

## Talisman

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In 1831, Honoré de Balzac published *Talisman*, centered around a piece of “Magic Skin”. In the story, this magical object is discovered in a Parisian curiosity shop by a destitute young man, Raphael de Valentin on his way to end his life after losing his last coin on the gambling table. His plan is intercepted. Upon deciphering the “magical” (in fact vaguely arabesque<sup>1</sup>) inscription on the Wild Ass's skin, Raphael seals the pact with his life: the skin will grant him any wish, only at the cost of its shrinkage, representative of the life of its owner.

The fantastical symbiosis of desire and decay in *Talisman* would later be echoed in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where the beauty of the magical picture slowly erodes as moral vices consume its subject. Frightened by the eventual truth confrontation, the unscathed Gray stabs the portrait of horror, bringing his own demise and salvation of the decaying picture.

What the *Talisman* offers, is beyond the perilous duality of protection and erosion, beauty and horror, excess and decay—but an instability that is infinitely susceptible to conditions of faith, desire, choice and action/leverage. In both cases, the talismanic event performs a rite of possibility, for the extraterrestrial, irrational force to animate an object that has a hold of its beholder's life. The perishing portrait brings out aspects more disturbing than the Faustian gamble on life against what it has to offer. The location of disturbance seems to overlap with the site of fascination in Dorian's picture: not in the fact that it suffers on his behalf, but that it is a picture that shows a relentless truth—undeniable and absolute truth, glaring in your face.

*Pastorale* by the Nabi painter Ker-Xavier Roussel anchors the exhibition. Though overlooked in their time, Roussel and the Nabis are an important source of reference for younger painters today. Created at the turn of the twentieth century, *Pastorale* is symbolic of the convergence of French modernism, Japonism, and decorative art.<sup>2</sup> At the center of the green field sits a backlit figure, suggestive of Pan, the Great God of the

Wild, with arms raised ready to play his flute, alluring the maiden and awakening the senses. Yet, upon closer inspection, one realizes that Roussel never actually painted His flute.

In response to this (absent) summon, *Talisman* enlists an intergenerational group of artists working across their own contexts and mediums, and recenters the talismanic pull that enchants an object of desire and belief. Bronze snails crawl from Kiki Smith's naturalistic learnings. The totemic face weeps in Raphaela Simon's layered dark sky. The portrait of Elizabeth I fixes R. H. Quaytman's rumination, suspended between face and mask in pictorial inversion. Martin Wong's cacophony of signs toys with self-exoticization as his erratic poetry scripts urban oracles in mystical inflection.<sup>3</sup> Exalted under the elephant's snare, a lady is held fast by a circle of biped cats in E'wao Kagoshima's painted tapestry. Phantasmorphic dancers emerge like cranes out of Oliver Bak's meteor mist, ringing turquoise tears. Alastair Mackinven's painting emanates inner magnetism between waking and dreaming.<sup>4</sup> Wang Ye's red, embroidered Queen Sago glistens in vegetal and anatomic allures. Heidi Lau conjures ceramic rites through vessels that hum from the depth of symbolic occlusion. Pauline Rintsch evokes tactile sensibility at the fingertips as Anna-Maria Škroba stages elegant gestural retrieval in a silhouette. Smith's *Minou* watches with whiskers alert.

What does this shared yearning for myth, reification, and the applied surface reveal about our present psychic and cultural condition?

Emerging from the Arabic *ṭilsam* and circulating in Europe from the seventeenth century onward, *talisman* crystallizes the exotic imagination that would later inform the sediments of Orientalism. It lingers outside empiricist rationality, yet persistently within the realm of sensuality. An item of rarity in the disarray of material excess and a dangerous temptation in moments of spiritual impasse. “Enchantment” locates the talisman between its material remnants and its cultural citations—stirring fetishistic

impulses and symbolic nostalgia. Moving between object and residue, the artists engage talismanic rituals and symbols to reveal the power—and precarity—of enchantment, recalibrating the spiritual coordinates of contemporary art in salvation and depletion.

*“Les hommes ont-ils le pouvoir de faire venir l'univers dans leur cerveau, ou leur cerveau est-il un talisman avec lequel ils abolissent les lois du temps et de l'espace?”*

As Balzac deduced in *La Peau de Chagrin* (1831), the real *Talisman* might just be the symbol of creative imagination itself, which ultimately is the possessor of the magical power that can defy the confines of time and space. So, let it rip, renew, reveal and glare, before it knows where to take us next.

Text by Hindley Wang.

## Endnote <sup>1</sup>

By Hindley Wang

The word “Talisman” first came (back) to me in the form of its ancillary, “The Magic Skin”, in the footnote of Yuk Hui’s *Post-Europe* (2024) citing his mentor, the late Bernard Stiegler. Stiegler deployed the provocative imagery of the magical object—whose shrinkage represents the lifespan of its possessor—to instill caution for the impending demise of Europe, in the face of the global becoming demanded by the age of techno-capitalism:

“[Europe] will have no future...unless it is able to turn its philosophy into something global, and thereby stamp through with the intrinsically accidental character of thought—and, furthermore, with the intrinsically non-European character of Europe and its future.”<sup>1</sup>

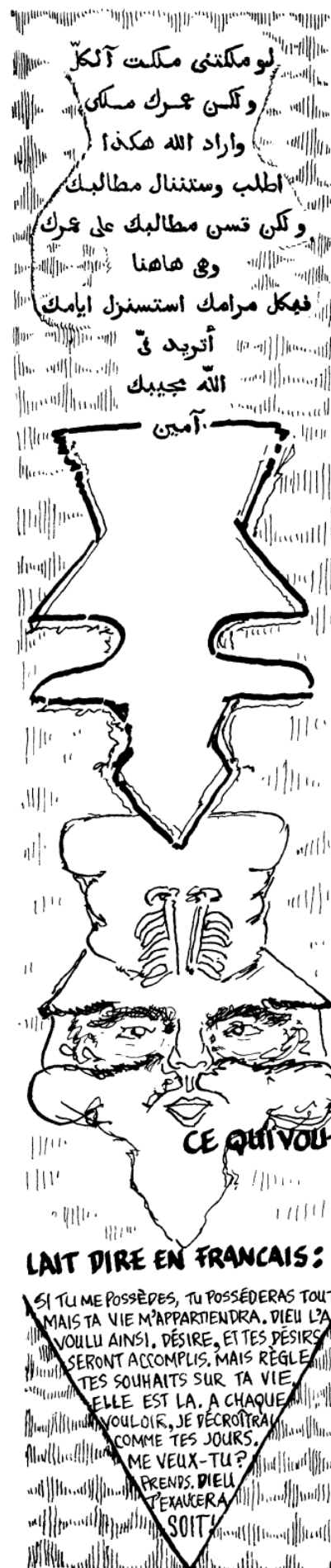
Yet the accident of thought here, was that this figurative expression for gradual decrease was precisely a product of “non-European” contact and metabolization, concealed in the cloak of the fantastic. If we trace the magical “shagreen” to its beginning, we’d land in the decadence of Napoleonic France, the beginning of colonial expansion and the rise of Realism in the early 19th century.<sup>2</sup> The Near-Eastern magical object at the center of Honoré de Balzac’s novel *Talisman* (1831) was discovered in a Parisian curiosity shop, amid an extravagant display of displaced treasures gathered from all corners of the world. A closet of erratic information and (mis)translation.

And mistranslation it is that seals the pact of our destitute protagonist, Raphael de Valentin, with the titular talisman, as he translates the “sanskrit” inscribed on its surface:

Si tu me possèdes, tu possèderas tout...  
A chaque vouloir, je décroîtais COMME tes jours.  
Me veux-tu?  
PRENDS.  
Dieu t'exaucera vouloir

<sup>1</sup> Stiegler, Bernard. “The Magic Skin; or, The Franco-European Accident of Philosophy after Jacques Derrida.” *Qui Parle* 18, no. 1 (2009): 99.

<sup>2</sup> This period was stamped by the “accident” of discovery in Napoleon’s conquest of Egypt in 1798: The Rosetta Stone, as the material key for Western scholars to decipher Egyptian hieroglyphic inscriptions with Greek, unlocking access to a lost civilization that would solidify the imagination and knowledge of a “Near East”.



Driven by poverty and desire for all that life has to offer, Raphael wields his Orientalist knowledge, deciphers the manual of magic and submits to the fantastic forces with his life—knowing that each wish fulfillment would chase him closer to death. Yet, the metonym of the skin as the physical emblem of his life was not part of the original inscription that Balzac referenced.

As it turns out the original text was not “sanskrit” either, but Arabic, which did not entail the shrinking of the skin, only the days of its holder.<sup>3</sup> Whilst the fabulous power of the magical object was only realized in Raphael's belief at the moment of his translation, the touch of “magic” came from Balzac. In an effort to amplify the enchantment of the unknown object, Balzac exposed the particular failure of Orientalist knowing, that was trapped at the crossroad of empiricism and enchantment, rational and emotional.<sup>4</sup> This “accident”, intentional or not, marked this story to be a piece of realism, reflective of its contextual imagining of a globe, through dispersed artefacts, discontextualized objects, standing in as distant others in the Western Museum.

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3 Nykl, Alois Richard. “The Talisman in Balzac’s *La Peau de Chagrin*.” *Modern Language Notes* 34, no. 8 (1919): 479–81. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2915576>.

4 Balzac wrote in *Talisman*: «Les hommes ont-ils le pouvoir de faire venir l’univers dans leur cerveau, ou leur cerveau est-il un talisman avec lequel ils abolissent les lois du temps et de l’espace?» (Do humans have the power to bring the universe into their brains, or is their brain a talisman with which they abolish the laws of time and space).