female “tu” who is begged for smiles, gazes, and implored to tell what she yearns for. In the second stanza, the narrator—supposedly the suitor, asks for her appearance while ordering her to conceal her soul “in the depth of itself.” Quite similar to “De la composition,” the switch of narrative perspectives in “Supplique” is triggered by an emphatic “moi” encapsulated in an appositive noun phrase—“Cet homme indigne, —moi” at the beginning of the second stanza.

39 Bouillier, Œuvres Complètes, 79. “Supplique” is one of twelve steles presented under the rubric “Stèles Orientées,” also known as “steles on love.” It was first published during Segalen’s lifetime in the 1914 Paris edition of Collection Coréenne. See Bouillier, Ibid., 27.
Notably, this stele carries a Chinese epigraph—月出照兮, 勞心慘兮, which is culled from the poem Yue chu 月出 in the Shi Jing. The original poem has three stanzas. Segalen compresses the first and last lines of the third stanza into a couplet and leaves out the rest of the poem. To trace the gradual metamorphosis of Yue chu into “Supplique,” I provide both a slightly “wooden” translation of the original poem along with Couvreur’s rendering:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>月出</td>
<td>The moon coming forth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>月出皎兮</td>
<td>The moon/ comes forth/ bright/ xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>佼人僚兮</td>
<td>The lady/ beautiful/ xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>舒窈紗兮</td>
<td>Gentle/ slender/ xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>勞心悄兮</td>
<td>Toiled heart/ anxious/ xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>月出皓兮</td>
<td>The moon/ comes forth/ white/ xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>佼人懰兮</td>
<td>The lady/ lovely/ xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>舒懮受兮</td>
<td>Gentle / svelte/ xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>勞心懘兮</td>
<td>Toiled heart/ excited/ xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>月出照兮</td>
<td>The moon/ comes forth/ shining/ xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>佼人燎兮</td>
<td>The lady/ attractive/ xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>舒夭紡兮</td>
<td>Gentle / gracious/ xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>勞心慅兮</td>
<td>Toiled heart/ painful/ xi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chant VIII. IUE TCH”OU（Yue Chu）
La beauté du visage comparée à la clarté de la lune.
1. La lune à son lever brille d’une clarté pure. Ce beau visage est aimable. Sa vue dilate un cœur serré par la tristesse. L’inquiétude fatigue mon cœur.
2. La lune à son lever brille d’une clarté pure. Ce beau visage est aimable. Sa vue dissipe la tristesse la plus profonde. L’inquiétude agite mon cœur.
3. La lune à son lever éclaire la terre. Ce beau visage est brillant. Sa vue dilate un cœur serré par le chagrin. L’inquiétude accable mon âme.40

Like many poems in the Shi Jing, Yue chu is comprised of tetrasyllables with a highly regulated pattern of scansion. Take for instance the first line of each stanza: they

40 Couvreur, Cheu King, 150.
invariably start with the same word 月 “moon,” immediately followed by the same verb 出 “to come forth,” and end with the same exclamatory particle兮 xì. Only the third character, namely 皎, 皓, 照, varies from one stanza to another and they are synonymous qualifiers describing the brightness of the rising moon. In the same vein, the fourth line of each stanza invariably begins with the narrator’s勞心 “toiled heart” and ends with the exclamatory particle兮; it is merely the synonyms 悄, 悚, 慘 (“fatigue,” “agite,” “accable” as Couvreur renders them) that informs the reader of the nuance at play. As Couvreur puts it, the Chinese poet compares here a woman’s beauty to the “clarté” of the rising moon. The moon shines, gleams, and illuminates while this comely maiden appears svelte, gracious, and ravishing.

There is a conspicuous inaccuracy in the last line of Couvreur’s translation, as the character心—meaning literally “heart” and figuratively “intimate sentiments” in勞心慘兮 should not be translated as “âme/soul” (in bold). Indeed, Couvreur does use the French word “cœur” to render心 in the first two stanzas. But why he replaces “cœur” with “âme” in the last line of the third stanza? Perhaps he wants to elevate the secular sensibilities of Yue chu to the sublime transcendence of Western theology? This assumption is corroborated by Couvreur’s repetition of “animus” in his Latin translation that reads“. . . laborans animus angitur/. . . Anxius animus agitator/. . . Mœstus animus cruciatur.” Regardless, Couvreur’s treatment of the poem Yue chu resonates so well with Segalen’s desire to “surpass” his Chinese sources. Not surprisingly, Segalen takes no interest in correcting Couvreur as he does

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41 The “face” is not explicitly stated in the Chinese text
42 Couvreur, Cheu King, 150.
in “De la Composition”; he, instead, on the heels of the Jesuit, blows up the religious overtone. We thus see in “Supplique” a dichotomy between the lightness of the maiden’s physical appearance and the weightiness of her inaccessible “soul.” The latter, not bereft of hyperbole, is said to be “ten thousand times heavy” in the eyes of a “Sage.”

This mind-body dualism is a recurrent trope of Western thoughts unknown to and unpracticed by Chinese poets of the pre-Qin era. Therefore, Segalen’s amplification of preexisting Orientalist biases only indicates his ideological allegiance to Couvreur. In this regard, when Édouard Glissant sets up Segalen in a radical opposition to Western missionaries, claiming that Segalen “travaille à la culture de l’autre, maohi ou chinois. À la différence de William Ellis ou de Séraphin Couvreur, il le fait sans autre finalité que de s’impliquer dans cette altérité,” he forges a progressiveness poorly supported by textual evidence.

Confucius and vampire

“Vampire” is another instance of Segalen’s flippant view of the Chinese and his fixation with the transcendental. In this stele, Segalen turns Confucius’s teaching on funerary moderation—which is confined to secular sphere, into his own reflections on the duality of life and death. He then transcends this duality through the supernatural power of vampires he conjures. By contriving speech acts such as “Je formerai donc un être équivoque,” Segalen even comes to impersonate a potent demiurge. In short,

43 Some may argue that compared with xin 心, better translations of “âme” would be hun 魂, po 魄, or linghun 灵魂, but all these words allude to a shamanic anima in pre–Qin China rather than the Western concept of the “soul.”
through a series of maneuvers, Segalen’s French ego once again “surpasses” China, this time led by Confucius:

**Vampire**

Ami, ami, j’ai couché ton corps dans un cercueil au beau vernis rouge qui m’a coûté beaucoup d’argent ;
J’ai conduit ton âme, par son nom familier, sur la tablette que voici que j’entoure de mes soins ;
Mais plus ne dois m’occuper de ta personne : « Traiter ce qui vit comme mort, quelle faute d’humanité !
Traiter ce qui est mort comme vivant, quelle absence de discrétion ! Quel risque de former un être équivoque ! »

Ami, ami, malgré les principes, je ne puis te délaisser. Je formerai donc un être équivoque : ni génie, ni mort ni vivant. Entends-moi :
S’il te plaît de sucer encor la vie au goût sucré, aux âcres épices ;
S’il te plaît de battre des paupières, d’aspirer dans ta poitrine et de frissonner sous ta peau, entends-moi :
Deviens mon Vampire, ami, et chaque nuit, sans trouble et sans hâte, gonfle-toi de la chaude boisson de mon cœur.45

This poem is certainly not Segalen’s greatest piece, though perhaps not so doggerel. It opens with a masculine “ami,” repeated twice and followed by a poignant discourse in which the narrator mourns the passing away of his friend. Segalen then draws attention to the duality of life and death. He beseeches his deceased friend to become a vampire to overcome such dilemma. The two opening sentences encapsulate a parallelism between the deceased friend’s body and soul. Yet unlike in “Supplique,” the body does not end up “in the depth of itself,” since the narrator assigns a “tablet” as its abode. Once the corpse and the soul are properly disposed, the narrator admits

45 Bouillier, Œuvres Complètes, 2:71.
that he is no longer responsible for his friend’s “personne”—an attitude justified by
the following speech:

Traiter ce qui vit comme mort, quelle faute d’humanité !
Traiter ce qui est mort comme vivant, quelle absence de discrétion !
Quel risque de former un être équivoque !

For a bilingual reader, this voice-over clearly refers to the epigraph situated at the
upper-right corner of “Vampire” that reads as 之死而致死之不仁，之死而致生之不知. Bouillier has traced the origin of “Vampire” all the way back to the Li Ji 禮記, or
the Book of Rites. Through some delving, I have located the following passage in
Couvreur’s translation of the Li Ji, which seems to have initially captured Segalen’s
attention.46

孔子曰，之死而致死之，不仁，而不可为也。
之死而致生之，不知，而不可为也。

Traiter les défunts comme s’ils étaient (entièrement) morts, ce serait manquer
daffectation envers eux ; cela ne se peut se faire. Les traiter comme s’ils étaient
encore vivants, c’est manquer de sagesse; cela ne convient pas non plus.

Since the Li Ji is a voluminous and complex work, it is helpful to give a summary of
the plot on the portion that inspired Segalen. These words attributed to Confucius can
be found in the chapter 檀弓上 “T’an Koung shang” (pinyin, Tan gong shang) in
which Confucius comments on the condolences presented by his disciple 曾子

46 Séraphin Couvreur trans., Li ki ou mémoire sur les bienséances et les cérémonies,
Tome I (Ho Kien Fou: Imprimerie de la Mission Catholique, 1913), 163.
Zeng zi to a stranger’s attendant whose father had just died. Departing from that, Confucius mocks the prodigality of桓司马“Huan sima”—the minister of war of the principality of Song who had ordered the carving of his luxurious stone coffin. In “Vampire,” Segalen forges a Chinese inscription out of the above-mentioned passage in the Li Ji. Segalen’s own notes keep track of the first draft of his epigraph.47

Traiter un mort comme tout à fait mort, ce n’est point de l’humanité !
Traiter un mort comme tout à fait vivant, c’est de l’ignorance !

Clearly, the third line of the first stanza of “Vampire,” namely “Traiter ce qui vit comme mort, quelle faute d’humanité,” derives from Segalen’s initial adaptation of Couvreur’s translation that reads “Traiter un mort comme tout à fait mort, ce n’est point de l’humanité!” As illustrated by the words in bold, Segalen supplants “un mort”—a retranslation of死(“les défunts” in Couvreur’s text), with “ce qui vit.” In so doing, Segalen contrives a chiasmus that follows a fourfold alive-dead-dead-alive trajectory, which comes with a dialectical circularity nonexistent in the original Chinese. If Confucius rebukes the “inhumane”不仁mindset of treating dead persons as if they were completely dead, Segalen by contrast reprimands the “inhumane” practice of treating living persons as if they were already dead. This permutation not merely parodies Confucius’s exhortation for funerary moderation but also foreshadows the advent of vampires. Given that vampires dwell in both realms of the dead and the living, by transforming his deceased friend into a “vampire” and by

47 Bouillier, Œuvres Complètes, 2:79.
feeding such “être équivoque” with his own blood, Segalen’s narrator keeps his friend alive through a sadomasochistic propitiation. Also for Confucius, “treating dead persons as if they were still alive” belies a “lack of wisdom,” whereas for Segalen this attitude only indicates a want of “discretion.” Since a Creator may inadvertently create an “être équivoque” out of “lack of discretion,” but never out of ignorance, this turn of phrase allows Segalen to leap from the Confucian world to his own wild imaginings where vampires leave their graves at night to thrive on human blood.

**Segalen: a modernist disciple of Mallarmé?**

For many critics, Segalen’s appropriation of China partakes in a modernist practice initiated by Mallarmé who elaborates lavishly on the signified-signifier relationship, nothingness, and the retreat of the narrator in poetic discourse. Yet the way Segalen rewrites his Chinese sources indicates that he shows little, if any, interest in applying Mallarmé’s concept of discursive impersonality. In fact, he could have effortlessly subscribed to Mallarmé’s modernist stance by performing a verbatim translation of the grammatically alien excerpts written in Classical Chinese in which the dropping of subject pronouns is the norm (and which should not have posed any linguistic difficulty to him), instead of conforming them to standard French. Put another way,

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48 Bush and Billings note that Segalen “is formally as well as thematically a modernist, and that he is also a post-Mallarmé as well as post-Baudelaire one.” According to them, the lapidary language of *Stèles* stands out as retreating from representation, from the poet’s self, and from utility, which echoes Mallarmé’s sonnet *Ptyx*. See Billings and Bush, *Stèles/古今碑錄*, 11. Bush also bills the rhetoric of *Stèles* as “impersonal and subjectless.” See Christopher Bush, *Ideographic Modernism: China, Writing, Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 80. Likewise, John Taylor, when reviewing Billings and Bush’s translation of *Stèles*, spots in Segalen’s prose “a vestige of Romanticism” lurking behind “the modernist superstructure and Mallarméan concerns with language.” See John Taylor, “Review: A French modernist à la chinoise,” *The Antioch review* 66, no. 2 (2006): 385.
Segalen is presented with the great opportunity to adopt both the conventions of Classical Chinese and the Mallarméan modernist position when adapting his Chinese sources, but he does not make use of it. This simply indicates that Segalen is neither a “Chinese poet” nor a literary modernist in the sense of Mallarmé.

Despite the fact that Segalen’s authorial subjectivity contradicts Mallarmé’s ban of narrator in *Crise de vers*, many critics strive to turn this bifurcation into affinity. They argue for instance that, in his foreword to *Stèles*, Segalen simulates the impersonal, material, and self-sufficient language of lapidary inscriptions that people find on Chinese steles. Yet although Segalen avoids the use of “je” in his foreword to *Stèles*, it is evident, however, that “je” is ubiquitous in the rest of this collection.

Below is a count of the “embrayeurs” used by Segalen in the *Stèles*:

> Sur les 64 stèles de l’édition de 1914, seule « Les mauvais artisans » ne présente aucun embraye de discours ; partout ailleurs, apostrophes, impératifs, déictiques même discrets, relèvent la présence du locuteur.

Now that Segalen’s “locuteur” is present in all but one stele, what on earth is his affinity with Mallarmé who champions the strict avoidance of narrative subjectivity? Moreover, Segalen’s all-engulfing superego is obsessed with bombastic formulae such as “Moi je dis,” in “De la Composition,” “Cet homme indigne,—moi” in


“Supplice,” not to mention in “Vampire,” he goes so far as to impersonate a Creator god. Clearly, Segalen’s subscription to Mallarmé’s advocacy for narrative impersonality is a pure fiction by Segalen’s apologists. Unwilling to remove him from the much-cherished modernist club, they are ascribing to Segalen progressiveness inexistent in his writings.

Moreover, if Mallarmé’s “disparition élocutoire du sujet” is considered a revolutionary idea in nineteenth-century France, its modernity holds true only for the French language. In Classical Chinese, however, the omission of narrator is commonplace. As we have seen, poems in the Shi Jing often go without an explicit narrator. However much it may strike us as coincidental, the language of the Shi Jing resonates very well with that of Mallarmé, which is impersonal, elliptic, and evocative. Yet when adapting his Chinese sources, Segalen erases, as his Jesuit predecessors, this evocative impersonality embedded in Classical Chinese. Examples are legion. Take, for instance, the stele “Écrit avec du sang,” which carries the following inscription:

死當為厲鬼以殺賊
Dead/ should/ become/ wrathful/ demon/ to/ kill/ bandits

This subject-free sentence is extracted from a passage in Léon Wieger’s Textes Historiques:

巡西向拜曰，臣力竭矣，生既無以報陛下，死當為厲鬼以殺賊．
(Zhang Xun bowed down toward the West, saying, “minister’s force is exhausted, alive cannot serve his Majesty, dead should become a wrathful demon to kill the bandits.”)

Wieger’s translation reads:

Puis, se prosternant vers l’Ouest (vers l’empereur), Tchang-sunn cria : Si j’ai succombé, c’est que mes forces sont absolument épuisées ! Je continuerai à vous servir de la pire espèce, pour continuer à mordre ces gens-là. . . .

Zhang Xun is a Chinese general faithful to the Tang court during the An Lushan rebellion. When captured by the rebels, he bowed down toward the direction of the Tang capital, pledged his loyalty to the Tang emperor and cursed the rebels. The narrative subjectivity is carefully avoided in the Chinese text, although Zhang’s honorific speech does carry a nominal subject—“臣” ([this] minister or [this] chancellor), which is a self-referring and self-debasing title used by high-ranking Chinese officials when addressing the emperor. In Wieger’s translation, the pronoun “je” (in bold) is added twice for practical reasons. Specifically, in Classical Chinese, the omission of subject in such a sentence as “死當為厲鬼以殺賊” (dead should become wrathful demon to kill those bandits) sounds perfectly acceptable. Yet in French, it would be aberrant to say “mort, continuerai à tuer ces brigands,” even though the subject can be inferred from the morphology of “continuerai.”

That said, Symbolist poets such as Baudelaire and Rimbaud are renowned for their lack of respect for such linguistic rigidity, not to mention Mallarmé. Jacques Sherer notes the systematic ellipsis of subject pronouns in Mallarmé’s prose and poems: “

Il y en particulier un mot de la la proposition précédente que Mallarmé évite de répéter chaque fois qu’il le peut ; c’est le sujet. Ainsi, “je suis le malade des bruits et m’étonne que. . . .” (conflit dans Divagations). . . . Cette ellipse systématique du sujet se trouve même dans des phrases très simples, où elle surprend. Par exemple dans un conte familier: “Il paraît très brillant,” dit-elle,

54 Unlike French, Spanish tends to be more flexible with the omission of subject pronouns. Formulations such as “muerto, continuaré matando a los bandidos” or “muerto, deberé matar a los bandidos” would be perfectly acceptable in Spanish.
“mais, vous le savez comme moi, Tom, (il) conduit à la ruine” (l’Etoile de Fées), ou dans une lettre, “je satisfais seulement une manie: mais (je) ne puis ranger dans ma bibliothèque un livre. . . .” (Lettres à Emile Zola du 27 novembre 1896, dans dix-neuf lettres). Ces phrases sont sans doute correctes, mais l’omission systématique du pronom les rend inutilement recherchées.55

It is evident that Mallarmé’s idiolect has pushed the French language to its extremes. Segalen, had he ever been a modernist heir of Mallarmé, should have emulated the latter’s minimum use of subject pronouns by performing a verbatim translation of the Chinese epigraph “死當為厲鬼以殺賊” in “Écrit avec du sang.” Regrettably, this is not the case as Segalen adds a “nous” (in bold) in his recasting, “Morts que nous renaissions mauvais démons afin de dévorer ces brigands.”56 He then fleshes his translation out into the two ending lines of “Écrit avec du sang”:

Mais qu’il n’évoque point nos esprits: nous voulons devenir démons, et de la pire espèce:
Par envie de toujours mordre et de dévorer ces gens-là.

**Conclusion**

With the passage of time, we see Segalen’s emergence as the first French modernist to “understand” China and fall in love with its culture. This may appear true, as Segalen inundates his *Stèles* with references drawn from French Jesuits’ translations of Chinese classics. But for scholars who not only read Segalen’s primary sources but also read them critically, it is evident that Segalen shows very little interest neither in

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immersing himself in Chinese culture nor in following Mallarmé’s modernist stance. Instead, he passes himself off as a modernist, and his own “Empire” trivializes and “surpasses” the “Empire of China” with the stroke of the pen. Not surprisingly, *Stèles* are no more than refined patchworks of Westernized Chinese allusions in which the Eastern backbone is missing, so that the Segalen’s French ego eventually becomes the *de facto* driving force leading the parade.

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57 Segalén is unapologetic about his lack of interest in authenticating China, as he states in his letter to Claude Debussy that “Au fond, ce n’est ni l’Europe ni la Chine que je suis venu chercher ici, mais une vision de la Chine.” Cited by Bouillier, *Œuvres Complètes*, 2:7.
Is it possible to write a “Tibetan” poem in French? Tentative reflections on Victor Segalen’s *Thibet*

When looking at the history of the reception of Asian literatures in the West, we are often intrigued by writers who, informed only by translations and travelogues, artfully reinvented the Orient using Western modes of expression. This is the case with Victor Segalen—an intrepid practitioner of such cultural appropriation. This chapter deals specifically with his unfinished long poem *Thibet* in which the author brings into a single narrative Jacques Bacot’s travelogue *Le Thibet révolté, vers Népémakö: la Terre promise des Tibétains* (henceforth *Le Thibet révolté*) and Gustave-Charles Toussaint’s translation of the Tibetan classic *Padma bka’ thang*. A close look at Segalen’s strategy of rewriting his primary sources brings to light some of the most problematic aspects of cross-cultural representation, such as clichéd exoticism, literary mimesis, linguistic incommensurability between French and Tibetan, misinterpretation of underutilized sources and its consequences, and so forth.

By focusing on how Segalen reworks the tropes of *Népémakö* and *Poyul* drawn from Bacot’s *Le Thibet révolté* and the “ciel occidental Disposé-en-Lotus” he culls from Toussaint’s translation of *Le dict de Padma*, I seek to demonstrate in this chapter that (1) *Thibet* can be read as a furtherance of Bacot’s romantic conceptualization of Tibet as an “idéal inaccessible;” (2) Although Segalen’s attempt to bring the rhythms of the *Padma bka’ thang* into French prosody creates an exotic feel, he does it cheaply;¹ (3) Segalen’s adaptation of a portion of *Le dict de Padma*...

¹ Segalen’s attempt to borrow from Eastern prosody predates and recalls Pink Floyd’s appropriation of the Sanskrit Shloka meter in “Another Brick in the Wall.”
inadvertently avails itself of Toussaint’s misreading of the original text, which results in the forgery of a *homo viator* that eventually becomes Segalen’s *alter ego* in *Thibet*. In so doing, Segalen replicates, amplifies, and even dramatizes Toussaint’s Orientalist biases.

A disclaimer of sorts must be made here: this chapter deals less with the intrinsic literary value of *Thibet* than with the far-reaching cross-cultural significance the poem’s textual genesis entails. More precisely, it seeks to map out, from a fresh perspective, the difficulty of bridging literary traditions as different as French and Tibetan. In so doing, we may elicit some critical thoughts on the nature of such intertextuality instigated by Segalen and his followers, as well as the progressiveness attributed to them by postcolonial scholars.

**The textual genesis**

Although many critics have noted that Victor Segalen understood Chinese culture very well through his extensive travels across China, he never reached Tibet except in his imagined journeys.\(^2\) While this unfinished long poem is not based on any empirical data pertaining to Tibet, findings in recent years have foregrounded the

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impact of Segalen’s aborted attempts to travel to Tibet on the genesis of his hymn. But it took shape only after the poet’s encounter with the French Orientalist Gustave-Charles Toussaint in 1917, whose translation of Guru Padma Sambhava’s hagiography \textit{Le dict de Padma} instantly inspired him. As Toussaint’s decisive influence on the poem makes clear, \textit{Thibet} is by definition “the product of intertextuality and translation, rather than an accurate documentary-style depiction of Tibet.” Parallel to \textit{Le dict de Padma}, Jacques Bacot’s \textit{Le Thibet révolté} also stands out as a vital inspiration for \textit{Thibet}. This arresting travelogue has provided Segalen the

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3 Segalen makes meticulous notes of his failed attempts to attain physical contact with Tibet during his archeological missions to West China. In a letter to his wife dated September 27, 1909, from Si-ngan-fou (pinyin: Xi’an), Segalen informs her of his project to go to Goumboum (Tibetan: sku ’bum) and Kou-Kou-nor (Tibetan: mtsho sngon po; Mongolian: khökʰ nuur, which is a calque of the Tibetan toponym meaning “blue lake”), where he will “revoir une autre frontière de ce dernier des pays clos, le Tibet” and “se faire recevoir par le Dalaï-Lama, sorte de pape du lamaïsme entier.” Yet from his letter sent from Lan-theou (pinyin: Lanzhou) on October 31, we know that Segalen had to abandon his plan due to heavy rain. However, he announced that he would instead make a detour to Song-pan (Tibetan: zung chu), where he would have “un aperçu du Tibet beaucoup plus intéressant que celui du Kou-Kou-nor.” However, once again, he had to cancel his project for practical reasons. See Victor Segalen, \textit{Lettres de Chine}, ed. Jean-Louis Bédouin (Paris: Plon, 1967), 178–211. Also in chapter 16 of \textit{Équipée–voyage au pays du réel}, Segalen relates at length how he witnessed, very likely in the Sino-Tibetan border town of Tatsienlou (Tibetan: dar rtse mdo), the murder of a young French missionary (Théodore Monbeig?) by Tibetan Lamas. The victim is described as \textit{éventré, écorté, brûlé, divisé,} and \textit{tenaillé} by his butcher. This unexpected encounter with Tibet through a French “martyr” should have enhanced Segalen’s vision of Tibet as a hazardous terrain. Segalen’s longings for Tibet can also be inferred from chapter 14 of \textit{Équipée}, dedicated to Tch’eng-tou (pinyin: Chengdu)—\textit{la Grande ville au bout du monde} as he terms it. The poet describes Chengdu as “la Principale de celles qui s’avancent vers le Tibet, et s’opposent à lui. J’espérais y voir un reflet du Tibet. . . .” For him, Chengdu symbolizes “la reine du pillage et des échanges entre le Tibet tributaire et la grosse impératrice chinoise. . . .” Certainly, in Segalen’s view, the splendor of Chengdu is totally reliant on its geographic closeness to Tibet, which conjures up a mystical aura. Cf: Segalen, \textit{Œuvre Complètes}, 290–291.


archetype of a Nietzsche-spirited mountain climber who, lured by poems and legends, searches desperately and futilely for the lost paradise of Népémakò in the wilds of Poyul.

No doubt this particular form of intertextuality that we find in Thibet is fundamentally ambiguous. Yet, regrettably, no scholars to date have studied this particular form of intertextuality à la Segalen in a philologically sophisticated way. Through a series of close readings, I show that although Segalen should be commended for attempting to write a “Tibetan” poem in French, his audacious enterprise falls short of its mark. Two facts may account for this. First, despite Segalen’s intention to preserve the sonority of the Padma bka’ thang in Thibet, he nevertheless fails to convey some key features of the Tibetan versification system. Second, Thibet is, from the outset, impeded yet propelled by Segalen’s inability to visit Tibet in person. In response to this inaccessibility, he borrows from Bacot the tropes of Népémakò and Poyul, avails himself of Toussaint’s mistranslation of an important passage of the Padma bka’ thang, and brings these two sources into line with a self-identified, simultaneously mighty and impotent homo viator who embarks on the journey of conquering Tibet. This romantic montage enables Segalen, on one hand, to overcome Tibet’s physical and figurative inaccessibility through literary imagination, yet on the other, it also causes his authorial self to overdo, override, and eventually trivialize the land depicted.

Arguably, oscillating between pedantic references and wild imaginings, Segalen’s long poem can be seen as drawing on a series of metatextual metaphors
alluding to Tibet.⁶ That said, it would be simplistic to aprioristically downplay it as merely distorting some Eastern realities. Instead, let us first look at how Segalen’s poetic sensibilities enable him to weave together, with inventiveness, different strands of his miscellaneous sources.

**The itinerary**

Given the considerable length of *Thibet*, a brief summary of the poem’s contents might be helpful. This long “hymn” dedicated to Tibet, as Segalen terms it, comprises fifty-eight séquences and is subdivided into three sections, namely, Tö-böd (séquences I-XXI),⁷ Lha-Ssa (séquences XXII-XLVII), and Po-youl (séquences XLVIII-LVIII).

The three sections correspond respectively to what Segalen conceptualizes as “Celui qu’on atteignit déjà, qui donna son nom au pays,” “Celui qu’on atteindra,” and “Celui qui ne sera jamais obtenu, innommable.”⁸

In the first thirteen cantos of Tö-böd, the narrator portrays himself engaging in a perilous–yet-celebratory ascent of Tibet. Séquences XIV and XV form an interlude in which the poet addresses Tibet as if the latter were his “concubine” (séquence XV).

From séquence XVI onward, the poet appears to interact more intimately with the

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⁶ Unlike *Stèles* which uses visual formatting and ideographs to convey the exotic flavoring, *Thibet* plays first and foremost with intertextuality. Amid *Thibet*’s variegated sources, Michael Taylor suggests that, in addition to Western Tibetological writings, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, the Bible, as well as certain passages of *The Odyssey* have also left lasting impression on Segalen. See Michael Taylor, “La création du paysage sacré dans *Thibet* de Victor Segalen et dans *Lost Horizon* de James Hilton,” in *Littérature et Extrême-Orient*, ed. Muriel Détrie. (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1999), 135–143.

⁷ *Tö-böd* is a phonetic transcription of *mtho bod*, meaning “High Tibet.” At the beginning of the twentieth century, many considered Tö-böd to be the etymology of “Tibet” in Western languages. See for example Alexandra David-Néel, *Voyage d’une parisienne à Lhassa* (Paris: Plon, 2004), 16.

mesmeric landscape of Tibet, as attested by the repeated use of the first-person possessive determiner in expressions such as “ma coupe de monts” (séquence XVI) or “en mon domaine” (séquence XVIII). In séquences XIX and XX, we have the return of this feminine archetype, this “reine du royaume d’ailleurs” (séquence XIX) as Segalen phrases it, which he associates with Tibet’s otherness. Yet surprisingly, the triumphant tone dissolves in the last séquence of Tö-böd, where the narrator is all of a sudden entrapped by a state of ontological doubt and exasperated by the impossibility of locating his “royaume Terrien” (séquence XXI). This may indicate that, even though Segalen defines Tö-böd as “Celui qu’on atteignit déjà, qui donna son nom au pays,” we are in fact navigating in the realm of imaginings from the very outset of Thibet.

The subsequent section, named Lha-Ssa, is composed of twenty-six cantos, which can be subsumed under two main themes, namely, “les séquences lamaïques” and “les séquences qui retracent les exploits des voyageurs.” Segalen first evokes Tibet’s “âme sombre et lamaïque” in séquence XXII, and gradually reveals his sense of misgiving vis-à-vis Lamaism in the séquences ranging from XXIII to XXXI. Clearly for the poet, a spiritual journey to Tibet does not require the adoption of any form of Tibetan Buddhism. We then proceed to three transitional séquences (XXXII, XXXIII, and XXXIV) fraught with mystical metaphors such as “mon Outremonde” (séquence XXXII), “le château de l’âme exaltée” (séquence XXXIII) as well as a Potala palace with its “passages ne menant à rien” (séquence XXXIV). Noticeably, in

séquence XXXV, the poet once again alludes to the fictional nature of his journey by conceding that “Lhā-sa, je n’irai pas à Lhā-sa!” Immediately after this disavowal, the thus far predominantly autobiographical narration gives place to the eulogy of some illustrious Western explorers of Tibet. Not until séquence XLIV does this first-person narrator resurface under the guise of “[un] pèlerin lassé vers Lha-sa.”

Of the three subdivisions of Thibet, Po-youl is by far the most challenging for a modern reader, partly due to its multiple narrative halts and its unfinished character. Although this “territoire ineffable” of Po-youl is meant to be the core of Tibet that lies outside the poet’s reach, Tö-böd and Lha-Ssa are in fact, as we have seen, equally tantalizing. Be this as it may, during the course of the last section, this self-portrayed homo viator seems to be caught by a delirium vis-à-vis a Tibet becoming more and more unattainable. The narrator reacts to the increasing inaccessibility by trumpeting his poem as having conquered Tibet (séquence LI), yet admitting at the same time that Tibet still “trône là-bas, dans l’interdit.” In fact, Segalen goes so far as to confess in séquence LV that “Je n’entrerai pas au Tod-Bod! Je n’obtiendrai jamais et en rêve Lhassa métropole des Esprits!”

The Promised Land

If Tibet epitomizes an insurmountable height to be tamed by a half-alpinist, half-poet narrator in Segalen’s hymn, this thematic kernel seems to have originated in Bacot’s Le Thibet révolté. To be precise, despite knowing that Népémakö in the wilds of Poyul is no more than a Tibetan “Promised Land” created by legends and poems, Bacot resolves to ascertain it himself. And his ultimate failure to reach this hidden paradise
doubtlessly inspired the threefold *Tö-böd, Lha-Ssa, Po-youl* itinerary presented to us by Segalen in *Thibet*. Indeed, Segalen first spells out his aspirations for *Népémakö* in the critical *séquence* XXI, just before he closes the first section of his hymn dedicated to *Tö-böd*:

XXI

Où est le sol, où est le site, —le milieu,
Où est le pays promis à l’homme ?

Le voyageur voyage et va... Le voyant le tient sous ses yeux
Où est l’innommé que l’on dénomme :
Nepemakö dans le Poyul et Padma Skod, Knas-Padma-Bskor
Aux rudes syllabes agrégées !
Dites, dites, moine errant, moine furieux, —encor :
Où est l’Asiatide émergée ?
J’ai trop de fois cinglé, doublé les contours du monde inondé
Où cœur ni oiseau ni pas ne pose.
Où est le fond ? Où est le mont amoncelé d’apothéose,
Où vit cet amour inabordé ?

A quel accueil le pressentir, —à quel écueil le reconnaître ?
Où trône le dieu toujours à naitre ?

Est-ce en toi-même ou plus que toi, Pôle-Thibet, Empereur-un !
Où brûle l’Enfer promis à l’Être ?

Le lieu de gloire et de savoir, le lieu d’aimer et de connaître
—

où gît mon royaume Terrien ?

For Segalen, *Népémakö* evokes such biblical images as the Deluge, “le voyant,” “le dieu toujours à naitre,” and “le pays promis à l’homme.” Evidently, Segalen is merely borrowing from Bacot an exotic name while disregarding its content, which reduces *Népémakö* to an aggregation of “rudes syllabes.” Yet for Bacot, the word has its own meaning in Tibetan, namely, “Népémakö s’écrit *knas padma bskor* et veut dire la terre sainte de Pémakö.”

Here, *Népémakö* is an abbreviation of *knas padma bskor* [gnas padma

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bskor], which reflects the term’s accurate spelling in Tibetan. The poet seesaws in this canto between heavenly blessedness and infernal damnation, as the “sol,” the “site,” and the “lieu” waver between “le pays promis à l’homme” to “l’Enfer promis à l’Être.” This oscillation suggests that the narrator is rather skeptical, if not pessimistic, about the ambiguous nature of his “royaume Terrien,” which seems to echo Bacot’s depiction of Népémakö in Le Thibet révolté.

This arresting travelogue is a testament to Bacot’s two expeditions to East Tibet between 1906 and 1910, during which he witnessed the massive exodus of local inhabitants after their rebellion against Qing rule had been crushed by the Chinese general Zhao Erfeng. As the book’s subtitle readily suggests, Bacot perceives Tibetan realities through a biblical prism, which enables him to put together a Western past with a real yet phantasmagoric Eastern present. In the preface to his travelogue, Bacot gives an overview of his motivation to explore this notorious Poyul haunted by bandits and terrifying magicians of a non-Buddhist primitive religion:

Mais il y a encore mieux que le Tibet, car, entre Lha-sa et la frontière de Chine,

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12 There was no standardized transliteration scheme for Tibetan in Bacot’s time. The Wylie scheme which is now commonly accepted by Tibetologists, results in gnas padma bs kor and not in knas padma bskor.
13 Of the two romanized names, knas padma bskor is by far the trickier for non-specialist readers. In fact, Tibetan spellings represent the way in which the language was pronounced around the eighth century, and this archaism affects mostly some consonant clusters. As far as knas padma bskor is concerned, this is the case with the last morpheme bskor (literally, to surround) in which both the prefixed consonant “b” and the super-scribed consonant “s” are no longer pronounced in modern standard Tibetan. This is perhaps the reason that Bacot prefers using the phonetic transcription Népémakö in most of his book. For an in-depth discussion of Tibetan phonology and the transliteration systems used by Western Tibetologists, see Nicolas Tournadre and Sangda Dorje, Manual of Standard Tibetan (Ithaca: Snow Lion publications, 2003), 44–46.
se trouve une autre contrée, un petit royaume ignoré, indépendant et mystérieux, au sujet duquel on ne connaît que des légendes. C’est le royaume de Poyul ou Pomi. Au XVIIIe siècle, des soldats chinois qui étaient venus guerroyer au Tibet auraient été séduits par la beauté du Poyul et y seraient demeurés. Ses habitants, maintenant habiles dresseurs de chevaux, se livrent au brigandage. Il n’est plus un voyageur ni un pèlerin, ni même une caravane bien armée qui ose traverser le Poyul dont les prêtres initiés de la religion primitive et non bouddhistes sont aussi des magiciens redoutables. . . . C’était le Poyul que j’avais voulu atteindre.14

If Poyul stands out as the ultimate destination of Bacot, he does, however, fail to reach it. Along his route, Bacot comes across empty houses abandoned by Tibetans who were said to have migrated to a certain Népémakö located in the wilds of Poyul.

The explorer explains that Népémakö is a fertile and tropical wonderland lying between Poyul and the Himalayas prophesized by the eighth-century Buddhist guru Padma Sambhava:

Cette fois encore, je ne réussirai pas à gagner le Poyul, mais la marche d’approche m’aura fait traverser des pays inexplorés et visiter les régions les plus ensanglantées par la guerre sino-tibétaine. J’apprendrai là, en voyant des villages abandonnés, l’existence de Népémakö, la Terre promise des Tibétains, vers laquelle ont émigré les populations vaincues. Où se trouve au juste Népémakö ? Je n’ai pas pu le savoir. Derrière le Tsarong, dit-on, entre le Poyul et l’Himalaya. Les Tibétains l’ont découvert il y a huit ans. Il était alors inhabité. C’était un pays très chaud, “aussi chaud que les Indes,” couvert de fleurs et si fertile, qu’il n’est pas besoin d’y travailler, mais de cueillir simplement les fruits de la terre. Avant de le découvrir, les lamas en savaient l’existence par les livres, car au VIIIe siècle, le missionnaire indou Padma Sambhava l’avait visité. Dans ses écrits, il en précise la position, en fait la description et annonce qu’après un cycle de milliers d’années, le bouddhisme touchant à sa fin, les lamas s’y enfermeront avec les livres sacrés. . . .15

Since Népémakö is an ongoing fascination for Western scholars and the general public

14 Bacot, Le Tibet révolté, 2–3.
15 Ibid., 10–11.
alike, it may be helpful to provide some background information regarding the unique religious and geographical features of this earthly paradise. Indeed, Népémakö or “the holy land of Pémakö” is generally considered the most famous of the hidden lands (Tibetan: *shas yul*) that were concealed by Padma Sambhava in the eighth century as sanctuaries of peace and spiritual potency to be recovered in future times of political strife. Following the pilgrimage guidebooks (Tibetan: *gnas yig*) of their visionary lamas (Tibetan: *gter ston*), nearly two thousand Eastern Tibetans migrated to “the Land of Pémakö” to escape the violence instigated by the Qing dynasty official Zhao Erfeng during the first decade of the twentieth century. The descendents of these Eastern Tibetans currently form the majority of the inhabitants of Pémakö along with other indigenous tribes. Nowadays, it is commonly accepted that the region spans from Kongpo and Poyul (Tibetan: *spo yul*) in the Tibet Autonomous Region of China to Arunachal Pradesh in India following the southward course of the Yarlung Tsanpo River as it leaves the Tibetan plateau and becomes the Siang and Brahmaputra.

Despite the profusion of studies and data surrounding the land of Pémakö in recent decades, this region was little known to Westerners at the time of Bacot’s expedition in 1909. In fact, he goes on to recount that a few years prior to the British expedition to Lhasa, a Tibetan lama rediscovered Népémakö and established

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This excerpt is culled from the ending paragraphs of Bacot’s preface. Viewed in retrospect, the narrator places himself at the starting point of his expedition, retracing the bad fortune of some naïve Tibetans migrating to Népémakö. This flash-back is recounted with an ironic lightness of touch, which is compounded by a sense of...
detachment, as borne out by the use of reported speech and the emphasis on hearsay. Nevertheless, the narrator becomes more and more sympathetic to Tibetans as the time frame switches from the past to the present, and then to the future. Ultimately, he speaks as if he were one of the unhappy Tibetan migrants setting out on the route of exodus. Finally, Bacot experiences a spiritual renewal by following the precedence of his Tibetan counterparts whose journey to the “Promised Land,” however, was destined to fail.

Most noticeably, in the last paragraph, the narrator makes it clear that he will be “tout seul” on the road by underscoring the cowardice and naivety of his “compagnons d’épopée.” The phraseology recalls a form of chivalry and romanticism, with Bacot’s valor pitted against the faintheartedness of his Tibetan followers. In addition, the narrator speaks as if he were partaking in an historical event that is about to take place; yet in the meantime, we know that he relates this imminence in retrospect, from the perspective of a veteran who has already gone through it. Likewise, we may note the complexity of time frames entailed by the word “nostalgie” hinting at a remembrance of the past. In other words, before getting to “la Terre promise,” the narrator has already been there and he knows how “disappointing” it is. This near-contradiction suggests that Bacot is in fact nostalgic of this bygone and biblical “Promised Land” while dying to embrace its Eastern equivalent known as Népémakô that still awaits him in Poyul. In so doing, Bacot appears to impersonate a tragic yet intrepid Moses struggling to lead his Tibetan
countrymen out of their puerile legends, albeit to no avail.\textsuperscript{20}

Parallel to this air of romanticism and chivalric heroism, there is also a
metaphoric use of literary terms such as “poèmes,” “légendes,” “fables,” “histoire,”
and “épopée,” which appear time and again throughout \textit{Le Thibet révolté}. To cite a
few examples, in chapter II, Bacot highlights the Tibetan people’s predisposition for
poetry, “Enfin les Tibétains, c’est pour cela que je les aime. . . . Ils sont à la fois
stoïciens et poètes.”\textsuperscript{21} In chapter VI, the author evokes the power exerted by poetry
on the Tibetan mind: “Voilà tout ce que savaient sur Népémakô les gens de ce village :
des poèmes. . . . et ils sont partis.”\textsuperscript{22} Although this note per se cannot dispense with a
hint of sarcasm, Bacot ends up approving the Tibetans’ faith in Népémakô and their
propensity for poems, as he confesses, “Qu’importe si je vais à une déception, pourvu
que l’illusion soit belle. . . . rien que suivre la trace de ces hommes qui sont partis, sur
la foi de poèmes, vers leur Terre promise, n’est-ce pas un pèlerinage?”\textsuperscript{23} What Bacot
calls “poems” here are most likely the pilgrimage guidebooks to the land of Pémakô
under the forms of rediscovered teachings (Tibetan: \textit{gter ma}). And \textit{Le dict de Padma}
or the \textit{Padma bka’ thang} in Tibetan, which was recovered by the “treasure finder”
(Tibetan: \textit{gter ston}) U rgyan gling pa in the course of the fourteenth century, is
perhaps the most famous of the concealed literatures ascribed to Padma Sambhava.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{20} Moses is a central figure of nineteenth-century French Romantic literature, see for
instance Alfred de Vigny’s famous poem \textit{Moïse}, in which Moses appears as a modern
visionary poet.
\textsuperscript{21} Bacot, \textit{Le Tibet révolté}, 92.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 163.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 164.
\textsuperscript{24} This biography, supposedly recorded by Padma Sambhava’s consort Ye shes mtsho
rgyal in the ninth century and rediscovered by the treasure finder U rgyan gling pa in
the fourteenth century, recounts how the guru and his disciples brought Buddhism to
Rich in apocalyptic prophecies (Tibetan: lung bstan), Le dict de Padma surely recalled Nostradamus’s Centuries for the turn-of-the-century French literati. As we will see, séquence XLIII in Segalen’s Thibet is patterned after the opening lines of Le dict de Padma, in which a mysterious “ciel occidental Disposé-en-Lotus” is extolled for its supreme spiritual qualities.

Arguably, for Bacot, running after Népémakö in Poyul is akin to a poetic undertaking. By making the illusion of Tibetans his own fancy, Bacot portrays himself as navigating the hazardous terrain while wavering between reality and imagination. This narrative pattern seems to have lent significant influence to Segalen. Accordingly, in both Thibet and Le Thibet révolté, we have this Tibetan landscape captured through a Christian lens, a sense of romanticism and unflinching heroism leading to predestined disenchantment, a masculine narrator identifying himself with a half-alpinist, half-poet homo viator, and most noticeably the metaphor of poetry as guiding the spiritual journey to a lost paradise that lies beyond physical reach.

The Orientalists

It is evident that both Bacot’s Le Thibet révolté and Toussaint’s rendering of Le dict de Padma have heavily influenced Thibet. Yet one may ask why Segalen chooses in particular these two authors’ writings as the conceptual bedrock of his hymn. The answer seems to be: Bacot and Toussaint are for Segalen the paradigmatic Orientalists to emulate. As a valiant yet hapless French explorer who failed to reach Tibet himself, Tibet by overcoming numerous obstacles. As the founding canon of Tibetan religious literature, the Padma bka’’thang is widely considered a holy text in and outside Tibet. It is generally believed that this type of texts, when recited, has power to dispel obstacles as well as diseases.
Segalen projects his Orientalist fantasies on Bacot and Toussaint and makes them his role models.

We know that *séquence* XLIII of *Thibet* is adapted from the opening lines of *Le dict de Padma*, in which we have this *homo viator* futilely searching for a series of abstract banal names under the “ciel occidental Disposé-en-Lotus.” Yet does this oddly disposed “Western sky” have anything to do with Bacot’s *Népémakö*? In fact, there is an inaccuracy in Bacot’s transcription of *Népémakö* as *gnas padma bskor*,\(^\text{25}\) literally meaning the “land of circling lotus.” To be precise, the last letter *bskor* (literally, to circle) seems to be a misspelling of *bkod* (literally, to array) due to the two words’ phonetic closeness. As a matter of fact, the commonly accepted transliteration used by Tibetologists nowadays for *Pémakö* is *padma bkod* (literally, the array of the lotus). In this regard, *Népémakö* in Bacot’s travelogue most likely means “the land of the array of the lotus,” which overlaps to a great extent with the *nub phyogs padma bkod pa’i zhing kham* (literally, the Western land of the array of the lotus) that we find in *Le dict de Padma*—a phrase Toussaint renders as “le ciel occidental Disposé-en-Lotus.” Etymological nuances notwithstanding, it seems that *Népémakö* and the “ciel occidental Disposé-en-Lotus” jointly epitomize, for Segalen, Tibet’s essence as an inaccessible and illusory “Promised Land.”\(^\text{26}\)

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This metatextual abstraction of Tibet takes place throughout Segalen’s hymn, but it is particularly evident in the portion spanning séquences XXXVI to XLIII of the second section Lha-Ssa, during the course of which the first-person narrator retreats from the forefront of the scene, giving the floor to a cohort of Western explorers who made their way to Tibet. This list covers the fourteenth-century Franciscan father Odoric de Pordenone (séquence XXXVI), the seventeenth-century Portuguese Jesuit Antonio d’Andrada (séquence XXXVII), and the Lazarists Huc and Gabet, who carried out their voyage to Lhasa between 1844 and 1846 (séquence XXXVIII). If Segalen regards the Christian missionaries with a sense of reservation, nevertheless he speaks highly of Dutreuil de Rhins (séquence XXXIX), Jacques Bacot (séquence XL) and Gustave-Charles Toussaint (séquence XLI), who are lay adventurers contemporary to Segalen. Most spectacularly, the poet gives a lengthy description of the trophy Toussaint garnered during his sojourn in Tibet—the Padma bka’i thang yig (séquence XLII), to which he even adds a heavily modulated adaptation of a small portion of this manuscript (séquence XLIII). Evidently, Segalen, bereft of any direct contact with Tibet, is keen to appropriate the empirical data gathered by his predecessors. This strategy of rewriting eventually replaces an empirical Tibet with a

figurative metatextual one.

As Dominique Gournay observes, “À l’échec représenté par l’impossibilité d’accéder à l’Être, Segalen oppose la victoire représentée par l’écriture du poème.”

It comes thus as no surprise that Segalen perceives Bacot’s and Toussaint’s feat as mostly residing in their capacity to possess Tibet by writing down its landscape, religion, and culture. Take for instance the four concluding lines of séquence XL in honor of Bacot:

*Que le Voyageur soit loué pour avoir erré vers lui sans l’atteindre,
   Laissant ce mystère plus grand :
   Il revient avec le regard au-delà, ce regard... 
   Il prend possession de son domaine :
   Ce qu’il a conquis et écrit d’un verbe seul en sa marche hautaine :
   Le Thibet révolté : toutes les Marches Thibétaines.*

As the last line indicates, Bacot’s two travelogues, namely *Dans les Marches tibétaines* (1909) and *Le Thibet révolté* (1912), merge and morph into a symbolic locale conquered by the explorer. In Segalen’s eyes, Bacot is all the more commendable for not having reached either Poyul or Népémakô, leaving thus the hidden paradise of Tibet unspoiled. Noticeably, the poet implies that Bacot’s unfulfilled mission leaves no room for regret, since the inaccessibility of the empirical Tibet does not preclude words gaining a figurative access to it. By staging Bacot as an intrepid Orientalist who gets pushed back by Tibet’s natural barriers while conquering it through “un verbe seul,” Segalen interprets the essence of Tibet as attainable only

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27 Gournay, *Pour une poétique*, 64.
by literary imagination. This consecration of literature’s symbolic power also applies to the subsequent séquence (XLI) dedicated to Toussaint. Certainly, Segalen’s hyperbolic language makes Toussaint unabashedly superhuman, portraying him as a “grand dépeceur” who “va de sa très sainte folie” and “s’abreuve et dîne en esprit.” Yet for Segalen, the greatest merit of Toussaint lies in the fact that “[il] s’en revenir auprès de nous ayant accompli son oracle: Portant le manuscript inconnu.” If Toussaint is depicted as a legendary treasure hunter who fulfills his own prophecy, he is above all praised for returning with this capitalized and somewhat Mallarméen “Livre.” And based on its “Colophon mystique,” we know it is the liturgical version and “la traduction même sans un seul mot qui ne soit pur et magique” of a lost book (séquence XLII).29 As one might expect, Segalen goes on to provide, in séquence XLIII, a sample of this sacred book duly prepared for the unraveling of its exotic attire.

**The “Padma bka’ thang”**

As is often noted, *Thibet* grows out of Segalen’s adaptation of a passage in Toussaint’s translation of *Le dict de Padma*. I want to insist, however, that Toussaint grossly misinterprets the Tibetan text by forging a *homo viator* motive inexistent in the original. This journeying character further becomes, in *Thibet*, Segalen’s *alter ego*; it provides Segalen the poetic license to overcome Tibet’s physical inaccessibility through figurative means.

Before proceeding to a philological scrutiny of Segalen’s strategy of rewriting,

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we must select the right corpus for comparison. Yet this is not an easy task. One major obstacle is that Toussaint does not give the exact edition of his Tibetan source.\textsuperscript{30} He simply states that his translation was based on a manuscript he acquired at the lamasery of Lithang on April 3, 1911, in addition to an 1839 xylograph he stumbled upon in Peking and a Mongolian edition.\textsuperscript{31} But from a scholarly point of view, it must be regretted that Toussaint fails to reproduce his primary sources in facsimile along with an annotated list of lexicon variants.

Based on the manuscript’s colophon, Toussaint provides the Tibetan title as \textit{Padma bka’i thang yig},\textsuperscript{32} which is a generic name applied to a myriad of Padma Sambhava’s biographies, varying considerably in both length and content. Yet as the modern English editor of Toussaint’s translation Tarthang Tulku insightfully infers,\textsuperscript{33}

\begin{quote}
\footnotesize
30 Blo gros rgya mtsho, who is a modern Tibetan editor of the \textit{bKa’ thang gser phreng}—one of the most widely-consulted extant editions of Padma Sambhava’s biography—notes that subsumed under the generic name of the \textit{Padma bka’ thang} are numerous different “treasure texts.” He specifies that the \textit{Padma bka’ thang} has more than one thousand variations if we count the incomplete editions as well. Cf: “O na pad ma bka’ thang zer ba de po ti gcig yin nam po ti gnyis ying nam/ po ti mang nyung ci tsam yod dam zhe na/ de yang gangs can bstan pa’i byed po slob dpon chen po pad ma ’byung gnas kyi skyes rabs rnam thar pad ma bka’ thang du grags pa de ni/ ’dzam gling gi tshigs bcad kyi bstan bcos thams cad kyi nang nas ches ring po’am ches mang bar gyur pa de yin te/ ’dir cha tshang min pa’i bsdoms rtsis ltar na/ pad ma bka’ thang la sna kha chig stong lhag yod/ ma mtha’ yang po ti rgya phrag tsam yod nges.” See Blo gros rgya mtsho, introduction to [Sangs rgyas gling pa?], \textit{O rgyan gu ru pad ma ’byung gnas kyi rnam thar rgyas pa gser gyi phreng ba thar lam gsal byed}, rediscovered by Sangs rgyas gling pa. (Lhasa: Bod ljongs mi dmangs dpe skrun khang, 2007), 6–7.


32 Ibid., 14.

33 Kenneth Douglas and Gwendolyn Bays, trans., \textit{The Life and Liberation of Padmasambhava. Padma bka’i thang}, as recorded by Yeshe Tsogyal (eighth century), rediscovered by Terchen Urgyan lingpa (b. 1323), translated into French as \textit{Le Dict de Padma} by Gustave-Charles Toussaint, translated into English by Kenneth Douglas and Gwendolyn Bays, corrected with the original Tibetan manuscripts and with an
this scarcely informed manuscript of Lithang cannot be other than the *Padma bka’ thang* recovered by the fourteenth-century treasure finder U rgyan gling pa, who himself “unearthed,” or much more likely, composed this signature text of Tibetan Buddhism.\(^{34}\)

Despite being the first Western scholar to attempt a complete translation of the *Padma bka’ thang*, Toussaint’s *Le dict de Padma* is regarded by most Tibetologists as amateurish, pointing out the translator’s lack of expertise in esoteric Buddhism.\(^{35}\) Indeed, a close look at Toussaint’s text reveals that while it is not entirely bereft of scholarly merit, this translation could have better informed us on Tibetan Buddhism if it had been carried out in a more philologically rigorous manner. But rather than viewing Toussaint’s rendering as an instance of “lost in translation,” one might ask how this particular translation serves Segalen’s appropriation of the *Padma bka’ thang*. In this respect, I would like to offer some suggestions.


\(^{34}\) This is the opinion of David Jackson, for whom “the text was a textual rediscovery or “treasure text” (gter ma), one of many such writings in Tibetan literature. As such, much of the work was very likely the composition of its ‘discoverer,’ O-rgyan gling-pa or Urgyan lingpa.” Furthermore, Jackson thinks the *Padma bka’ thang* presents great historiographical value since “O-rgyan gling-pa brought into circulation a number of remarkable and influential texts. Some of his ‘discoveries’ contain sections that most likely were copied from or patterned after genuine ancient documents of the eighth century A.D., and are therefore of historical importance. In addition, his ‘discoveries’ reveal a great deal about the cultural and spiritual life of the period in which they were ‘discovered’ (c. 1350 A.D.).” See David Jackson, “Review of The Life and Liberation of Padmasambhava (Padma bka’i thang),” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 39, no. 1 (1979): 123–125.

\(^{35}\) Giuseppe Tucci, for instance, regrets that “mere knowledge of the Tibetan language is not enough for arriving at the proper meaning of these difficult texts.” See Giuseppe Tucci, “Review of Padma thang yig,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, no. 3 (July 1937): 514–516.
séquences, et chaque séquence se compose en général de dix-huit vers ou ; plutôt, de neuf distiques formés d’un long vers de treize, quinze ou dix-huit pieds suivi d’un vers constant de neuf pieds.”

Put another way, this overarching prosodic pattern adopted by Segalen in Thibet rests predominantly on couplets, and each canto carries nine of them. But this metric guideline is not absolute, since séquence XLIII visibly carries ten couplets instead of nine. Accordingly, it is very helpful if we develop a critical apparatus assigning each of these couplets a serial number:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Couplet</th>
<th>Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Suit, la séquence en son Neuvain ; puisse le Poète répondre : « A l’Esprit futur diffusé là ! »</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Plus mont que le Mérou des dieux ; plus palais que le Potala, Voici (le) chant qui ne se peut confondre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>« Apparu dans l’échiquier du sol d’or il chercha et ne trouva pas le nom Banal du carré des champs terrestres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Flambant du feu personnel de l’arc-en-ciel savoir de la science, il chercha (et ne trouva pas le nom Banal des lanternes allumées</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Fleurant l’encens tout à fait pur, il chercha et ne trouva pas le nom Banal des fientes et des fumées</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Rayonnant dans les astres clairs de la science de l’espace, il chercha, et (ne trouva pas le nom Banal du soleil et de la lune. . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Plongeur au ciel vide et nu, par au delà des ailleurs inconnus, il chercha et (ne trouva pas le nom Banal du ciel de notre apparence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Enivré par la boisson de l’extase qui soutient, il chercha et ne trouva pas (le nom Banal de la soif proprement dite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Ayant mangé dans la chair ardente au penser (?) magnifique, il</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Footnote: 36 Segalen. Œuvres Complètes, 2:606.
Semantically and stylistically, this canto may strike the reader in many respects. First, the long-windedness and repetition of “il chercha et ne trouva pas le nom banal...” at the end of each couplet recalls a supposedly liturgical prosody. Second, the citation of an obscure “chant qui ne se peut confondre” spanning the third couplet through the tenth creates a disjuncture in the narrative progression of *Thibet*, which is compounded by such incomprehensible phrases as “l’échiquier du sol d’or” or “la vie adamantine de félicité” that readily challenge a French reader’s metaphysical vocabulary. Third, we have great trouble identifying this third-person masculine pronoun *il* that appears over and again in this *séquence*. Last but not least, it is not clear at all why Segalen would be concerned with depicting a concatenation of seemingly meaningless actions executed by an anonymous *homo viator*. To compare, I provide Toussaint’s rendering of the corresponding passage as follows:37

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Couplet 1</td>
<td>Se délectant au sol en damiers d’or, il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint du Meru du sol.38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

37 This passage is extracted from the partial translation of the *Padma bka’ thang* published by Toussaint in 1920 in *Bulletin de l’Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient*. Among the various editions of Toussaint’s translation, this earliest version should be the closest to the one Segalen had access to in 1917. The 1933 edition, which is a complete translation of *Le Padma than yig*, presents some lexical variations, probably because Toussaint heavily reworked his translation between 1920 and 1930. For a further comparison of the two editions, see Toussaint, “Le Padma than yig,” 13–56; and Toussaint, trans., *Le dict de Padma: Padma thang yig. Ms. de Lithang* (Paris: Librairie E. Leroux, 1933).

38 “du Meru du terrestre” in the 1933 edition of *Le dict de Padma* (hereafter the 1933 edition).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Couplet</th>
<th>Phrase en français</th>
<th>Phrase en anglais</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Développant les feuilles annuelles et les fleurs de l’arbre de la Bhodi, il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint des arbres et des forêts.</td>
<td>Développing the annual leaves and flowers of the tree of Enlightenment, he seeks and cannot find the name of the trees and forests.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Plongeant au Gange huit fois excellent de l’extase, il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint des différentes rivières.</td>
<td>Diving into the Ganges eight times excellent of the ecstasy, he seeks and cannot find the name of the different rivers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Enflammant l’arc-en-ciel de la sagesse comprise, il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint du feu du monde.</td>
<td>Kindling the rainbow of wisdom included, he seeks and cannot find the name of the fire of the world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Possédant la fragrance de l’encens tout à fait pur, il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint du vent du monde.</td>
<td>Possessing the fragrance of the pure incense, he seeks and cannot find the name of the wind of the world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>N’ayant pas trébuché aux profondeurs de la Loi absorbant toutes choses, il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint du ciel apparent.</td>
<td>Not having stumbled at the depths of the Law absorbing all things, he seeks and cannot find the name of the apparent sky.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Déployant l’astre clair de la science des degrés de l’Abîme, il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint du soleil et de la lune.</td>
<td>Deploying the bright star of the science of degrees of the Abyss, he seeks and cannot find the name of the sun and the moon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Rayonnant dans son noble arc-en-ciel de victoire, il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint du jour et de la nuit.</td>
<td>Radiant in his noble arc-en-ciel of victory, he seeks and cannot find the name of the day and the night.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Gardant le règne lumineux et sauveur de la Loi préculte, il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint des querelles.</td>
<td>Guarding the luminous kingdom and savior of the pre-cult law, he seeks and cannot find the name of the disputes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>N’ayant fait qu’un indistinctement de lui-même et d’autrui, il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint des querelles.</td>
<td>Not having done anything distinctively of himself and others, he seeks and cannot find the name of the disputes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Content de l’aliment de l’extase substantielle, il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint de l’aliment banal.</td>
<td>Content with the food of the substantial ecstasy, he seeks and cannot find the name of the food of the common.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Ayant bu dans la soif le flot de nectar de sa pensée, il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint de la soif banale.</td>
<td>Having drunk in the thirst the flow of nectar of his thought, he seeks and cannot find the name of the thirst of the common.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Ayant revêtu le bon vêtement de l’observance pure, il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint du vêtement banal.</td>
<td>Having put on the good clothing of the pure observance, he seeks and cannot find the name of the clothing of the common.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Miraculeusement issu du lotus de sa naissance.</td>
<td>Miraculously issued from his lotus of birth.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

40 “plants fruitiers” in the 1933 edition.
41 “Plongeant au Gange de la concentration” in the 1933 edition.
42 “des rus et des fleuves” in the 1933 edition.
43 “Dedans l’arc flamboyant de la sagesse comprise” in the 1933 edition.
44 “au gouffre” in the 1933 edition.
45 “Éployant” in the 1933 edition.
46 “de la science d’abîme” in the 1933 edition.
47 “Radieux” in the 1933 edition.
48 “éclatant” in the 1933 edition.
49 “Content de substantielle contemplation” in the 1933 edition.
50 “Désaltéré au flot de nectar de sa pensée” in the 1933 edition.
52 “Surnaturellement issu du lotus de sa naissance” in the 1933 edition.
il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint de l’autre naissance.

**Couplet 15**
Devenu puissant dans la vie adamantine de félicité,
il cherche et il ne trouve même plus le nom éteint de la sénescence.

**Couplet 16**
Parfaitement établi dans la terre sans naissance et sans mort,\(^{53}\)
il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint de la mort de ceux qui naquirent.

**Tristich**
Dans ce ciel\(^{54}\) sublime de tous les Bouddha des Trois Âges,
Heureux de concentrer dans l’illumination de son entière activité,\(^{55}\)
il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint du malheur et de la misère.

I have extracted this passage out of the first canto (Tibetan: *le’u*) of *Le dict de Padma* on the basis that it contains the key leitmotiv of “il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint,” which seems to have initially captured Segalen’s attention. To be precise, this excerpt comprises an introductory phrase, “A celui-là le Ciel occidental Disposé-en-Lotus,” followed by sixteen couplets and a tristich. Through a comparison, I have ascertained that couplets 3, 4, 5, 7, 6, 9, 8, and 10 of Segalen’s *séquence* XLIII are respectively patterned after couplets 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 11, 12, and 15 of Toussaint’s text.\(^{56}\)

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\(^{53}\) “Établi en la terre où nul ne naît ni meurt” in the 1933 edition.

\(^{54}\) “Au ciel” in the 1933 edition.

\(^{55}\) “Heureux de vouer à l’Éveil son entière activité” in the 1933 edition.

\(^{56}\) Toussaint’s rendition is imbued with conspicuous inaccuracies. I content myself with citing a few of them. In the second couplet, Toussaint seems to misunderstand *lo ’dab* as two separate words, namely *lo* (literally, year) and *’dab ma* (literally, tree leaves), but this is not the case, since *lo ’dab* altogether means “tree leaves.” Therefore, the qualifier “anuelles” in “les feuilles anuelles” should be crossed out. Take also, for example, the third couplet that starts with a description of the Ganges River “huis fois excellent de l’extase”; it must be admitted that Toussaint’s phraseology is not quite comprehensible, whereas the Tibetan text poses no difficulty to someone who has a basic knowledge of Buddhism. To be precise, Toussaint seems to confound the Buddhist epithet *yan lag brgyad ldan chu bo*, meaning “the water possessing eight virtues,” with *yan lag brgyad ltan*, which is an alternative appellation (Tibetan: *mngon brjod*) of the Ganges River. Yet since the Ganges River is a worldly reference, it should not be associated with the “Western land of the array of the lotus.” Similarly, we are also baffled by the obscure expression “absorbant toutes choses” in
From a logical point of view, Toussaint’s rendering seems befuddling, as a skeptic might well ask: if in the eleventh couplet this masculine protagonist (Padma Sambhava?) is already content with the nourishment of the substantial ecstasy, why would he bother looking for the extinguished name of the banal nourishment? Likewise, if in the subsequent couplet the nectar of his thought has already quenched his thirst, why would he bother running after the extinguished name of the banal thirst? To elucidate such near-contradiction, we are obliged to parse the corresponding passage in Tibetan.\textsuperscript{57}

The Tibetan text is based on the most popular edition of Guru Padma Sambhava’s biographies, namely, \textit{Padma bka’ thang}, attributed to Ye shes mtsho rgyal and rediscovered by U rgyan gling pa. (Chengdu: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2006), 4–5. This edition is based on a Derge xylograph (Tibetan: sde dge par khang gi shing brkos par ma), as its colophon indicates. Concurrently, I have also consulted [Sangs rgyas gling pa?], \textit{O rgyan gu ru pad ma ‘byung gnas kyi rnam thar rgyas pa gser gyi phreng ba thar lam gsal byed}, 1–2. It must be noted that the second text, henceforth designated as \textit{bKa’ thang gser phreng}, is only intermittently versified. It differs occasionally from the first text in terms of prosody and lexicon. Yet respecting the opening paragraphs of the first canto, they are quite similar.
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<td>Couplet 2</td>
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<td>Couplet 6</td>
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<td>dbyings-rig ye-shes gsal ’ba i khri-gdugs brdal-62 las/ nyi-ma zla-’ba ’i ming-yang mi-grag btsal-kyang mi-rnyed-pa/</td>
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<td>skye-ba padma ’i steng-du rdzus-te skye-ba las/ skye-ba gzhon65 -gyi ming-yang mi-grag btsal-kyang mi-rnyed-pa/</td>
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</table>

58 *ri-rab* is spelled as *ri-brag* in *bKa’ thang gser phreng*, meaning either “rock mountain” or “remote location,” whereas *ri-rab* designates “Mount Meru.” Either way, the second verse of this couplet seems to refer to *Samsāra* (Tibetan, gling bzhi pa ’i ’jig rten or mi mjed ’jig rten), which is the realm where unenlightened sentient beings reside.

59 Spelled as *grags* in the *bKa’i thang gser phreng*. Grags is past tense of grag, literally meaning “to resound.”

60 ’lo ’dab me tog rgyas pa (leaves and flowers flourish) is written as *me tog ’bras bu smin pa* (flowers and fruits ripen) in the *bKa’i thang gser phreng*.

61 ’od lnga cannot be found in the *bKa’ thang gser phreng*.

62 Spelled as *gdal ba* in the *bKa’ thang gser phreng*. That said, *brdal ba* and *gdal ba* are synonyms, both meaning “to propagate.”

63 *zes* (nourishment) is written as *bkres lto* (hunger) in the *bKa’ thang gser phreng*.

64 *gos zhes bya ba* (the so-called “clothing”) is written as ‘jig rten gos zhes bya ba (the so-called “worldly clothing”) in the *bKa’ thang gser phreng*.
Couplet 15  zag-med rdo-rje lta-bu’i tshes-la mnga’-brnyes pas/  rgas-shing rgyud-pa’i ming-yang mi-grag btsal-kyang mi-rnyed-pa/

Couplet 16  skye-shi med-pa’i sa-la yongs-rdzogs ’jog-pa las/  skye-zhing chi-ba’i ming-yang mi-grag btsal-kyang mi-rnyed-pa/

Tristich 1  dus-gsum sangs-rgyas kun-gyi zhi-gyur de-na ni/  ma-lus thams-cad byang-chub la-spyod skyid-pa la/,  mi-bde sdug-bsngal ming-yang mi-grag btsal-kyang mi-rnyed-pa\(^66\)

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\(^{65}\) Spelled as *skye ba bzhi* (the four kinds of birth) in the *bkAs thang gser phreng*. The “four kinds of birth” include, from the best to the worst, *rdzus skye* (literally, birth from a miracle, which is applied to gods), *mngal skye* (literally, birth from a womb, which is applied to humans and livestock), *sgong skye* (literally, birth from an egg, which is applied to birds), and *drod gsher skye* (literally, birth from heat and moisture, which is applied to insects). However, since *rdzus skye* is one of the “four categories of birth,” it would make better sense to keep the spelling of *skye ba gzhan* (literally, other categories of birth) as we find in the *Padma bka’ thang*. As such, the fourteenth couplet literally means “with the exception that [one is] born from miracle on the surface of a lotus, the names of other kinds of births never resound, and even if one searches for them one cannot find them.”

\(^{66}\) It would be helpful to provide a literalist and even slightly “wooden” translation of this passage. “In this land named the ‘Western land of the array of the lotus’ (introduction), with the exception that golden lands appear as orderly as squares on a chessboard, the name of the earthly Meru mountain never resounds, and even if one searches for it one cannot find it (couplet 1). With the exception that the Bodhi tree’s leaves and flowers flourish, the names of [common] trees and forests never resound, and even if one searches for them one cannot find them (couplet 2). With the exception that the river of *Samādhi* containing eight virtues flows, the names of all kinds of common rivers never resound, and even if one searches for them one cannot find them (couplet 3). With the exception that the five wisdom lights spontaneously burn, the name of the worldly fire never resounds, and even if one searches for it one cannot find it (couplet 4). With the exception that the odor of the pure essence emanates, the name of the worldly wind never resounds, and even if one searches for it one cannot find it (couplet 5). With the exception that the dharma realm impartially permeates, the name of the material sky never resounds, and even if one searches for it one cannot find it (couplet 6). With the exception that the sun of clear wisdom, realm, and awareness radiates, the names of sun and moon never resound, and even if one searches for them one cannot find them (couplet 7). With the exception that the five victorious and noble lights spontaneously burn, the names of night and day never resound, and even if one searches for them one cannot find them (couplet 8). With the exception that the noble dharma king rules in a self-occurring and self-liberating way, the names of kings and ministers never resound, and even if one searches for them one cannot find them (couplet 9). With the exception that self and other [are] inseparably the same, the names of fight and dispute never resound, and even if one searches for them one cannot find them (couplet 10). With the exception that the *Samādhi’s* nourishment satisfies the life, the names of [common] aliments never resound, and even if one searches for them one cannot find them (couplet 11). For the sake of quenching the thirst, with the exception that [one] drinks the constant current of wish-fulfilling nectar, the name of thirst never resounds, and even if one searches for it one cannot find it (couplet 12). For the sake of dressing, with the exception that...
It is readily evident that Toussaint fails to understand the syntactic function of the particle *las* in bold (Tibetan: *las sgra*) placed at the end of the first line of each couplet (except the fifteenth), which is not an ablative case marker (Tibetan: *byung khungs*) as he appears to assume, but rather a conjunction meaning “with the

[one] wears the good clothing of the pure observance of monastic vows, the names of clothes never resound, and even if one searches for them one cannot find them (couplet 13). With the exception that [one is] born from miracle on the surface of a lotus, the names of other kinds of births never resound, and even if one searches for them one cannot find them (couplet 14). With the exception that [one] obtains mastery over a life that resembles an undefiled diamond, the names of senescence and degeneration never resound, and even if one searches for them one cannot find them (couplet 15). With the exception that [one] establishes everything on the earth bereft of birth and death, the names of birth and death never resound, and even if one searches for them one cannot find them (couplet 16). In that noble land of all Buddhas of the three times, everyone without exception practices the conduct of enlightenment and enjoys happiness, and the names of unhappiness and distress never resound, and even if one searches for them one cannot find them (tristich).” For other English translations of Padmasambhava’s biographies, see Kenneth Douglas and Gwendolyn Bays, trans., *The Life and Liberation of Padmasambhava. Padma bka’i thang*; and Erik Pema Kunsang, trans., *The Lotus-Born: The Life story of Padmasambhava* (Boston: Shambhala Books, 1992).

In his review of Toussaint’s translation dating back to 1937, the Italian polymath Giuseppe Tucci bluntly concludes that “*Padma thang yig* still awaits a translator.” To justify this opprobrium, Tucci notes precisely that Toussaint’s rendering of the foregoing passage “seems to be quite unintelligible, but the Tibetan text is quite clear and contains the description of the world in which the western Paradise is situated.” He even translates the introductory sentence and the first four couplets as, “There in the western quarter there is a world called Padmavyūha: There with the exception of the golden surface appearing to the eyes even the name of (any other kind) of soil–mountains or rocks–is not known, and even if one searches for it one cannot find it. With the exception of the ripe fruits of the tree of illumination even the name of (other) gardens and fruit trees is unknown, and even if one searches for them cannot find them. With the exception of the flowing stream possessed of the eight qualities of meditation not even the name of (other) kind of water is known, and if one searches for it one cannot find it. With the exception of the flame of that fire which is the gnosis, not even the name of the mundane fire is known, and if one searches for it one cannot find it (This description is quite in accordance with that of the Sukhāvatīvyūihah).” Undoubtedly, Tucci’s attested acquaintance with Classical Tibetan and his mastery of the Buddhist terminology allowed him to correct quite a few lapses in Toussaint’s text. See Giuseppe Tucci, “Review of *Padma thang yig*,” 514–516.
exception that” and tantamount to *ma gtogs* in colloquial Tibetan. Arguably, Toussaint’s misunderstanding of this conjunction repeated sixteen times should account for the visible bifurcation between his rendition and the original Tibetan text.

Take for example the second couplet: *byang-chub shing-gi lo-'dab me-tog rgyas.pa* *las*/* rtsi-shing nags-tshal ming-yang mi-grag btsal-kyang mi-rnyed-pa,*

which can be rendered word-for-word as “Bodhi tree[’s]/ leaves and flowers/ flourish/...
with the exception that; trees/forests/even name/not resound\textsuperscript{70}/searched for\textsuperscript{71}/but/not find.” Alternatively, we can translate it less literally as “with the exception that the Bodhi tree’s leaves and flowers flourish, the names of [common] trees and forests never resound, and even if [one] searches [for them] [one] cannot find [them].”

In this couplet, we see an explicit line between byang chub shing, “Bodhi tree,” in the subordinate clause and rtsi shing nags tshal, “trees and forests,” in the main clause. In addition to the conjunction las, “with the exception that,” that syntactically articulates this incommensurability, there is also a differentiation of registers between the Buddhist term, “Bodhi tree,” and “trees and forests,” which are generic substantives. As such, in the foregoing Tibetan excerpt, the attributes of “the Western land of the array of the lotus” (Tibetan: nub phyogs padma bkod pa’i zhung khams), also construed by many as the land of the body of perfect enjoyment (Tibetan: longs sku’i zhung khams; Sanskrit: sambhogakaya),\textsuperscript{72} are pitted against the unattractive realities of the Samsāra occupied by unenlightened sentient beings. In the

\textsuperscript{70}Since the Tibetan verb grag is both intransitive (Tibetan: bya tshig tha mi dad pa) and non-volitional (Tibetan: bya tshig gzhan dbang can), “to resound,” which is an intransitive verb in English, would be a better translation of grag than “to give off or to broadcast [the sound].”

\textsuperscript{71}In literary Tibetan, it is usual that the verb preceding the conjunction kyang/yang (Tibetan: rgyan sdud) be inflected into past tense. However, this does not necessarily mean that the action described by the verb takes place in a past time frame.

\textsuperscript{72}I am deeply indebted to Gen Ganden Lobsang and Sonam Phuntso, who kindly shared with me their thoughts about “the Western land of the array of the lotus” from the perspective of the rNying ma pa school of Tibetan Buddhism. Needless to say, all the remaining mistakes are my own. Generally speaking, the body of perfect enjoyment (Tibetan: longs sku) is one of the three Buddha-Bodies (Tibetan: sku gsum), including the absolute body (Tibetan: sangs rgyas kyi chos sku; Sanskrit: dharmakaya), the body of perfect enjoyment (Tibetan: longs sku; Sanskrit: sambhogakaya), the manifested body (Tibetan: sprul sku; Sanskrit: nirmanakaya). Nevertheless, it seems unnecessary to tap any further into the meaning of the body of perfect enjoyment as adopted by esoteric Buddhism since Toussaint does not seem to be fully cognizant of it.
foregoing passage, this sacred–secular binary revolves around a series of metaphoric images totaling the number of seventeen, all of which consist of two contrasting yet intertwined images, one being transcendental and the other earthly, such as the “Bodhi tree” versus “common trees” in the second couplet and the “water of Samādhi” versus the “worldly water[s]” in the third couplet.73

By contrast, in Toussaint’s version, the second couplet metamorphoses into “développant les feuilles annuelles et les fleurs de l’arbre de la Bhodi, il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint des arbres et des forêts.” It may hardly be necessary to point out that Toussaint’s phrasing considerably attenuates the dichotomy between “the Western land of the array of the lotus” and the earthly Samsāra. More concretely, Toussaint does not properly translate the conjunction las, but brings to the fore a third-person pronoun il in the second line of the couplet and turns the verb rgyas pa (literally, to flourish or to multiply) preceding the conjunction las into the present participle développant. In so doing, both “the Bodhi tree’s leaves and flowers” and “the names of all kinds of [common] trees” in the Tibetan text are now direct objects of the actions performed by a masculine agent designated as il in the French text.

Although we see that there is someone who “develops” the Bhodi tree’s “annual leaves and flowers” while “searching” in vain for some other species of trees, Toussaint’s rendering as a whole is not very comprehensible, since we are baffled by

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73 These rotating oppositions revolve around sa gzhi “land” (couplet 1), shing “trees” (couplet 2), chu “river” (couplet 3), me “fire” (couplet 4), rlung “wind” (couplet 5), nam mkha ’”skies” (couplet 6), ngyi ma zla ba “sun and moon” (couplet 7), nyin mtshan “day and night” (couplet 8), rgyal po “king” (couplet 9), ’thab rtsod “fight and dispute” (couplet 10), zas “food” (couplet 11), skom “thirst” (couplet 12), gos “clothing” (couplet 13), skye ba “birth” (couplet 14), tshe “life” (couplet 15), skye shi “birth and death” (couplet 16), skyid sdug “happiness and suffering” (tristich 1).
the protagonist’s intention to counter-intuitively “develop” tree leaves (instead of letting them grow by themselves), and we are keen to know what on earth motivates this character to look for, incognito, the extinct names of some other species of trees and forests.

These odd phrasings are evidence of Toussaint’s misinterpretation of the Tibetan text. Indeed, the verb rgyas pa (literally, to flourish or to multiply) is both intransitive and non-volitional in Tibetan. Thus Toussaint’s rendering of it as développant is misleading since développer is a transitive verb in French, which grammatically requires a volitional agent. Yet one may immediately realize that this shift operates in perfect tandem with the pronoun il, which serves as the subject of développent. Evidently, the metamorphosis of rgyas pa into développent is not a lapse, but a well-advised strategy of rewriting. We may cite the sixth couplet of Toussaint’s text that goes as:

N’ayant pas trébuché aux profondeurs de la Loi absorbant toutes choses
il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint du ciel apparent

From the various Tibetan editions of the Padma bka’ thang available to me, I can see that N’ayant pas trébuché, meaning “not having tripped” or “not having stumbled,” is an erroneous rendering of the Tibetan verb khyab gdal, meaning “to permeate” or “to fill with.” I have come up with the hypothesis that Toussaint might either have unthinkingly mistaken the verb gdal for brdab, meaning in Tibetan “to hit against,”74

74 In modern Tibetan, brdab is also frequently used in the set phrase ’dred brdab shor, meaning “to lose one’s footing” and in the collocation brdab skyon shor, meaning “to have an accident.”
or in a greater likelihood, he may have consciously interpreted *gdal* as denoting *trébucher*—a verb requiring an animate subject and thereby foreshadowing the advent of an anonymous male protagonist *il* in the following line of the couplet. By the same token, Toussaint should have deliberately mistranslated the polysemic verb *chags pa* as “se délectant,” which implies a sentient subject,\(^{75}\) despite the fact that he could have rendered *chags pa* into “apparaissant” in the sense of “to come into being,” which better fits the context.\(^{76}\) Nonetheless, one must not lose sight of the tremendous difficulty of translating religious text across languages as different as French and Tibetan. This is perhaps the reason that, despite all its flaws, Toussaint’s *Le dict of Padma*, along with Kenneth Douglas, and Gwendolyn Bays’s English translation which is based on it, remains a widely-circulated primary reference for Western practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism.

\(^{75}\) When used as a verb, *chags pa* can mean both “to come into being” and “to desire.”

\(^{76}\) Hence, all the volitional present participles in Toussaint’s translation, namely, “se délectant,” “développant,” “plongeant,” “enflammant,” “possédant,” “n’ayant pas trébuché,” “ayant bu,” “ayant revêtu,” “gardant,” “déployant,” “rayonnant” and so forth need to be retranslated. For instance, instead of turning *rgyas-pa* into *développant* and assigning as its subject an oddly coined *il* non-existent in Tibetan, it makes better sense to use the pronominal form *se développer* and replace *il* with the indefinite pronoun *on* (if we want to keep the active voice, which is preferred). Likewise, it appears more appropriate to translate *ming-yang mi-grag btsal-kyang mi-nyed-ba* into French as “le[s] nom[s] ne résonne[nt] pas et même si l’on le[s] cherche, on ne le[s] trouve pas.” Thus we may render the second couplet as a whole into “À part le fait que les feuilles et les fleurs de l’arbre de la Bhodi se développent, les noms des arbres et des forêts [ordinaires] ne résonnent pas et même si l’on les cherche, on ne les trouve pas.” Similarly, the third couplet, which goes as “Plongeant au Gange huit fois excellent de l’extase, il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint des différentes rivières” in Toussaint’s text, may be rephrased as “À part le fait que la rivière dotée de huit vertus de *Samādhi* s’écoule, les noms des rivières [ordinaires] ne résonnent pas et même si l’on les cherche, on ne les trouve pas.” By the same token, we may reformulate the eleventh couplet singled out above for its oddity as “À part le fait que l’aliment de *Samādhi* procure de la satisfaction à la vie, les noms des aliments [ordinaires] ne résonnent pas et même si on les cherche, on ne les trouve pas.”
In short, Toussaint winds up adding a masculine agent to the original text via both the pronoun *il* and the attendant transformation of a series of non-volitional and intransitive Tibetan verbs into volitional and transitive French verbs in the first line of each couplet. Indeed, the Tibetan text does not display such agency. Also the avoidance of grammatical subject is not uncommon in both literary and colloquial Tibetan. Partly because of this, there is simply no epic element nor any room for the display of a heroic spirit à la Friedrich Nietzsche in the aforementioned section of the *Padma bka’ thang*, which is strictly composed of metaphysical formulations. By contrast, Toussaint’s rendering brings forth a considerable dose of extra drama, particularly this pervading *homo viator* who takes turns in “plongeant au Gange,” “enflammant l’arc-en-ciel,” “déployant l’astre clair” (to cite only a few examples), while not being able to put his finger on a series of extinct names.  

Needless to say, this simultaneously mighty and impotent character eventually becomes Segalen’s *alter ego* in *Thibet*. In both *Thibet* and *Le Thibet révolté*, we have this valiant yet hapless French poet who sets off in search of a Tibetan utopia and who ultimately gets pushed back by Tibet’s insurmountable barrier. Indeed, Toussaint’s mistranslation of the encomium of “the Western land of the array of the lotus” has paradoxically the advantage of offering Segalen, as does Bacot’s recounting of his failed expedition to *Népémakö*, the dramatic archetype of such a male *homo viator*, who embodies the heroic spirit of Nietzsche. Hence, it is no surprise to see *Thibet* open with a first-person narrator who portrays himself *tour à tour* as “saccadant le  

77 Michael Taylor describes this extra dose of drama as “le souffle épique que Toussaint a si bien su rendre en français.” See Segalen, *Thibet*, 11.
roc” (séquence I), “plongeur à la mer saumâtre,” or “nageur à plat dessus la plaine” (séquence III), and ends with some equally self-centered and dramatic formulae such as “Je monte en frappant ton sol craquant” or “Je scande le tréteau…” (séquence LIII).

Based on this overarching trope of homo viator, we may even elicit the conclusion that as someone who yearns for Tibet from afar, Segalen utilizes both poetic imaginings and pedantic references as a compensation for his inability to visit Tibet in person. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that the poet’s strategy of rewriting in Thibet resembles an ecstatic projection of his alter ego upon a body of abstruse metaphors.

**The untranslatability of Tibetan prosody**

Indeed, Thibet is loaded with recondite tropes, ecstatic hyperboles, and above all relentlessly forceful rhythms. As many commentators have noted, Segalen strains to reproduce in his hymn the supposedly “Tibetan” sonority via Toussaint’s conduit. I want to insist, however, that as someone who knows no Tibetan, Segalen merely offers his readers some undecipherable Orientalist gimmicks while passing himself off as a western writer who attempts to bring Tibetan rhythms into French prosody. In fact, Segalen’s own draft notes attest to such intentionality of borrowing from what he terms as “le grand verset d’oddhyana:”

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As Segalen notes with the benefit of hindsight, Oddhyana is the birthplace of Padma Sambhava and not a poetic mode of expression. This slip casts light on Segalen’s perfunctory knowledge of his Tibetan source. He might have listened to Toussaint’s recitation of some snippets of the *Padma bka’ thang* in Tibetan, but this much-discussed exposure is by no means sufficient for someone who strives to write a “Tibetan” poem in French. However, some critics have opined with verve that Segalen dismisses alexandrine and embraces a form of “Tibetan” prosody that enables his Western audience to “capture the otherness of Tibet.”80 Very little about this assumption survives close inspection.

To avoid hasty interpretation, let us first focus on *Thibet*’s metric pattern. As Bouillier convincingly notes, each séquence of *Thibet* “se compose en général de dix-huit vers ou ; plutôt, de neuf distiques formés d’un long vers de treize, quinze ou dix-huit pieds suivi d’un vers constant de neuf pieds.”81 However capricious this versification guideline may appear due to the poem’s unfinished character, seemingly

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79 Segalen, *Thibet*, 12. The “grand verset d’oddhyana” refers to Toussaint’s *Le dict de Padma*, as the Tibetologist explains that the Tibetan title of his manuscript is based on “la mention terminale de chaque chapitre” that reads as “Histoire en teneur intégrale des existences du Guru d’Oddiyana Padmasambhava.” See Toussaint, “Le Padma than yig,”13–14; and Toussaint, *Le dict de Padma*, 1–2.

80 For example, John Stout suggests that “to capture the otherness of Tibet for a Western audience, Segalen consistently rejects traditional French versification based on the alexandrin—this is, the twelve-syllable line—here. In place of the alexandrin, he adopts a more eccentric system.” See Stout, “Metapoetic Explorations of Tibet,” 66–67.

for Segalen the “Tibetan” sonority of the *Padma bka’ thang* can be rendered into French through a wealth of couplets alternating a long-winded first line with an enneasyllabic second line.

Seemingly, the metric pattern of *Thibet* can be traced all the way back to the *Padma bka’ thang*, especially to the portion of the first canto describing “the Western land of the array of the lotus” where we find a concatenation of couplets with regulated yet uneven lines. This is the case of the first couplet in the foregoing excerpt:

\[
gser\text{-}gyi \text{ sa\text{-}gzhi mig\text{-}mangs ris\text{-}su chags\text{-}pa \text{ las/}}
\text{sa\text{-}gzhi ri\text{-}rab ming\text{-}yang mi\text{-}grag btsal\text{-}kyang \text{ mi\text{-}rnyed\text{-}pa/}}
\]

Also we spot a few enneasyllables in the portion of the first canto preceding “the Western land of the array of the lotus”:

\[
dus\text{-}gsum \text{ 'rjid\text{-}rten khams\text{-}\text{'}dir mtshungs\text{-}med rje/}
skyon\text{-}spangs yon\text{-}tan yid\text{-}bzhin nor\text{-}bu \text{ 'dra/}
\text{'gro\text{-}kun ma\text{-}lus dgos\text{-}pa\text{'i don\text{-}kun \text{ 'grub/}}
\text{mdzad\text{-}tshul rnam\text{-}grangs bsam\text{-}gyis mi\text{-}khyab kyang/}
\text{'di\text{-}ru spros\text{-}te ma\text{'ongs sems\text{-}la glan/82}
\]

Toussaint’s rendering goes as follows:

\[
\text{Ce Bouddha n’a pas de rival,}
\text{seigneur sans pair dans cet univers des Trois Âges,}
\text{fameux dans l’incarnation où il ne débat plus les préceptes vainqueurs,}
\text{est semblable à la Gemme-des-Désirs aux qualités sans défaut.}
\text{Pour atteindre toutes les fins nécessaires à la totalité des êtres,}
\]

82 *Padma bka’ thang*, 4.
le nombre de modes d’actions étant inconcevable, après s’être prodigué ici, il renvoie à l’Esprit futur.\textsuperscript{83}

Toussaint does not seem the least preoccupied with regulating the meter of his French rendering, let alone keeping the original prosody.\textsuperscript{84} The translator’s want of metrical concern is vividly at odds with Segalen’s intention to recuperate the lost feel of Tibetan prosody. Segalen’s objective is very likely based on what Toussaint informs him regarding the original meter of the Padma bka’ thang and not on what he finds in Toussaint’s translation per se. Although Segalen should be commended for attempting such a difficult task, it would be reductive to equate the Tibetan versification, known as “tshigs bead” (literally, the cutting of joints), with couplets alternating a long-winded first line with an enneasyllabic second line.

Let us use again the above-cited Tibetan verses as an exemplar: in a hendecasyllable like “gser-gyi sa-gzhi mig-mangs ris-su chags-pa las” (literally, 

\textsuperscript{83} Toussaint, “Le Padma than yig,” 16.

\textsuperscript{84} This translatorial stance per se is irreproachable, given that the foregoing Tibetan verse contains a high percentage of monosyllables, which rules out the possibility of preserving the exact identical meter in a French translation that unavoidably carries a higher ratio of multi-syllables. That said, we do know a few cases in which Western translators adopt the Tibetan prosody. Pavel Poucha notes in this regard how Heinrich Jäschke renders with painstaking care certain passages of the New Testament into decasyllabic Tibetan lines. See Pavel Poucha, “Le Vers Tibétain,” Archiv orientální 18, no. 4 (1950): 188–235. Unfortunately, the Tibetan translation on which Poucha’s analysis is based, namely the 1925 Shanghai edition of the New Testament published by the British and Foreign Bible Society under the name Dam pa’i gsung ras bya ba bzhugs so: zhal chad gsar ba’i mdo rnam ni is currently unavailable to me. According to John Bray, this so-called Ghoom/Shanghai New Testament is a revision of Jäschke’s initial translation by Moravian missionaries A.W. Herde, Graham Sandberg, as well as the later British agent in Tibet David Macdonald, See John Bray, “Language, tradition and the Tibetan Bible,” The Tibet Journal 16, no. 4 (Winter 1991): 28-48. We may speculate that Jäschke’s target-oriented translation strategy is motivated by pragmatic rationale, as a Bible written in elegant Tibetan verses would be a better tool for missionaries to gain Tibetan converts, especially those conversant with literary Tibetan.
gold’s/ earth/ chessboard squares/ orderly/ appear/ with the exception that), there is a latent rhythm giving off the musicality of TAH-ta/ TAH-ta/ TAH-ta/ TAH-ta/ TAH-ta/ TAH, which has five disyllabic feet followed by one stressed ending rhyme las.\textsuperscript{85} Idem for the thirteen-syllabic sa-gzhi ri-rab ming-yang mi-grag btsal-kyang mi-rnyed-pa (literally, earth/ the Meru mountain/ even name/ not resound/ searched for/ but/ not find), which is reliant on a slightly differing rhythm that can be illustrated as TAH -ta/ TAH-ta/ TAH-ta/ ta-ta/ TAH-ta/ ta-ta-ta with the substantive ming and the verb btsal duly accentuated.\textsuperscript{86} In the same vein, the enneasyllable das-gsum 'rjid-rten khams-'dir mtshungs-med rje (literally, three times/ world/ realm/ this/ unparalleled/ lord) presents the rhythm of TAH-ta/ TAH-ta/ TAH-ta/ TAH-ta/ TAH-ta/ TAH. Indeed, the use of hyphens in the scholarly transliteration can in most cases help delineate the scansion of Tibetan verse (Tibetan: yig 'bru'i tsheg bar cha dang ya khel stangs as the polymath Dungkar Lozang Thrinlé glosses on it).\textsuperscript{87} However, unlike modern Indo-European languages, since the segmentation of words is non-existent in Tibetan typography, the scansion of Tibetan verse may thus appear extremely elusive for a Western eye. Equally important is the fact that, compared with Tibetan, it seems much

\textsuperscript{85} As conjunction, las is grammatically and semantically unstressed, but it becomes metrically accented when placed at the end of the line. See J. Verkerdi, “Some Remarks on Tibetan Prosody,” \textit{Acta Orientalia} 2, no. 2/3 (1952): 221–233. I have provided the scansion based on how these verses are read in modern Tibetan, which may not exactly reflect how they were pronounced in Classical Tibetan.

\textsuperscript{86} The two disyllabic feet ming-yang and mi-grag tend to merge into a tetrasyllabic foot while the disyllabic foot btsal-kyang and the ending trisyllabic foot mi-rnyed-pa tend to merge into an elongated pentasyllabic foot. In this case, the first syllable of each conjunct foot, namely ming and btsal acquire a metrical stress.

\textsuperscript{87} For a more in-depth analysis, see Dung dkar blo bzang 'phrin las, \textit{sNyan ngag la 'jug tshul tshig rgyan rig pa'i sgo 'byed} (Xining: mtsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2012), 28–38.
harder to do syllable by syllable bounds in an inflected language like French that has a higher frequency of polysyllabic words. In sum, from a metrical point of view, the aforementioned portion of the *Padma bka’ thang* is almost untranslatable due to its rhythmic pattern that differs in crucial ways from French versification.

Needless to say, however dedicated Segalen is, without being conversant with this prosodic incommensurability he cannot recuperate “the Tibetan sonority” by superficially patterning his French verse after a supposedly Tibetan meter. In this respect, *Thibet* can be seen as a literary experiment that wishfully reinvents Tibetan poetic features in the French context. As for Segalen’s meticulously crafted enneasyllables, they seem to have nothing to do with the sonority of the *Padma bka’ thang* but resemble more the high-flown idiolect of the turn-of-the-century French literati. Such a painstaking simulacrum may even run the risk of debunking the much-cherished definition of Segalen’s poetics as “le transfert de l’empire de Chine à l’empire de soi-même.” If this putative alterity presented under the guise of China, Maor, or Tibet turns out to be an avatar of Segalen’s own French ego, such transfer would acquire no *raison d’être* in the first place.

Despite all this, no one can dismiss the fact that *Thibet* is a unique piece of turn-of-the-century French literature; it is simultaneously a yelp of ecstasy and an outcry of dismay. Born out of adaptation, it is every bit as patchy as florid, insofar as the poet feels licensed to dispense with the empirical landscape and turns instead to a

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88 There are quite a few similar examples in the history of literary translation in France. This is the case with the theoretician Henri Meschonnic, who authored a strictly rhythmic translation of a quatrain written by the Tang poet Meng Haoran. See Henri Meschonnic, *Poétique du traduire* (Paris: Éditions Verdier, 1999), 180–183.
handful of metatextual tropes for inspiration. Through a close investigation of how Segalen creatively reworks the metaphors of Népémakô, Poyul, and “Western land of the array of the lotus,” this chapter has resolved some points of debate regarding Thibet’s genesis, stylistic originalities, and, above all, the extent to which this unfinished long poem fulfils Segalen’s aesthetic ambitions.

As a final note, Thibet advisedly emulates Bacot’s pursuit of Népémakô and a key episode of the Padma bka thang that Toussaint has brought back from the wilderness of Tibet. This double-fold mimesis has uneven results. Although Segalen’s reworking of Bacot’s Le Thibet révolté can be hailed as a bold enterprise, his borrowing from Le dict de Padma proves to be cross-culturally deceptive in that it provides merely a stylized Western mirage of the land depicted.
Translingual Adaptations: Asian Works in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-century French Literature

**Conclusion**

I have crafted the term “translingual adaptations” to describe an important genre of world literature thus far overlooked by previous scholars, namely, creative adaptations by Western authors based on received translations of Eastern works. My approach in this study has consisted of closely comparing these adaptations with the previous translations on which Théophile Gautier, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Victor Segalen based their retellings, as well as against the original source works in Chinese, Sanskrit, and Tibetan. Under the theoretical aegis of Edward Said, David Damrosch, and Lawrence Venuti, I have critically teased out examples of truncation, addition, paraphrase, annotation, and unintentional misreading that befell these Asian works as they traveled across cultural spheres.

Specifically, for Said, Western appropriation of Eastern culture is a problematic act of imperialism. On the other hand, under a more inclusive view of world literature, Damrosch has argued that non-Western works also have the potential to become world literature, provided that their scope and depth are enhanced through translation. Both competing premises are in fact applicable to the study of translingual adaptations, which can be seen as a continuation of the previous translations’ afterlife in the target culture. In addition to Damrosch and Said, my investigation has also drawn on Venuti’s insightful analysis on the contrast between domestication and
foreignization. Indeed, Venuti advocates foreignization as a means to counteract cultural complacency and self-centered provincialism. That said, people will seldom read word-for-word translations of foreign literary texts, let alone adaptations that faithfully reiterate previous translations. In this regard, Venuti has adopted a very broad definition of foreignization, as any discursive strategy deviating from the reign of transparency, such as the use colloquialisms and archaisms, can be considered foreignizing. In other words, foreignization does not necessarily mean rigid faithfulness toward the original text, but rather “a dissident cultural practice, maintaining a refusal of the dominant by developing affiliations with marginal linguistic and literary values at home.”

On the heels of Venuti, my own definition of foreignization as it pertains to the translational adaptations examined in this study refers to all discursive features introduced by rewriters that may or may not have been found in the original Asian works, provided that these features deviated from the established norms of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French literature. Following the path started by Said, Damrosch, and Venuti, my thesis thus endorses foreignized translational adaptations as a sound means of transforming non-Western national literature into world literature by challenging the assimilative practices of the target culture while curbing the Orientalism of previous translators.

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Frankly, the various translations under scrutiny in the present investigation are quite mediocre; they are all very Orientalist domesticated renderings except perhaps for Burnouf’s. If assimilative translations were more commercially viable because the French literary market imposed on foreign works a regime of fluency and easy readability, they also involved the loss of the source text’s discursive peculiarities, literary agency, and in the case of the “Heying lou,” even Li Yu’s authorship. In contrast to the scarcity of highlights among translators, the subsequent adaptations by Mallarmé and Gautier registered a previously understudied array of features and techniques, which may be subsumed under the rubric of foreignizing adaptation strategies. Specifically, Mallarmé programmatically foreignized his retelling of the *Nalopākhyānam* by distorting French syntax, replacing finite verbs with noun phrases and participles. In so doing, he inadvertently recovered characteristics of Sanskrit phraseology lost in previous renditions. Likewise, Gautier tossed in a battery of Chinese idioms in his substantively foreignized prose style. Concurrently, he used Chinese narrative conceits such as onomastics and dream visions to supplant the polygamous happy ending with a monogamous one, thereby counterintuitively assimilating Li Yu’s narrative with Chinese devices. I attribute such diversity of foreignizing approaches to the fact that compared to translations, adaptations allow a greater poetic license on the part of rewriters, who often yield unexpected results by preserving, recovering, and even reinventing features of the source text that are unconventional in the target culture. Accordingly, this investigation, not bereft of a certain elitist idealism, has championed translingual adaptations of a foreignizing
nature as having greater potential than translations per se in inventively and ethically elevating national literature into world literature.

Yet as a major point of disagreement with Venuti’s dichotomous and ideologically-minded discourse, I have also shown how foreignizing adaptation tendencies go hand in hand with domesticating ones. All three authors, without exception, jointly used domestication and foreignization when poeticizing, aestheticizing, and romanticizing some Asian localities of their own coinage; their ideological configuration was thus never one-sided—a fact attesting to the fuzzy boundary between gross misinterpretation and artful reinvention and thereby challenging the scholarly piety of clichéd Orientalism as against ethical multiculturalism. Yet, despite their domesticating tendencies—as evidenced by Gautier’s addition of Chinese clichés and the way Mallarmé reworked the imagery of dice-throwing—in balance, both authors foreignized much more than they domesticated. In contrast, Segalen proved a crypto-cultural imperialist who assimilated much more than he superficially foreignized; his appropriation of a specious Tibetan prosody and decorative epigraphs extracted from Chinese classics resulted merely in some eye-catching trinkets at the service of his French superego, giving his nonspecialist readers a very superficial feel of Eastern otherness while either intentionally ridiculing or inadvertently disregarding the non-French backbone. To use an imperfect analogy, browsing through the pages of Segalen’s fusion works makes me feel like I am eating leftover spaghetti run through the microwave in a New York City Sushi restaurant decorated with mostly refined Japanese calligraphy.
As a concluding remark, if Mallarmé’s and Gautier’s foreignized retellings of Asian works reversed the accruement of Orientalism, partly recovered narratives traits lost in previous translations, and challenged or even enriched the literary landscape of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century France, Segalen’s domesticated adaptations, in sharp contrast, amplified the Orientalism of previous translators and trivialized the lands depicted with a set of fancy gimmicks, thereby bringing no substantially new elements into the target culture.
Appendix. Synopsis of the *Nalopākhyānam* with selections of the Sanskrit text and English translation

The first chapter of the *Nalopākhyānam* introduces the two main characters, namely Nala, the king of Niṣadha, and Damayantī, the daughter of Bhīma, king of Vidarbha. Specifically, Nala is said to be:

endowed with all the desired qualities, handsome, and skilled in horse riding *(upapanno guṇair īṣtai rūpavān aśvakovidah)*. He stood at the head of mortals like Indra the lord of gods *(atiṣṭhad manujendrāṇāṁ mūrdhni devapatiṁ iva)*, well-above all by his majesty just as the son of Aditi *(uparyupari sarvēśāṁ ādiya iva tejasā)*. Friendly to Brahmans, Veda-knowing hero, great lord among the Niṣadhans *(brahmaṇyo vedavic chūro niṣadheṣu mahīpaticḥ)*, fond of dice, truth-speaking, general of a complete army *(akṣapriyāḥ satyavādī mahān aḵṣauhiṁpicatīḥ)*. The noble one, desired by excellent women, senses of organ under control *(īpsito varanārīṇāṁ udāraḥ samyatendriyāḥ)*, protector, best of archers, like Manu himself before the eyes *(rakṣitā dhanvinīṁ śreṣṭhāḥ sākṣāḥ iva manuḥ svayaṃ)*. . . . And Nala—the tiger among men—unparalleled on earth by handsomeness *(nalaśca naraśārdūlo rūpeṇāpratimo bhūvi)*, was like Kandarpa [the god of Love] himself incarnate *(kandarpa iva rūpeṇa mūrtimān abhavat svayaṁ)*.

The eulogy of Damayantī is no less exuberant. First, her birth was the result of a boon granted by the sage Damana to Bhīma, who was “childless, desirous of offspring *(prajākāmaḥ sa cāpraṭañāḥ)*.” The narrator of the *Nalopākhyānam* spills much ink on Damayantī. Here is what the Sanskrit text says:

Damayantī, by beauty, brilliance, splendor, radiance *(damayantī tu rūpeṇa tejasā yaśasā śriyā)*, and happiness, obtained fame in the world, the slender-waisted one *(saubhāgyena ca lokeṣu yaśaḥ prāpa sumadhyanāḥ)*. When she had attained the coming-of-age, thus one hundred well-adorned female servants and companions attended upon [her] as [around] Śacī, the wife of Indra *(atha tāṁ vayasi prāpte dāśīnāṁ samalamkṛtam śataṁ śataṁ*
sakhīnāñca paryupāsac chacīm iva). Among them truly shines Bhīma’s daughter, decorated with all sorts of ornaments (tatra sma bhrajate bhaimi sarvābharaṇabhūṣitā), in the midst of female companions, the one who had unblemished limbs, just as the lightning born out of a raincloud (sakhimadhye navadyāṅgī vidyut saudāminī yathā). Endowed with extreme beauty, like the long-eyed Śrī [Lakṣmī] (atīva rūpasampannā śrīrīvāyatalocanā), not among the gods, not among Yakṣas, [is] such beauty anywhere (na deveṣu na yakṣeṣu tādgrūpavatī kvacit), [not even] among human beings, and among other beings, not seen neither heard [of] before (mānuseṣvapi cānyesu drṣṭapūrvā na ca śrutā). A mind-agitating, comely damsel, even for the gods (cittapramāthinī bālā devānāmapi sundarī).

Owing to their unparalleled attributes, not surprisingly, “in Damayantī’s proximity, [people] eagerly extolled Nala, [and vice versa], in Nala’s surroundings, Damayantī’s name [was mentioned] again and again (tasyāḥ samīpe tu nalaṃ praśaṃsuḥ kutūhalāt naiṣadhasya samīpe tu damayanīṃ punah punah).” Thus, “without even having seen each other, there was a desire of the two to constantly hear the qualities of the other, and thereby [their] sentiment increased (tayoradṛṣṭakāmo ’bhucchṛṇvatoḥ satatam guṇān anyonyam prati kaunteya sa vyavardhata hṛcchayaḥ).” Thereafter, the Indian epic’s favorite animal—haṁsa (wild geese or swans, depending on context) comes into play by serving as the go-between for the two youngsters. Specifically, “Nala, then, unable to bear the desire in [his] mind (aśaknuvannaḥ kāmaḥ tadā dhārayitum ṇṛdā), concealed, he remains in the wood near to the women’s quarters (antahpurasamīpasthe vana āste rahogataḥ).” In the wood, Nala sees haṁsa swans “whose garment [is] gold (haṁsāṅjātarūpaparicchadān).” When he seizes one of them, the swan assumes a human voice, begging Nala not to kill him:

I am not to be killed by you, O king—I will certainly do you a favor (na hantavyo ’smi te rājan karisyāmi hi te priyam)! In the presence of Damayantī, I will mention you, O king of Niṣadha (damayanīṣakāše tvām kathiyāsyāmi naiṣadha), so that she will think about no man other than you at any time (yathā tvadanyāṃ puruṣaḥ na sā maṁsyati karhicit)!"
Nala then releases the swan, who immediately flies to Vidarbha. The Sanskrit text next gives a picturesque depiction of Damayantī chasing the swans:

Those birds flew down. Then she saw those birds (nipetuste garutmanthaḥ sā dadarśātha tāṅkhagāṅ). She, having just seen those magically shaped ones, surrounded by troops of companions (sā tān adbhutarūpān vai dṛṣṭvā sakhigānaṇvṛtā), thrilled to grasp the birds, hurrying [she] approached (hṛṣṭā grahitum khagamāṃs tvaramāṇopacakrame). Thereafter, the swans dispersed, everywhere, in the grove of women (atha haṃsā visarṣpuḥ sarvataḥ pramadāvane). One by one, then, the young ladies ran up to those swans (ekaikaśas tataḥ kanyās tān haṃsaṃ samupādravan). The swan to whom Damayantī ran up in proximity (damayantī tu yaṃ haṃsāṃ samupādāvadañte), he, having taken on a human voice, spoke to Damayantī (sa māṇuṣīṃ girāṃ krīvā damayantīṃ athābrāvī): “O Damayantī! Nala by name, the king of Niṣadha (damayanti nalo nāma niṣadheṣu mahīpatiḥ), like Aśvins in handsomeness, humans [are] not equal to him (aśvinoh sadṛśo rūpe na samāṣtasya mānuṣāḥ). If you were to become his wife, O the one whose complexion is beautiful (tasya vai yadi bhāryā tvaṃ bhavetha varavarṇīti), it would be fruitful for you, and this existence would be beautiful. O slender-waisted one (saphalaṃ te bhavejjanma rūpe na samadhyame)!

We have seen gods, gandarvas, humans, serpents, rākṣas (vayaḥ hi devagandharvanusyoragaraṅkṣasān), yet not seen by us before [is one] of such caliber (dṛṣṭavanto na cāsmābhirdrṣṭapūrvaṃ vādāvaste). And you also, the jewel of women, and Nala, best among men (tvam cāpi ratnaṃ nārīṇām nareṣu ca nalo varaḥ), a union by the best [woman] and the best [man] would be endowed with qualities (viśiṣṭāyā viśiṣṭeṇa samgamo guṇavān bhavet)!”

Following the haṃsa’s eulogy of Nala, Damayantī instantly replies: “Thus spoken by the swan, Damayantī, O lord of commoners2 (evam uktā tu haṃsena damayantī viśaṃ pate)! There [she] addressed the swan, ‘Please also say this to that Nala (abravāttrā tāṃ haṃsāṃ tamapyevaṃ nalaṃ vada)!” The swan then flies back to Niṣadha and informs Nala of everything.

Chapter II opens with a telling depiction of Damayantī’s lovesickness:

2 “O lord of commoners” is direct speech addressed by the narrator of the story Bṛhadāśva to the listener Yudhiṣṭhira.
Damayantī, having heard that speech of the swan, O brother (damayantī tu tac chrutvā vaco hamsasya bhārata), from then, henceforth, she was not herself with regard to Nala (tadā prabhṛti na svasthā nalarā prati babhūva sā). Then, lost in thought, dejected, pale-cheeked, haggard (tataś cintāparā dīnā vivarnavadanā kṛśā), Damayantī was absorbed in signs of [melancholy], then (babhūva damayantī tu niḥśvāsaparamā tadā), [She whose] gaze was upward, became engaged in meditation, looking maniac (ūrdhvadṛṣṭir dhyānaparā babhūvonmattadarśanā), [she whose complexion] was yellowish white, in a moment, [she whose mind] was possessed by love (pāṇḍuvarnā kṣanenathā hṛcchayōviṣṭacentā), not in bed, on a seat, in food does she find pleasure whenever (na śayyāsanabhogeṣu ratiṁ vindati karhi cit), not at night, not during the daytime [does she] sleep: “Woe, woe,” [she] suddenly uttered (na naktāṁ na divā śete hā heti vadaṅī muhuḥ).

Taking her torment as indicating her readiness for marriage, Bhīma organizes a svayaṁvara—the “self-choice” bridegroom selection ceremony in which Damayantī will choose her husband among an assembly of suitors. The event attracts kings from all over the world, including Nala.

Meanwhile, two sages—Nārada and Parvata—ascend to Indra’s abode. Indra is keen to know where the Kshatriya heroes are since he has never seen them come forth (kva nu te kṣatriyāḥ sūrā na hi paśyāmi tāṁ aham). In Indra’s words,

the dharma-knowing earth-rulers fighting, with their lives set aside (dharmajñāḥ pythivyāpalās tyaktajīvitayodhinaḥ), at the appointed time, with weapon, they go to death, [they whose] faces not turned back (śastreṇa nidhanam kāle ye gacchanyaparāṁmukhāḥ); this indestructible realm [Indra’s abode] for them is like what the wish-fulfilling cow is for me (ayaṁ loko'kṣyasteśāṁ yatheva mama kāmadhuk).

For Nārada, “the earth-rulers were not seen (na drṣṭyante mahīkṣitaḥ)” [by Indra] because they are all hastening to the forthcoming svayaṁvara of Damayantī, who “by beauty, surpassed all women on earth (rūpeṇa samatikrāntā pythivyāṁ sarvayōṣitaḥ).”

Attracted by the event, Indra, along with three other primary gods—Agni, Varuna, and
Yama—immediately rushes out to the svayaṁvara.

The story becomes more dramatic when the gods meet Nala on their way to Vidarbha. After they stop him, Indra tricks him into accepting a task against his will, namely, to bring word to Damayantī that the gods have come specifically for her. Despite his initial unwillingness, Nala ends up complying with this demand. He is then transported all at once to Damayantī’s inner chambers:

There [he] saw the princess of Vaidarbha surrounded by a group of female companions (dadarśa tatra vaidarbhīṁ sakhiṇasamāvṛtāṁ), intensely blazing with beauty and splendor, [she whose] color was fair (dedīpyamānāṁ vapaśā śriyā ca varaṁviniṁ), [she whose] limbs were extremely delicate, [she whose] waist was slender, [she whose] eyes were beautiful (ākṣipantīm iva prabhāṁ śaśinaḥ svena tejasā).

Here Nala’s predicament is described: “Having seen [Damayantī] smiling sweetly to him, Nala’s desire increased (tasya dhṛṣṭvaiva vavṛde kāmas tāṁ cāruḥāsinīm). [Yet] desiring to do the truth, [he] held his love (satyaṁ cikīrṣamāṇas tu dhārayāmāsa hṛcchayam).”

Upon seeing Nala, Damayantī’s retinue is amazed by his magnificence:

Then, having beheld the king of Naśadha, the agitated excellent-limbed maids (tatas tā naśadhaṁ dhṛṣṭvā saṁbhṛāntāḥ paramāṅganāḥ) sprang from [their] seats, overpowered by [his] luster (āsanebhyāḥ samutpetus tejasā tasya dhārṣitaḥ). They praised Nala, very delighted, filled with astonishment (praśaśāṁ suś ca suprītā nalaṁ tā vismayānvitāḥ), [they] did not speak to him, [but] thought through their minds (na caiṇam abhyabhāṣanta manobhiś tvabhyacintayan), “Ah, what handsomeness, Ah, what beauty, Ah, what firmness of a great high-souled man (aho rūpam aho kāntir aho dhārayāṁ mahātmamanāḥ)! Who would this man be, a god, a Yaksha, or a Gandharva (ko ‘yaṁ devo ‘thavā yakṣo gandharvo vā bhaviṣyatī)?” They cannot utter anything to him (na tās tam śaṅkuvanti sma vyāhartum api kiṅcana), all overpowered by his luster, the bashful fair-limbed [maids] (tejasā dhārṣitāḥ
By contrast, Damayantī reacts to Nala’s sudden apparition with grace, eloquence, and equanimity, as she:

at that very point, smiling [at him], addressing [him] with a smile at first (*athaɪnɛm smayamɛnɛm tu smitapuruśvbhɛsɛnɛ*), Damayantī, surprised, addressed Nala the hero (*dɛmɛyantɛ nalaṁ vɪʁɛm abhyabbaṣata vɪsɛmitɛ*), [saying]: “Who [are] you? O the man whose body is entirely unblemished, O the booster of my love (*kas tvaṁ sarvāṇavadyāṅga mama hṛcchayavardhana*!)

You have come like an immortal, O hero, I want to know about you, O sinless man (*prāptɔ ȳamaravad vɪra jɪnɛtum icɛɛmi te 'nagha*). How [was] your coming here? And how were [you] unseen (*kathɛm āgamamɛ cɛha kathɛm cǎsi na lakṣɪtaḥ*)? Well-protected indeed [is] my house, by the king [is] the severe order (*surakṣɪtaḥ hi me veṣma rājā caivograṣāsanah*).”

Composed and inquisitive in the *Nalopākhyaṇam*, Damayantī’s image undergoes dramatic modifications in the hands of Summer, evolving into that of a sleeping beauty awoken by the supernatural advent of her prince-savior.

Let us now look closely at the extent to which, in their first face-to-face interaction, Nala’s attitude contrasts sharply with that of Damayantī. Indeed, whereas Damayantī makes initiatives, Nala constantly fails to act on his own behalf, while his commitment to Damayantī falters from time to time, either hindered by his duty toward the gods or impeded by an evil spirit who will later possess him.

Now asked by Damayantī, Nala mechanically reveals his name, repeats the god’s message to her, and phlegmatically exhorts her to “make a decision as she wished (*buddhiṁ prakuruṣva yathecchasi*).” By contrast, Damayantī is unflinching in

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3 Burnouf’s translation of this line, which reads “Nala sourait, Damayanti, qui avait souri la première, lui dit tout étonnée,” seems slightly off here. Burnouf, *Nala épisode*, 21.
her choice of Nala. Here the Sanskrit text reads:

She, having paid homage to the gods, having laughed, spoke to Nala (sā namaskṛtya devebhyaḥ prahasya nalam abravī): “Thus express your feelings, according to your belief, O king, what shall I do for you (prāṇayasya yathāśradhalam rājan kiṁ karavāṇi te)? Both I and whatever wealth of mine (ahaṁ caiva hi yac cānya mamāsti vasu kiṁ cana), all this is yours, confidently express your love, O lord (tat sarvaṁ tava viṣrabdham kuru pranayam iśvara)! The words of the swans consume me, O lord of earth (hamśānāṁ vacanaye yat tu tan māṁ dahati pārthiva)! For your sake, O hero, kings assembled by me (tvatkrte hi mayā vīra rājanaḥ samnipātīḥ), if you will reject me—the one choosing [you], O honor-giver (yadi ced bhajamānāṁ māṁ pratyākhyāsyasi mānada), I will resort to poison, fire, water, and a rope because of you (viṣam agnim jalam rājjuṁ āsthāye tava kāraṇāti)!”

Nala, apathetic, entreats Damayantī to choose the gods, saying:

[I am] not equal to the dust of [their] feet, may your mind dwell on them (na pādarajasā tulyo manas te teṣu varatām)! The mortal who makes offense to the gods falls into death (vipriyam hyācaran martyo devānāṁ mṛtyum rechati). Save me, O the one whose limbs were faultless, choose the chief gods (trāhi mām anavadyāṅgi varayasva surottamān)!

Nala then enumerates, one by one, the prowess of the gods wooing Damayantī, repeating, “Who should not choose him as husband (kā taṁ na varayet patinī)?”

Damayantī, “with eyes flooded with the water produced by sorrow (samāplutābhyaṁ netrābhyaṁ śokajenātha vārinā),” replies: “I, having paid reverence to all the gods, O lord of the earth (devebhyo ‘ham namaskṛtya sarvebhyaḥ prthivipate), indeed I choose you as husband, I am saying this truth to you (vṛne tvāṁ eva bhartāraṁ satyam etad bravīmi te)!” To the shivering Damayantī, her hands folded in the Añjali gesture (a hand gesture of reverence and supplication, vepamānāṁ ṛktāñjaliṁ), Nala, caught in a dilemma, evokes both his dharmic duty and, less explicitly, his love for Damayantī:

Having come here with a message, O noble lady, how do I bear my own cause
(dautyenāgatya kalyāṇi kathaṁ svārthaṁ ihotsahe)? How, especially, having promised the deities (kathaṁ hyaham pratiśrutyā devatānāṁ viśeṣatah), for others’ interest, having undertaken the effort, how do I bear my own cause (parārthe yatnam ārabhyāḥ kathaṁ svārthaṁ ihotsahe)? This [is my] dharma, if [it] will be my own cause (eṣa dharmo yadi svārtho mamāpi bhavitā tataḥ), then I will do it, my dear lady, let it be jostled with (evaṁ svārthaṁ kariṣyāmi tathā bhadre vidhiyatām)!

Nala’s reply reassures Damayantī:

Then, smiling brightly, a speech filled with tears (tato vāspakulāṁ vācaṁ damayantī śucismitā), uttering gently, [she] spoke to King Nala (pratyāharantī śanakair nalaṁ rājānam abravīt): “This infallible stratagem was seen by me, O lord (upāyo ‘yaṁ mayā drśto nirapāyo nareśvara), with which [there] will be no sin, O king, barely (yena doṣo na bhavitā tava rājan kathaṁcan). And even you, O best of men, the gods headed by Indra, approaching (tvāṁcaiva hi naraśreṣṭha devaṁ cendrapurogamāḥ), let them all, united, enter there where my svayainvara [is held] (āyāntu sahitāḥ sarve mama yatra svayainvaraḥ); then I, in the presence of the world-protectors, [will choose] you, O lord (tato ‘ham lokapālānāṁ saṁnidhau tvāṁ nareśvara)!”

Clearly, if Damayantī chooses Nala in the gods’ presence, Nala will not default on his commitment to them. Put another way, it is Damayantī who runs the risk of offending the gods, while Nala would “righteously” fulfill his duty as the gods’ messenger. One should not, of course, lose sight of the emphasis placed jointly on dharma-observance and truth-speaking by the Sanskrit text in this round of repartee between Nala and Damayantī. These two essential virtues of Hinduism have put Nala in a dilemma, of which Damayantī is well aware, and so she insists on choosing Nala as “expressing the truth (satyam etad bravīmi).” Moreover, she presses Nala to “show his love without fear (viśrabdham kuru praṇayam)”—hinted here as an imperative of

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4 The round of repartee between Nala and Damayantī cannot be found in the critical edition.
truth-speaking on Nala’s part. She even goes so far as to threaten Nala with suicide if her advances are rejected. Indeed, her intelligence, devotion, and proactiveness make her one of a rare stripe of female characters in Sanskrit literature. As the de facto protagonist of the *Nalopākhyānam*, she in fact eclipses Nala in many ways. Unlike Nala, she ventures to valorize her free will vis-à-vis the gods headed by Indra—reputed to be irascible and jealous. As we will see, her divine suitors will even acknowledge her initiatives.

Back to the plot, Nala returns to the assembly of the gods (*ājagāma punas tatra yatra devāḥ samāgatāḥ*), where he not so chivalrously reports to them Damayantī’s strategem. Then on the appointed date of the *svayaṁvara*, the four gods all take on the physical aspect of Nala. Unable to discern which is he, Damayantī piously petitions the gods to point him out to her (*devāstaṁ pradiśantu me*) by virtue of the very truth (*tena satyena*) that she had already chosen him after hearing the swan’s words (*hamsānāṁ vacanaṁ śrutvā yathā me naiśadho vṛtaḥ*). The gods indulge their supplicant, and Damayantī, now capable of distinguishing gods from humans, chooses Nala by throwing an extremely brilliant garland onto his shoulder (*skandhadeśe śr̥jat tasya srajaṁ paraṁśobhanāṁ*). The gods then congratulate their union, and each one bestows on Nala two supernatural gifts, totalling eight. Specifically, Indra gives Nala the ability to discern (the presence of a god) in sacrifice (*pratyakṣadarśanāṁ yajñe*) as well as an excellent and noble gait (*gatiñcānuttamāṁ śubhām*); Agni grants Nala self-existence whenever he asks for it (*agnirātmabhavāṁ prādād yatra vāñchanti naiśadhaḥ*) as well as self-illuminated worlds (*lokān*
ātmaprabhāṃścaiva dadau tasmai hutāśanaḥ); Yama endows Nala with subtle taste in food (annarasaṁ) and excellent adherence to dharma (dharme ca paramāṁ sthitim); and the Lord of Waters (Varuna’s epithet) gifts him with the appearance of water whenever he desires (apāṁpatirapāṁbhāvaṁ yatra vāñchati naisadhaḥ) as well as a matchlessly fragrant garland (srajaṅcottamagandhāḥdyāṁ).

The demons Kali and Dvāpara, however, arrive late to the svayaṁvara. When informed by Indra that Damayantī has selected a mortal and that this marriage has been sanctioned by the gods, Kali, enraged, says he will punish Damayantī. The gods then praise Nala’s virtues while cursing Kali, saying:

When permitted by us, Nala was chosen by Damayantī (asmābhīḥ samanujñāto damayantyā nalo vṛtaḥ). What woman would not choose the king Nala, endowed with all qualities (kā ca sarvagunopetam nāśrayeta nalaṁ nr̥pam), he who knows the complete dharma[s] and his vow duly observed (yo veda dharmān akhilān yathāvac caritavrataḥ), he who remembers all the four Vedas, the fifth Ākhyāna tales (yo ‘dhīte caturo vedān sarvān ākhyānapañcamān), [he] at whose house, in compliance with the dharma, the gods are always satiated with offerings (nityam trptā grhe yasya devā yajñeso dharmataḥ), he who is devoted to Ahimsā [harmlessness], truth-speaking, firm in his vow (ahimsāniratato yaśca satyavādī drtha vrataḥ), he in whom truth, constancy, generosity, austerity, self-control, and equanimity [are found] (yasmin satyaṁ dṛḍhir dānāṁ tapaḥ śaucaṁ damaḥ śaṁaḥ)? He who may wish to curse Nala of such form, O Kali (evaṁrūpaṁ nalaṁ yo vai kāmayec chapituṁ kale), may [he] curse himself; may the fool strike himself by himself (ātmānam sa śapenmūḍho hanyād ātmānam ātmanā)! He who may wish to curse Nala possessing such virtues, O Kali (evaṅguṇaṁ nalaṁ yo vai kāmayec chapituṁ kale), may he plunge into the tormenting hell, into the wide and deep lake (kṛcchre sa narake majjed agādhe vipule hṛde)!

Yet despite the curse of the gods, Kali stubbornly asks Dvāpara to take possession of the dice, while he himself will dwell within Nala and ruin his happy lot.

Evidently, in the Nalopākhyaṇam the gods are on Nala’s side. Indeed, they not
only ungrudgingly give Damayantī away to him, but also endow him with supernatural gifts. Moreover, they curse Kali, who intends to do him harm. What has Nala done to deserve such benefits? To justify these, the Sanskrit text repeatedly evokes Nala’s religious virtues, such as his knowledge of sacred books, his observance of vows, his practice of rituals and austerities, and so forth. Yet, one may still wonder to what extent this panegyric stock language, so replete with formulaic circumlocutions and so characteristic of Brahmanic literature, should be guiding our reading of the Nalopākhyānam. As we have seen, the gods are initially Nala’s rivals; it is Damayantī’s plea that reverses the course of such antagonism. The gods gratify her wish by revealing their divine forms at her swayāmvara so that she can choose Nala. In other words, Damayantī challenges the gods by exercising her free will, and her bold initiatives yield happy outcomes. In contrast, Nala, who is fortunate enough to be chosen by Damayantī, has thus far avoided displaying similar volition. Passive and yielding, he is merely a benefactor of divine favors initiated by Damayantī. Ironically, despite Sanskrit’s use of the word bhartṛ (literally, bearer or protector) to designate “husband,” it is Damayantī who bears and protects Nala, not the other way around. Indeed, Damayantī will soon assume the responsibility of safeguarding her family as well, as Nala falls prey to Kali’s possession.

In chapter VII begins the endless train of afflictions suffered by the royal couple. After waiting twelve years, Kali eventually takes possession of Nala (kalir āviśat), who, “having urinated and having performed the ablution at twilight, king of Niṣadha, not having purified the dirt of his two feet (kṛtvā mūtram upasprśya
“sāṁdhyāṁ anvāsta naiṣadhaḥ, akṛtvā pādayoh śaucam tatrāṇaṁ kalir āviṣat),” is then induced to begin a game of dice with his brother Puṣkara. Possessed by Kali, Nala little by little loses his wealth while remaining unresponsive to Damayantī’s exhortations.

Chapter VIII gives a thorough description of Damayantī’s use of her wits in safeguarding her twin children. Here Damayantī is said to “know the time and place, and that the right time had come (deśakālajñā prāptakālam).” Specifically, Damayantī entrusts Vārṣṇeya—Nala’s charioteer—with the task of bringing her twin children to her father Bhīma’s kingdom of Vidarbha, addressing him as follows:

I have come to your protection, O charioteer, please act in accordance with my word (śaraṇāṁ tvāṁ prapannāṁ ‘smi sārathe kuru madvacaḥ). It is unclear to me, [Nala’s] mental state may at some point be utterly lost (na hi me śudhyate bhāvah kadā cid vinaśed iti). Having harnessed Nala’s cherished horses that are swift as thought (nalasya dayitān aśvān yojayitvā manojavān), having placed the pair on this [chariot], you are advised to go to Kuṇḍina (idam āropya mithunāṁ kuṇḍināṁ yātum arhasi). Having delivered to my kinsmen these two children, chariots (mama jñātiṣu niksipyā dārakau syandanaṁ tathā), and horses, according to your wish, you [may] either stay [there] or go somewhere else (aśvāṁścaitān yathākāmaṁ vasa vānyatra gaccha vā)!”

Vārṣṇeya complies with Damayantī’s instructions, and after accomplishing the mission, continues on his way to Ayodhyā. There he enters the service of King Ṛtuparṇa as his charioteer.

Meanwhile, the devastating gambling goes on, and Nala is bereft of his kingdom. Yet unlike Yudhiṣṭhira, Nala refuses to wager Damayantī in response to

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5 Hiltebeitel argues that Damayantī’s “knowledge of time must include at some unknowing level that Dvāpara and Kali are at play in the dice match. It is time to respond.” Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahabharata*, 225.
Puṣkara’s proposal. At the end, Nala is “wordless (na caināṃ kiṃ cid abravī).” The Sanskrit text reads as follows:

Having looked at Puṣkara, extremely distressed (tataḥ puṣkaram ālokya nalaḥ paramamanumāṇ), he whose glory is great, having thrown away ornaments from all his body members (utsyāja sarvakātrebhya bhūṣaṇāni mahāyaśāḥ), clothed in one garment, indeed unclothed, sorrow-booster for his friends (ekavāśā hyasaṁvītaḥ suhṛccokavivardhanah), the king went out, having relinquished [his] great quantity of wealth (niṣcakrāma tadā rája tyaktvā suvipulāṁ śriyaṁ). Damayantī, clad with one garment, followed the departing one from behind (damayantyekavastā tāṁ gacchantāṁ prṣṭhato ‘nvagāt).

Starving, homeless, they wander three days and three nights, feeding only on water and no one giving them hospitality. Finally, Nala sees some śakuna birds whose wings are like gold (apaśyacchakunān kāṁścid dhiranyasadṛśacchadān) and thinks, “This is my dish today and there will also be [some] wealth” (asti bhakṣo mamādyāyaṁ vasu cedam bhaviyati).” Yet when he tries to wrap them up in his single garment, having seized his clothes, all [the birds] went off, through the sky (tasya tad vastram ādāya jagmuḥ sarve vihāyasā). The birds hovering above then said this speech to Nala (utpatantāḥ khagā vākyam etad āhus tato nalaṁ), having seen him naked, miserably standing on the ground, with face lowered downward (dṛṣṭvā digvāsasam bhūmau sthitaṁ dinam adhokumkham): “We are dice, O foolish one, wishing to rob your clothing (vayam aksāḥ sudurbuddhe tava vāso jihīrṣavaḥ)!”

Dejected and abashed, Nala hints at letting Damayantī return to Vidarbha alone by pointing the way out to her. But Damayantī is terrified by Nala’s scheme, saying: “[Since you are] deprived of kingdom and riches, unclothed, connected with hunger and sickness, how could I, having abandoned you in the desolate forest, go away (ḥṛtarājyaṁ ḥṛtadhanam vivastāṁ kṣucchramānvitam katham utsyāja gaccheyam
ahaṁ tvāṁ vijane vane)?” She also reminds him that “there is nothing equal to a wife considered as a medicinal herb of physicians in all sorrows (na ca bhāryāsamaṁ kiṁ cid vidyate bhisajāṁ mataṁ ausadhaṁ sarvaduhkheṣu).” Nala replies, “This is true (satyam etad)” and reassures her: “I have no desire to leave you; for what reason, timid one, are you afraid? I may abandon myself but not you, O irreproachable one (na cāham tyaktukāmas tvāṁ kimarthāṁ bhīra ṣaṅkase tyajeyam aham ātmānaṁ na caivaṁ tvām anindite)!”

Evidently, here Nala is lying to Damayantī, who is fully aware of her husband’s whims. She then suggests: “Let us go together to Vidarbha! If you want (sahitāv eva gacchāvo vidarbhāṁ yadi manyase), there the King [Bhīma] will honor you (vidarbharājas tatra tvāṁ pūjayiṣyatī)” and “you will live happily in our house (sukhaṁ vatsyasi no grhe).” Nala, however, vaingloriously rejects her proposal, saying, “How, having gone [there] for you as a winner, as the joy-booster, will I [now] go [back] for you as a loser, as the sorrow-booster (kathaṁ samṛddho gatvā tava harṣavivardhanaḥ paricyuto gāmisyaṁi tava śokavivardhanaḥ)?” Now together covered by a single garment (tāv ekavastra saṁvītāv), they arrive at a forest cabin, where Damayantī falls asleep. But under Kali’s influence, Nala severs the robe in two with a knife he finds in a corner of the cabin and goes away.

Chapter XI opens with Damayantī waking up alone in the wilderness. Deserted by Nala, she falls into madness, crying desperately, running hither and thither searching for her missing husband. Notably, she curses Kali in a poignant speech:
He, the distressed one, because of whose imprecation Nala bears the suffering (yasyābhīṣāpād duḥkhārto duḥkhāṁ vindati naiṣadhaṁ), may there occur to that creature a grief greater than this suffering (tasya bhūtasya tad duḥkhād duḥkhānamabhyadhikāṁ bhavet)! The wicked one who acted so toward the non-evil-minded Nala (apāpacetasaṁ pāpo ya evaṁ kṛtavāṁ nalaṁ), may he, having obtained more misery than him [Nala], live an unhappy life (tasmād duḥkkhataram prāpya jīvatvasukhajīvikāṁ)!6

Wandering around the forest, Damayantī falls prey to a hungry serpent. At this critical juncture, she barely feels any pain for herself since she is afflicted by thoughts of Nala (nātmānaṁ śocati tathā yathā śocati naiṣadhaṁ). Fortunately, a hunter arrives and kills the snake. Yet enthralled by Damayantī’s matchless beauty, her savior, going astray, makes bold advances toward her. Damayantī, distressed and bereft of her lord and kingdom (damayantī tu duḥkhārtā patirājyavinākṛtā), deems the time for speech has passed (atītavākpathe kāle) and, filled with anger, curses the hunter (śaśāpainaṁ ruṣānvitā): “Since surely I think about nobody other than Nala in [my] mind (yathā’haṁ naiṣadhād anyaṁ manasāpi na cintaye), let this wicked hunter fall lifeless (tathāyāṁ patatāṁ kṣudraḥ parāśur mṛgajīvanah)!” As soon as she pronounces these words, the hunter falls to the ground like a tree burnt by fire.

Yet this miraculous deliverance is merely a short-lived hiatus in Damayantī’s travails. In chapter XII, she continues to grapple with the crucibles of her plight as she navigates her passage through forested terrain haunted by ferocious animals. As the Sanskrit text describes her:

6 According to van Buitenen, here we have a vivid example of “viraha, or love in separation—a theme so beloved by later kāvya poets.” Moreover, Damayantī’s lament readily reminds the reader of “the ravings of Purūravas in the forest searching for Urvaśī in the fourth act of Kālidāsa’s Vikramorvaśiya or Rāma’s plaint in the Rāmayana.” van Buitenen, Mahabharata, 183.
Endowed with splendor, beauty, luster, and extreme constancy (tejasā yaśasā lakṣmyā sthityā ca parayā yutā), the daughter of Vidarbha then moves alone in different directions searching for Nala (vaidarbhī vicaratyekā nalam anveṣatī tadā); the princess, Bhīma’s daughter, did not fear anything there [in the forest] (nābibhyat sā nṛpasutā bhaimī tatrātha kasyacit), having arrived at the dreadful forest, afflicted by the plight of her protector (dāruṇām aṭavīn prāpya bhartṛvyasanapīḍitā).

Eventually, Damayantī mourns her misfortune in long-winded monologue of dismay from the top of a rock. Almost maddened, she ends up querrying the mountains for Nala’s whereabouts. Then reaching a hermitage, she recounts her plight to the hermits there, who promise her a beautiful future, saying, “The future, O beautiful one, will be beautiful for you (udarkas tava kalyāṇi kalyāṇo bhavitā).” The fortune-telling hermits then vanish, and Damayantī is once again left alone on her treacherous journey. Passing by an Aśoka tree, she inquires of it Nala’s whereabouts, and then eventually comes upon a caravan. Shocked by Damayantī’s miserable appearance while simultaneously amazed by her glowing elegance, the caravan leader asks her to reveal her identity. Damayantī relates what has befallen her and then joins the caravan.

In chapter XIII, another disaster ensues when a herd of wild elephants tramples the caravan, and the survivors blame Damayantī for bringing them misfortune. Damayantī, ashamed, runs off from them and, introspectively staring at her tribulations, cries:

Alas, the great dreadful anger of fate [is] above me (aho mamopari vidheḥ saṃrambhō dāruṇo mahān), welfare does not follow; from which karma [is] this fruit (nānubadhnāti kuśalam kasyedāṁ karaṇaḥ phalam)? I do not even remember doing any minute evil deed to anyone (na smarāmyasubham kiñcīt kṛtam kasyacid anvapi) through action, thought, [or] speech; from which karma [is] this fruit (karaṇaḥ manasā vācā kasyedāṁ karaṇaḥ phalam)? A great sin committed in other births, now befallen [me] (nūnaḥ
*janmāntarakṛtam pāpam āpatitaṃ mahat*, I, the one having gained this endless severe misfortune (*apaścimāṃ imāṃ kaśṭāṃ āpadam prāptavat�aham*)—the loss of husband and kingdom, the turning away from one’s relatives (*bhartrāyāpaharanāṃ svajanācca parājayaḥ*), the separation from husband, the severance from [my] two children (*bhartrā saha viyogaṅca tanayābhyyāña vicyuṭiḥ*), protectorless in the forest, haunted by many serpents (*nirnathatā vane vāso bahuvyālanīṣevite*).

Damayantī then continues on her route to the city of Cedi, where the king’s mother gives her shelter and assigns her as an attendant to her daughter Sunandā.

In chapter XIV, the narrative zooms in again on Nala. Having deserted Damayantī, Nala comes upon a jungle fire and hears someone desperately calling his name. Stepping into the fire, he finds the serpent king Karkoṭaka. Cursed by the sage Nārada, Karkoṭaka has ever since been awaiting Nala, his predicted savior. Nala takes the thumb-sized snake out of the fire, who then tells him to expect a boon, yet then unexpectedly bites him. Karkoṭaka’s venom not only deforms Nala’s appearance, but also causes Kali to suffer from inside Nala’s limbs. Karkoṭaka then instructs Nala to disguise himself as an ugly charioteer under the name of Vāhuka and go to King Ṛtuparna in Ayodhyā, who is skilled in the art of dice. There he should learn how to throw dice from Ṛtuparna and teach him the skills of horse riding in turn. Karkoṭaka also gives Nala a magic garment, telling him that he can recover his stately form at any time by putting it on.

In chapter XV, Nala arrives in Ayodhyā and enters the service of Ṛtuparna owing to his mastery of horse riding as well as his culinary skills. He is then appointed as the inspector of royal stables, with Jīvala and Vārṣṇeya as his subordinates. Here we should remember that after handing Nala and Damayantī’s
twins over to Bhīma, Nala’s one-time equerry Vārṣṇeya continued on his way to Ayodhyā and joined Ṛtuṣṇa’s retinue. Now, every evening, Nala utters the same verse in remembrance of Damayantī, moaning, “Where is she lying, afflicted by hunger and thirst, weary and ascetic (kva nu sā kṣutpipāsārtā śrāntā śete tapasvinī), recollecting the dull and indifferent man, next to whom she now possibly rests(smaranī tasya mandasya kam vā sādyopatiṣṭhati)?” When Jīvala, curious whom the ballad is about, asks him, Nala relates the checkered history of a madman who abandoned his spouse in the jungle.

By the end of chapter XV, both Nala and Damayantī have settled down in their respective shelters. In chapter XVI, Bhīma, anxious about his daughter’s whereabouts, sends to the city of Cedi a Brahman named Sudeva, who recognizes Damayantī among Sunandā’s servants. Approaching her, he informs her of Bhīma’s mandate to bring her home. Hearing his words, Damayantī begins weeping and bombards Sudeva with questions. Sunandā, noticing this strange conversation between her handmaid and a visiting Brahman, asks her mother to summon Sudeva, who then reveals to them Damayantī’s identity.

In chapter XVII, Sudeva not only relates the misfortunes of Damayantī, but also brings to Sunandā’s attention a birthmark mole between Damayantī’s eyebrows, which is covered by dirt. Sunandā thereupon washes up Damayantī’s forehead and the lovely mole appears. Seeing it, both Sunandā and her royal mother embrace Damayantī, since this servant in disguise has turned out to be the daughter of the royal mother’s sister, in other words, Sunandā’s maternal cousin. Following this blissful
reunion, Damayantī asks for an escort back to Vidarbha. With her son’s approval, the royal mother sends Damayantī home in a palanquin.

Once back in Vidarbha, Damayantī recovers her royal prestige. Yet disturbed by thoughts of her missing husband, Damayantī devises a series of stratagems and even subterfuges to bring Nala back to her; these doubtlessly form the highlight of the Nalopākhyānam. Here, once again, we have long-winded yet vivid depictions of her intelligence, devotion, and acumen. For instance, when Bhīma decides to send out Brahmans everywhere in search of his missing son-in-law, Damayantī instructs the messengers to recite a coded speech “again and again in all assemblies of men (brūyāsta janasaṁsatsu tatra punaḥ punaḥ).” The speech is in fact a riddle meticulously composed by Damayantī in a way that it both reflects her innermost pain and will “move Nala to take pity on her (kṛpāṁ kuryād yathā mayi).” It goes as follows:

Where did you go, O gambler, having cut off half my garment (kva nu tvam kitava chittvā vastrārdham prasthitam mama)? Having abandoned the dear and cherished woman sleeping in the forest, O beloved one (utsrijya vipine suptām anuraktām priyām priya), she, indeed, as indicated, sits there, waiting for you (sā vai yathā samādiśṭā tatrāste tvatpratīkṣīṇī) while being violently tormented, the young woman, clad in half a garment (dahyamānā bhṛṣaṁ bālā vastrārdhenābhisaṁjīta). For the ever-weeping lady with sorrow, O king (tasyā rudantyāḥ satataṁ tena šokena pārthiva), please do a favor, O hero, please give an answer (prasādaṁ kuru vai vīra pratīkṣyam dadasva ca)! By the wind intensely shaking, the fire burns the forest (vāyunā dhūyamāno hi vanam dahati pāvakaḥ); a wife is always to be supported and guarded by the husband (bhartavyā rakṣaṇīyā ca patnī hi patinā sadā). Why did this twofold duty of excellent dharma knowing one fail [for you] (tan naṣṭam ubhayam kasmād dharmajñasya satas tava)? Renowned, knowledgeable, well-born, compassionate, always (khyātaḥ prājñāḥ kalīnaśca sānukrāṣṭaḥ ca tvam sadā) you become pitiless, I assume, because of the complete destruction of my fate (saṁvyṛtto nirukräṣṭaḥ śaṅke madhāgyaśamsaṁkṣayā). Then, O tiger among men, take pity on me, O lord of men (tat kuruṣva naravyāghra dayāṁ mayi
narēśva)! “Mercy is the chief dharma” —from you [this was] heard by me (ānśaṁṣyaṁ paro dharmaṁ tvātta eva mayā śrutaḥ).

In chapter XVIII, a Brahman named Parṇāda returns with heartening news. He tells Damayanti that at Rūpaprana’s court in Ayodhyā he met “a deformed and short-armed charioteer named Vāhuka (sūtas tasya narēndrasya virūpo hrasvabāhuka).” After listening to Damayanti’s riddle, Vāhuka had groaned in anguish, approached Parṇada, and extolled Damayanti’s unblemished virtues, saying:

Even in distress, virtuous women of good family preserve (vaśamyaṁ api samprāptā gopāyanti kulastrīyah) themselves by themselves, these virtuous women by whom heaven is acquired, doubtlessly (ātmānaṁ ātmanā satyo jītasvargā na samśayah). Even forsaken by [their] husbands, [they] never get angry (rahitā bhartṛbhīś caiva na krudhyanti kadā cana); noble women continue living lives armored with righteous conduct (prāṇāṁścāritrakavacān dhārayanti varastrīyah). That she was abandoned by one in dire straits, a fool, or one fallen from bliss, she does not deign to be angry about it (viśamasthena mūḍhena paribhraṣṭasukhena ca yat sā tena parityaktā tatra na kroddhum arhati). [Though he] who, desiring to obtain sustenance, had his clothes taken away by šakana birds (prāṇayātraṁ pariprepsoḥ śakunair hṛtavāsasah) while [he] being consumed by anguish, the swarthy-complexioned woman does not deign to be angry (ādhibhir dahyamānaṁ śyāṁ na kroddhum arhati), [she], honored or ill-treated, having beheld her husband being in such a state (satkṛṣṭasatkṛṣṭā vāpi patiṁ dṛṣṭvā tathāgatam), bereft of prosperity and kingdom, starving, and overwhelmed by distress (bhraṣṭarājyaṁ śriyā hīnaṁ kṣadhitam vyasanāplutam).

A few details are worth noting here. First, Damayanti’s coded message is the height of self-debasement on the part of an innocent woman wronged by her husband. She goes so far as to consider Nala’s “pitiless” act the result of the “complete destruction” of her own fate. Nala, not impervious to this outcry of dismay, extols Damayanti’s primary virtue as “not deigning to be angry with him.” Feminists nowadays may consider Nala a brazen-faced sexist, but this certainly does not hold true for the
cultural milieu around the *Nalopākhyānam* at the time of its production. After all, it seems that Nala, owing to his passivity, serves merely as a foil to Damayantī, who is simultaneously valiant, proactive, and humble—the most valuable feminine virtues suggested by the Sanskrit text. Following this rationale, it comes as no surprise that, although moved by Damayantī’s message, Nala nonetheless takes no firm action to reunite with her. Once again, it is Damayantī who takes action to bring him back.

Specifically, Damayantī first beseeches her mother to conceal momentarily her real intentions from Bhīma. Meanwhile, she sends the Brahman Sudeva to Ayodhyā to let the king Ṛtuparṇa know that she will hold a second *svayaṁvara*. But she also gives Ṛtuparṇa only one day to make it there, hoping such short notice will prompt him to order Vāhuka—whom now she suspects to be Nala—to take the reins. Chapter XIX opens with Sudeva’s arrival in Ayodhyā. The news of the *svayaṁvara* plunges Nala into anguish, and he ponders, vacillates, and blames both himself and Damayantī, yet he is certain that Damayantī will not remarry because she already had children. Nala then consents to go. Along with the charioteer Vāṛṣṇeya, Nala sets out with the fastest horses, driving Ṛtuparṇa to the kingdom of Vidarbha where the *svayaṁvara* is about to be held. The astounding speed of the chariot convinces Vāṛṣṇeya that this Vāhuka with deformed limbs must indeed be Nala in disguise.

Chapter XX is a vital episode in the *Nalopākhyānam*. On the road, Ṛtuparṇa sees a Vibhītaka tree whose nuts are used in dice games. Counting its nuts and leaves, he announces the number to Vāhuka. Despite having been ordered by Ṛtuparṇa not to interrupt the journey, Vāhuka stops the chariot and dismounts, cleaves the tree
branches, counts the nuts and leaves, and gets exactly the same number. Amazed by Ṛtuparna’s calculating skill, Vāhuka then offers to exchange his knowledge of horsemanship for Ṛtuparna’s knowledge of dice counting. Ṛtuparna kindly agrees, and Vāhuka obtains what he has been longing for, namely, the “heart of the dice” (akṣahṛdaya).

As soon as Nala grows skillful in dice, Kali exits from his body, vomits out Karkoṭaka’s poison, and resumes his original form. Here the Sanskrit text says:

[Nala], the lord of Niṣadha, wrathful, wanted to curse him [Kali] (taṁ śaptum aicchat kupito niṣadhdhāhipatīr nalaḥ). Kali, frightened, trembling, with his hands folded in the Añjali gesture, spoke to him [Nala] (tam uvāca kalir bhīto vepamānaḥ kṛtānjaliḥ): “Please hold your anger, O lord, I will give you supreme fame (kopāṁ saṁyaccha nṛpate kṛtiṁ dāsyāmi te parām). Indrasena’s wrathful mother [Damayantī] cursed me before (indrasenasya jananī kuptītā mā 'sapat purā) when deserted by you; since then, extremely afflicted (yadā tvayā parityaktā tato ‘ham bhṛṣapīḍitaḥ), I have lived in you, O King, very painfully, O unconquered one (avasaṁ tvayi rājendra suduḥkham aparājitā), being burnt by the poison of the serpent king, day and night (viṣeṇa nāgarājasya dahyamāno divāniśam). I have come to your protection; please listen to this word of mine (śaraṇaṁ tvāṁ prapanno 'smi śṛṇu cedam vaco mama): those wise men who in the world will glorify you (ve ca tvāṁ manuṣyā loke kīrtaviṣayantvāndritāḥ), the fear produced from me will never be theirs (matprasūtaṁ bhayaṁ teśāṁ na kadācid bhaviṣyati), if you do not curse me, the frightened one coming to your protection (bhavārtāṁ saraṇaṁ yātāṁ yadi māṁ tvam na śapsyase).

Suppressing his anger, Nala pardons Kali, who enters the Vibhītaka tree. Now liberated from Kali’s influence, Nala joyfully carries on his ride.\(^7\)

In chapter XXI, after a journey of one hundred yojanas, the king Ṛtuparna,\(^8\)

\(^7\) The Sanskrit text states at the end of chapter V that Nala and Damayantī had two children—a son named Indrasena and a daughter named Indrasenā.

\(^8\) Here it is interesting to note that Kali’s affliction was instigated by Damayantī’s curse and not by that of the gods. Kali’s confession once again gives credit to Damayantī’s role in the *Nalopākhyānam* as a fully empowered character acting as Nala’s de facto protector.
Vārṣṇeya, and Nala under the aspect of Vāhuka arrive in Vidarbha. Ascending to the rooftop of the palace, Damayantī beholds their approach. Not seeing Nala, she sends her handmaid Keśini to make inquiries to Vāhuka, whom she suspects to be her missing husband. The following chapters XXII through XXIV mark the most compelling episode of the *Nalopākhyānam*, namely, the scenes of reunion.

Following Damayantī’s instructions, Keśini first asks Vāhuka the purpose of their visit, and he replies that he, as Rtuparṇa’s charioteer, has driven the king one hundred yojanas all the way from Ayodhyā to attend Damayantī’s second svaṁvara.

Likely puzzled by the presence of two charioteers in a single cart, Keśini asks Vāhuka:

“Where does that third man [Vārṣṇeya] of your party come from; whose is he? And whose are you? How has this undertaking been placed on you (atha yo ’sau tṛīyo vah sa kutah kasya vā punah, tvaṁca kasya kathaṁcedaṁ tvayi karma samāhitam)?”

Vāhuka replies:

He is the renowned Vārṣṇeya—Puṇyaśloka’s charioteer [Puṇyaśloka being Nala’s moniker, meaning literally “well-reputed”]; when Nala ran away, O good lady, he [Vārṣṇeya] turned to Bhāṅgāsura’s son [Rtuparṇa]. I am skillful in horsemanship and also in the art of chariot riding, myself appointed by Rtuparṇa as his charioteer and cook (puṇyaślokasya vai sūto vārṣṇeya iti viśrutah, sa nale pradrute bhadre bhāṅgāsurim upasthitah, aham apyaśvakuśalaṁ sūtate ca pratiśṭhitah, ṛtuparnaṁ sārathye bhojane ca vṛtaḥ svayam).

Keśini then asks: “Does Vārṣṇeya know where the king Nala went? Was anything said by him in your presence, O Vāhuka (atha jānati vārṣṇeyah kva nu rājā nalo gatah, kathaṁca tvayi vaśena kathitaṁ syāt tu vāhuka)?” Vāhuka/Nala replies:

Having left the two children of the Nala of misfortunate karma (ihaiva putrau niśipya nalasyāśubhakaranāṁ), he went off as he wished; he does not know
the king of Naśadha [Nala] (gatas tato yathākāmaṁ naiśa jānāti naśadham), nor does any other man know Nala, O beautiful lady (na cānyāḥ puruṣaḥ kaścin nalaṁ vetti yaśasvini). The king, whose form is lost, wanders hidden in this world (gūḍhaḥ carati loke 'śmin naṣṭarūpo mahīpatiḥ); the self [ātma] surely knows Nala, she who is seamless to that (ātmaiva hi nalaṁ vetti yā cāsyta tadantarā); Nala certainly never declares any signs themselves (na hi vai svāni liṅgāni nalāḥ śaṁsati karhicit).

Keśini then recites to Vāhuka/Nala Damayantī’s riddle speech and urges him to repeat what he had said to the Brahman Sudeva. Vāhuka/Nala, in a choked voice, complies.

After hearing Keśini’s report, Damayantī, believing Vāhuka to be Nala in disguise, then launches another series of investigations by asking Keśini to observe silently how Vāhuka, without fire or water, performs his labor duties as Ṛtuparna’s cook. She moreover orders:

Having closely inspected all this, please report [his] behavior to me (etat sarvāṁ samiṅśya tvāṁ caritaṁ me nivedaya), whichever sign, divine or human, you see in Vāhuka (nimittaṁ yat tvayā dṛṣṭaṁ vāhuke daivamānuṣaṁ), [and] whatever else you may see, that is to be related to me by you (yaccānyadapi paśyethās taccākhyeyaṁ tvayā mama)!

Keśini, “having observed the horse-knower’s signs, again came back (niśāmyāha hayajñasya liṅgāṁ punar āgamat)” and gives Damayantī a meticulous account of the superordinary behaviors she has witnessed by Vāhuka:

Drawing near to a low entrance, he never bows down his head (hrasvam āśādyā saṁcārāṁ nāsau vinamate kvacī); having seen him, it [the entrance] suitably and comfortably rises up (taṁ tu dṛṣṭvā yathāsaṁgam utsarpati

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9 Bāhuka/Nala’s words are slightly serpentine here, yet the philosophical implications are deep. The clue lies in the feminine ending in yā and tadantarā. The “she who is seamless to that” refers undoubtedly to the discerning Damayantī. As Hiltebeitel acutely remarks, “In any event, the self that knows Nala and the self that Damayantī knows is one self which knows itself as one-another.” See Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 236. Accordingly, Nala knows that he is known by Damayantī, and he declares no signs other than those known by her.
yathāsukham). For the sake of Ṛtuparna, food in great quantities (ṛtuparṇasya cārthāya bhogaṇyam anekasāh) [is] also dispatched there by the king [Bhima], abundant meat produced from animals (preṣitaṁ tatra rājñā tu maṁsāṁ bahu ca pāśavam). For the sake of the washing of it, jars were prepared there (tasya prakṣālanaṁ kumbhas bahu ca pāśavam). Then, having done the washing, Vāhuka went forth (tataḥ prakṣālanāṁ kṛtvā samadhiśritya vāhukāḥ), [and] having grasped a handful of grass, he held it toward the sun (tr̥ṇamuṣṭīṁ samādāya savitus taṁ mādadhat), [and] then [was] a intensely blazing fire (atha prajvalitas tatra sahasā havyavāhanāḥ). Having witnessed that extraordinary wonder, amazed, I came here (tad adbhutatamāṁ drṣṭvā vismitā 'ham ihāgatā). And another great marvel was seen by me (anyacca tasmin sumahad āścaryam laksitaṁ māyāḥ): he who having even touched the fire, he was not burnt, O fair lady (yad agnim api saṁsprśya naivāsaḥ dahiye śubhe). According to his wish, [the water] flows into the given direction and quickly sinks (chandena codakaṁ tasya vahatyāvarjitaṁ drutam). Another extremely great wonder having been seen by me (atīva cānyat sumahad āścaryam drṣṭavyathām): he who, having seized flowers with his two hands, gently squeezed [them] (yat sa puṣpāṇiḥ pāṇibhyāṁ tena puṣpāṁ tānyatha), become truly fragrant and fresh (bhūya eva sugandhīṁ hṛṣitāṁ bhavanti ca).

Continuing to suspect Vāhuka of being Nala in disguise (sā śaṅkamānā bhartāraṁ nalam vāhukarūpiṇaṁ), Damayantī next asks Keśini to steal a piece of meat he has prepared. “Having tasted the delicious piece of meat prepared by Nala as [she had] many times before, having thought, Damayantī cried out in distress, ‘The charioteer [must be] Nala (socitā nalasiddhasya maṁsasya bahu śaḥ purā, prāśya matvā nalam sūtaṁ prākroṣad bhṛṣaduhkhitaṁ)!’” She then orders her children sent to Vāhuka/Nala, who immediately recognizes them: “He, having approached the children as if they were the sons of the gods (bāhukas tu samāsādyā sutaṁ surasutopamanuḥ), started to cry loudly (sasvaraṁ praruroda ha).”

Having obtained permission from her parents, Damayantī then has
Vāhuka/Nala ushered into her room. Thereupon, seized with sorrow, Damayantī, clad in a brown-red garment, her hair twisted together and her face covered with mire (kāśāyavasanā jaṭilā malapaikīnikī), addresses Nala:

Has someone—dharma-knower by name—been seen by you before, O Vāhuka (pūrva druṣṭas tvayā kaścid dharmajñō nāma vāhuka)? The man who, having abandoned a woman sleeping in the wood and gone away (suptām utsṛjya vipine gato yah puruṣāḥ striyam), the blameless and beloved wife in a witnessless lonely spot, stupefied by fatigue (anāgasam priyāṃ bhāryāṃ vijane śramamohitām), who, having discarded [her], would go away, except Nala the well-reputed one (apahāya tu ko gacchet punyaslokam ṛte nalam)? What [guilt] have been perpetrated by me from childhood toward that king (kiṁ nu tasya mayā bālyād aparāddhā mahīpateḥ), he who, having abandoned me, seized by slumber in the wood, the goer (yo mām utsṛjya vipine gatavān nidrayā hṛtām), having openly rejected the gods, he who was chosen by me previously (sākṣād devān apāhāya vrto yah sa mayā purā). How, abandoning the devoted, affectionate [one], she who has children (anuvratāṃ sābhikāmā putrīṃ tyaktavān katham)? By the fire, having taken my hand in front of the gods (agnau pāṇigṛhītvā tu devānām agratas tathā), “I will be,” having pledged the truth, where did it go (bhaviṣyāṃti satyaṁ ca pratiśrutya kva tad gatam)?

Facing Damayantī’s indictment, Nala mounts an apology for his innocence:

That my kingdom was lost, I myself [was] not the doer (mama rājyaṁ pranaṣṭām yan nāham tat kṛtavān svayam)—that was wrought by Kali, O timid one, that I forsook you (kalinā tat kṛtaḥ bhīru yac ca tvām aham atyajam). The wicked one was struck by you and the painful curse long since (tvayā tu pāpaḥ kṛcchreṇa sāpenābhihataḥ purā), dwelling in the forest, afflicted, mourning for me day and night (vanasthayā duḥkhitayā sācanyā māṁ divānaśaṁ)—Kali, he dwelt in my body, being burnt by your curse (sa maccharīre tvacchāpād dahyaṁāno ’vasat kaliḥ), he [was] constantly scorched by your curse, as if a fire [were] added to another fire (tvacchāpadagdhaḥ satataṁ so ’gnāv agnir ivāhitaḥ), [he] was subdued by my strenuous effort and religious austerity (mama ca vyavasāyena tapasā caiva nirjitaḥ). With this end of suffering, it is to be for us two, O fair lady (duḥkhasyāntena cānena bhavitavyāṁ hi nau śubhe)! Having set me free, the evil one departed, and then I came here (vimucya māṁ gataḥ pāpaḥ sa tato ’ham iha cāgataḥ), for your sake, O one of the wide hips, no other aim of mine (tvadartham vipulaśrōṇi na hi me ’nyat prayojanaṁ). How indeed a woman, the beloved and faithful husband (kathaṁ nu nārī bhartāram
anuraktam anuvratam having let go, so that she would choose another, you, O timid one (utsṛjya varayed anyain yathā tvam bhīru karhicit)? Messengers travel all over the earth on account of the king’s order (dūtās caranti prthivīṁ kṛṣṇāṁ nṛpatiśāsanāḥ): “Bhima’s daughter allegedly indeed will choose a second husband (bhaimi kila sma bhartāraṁ dvitiyaṁ varayisyati), practiced according to her own inclinations, as she wishes, a suitable match for herself (svairavī yathākāmam anurūpam ivātmanah).” Just having heard [this], thus, hurried, Bhāngāsura’s son [Ṛṭuparna] approached (śrutvaiva caivam tvarito bhāṅgāsuraṁ upasthitaḥ).

Evidently, Nala’s reply is not merely a disclaimer but also an overt charge against Damayanti’s “infidelity”! Here we have once again a vivid portrayal of Damayanti’s much-cherished self-debasement, almost begging for Nala’s pardon, as the Sanskrit text says, “Damayanti, having heard Nala’s lament, (damayanti tu tac chrutvā nalasya paridevitam), with her hands folded in the Aṅjali gesture, shivering, frightened, uttered the speech (prāñjalir vepamānā ca bhītā vacanam abravīt).” Her exact words are as follows:

O noble one, you are not entitled to suspect me of guilt (na mām arhasi kalyāṇa doṣena pariśāṅkitum); the gods having been rejected by me, you, lord of Niṣadha, were chosen (mayā hi devān utsṛjya vr̥tas tvam niṣadhādhipa). For the sake of obtaining you, the Brahmans went everywhere (tavādhigamanārthaṁ tu sarvato brāhmaṇaṁ gataḥ), my words, being chanted through verses, to ten directions (vākyāṁi mama gāthāṁ gāyamānā diśo daśa). Then the wise Brahman named Pāṇāda, O lord of earth (tatas tvam brāhmaṇo vidvān parṇādo nāma pārthiva), approached you in the country of Kośala, at Ṛṭupāṇa’s residence (abhyagacchat kośalāyām Ṛṭuparaniveśane), when the speech done by him [Pāṇāda] and the answer thus properly spoken (tena vākye kṛte sanyak pratīvākye tathāḥṛte); this expediency was seen by me, O prince of Niṣadha, to bring you back. (upāyo ‘yaṁ mayā dr̥ṣto naiṣadhānayane tava). Except for you, surely no other in the world, in the course of one day, O prince (tvāṁ rte na hi loke ‘nya ekāṁ br̥ihvīpate), would be able to cover one hundred yojanas with horses, O ruler of men (samartho yojanaśatāṁ gantar asvair narādhīpā)! I may touch by this truth your feet, O king (sprteyam tena satyena pādāv etau mahīpate), for I commit no offense, not even in mind (yathā nāsatkṛtaṁ kiñcid manasāpi carāmyaham). He [who] goes in this world, the eyewitness of creatures, the
[god of] wind (ayaṁ carati loke ṣmin bhūtasākṣi sadāgatiḥ), let him deprive me of breath if I commit a sin (eṣa me muṇcatu prāṇān yadi pāpaṁ carāmyaham)! The sun [who] thus always moves beyond the earth (tathā carati tigmāṁśuḥ pareṇa bhuvanām sadā), let him deprive me of breath if I commit a sin (sa muṇcatu mama prāṇān yadi pāpaṁ carāmyaham)! The [deity of the] moon [who] of all beings moves within as a witness (candramāḥ sarvabhūtānāṁ antaścarati sākṣīvat), let him deprive me of breath if I commit a sin (sa muṇcatu mama prāṇān yadi pāpaṁ carāmyaham)! These three gods [who] carry the entire three worlds (ete devāḥ trayaḥ kṛtsnāṁ trailokyāṁ dhārayantī vai), let them speak out thus the truth, or just today abandon me (vibruvantu yathāsatyam ete vā 'dyā tyajantu mām)!

Once again, Damayantī startles and moves the heavenly beings. From the air, the wind (vāyu) announces:

She is not one who has done evil, O Nala, we are speaking the truth to you (naiṣaṁ kṛtvātī pāpaṁ nala satyaṁ bravīmi te). O king, the prosperous treasure of virtue has been well protected by Damayantī (rājaṁ śīlanidhiḥ spīto damayantyā surakṣitaḥ), [say] we, her witnesses and protectors for three years (sākṣīno rakṣinās cāsyā vayaṁ trīn parivatsarāṁ); this unequalled expediency was contrived for your sake by her (upāyo vihitaś cāyaṁ tvadartham atulo 'nyā). No human being could go one hundred [yajanas] during one day in this world except you (na hyekāhnā śataṁ gantā tvāṁ 'ṛte 'nyāḥ pumān iha). Bhīma’s daughter has been obtained by you and you by Bhīma’s daughter, O king (upapannā tvayā bhaimī tvaṁca bhaimyā mahīpate). Now no distrust is to be had by you, please unite with your wife (nātra śaṅkā tvayā kāryā saṅgaccha saha bhāryayā)!

On this auspicious occasion, the wind’s testimony is accompanied by a formulaic device in the machinery of Sanskrit literature, namely: “While [the wind] was speaking, in the air a shower of flowers dropped (tathā bruvati vāyu tu puspavṛṣṭiḥ papāta ha), divine drums resounded, an auspicious breeze blew (devadundubhayo nedur vavau ca pavanaḥ śivaḥ).”

Thereafter, Nala gazes at his blameless wife, and his jealousy and doubts melt away. Then, putting on the vest given him by the serpent king Karkoṭaka, he resumes
his proper form. Immediately following the couple’s reunion in chapter XXV, Nala thanks the king Ṛtuparna for providing him hospitality and teaches him, as promised, the skills of horse riding. In chapter XXVI, Nala returns to Niṣadha, challenges his brother Puṣkara to a throw of dice, and gains back his lost kingdom in one go (ekapāṇena vireṇa naleṇa sa parājitaḥ). Nala then says to Puṣkara: “The action by which I was defeated hitherto was not done by you (na tat tvayā kṛtam karma yenāham vijitah purā), it was done by Kali, and you—the fool—do not understand (kalina tat kṛtam karma tvain tu mūḍha na budhyase).” Yet Nala does not seek revenge on his brother but pardons him instead; then, lavishly endowing him with wealth, he blesses him and sends him back to his town. Only afterward does Nala bring Damayantī back to Niṣadha.

The Nalopākhyānam thus draws to a joyful close:

Then the splendor spread throughout India, he [Nala] among kings (tathā prakāṣatāṁ yāto jambūdvīpe sa rājasu) ruled again. The very glorious one, having recovered that kingdom (punah śaśāsa tad rājyam pratyāhṛtya mahāyaśāḥ), he duly worshiped [the gods] with various sacrifices and abundant donations (īje ca vividhair yajñair vidhivac cāptadakṣiṇaiḥ).
Acknowledgment of Previous Publications

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