

Genova on Mattiussi (2015)

Mattiussi, Laurent. *Mallarmé et la Chine*. L'Harmattan, 2015, pp. 270, ISBN 978-2-343-07034-6

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In his study on the relationship between one of the most important poet-thinkers of the French nineteenth century and the history of Chinese aesthetic expression, Laurent Mattiussi unveils some perhaps unexpected connections between the work of Stéphane Mallarmé and the dynamics of Chinese culture. The author makes clear that he does not claim that these correlations are obvious, deliberate, or direct; rather, describing the parallels richly as “proches constellations intellectuelles et spirituelles” (30), he embarks on a kind of comparative archaeological adventure to analyze certain similarities he identifies in the poet’s work and in Chinese art and thought.

In fact, Mallarmé seems to have been more interested in things Japanese, not Chinese (despite the widespread European confusion between the two in his day), and he was active in fin-de-siècle *japoniste* culture. Yet while Mallarmé spoke no Chinese and never visited the country, it is undeniable that he shared a fascination with Eastern culture (and some curiosity specifically about China), with a number of his peers and successors (Mattiussi highlights Judith Gautier, Paul Claudel and Victor Segalen, for instance), identifiable even in his earliest work, such as the 1866 “Las de l’amer repos...,” which includes the clearly significant verse: “Imiter le Chinois au cœur limpide et fin.” Mattiussi offers a detailed reading of this poem, underscoring what he sees as the extremely evocative image of the Chinese painter depicted in the text. He argues that this early piece not only offers an important musing on poetics itself, but also exemplifies the spiritual crisis Mallarmé undergoes in the 1860s, and points to Chinese art as a means of salvation from that very *angoisse*. Mallarmé’s interest in China, discernible in the 1866 poem, may indeed emerge from his deep desire to rethink the relationship of poetry and painting, as well as to reformulate vital artistic notions such as representation and figuration. Mattiussi contends that a number of influences in the French writer’s literary and philosophical *formation*, such as Neoplatonism, German Romanticism, and the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, helped to create in his aesthetics a sensibility (though ultimately embodying more a natural intuitive sense than a learned analytical understanding) that mirrors many vital elements in Chinese culture. Again, direct references to China are rare in Mallarmé’s work and must be teased out, states Mattiussi, from their implicit, even at times seemingly invisible site couched deeply within his writing.

Certainly, readers familiar with Mallarmé’s *œuvre* will recognize the significance of the elements that Mattiussi emphasizes: the role of silence, the menace of the blank page, the haunting sensation of the void, the vibrant relationship of presence and absence, the reconsideration of objects commonly considered as banal, the preference for nuance over description, and the stylistic exploration of fundamental figures of rhetoric, such as metaphor and metonymy. In his comparative approach, the critic maintains that these same preoccupations characterize much prominent Chinese writerly art and modes of thought, particularly evident in the tenets of philosophical Taoism and classical Chinese poetry. Such parallels are also evident in the Chinese aesthetic appreciation of suggestive, allusive, and indirect forms of expression.

Further, backgrounding his argument with references to many scholars who have examined various aspects of the Europe-Asia relationship, notably the extensive work of François Jullien (with whose analysis the critic takes issue on certain points), Mattiussi accents the importance of avoiding an Orientalist trap, and proposes a rethinking of the notion of “otherness” with regard to a European figure of Mallarmé’s stature, integrating instead that which seems different into a more complete appreciation of the French poet’s work. As Mattiussi notes, the interpretation of the East by representatives of the West has never quite reached a true level of neutrality, but in his own study the aim to reread Mallarmé in light of Chinese concepts involves highlighting potential similarities, not accentuating obvious differences. For him, the art of comparative analysis must include the question of the perspective of the scholar, with special emphasis on the notion of the *regard*: From how far away is the subject at hand being analyzed? Metaphorically, is a microscope or a telescope a more useful tool? How does the inescapable bias of the lens or filter of the analyzing eye distort the subject at hand?

In the end, Mattiussi’s book sheds important light on the intriguing possibilities of East-West studies with regard to France’s expanding interest in Asian culture in the 1800s, while it also asserts a new perspective into an ongoing, larger philosophical debate (particularly with regard to earlier studies, such as Jean François Billeter’s 2006 *Contre François Jullien*), surrounding Mallarmé’s still ambiguous role in the complex processes of cross-cultural dialogue.

Volume: 45.1-2

Year:

- 2016