

## Roland Barthes, Japan and *l'utopie de l'écriture*

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### 1. *What is utopia for?* Japan as a Conceptual Crossroad against Western Cultural Oppression

In a passage of *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975), entitled “What is utopia for?,” utopia is defined as «familiar to the writer», implying a suspension and an overcoming of sense, promising no forced value and remaining in the realm of possibility:

The utopia is familiar to the writer, for the writer is a bestower of meaning: his task (or his delight) is to give meanings, names, and he can do so only if there is a paradigm, functioning of the *yes/no* mechanism, alternation of the two values: for the writer, the world is a medal, a coin, a double surface of reading, his own reality occupying its revers and the utopia the obverse. The Text, for example, is a utopia; its – semantic – function is to make the present literature, art, language signify, insofar as they are declared *impossible*. . . (76-77; emphasis in original).

Evolving from the concept of a political utopia of «social universality» – which Barthes upheld in *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), «as if utopia could only be the strict converse of the present evil, as if division could only be answered, ultimately, by indivision» – these lines advance the proposal of a textual utopia, associated with an ideal multiplicity «hostile to massification» in both a linguistic and semiological perspective, resulting in the image of infinite difference, within which the sign is freed of any forced meaning and opened towards a thrilling, non-conflictual, and otherwise impossible, parcellation of sense (77). It is exactly this type of utopia – intended as a non-confrontational suspension of meaning – which appears at stake in one of Barthes’s most beautiful essays, written a few years before *R.B. by R.B.: the Empire of Signs*, published by Skira in 1970 and inspired by the three periods (in 1966, 1967, 1968) spent at Tokyo’s Franco-Japanese Institute by invitation of its director Maurice Pinguet, and which collects Barthes’s contemporary meditations on the concepts of *Text*, *Writing*, and *Desire*.

Focusing on those fundamental notions, this paper will first linger on the reportage’s main theoretical features; its closer reading will eventually enable the exploration of the

concept of *utopie* through Japan's textual meaning:<sup>1</sup> that of a *déprise du sens* («loss of meaning»), which revives the dream of the *écriture blanche* («white writing»: an empty language fractioned and stripped of any predetermined significance, conceived as a non-functional game of free, although strong signifiers, opposed to Western mythologies), bonding it to the formulation of a special 'theory of love' and to the dynamic of the fragment, the unstructured and frail literary form which can embody the utopic function on the written page (Coste 151).<sup>2</sup> It will become clear how writing becomes in Barthes's Japan a means of breaking the symbolic function of the sign, the compulsory bond between the sign itself and the phantom of its referent: in Japan, in fact, every sign opens only to another sign, just as happens in a famous Buddha statue, whose face-mask reveals underneath only another mask; or as in the ritual of gift wrapping, a *mise en abyme* of enclosures which progressively void their content. This is possible, of course, because Barthes is facing a civilization whose codes he does not know and thus every ongoing signification is felt by him without being understood; but whereas the semiosis is implicit for a Japanese and inexistent for the common Western man, Barthes engages with an interpretive challenge, which is the only way to question Western society, shaking the laws «of the "father tongue" . . . that tongue which comes to us from our fathers and which makes us, in our turn, fathers and proprietors of a culture» (*Empire of Signs* 6).

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<sup>1</sup> Diana Knight has shed light on the concept of utopia in specific relation to the *Empire of Signs*, though relying on an Orientalist discourse that I do not wish to take into account here, as I believe that by narrating Japan Barthes gives voice to a personal «remystification» which, even if subconsciously standing «on the shoulders of one of the most irrepressible mythmaking modes of reading, that is, of exoticism» (Kandiyoti 228), still shapes a creative and theoretical writing where the colonial implications are truly irrelevant: the *otherness* of the foreign country is perceived as a powerful liberating possibility, that not only overturns the dynamics West *vs* East (in the light of a supremacy of the latter), but disrupts it completely. Far from «epitomizing the colonizing "Western gaze"» (as Dale believes – 64), Barthes instead aims to eliminate any oppositional structure – which always leads to meaning – in order to linger on the openness of the undetermined, both in a semiological and human perspective. I have deeply analyzed such utopic aspiration in my 2016 comparative book– *L'Eleganza è frigida e L'Empire des signes. Un sogno fatto in Giappone* – which examines Barthes's Japan in conjunction with the Japanese experience of the Italian author Goffredo Parise, and from which this paper stems (often re-elaborating or translating key parts of that research).

<sup>2</sup> «Le fragment devient le moyen de noter des états infinitésimaux de la pensée en opposition à la grossièreté sidérante de toute entreprise de conceptualisation. C'est ainsi le fragment qui assume la fonction utopique du Texte, non pas parce qu'il se situerait au plus près d'un désordre initial mais parce qu'il devient l'outil le plus fin pour traduire le chatoisement du sens en devenir».

## 2. The Emptiness of the Sign: Japan as Suspended Writing

Grounded on the freedom and emptiness of the Japanese sign and on its irreducibility to any ideological stereotype, the *Empire of Signs* manifestly rejects all narrative forms, qualifying itself as a mental reportage, or an «intellectual autobiography» (Jung 165). Barthes's specific interest is indeed embodied in a well-defined formula, which justifies his choices on the basis of a fictitious operation.

. . . Orient and Occident cannot be taken here as “realities” to be compared and contrasted historically, philosophically, culturally, politically. I am not lovingly gazing towards an Oriental essence – to me the Orient is a matter of indifference, merely providing a reserve of features whose manipulation . . . allows me to “entertain” the idea of an unheard-of symbolic system, one altogether detached from our own. What can be addressed, in the consideration of the Orient, are not other symbols, another metaphysics, another wisdom . . . it is the possibility of a difference, of a mutation, of a revolution in the propriety of symbolic systems (*Empire of Signs* 3-4).

The object of the *Empire* is Japan, but could have been any country able to be completely *other*, subtracted from the bonds of Western history and ideology. The foreign place is thus conceived only as a set of traits – «In *The Empire of Signs*, Japan is in quotation marks; it is an invention, a construct» (Kandiyoti 234) – to be preferred to the myths of the Western world, not due to an opposition, but according to a radical revolution in the symbolic system, to a *fissure* of the symbolic itself. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to exclude from the horizons of the selected unit some dystopic parts of Japan's reality (the development of capitalism, the Americanization), focusing only on the hedonistic elements of a world idealistically stripped of any mythological nausea.<sup>3</sup> It is not surprising then, that in 1974, pointing out the fundamental difference between (*Literary*) *Work* and *Text* at the conclusion of

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<sup>3</sup> Dalia Kandiyoti has spoken of an «Ur-japan», a sort of pre-contamination place, to describe Barthes's fictitious abstraction: «Barthes's highly selective eye is fixated on “traditional” aspects of Japanese culture. From theater, food, clothing, social forms, religion, poetry, the “indigenous” is privileged to be a part of Barthes's Japan. . . . Modern Japanese customs, cuisine, literature, economic and political systems – all of which carry indelible traces of the West – are absent» (234).

a lecture given at an Italian conference,<sup>4</sup> Barthes establishes an interesting equivalence between a «Text of Life» and Japan, implicitly qualifying the latter as a signifying practice tied to a non-mimetic, multiple, infinite concept of writing: «the Text exceeds the old literary work; there is, for example, a Text of Life, one I tried to enter by writing apropos of Japan» (“The Semiological Adventure” 7). The equation had already been formulated – although maybe in a less explicit form – the previous year, within a special investigation of writing as a *verbe intransitif*, that is as a linguistic emptiness liberated from any forced productivity and used exclusively in a dimension of enjoyment, so as to cause a loss of consciousness similar to that experienced during the erotic bliss:

The writer is always on the blind spot of systems, adrift; he is the joker in the pack, a *mana*, a zero degree, the dummy in the bridge game: necessary to the meaning (the battle), but himself deprived of fixed meaning . . . He himself is outside exchange, plunged into a non-profit, the Zen *mushotoku*, desiring nothing but the perverse bliss of words (but bliss is never a taking: nothing separates it from *satori*, from losing) (*The Pleasure of the Text* 35).

The reference to the Zen concept of *mushotoku* («the non-profit») clarifies here the value of the Japanese experience; in the *Empire of Signs* the act of writing plays indeed a special role from the first chapter, being associated with Buddhist ascetic practices, with the very core of Zen thought, consisting exactly in the *satori*: a form of drifting of the subject, of fluctuation of individual limits.

The author has never, in any sense, photographed Japan. Rather, he has done the opposite: Japan has starred him with any numbers of “flashes”; or, better still, Japan has afforded him a situation of writing. This situation is the very one in which a certain disturbance of the person occurs, a subversion of earlier readings, a shock of meaning lacerated, extenuated to the point of its irreplaceable void, without the object’s ever ceasing to be significant, desirable. Writing is after all, in its way, a *satori*: *satori* (the Zen occurrence) is a more or less powerful (though in no way formal) seism which causes knowledge, or the subject, to vacillate: it creates *an emptiness of language*. And it is also an emptiness of language which constitutes writing; it is from this emptiness that derive

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<sup>4</sup> The first Congress of the International Semiotics Association was held in Milan, from June 2 to June 6, 1974; Barthes’s talk was entitled “The Semiological Adventure” and published in *Le Monde* on June 7.

the features with which Zen, in the exemption from all meaning, writes gardens, gestures, houses, flower arrangements, faces, violence (*Empire of Signs* 4; emphasis in original).

Japan's indefinable contours thus fully comply with the theoretical characteristics of writing – understood in its discontinuous materiality and its joyful cancellation of subjectivity – becoming writing itself in every manifestation of the native traditions (Jung 167). This is favored by the same allusive structure of the unknown Japanese language (Boulaâbi: 294-300) – in which the proliferation of enclitic particles «turns the subject, precisely, into a great envelope of empty speech» (*Empire of Signs* 7) – and justified by the above-mentioned properties attributed to all Japanese signs. It is in this sense relevant to combine the last couple of excerpts to some final lines of *The Death of the Author* (1968) where writing takes the form of a systematic exemption of meaning, resulting from an exhibited lack of subject.

In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*; the structure can be followed, 'run' (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath: the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning. In precisely this way literature (it would be better from now on to say *writing*), by refusing to assign a 'secret', an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases – reason, science, law (*Image, music, text* 147; emphasis in original).

This aberrant depletion exercise shows Barthes looking at the empty (literary and linguistic) structure, in the attempt to stop the cancer of interpretation and to allude to multiple, never definitive senses. The *époque* glimpsed in the Japanese indecipherable world appears as a utopian solution to Barthes's central desire to give voice to a speech that is neither assertive nor negative, but simply suspended without responding to the compulsory schemes of a language perceived as fascist – as famously stated in the inaugural *Leçon* held at the *Collège de France* in 1977. In the following part of that lecture, rather than suggesting a philosophical choice, Barthes seems to track precisely in literature (or better in its 'textualist' approach) the only way of conceiving language outside Power. Literature – and especially the fragment,

elusive genre *par excellence* which mimics the suspension of meaning – meant as pluralistic and a-subjective practice, can indeed break the bondage of signs creating, through the overlapping of languages (and desires) and through the responsibility of the form, a mobile word and a new semiological science immune to the obligations of law and of stereotype.

### 3. Escaping the Referential Hallucination: Japanese Display of Codes in Food and Theater

Escaping utopia, fantastic geography able to respond to a painful intellectual inquiry urged by the increasingly suffocating relationship between Language and Power, Barthes's Japan seems therefore implied in the double transference that makes it a body of ideal writing and, for that same reason, an object of love and desire. Japan is loved as a *place* and as a *text* – by virtue of the two concepts' identity and of the attention for a sophisticated writing, which is released in the *Empire of Signs* – and also because it is openly experimented as a *fictum* (Boulaâbi 291-293). In fact Barthes considers *mimesis* strictly repressive, working as an ally of ideology, to which it serves as a tool in naturalizing cultural impositions. It is in particular the bourgeois ideology to be identified with the linguistic illusion which recognizes in literature the ability to accurately represent the world, whereas Realism is only a code not truer than any other, a deception generated by intertextuality:

. . . in the most realistic novel, the referent has no “reality”: suffice it to imagine the disorder the most orderly narrative would create were its descriptions taken at face value, converted into operative programs and simply *executed*. In short . . . what we call “real” (in the theory of the realistic text) is never more than a code of representation (of signification): it is never a code of execution: *the novelistic real is not operable* (S/Z 80; emphasis in original).

Insisting on the fictitious character of the *Empire*, then, allows Barthes to escape the referential hallucination and, at the same time, to reveal its persistence in the Western symbolic system. In the Japanese universe, instead, every expression of life and art is based on an ostensive display of the creative process, so that the result is always performed as a material combination of codes subtracted from the imposture of naturalization (ultimately, of any

dictated meaning): under the sign, the real evaporates or is continuously deferred. Let us consider, for example, the description of Japanese food.

The dinner tray seems a picture of the most delicate order: it is a frame containing, against a dark background, various objects (bowls, boxes, saucers, chopsticks, tiny piles of food, a little gray ginger, a few shreds of orange vegetable, a background of brown sauce), and since these containers and these bits of food are slight in quantity, but numerous, it might be said that these trays fulfill the definition of painting . . . However, such an order, delicious when it appears, is destined to be undone, recomposed according to the very rhythm of eating; what was a motionless tableau at the start becomes a work-bench or chessboard, the space not of seeing but of doing – of *praxis* or play; the painting was actually only a palette (a work surface), with which you are going to play in the course of your meal, taking up here a pinch of vegetables, there of rice, and over there of condiment, here a sip of soup, according to a free alternation . . . : the entire *praxis* of alimentation being in the composition, by composing your choices, you yourself make what it is you eat . . . (*Empire of Signs* 11-12).

Associated with painting for its visual qualities, the dinner tray – in which stands the obvious equivalence *food = writing* – is a worktop, a «continuous text», where everything blends and is continually divided by means of the transferring action of the *baguettes*. The latter never force the food with the lacerating violence of our cutlery, but gently separate the edible matter only to reassemble it in new combinations. The dictates of the Western food's theater, based on the same rules of literary dissimulation – as it claims to be natural, but is instead the result of oppressive mixtures – are also subverted by the Japanese dish, essentially raw, infinitely small, fragile and transparent even when it's fried, made of fragments «whose real name would be *the interstice* without specific edges, or again: the empty sign» (26; emphasis in original). Japanese food is deprived of any center and depth, concepts related to the artifice of dishes' decoration and to the ordered sequence of courses: while in the Western world it is necessary to follow a menu, the food in Japan is a collection of pieces, a paradoxical dream in which the consumer can «select, with a light touch of the chopsticks, sometimes one color, sometimes another, depending on a kind of inspiration» (22). This extraordinary freedom and abstraction goes together with food's extemporaneous, graphic preparation:

. . . he [the chef] inscribes the foodstuff in the substance; his stall is arranged like a calligrapher's table; he touches the substances like the graphic artist (especially if he is Japanese) who alternates pots, brushes, inkstone, water, paper; he thereby accomplishes . . . a hierarchized arrangement, not of time but of tenses (those of a grammar of *tempura*), makes visible the entire gamut of practices, recites the foodstuff not as a finished merchandise, whose perfection alone would have value (as is the case with our dishes), but as a product whose meaning is not final but progressive, exhausted, so to speak, when its production has ended: it is you who eat, but it is he who has played, who has written, who has produced (*Empire of Signs* 26).

The idea of a progressive and open-ended *cusine* recalls Barthes's textualist theories and the status of a literature not subjected to any demiurgic subjectivity, reduced to a manual, combinatory practice. The same ideas of *division*, *interstice* and *fragment*, moreover, lead to the literary features outlined in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973). The sensual forms of enjoyment – which enhance the loving quality of Barthes's artistic ideas – do not depend in fact on a subversive violence, or on an ideological or linguistic assault (symbolically represented by the image of the piercing knife), but on the fractioning and scratching of the language itself.

. . . the pleasure of reading . . . proceeds from certain breaks . . .: antipathetic codes (the noble and the trivial, for example) come into contact; pompous and ridiculous neologisms are created . . . As textual theory has it: the language is redistributed. Now, *such redistribution is always achieved by cutting*. Two edges are created: an obedient, conformist, plagiarizing edge (the language is to be copied in its canonical state, as it has been established by schooling, good usage, literature, culture), and *another edge*, mobile, blank . . . which is never anything but the site of its effect: the place where the death of language is glimpsed. . . . it is not violence which affects pleasure, nor is it destruction which interests it; what pleasure wants is the site of a loss, the seam, the cut, the deflation, the *dissolve* which seizes the subject in the midst of bliss (*The Pleasure of the Text* 6-7; emphasis in original).

Confirmed is the association of the Japanese table with writing – «Hence Japanese food establishes itself within a reduced system of substance (from the clear to the divisible), in a shimmer of the signifier: these are the elementary characters of the writing, established upon a kind of vacillation of language» (*Empire of Signs* 14) – and precisely with the text of pleasure, erotic body whose perversion derives from its deviations and intermittences. Once again, it is the *époque* (the only possible *degré zéro*) to be sought in food as in language: the fault of self-

dispersion, the border zone between languages, sheltered from any stratification and exploitation of sense.

Beyond the culinary reflections, the pages on Bunraku also celebrate the recovery of writing to a working dimension, which exceeds the deceitful space of realistic or dramatic illusion. The Bunraku is a form of puppets theater, each puppet being manipulated by three visible operators, while the recitative is separated from the performance and entrusted to musicians seated behind small desks. Bunraku acts thus as multiple writing, dissociating the acting subject(s) and rejecting the metaphysical dimension according to which the Western actor is conceived as an indivisible unity of gesture and word. Performing a total but divided spectacle, Bunraku distances itself from realism and the public, resulting in an estrangement based on the display of naked signs, free from those excesses of sense that in the Western world express interiority.

*Bunraku* (this is its definition) separates action from gesture: it shows the gesture, lets the action be seen, exhibits simultaneously the art and the labor, reserving for each its own writing . . . That distance, regarded among us as impossible, useless, or absurd, and eagerly abandoned . . . is made explicable by *Bunraku*, which allows us to see how it can function: by the discontinuity of the codes, by this caesura imposed on the various features of representation, so that the copy elaborated on the stage is not destroyed but somehow broken, striated, withdrawn from that metonymic contagion of voice and gesture, body and soul, which entraps our actors (*Empire of Signs* 54-55).

The insistence on the simple combinatory method of Bunraku, which limits the body to a single semantic role, leads clearly to those which for Barthes are the goals of literature, aimed at a subversion of the symbolic system (instead of towards a representative purpose). It now appears undeniable that in the *Empire of Signs* the matter of reality is consciously treated as that of literature itself, where spaces and discourses are cut to fit into a desired shape – the shape of what is loved (namely, for Barthes, the *signs*). The strength of such a love for Japan and for its playful deconstruction of Barthes's own traditions is reflected in the book's material qualities. Published with a number of photographs, whose only purpose is to disperse the meaning of the text, as Barthes himself confirms – «The text does not “gloss” the images, which do not “illustrate” the text. For me, each has been no more than the onset of a kind of visual uncertainty, analogous perhaps to that *loss of meaning* Zen calls a *satori*» (XI; emphasis in

original) – the *Empire* is enriched by an heterogeneous set of elements: pictures of sumo wrestlers or of Kabuki's actors; newspaper clippings; a map drawn on the back of a business card and even a postcard sent to the Author by a friend; and then many calligraphic texts, probably excerpts from one of those notebooks that Barthes used to carry around, to satisfy his graphomania. All this underlines the private nature of the book, an extension of Barthes's body, physical proof of his amorous relation with Japan.<sup>5</sup> Love eventually proves to be aroused by both the fictitious and the empty structure of the foreign country, whose material and cognitive effects are unspeakable beyond the infinite addition and combination of its different signs, codes, pieces, whose interpretation is always negotiable, therefore always inconclusive.

#### 4. Japan as the Unspeakable: *Haiku's* Suspended Poetics of Love and Desire

In the introduction to the third volume of the French edition of Barthes's *Œuvres Complètes*, curator Eric Marty emphasizes the importance of the *Empire of Signs* as a first step towards a structuralism purified of any ideological implication, adding suggestive remarks about its fictitious character and suggesting that Barthes's favorite form of free signification is, in the essay, the suspended language of poetry: «D'une certaine manière, si le «Japon» est un *factum*, c'est parce qu'il est l'autre nom du mot poème, qui, on le comprend maintenant mieux, est réciproquement le synonyme exact de "l'empire des signes"» (17). Poetical metaphors are repeated throughout the whole reading of Japan, converging in the four chapters dedicated to

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<sup>5</sup> Another material symptom of Barthes's love for Japan can be seen in the original book cover's image, to which Hwa Yol Jung has devoted some intriguing words (although he is actually speaking about the cover of the box that encloses the Japanese translation of the *Empire*, where the image has clearly transited): «The outer box has a separate wrapper with the photograph of a traditional, aristocratic, anonymous courtly woman, which could easily depict a scene from the *Genji monogatari*. The picture is explained in the French original simply as "*Fragment d'une carte postale*" . . . Without doubt the woman is the surfacial *centerfold* of *Empire of Signs*, which is consonant with Barthes's own semiological approach. As a picture is worth a thousand words, the woman is the "*stadium*" where Barthes displays the multicolored galaxy of signifiers in Japanese culture» (168; emphasis in original). Even if we omit that Barthes constantly associates the image of the Woman (and of the Mother) with the field of Desire and Love, in opposition to the male and fatherly field of the Law, the picture on the cover responds to his loving attitude, as «it *de/sign/ates* the presence of Japan in absence» (168). In addition, the disrupting celebration of Japanese graphism through the image of a woman untraditionally engaged in the act of writing seems to confirm the powerful implications of the female figure within Barthes's loving discourse on Japan.

the *haiku*, the small flock of seventeen syllables enclosed in three lines, which does not describe, does not mean, but just happens:

The haiku wakens desire: how many Western readers have dreamed of strolling through life, notebook in hand, jotting down “impressions” whose brevity would guarantee their perfection, whose simplicity would attest to their profundity (*Empire of Signs* 69).

An exploratory model at the borders of writing, the *haiku* offers a double possibility: that of the Zen notion of *non-vouloir-saisir* («the refusal to seize hold»); and that of an experience of a joyful *déprise du sens* («abandonment of meaning»), functioning as the true poetic correlative of Barthes's fragmented and ephemeral idea of literature. Japan's artistic synecdoche, graphic space of sublimation of its loving energy, the *haiku* condenses that poetic lump of enjoyment inseparable from the infinite practice of writing and celebrates the empty form, in which symbols and metaphors do not matter anything at all: in opposition to Western literature – which always «requires a poem, a development or . . . a chiseled thought; in short a long rhetorical labor» (70) – the *haiku* denies every mythical and metonymic sense, turning its object into a flat speech which escapes any hermeneutic that is more than its simple repetition.<sup>6</sup>

Neither describing nor defining, the haiku . . . diminishes to the point of pure and sole designation. *It's that, it's thus*, says the haiku, *it's so*. Or better still: *so!* it says, with a touch so instantaneous and so brief (without vibration or recurrence) that even the copula would seem excessive, a kind of remorse for a forbidden, permanently alienated definition . . . Or again: haiku reproduces the designating gesture of the child pointing at whatever it is . . . merely saying: *that!* with a movement so immediate (so stripped of any mediation: that of knowledge, of nomination, or even possession) that what is designated is the very inanity of any classification of the object: . . . nothing has been acquired, the word's stone has been cast for nothing: neither waves nor flow of meaning (*Empire of Signs* 83-84; emphasis in original).

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<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, Hokenson writes: «In his concept of the averbal poem, Barthes takes a sharp turn away from the mainstream of French japoniste tradition. He downplays interiority (intuition, affective motion in the mind), while stressing the visual, even at one point calling the haiku a “tableautin”» (357).

The *haiku*, literary aspect of Zen thought – whose metaphysics has neither subject nor God – appears to be a practice purified of any idea of purpose and devoted to stopping the language; a reflecting surface that does not grab anything but neither rejects it; a «vision without commentary» (82). Barthes ultimately pulls *haiku*'s linguistic suspension close to the lover's aphasia: for the lover can say nothing about the object of his desire, beyond the statement of its existence. The lyric excursus of the *Empire* ends, then, with the implications of the paragraph *Tel (Thus)*, whose simple title is enough to confirm the link between the concentrated Japanese poetry and the loved object. After all, we would find the very same title to designate one of the fragments of *A Lover's Discourse*, published seven year later than the *Empire*:

*Thus*

*tel / thus*

Endlessly required to define the loved object, and suffering from the uncertainties of this definition, the amorous subject dreams of a knowledge which would let him take the other *as he is*, thus and no other, exonerated from any adjective (220; emphasis in original).

To describe the *haiku* Barthes uses words strikingly similar to those he was going to destine to the dialectic of love (of which he has widely talked, especially in its complex relations with the linguistic expression, too often unable to give proper voice to love's motivations and effects): thinned up to the pure and simple utterance, it is nothing but a tautology (*thus*), indefinable and without place. In addition, just as the *haiku* is made of fragments, the amorous discourse has a fluttering dimension, being without a precise order. The *haiku* seems therefore to endorse the identity *Japan = Text = Text of love*, also due to another comparison with one last excerpt from the *Fragments*, openly proving the loving nature of the textual operation: «what would best resemble the loved being *as he is, thus and so*, would be the Text, to which I can add no adjective: which I delight in without having to decipher it» (222; emphasis in original). The *Empire of Signs* and Japan indubitably stand, then, as reserves of graphic traits and, at the same time, as texts of pleasure, of which *haiku* is an essential part – since the Japanese world is full of atopic incidents without predicate, resistant to description, definition, language:

. . . there, in the street, in a bar, in a shop, in a train, something always *happens*. This something – which is etymologically an adventure – is of an infinitesimal order: it is an incongruity of clothing, an anachronism of culture, a freedom of behavior, an illogicality of itinerary, etc. To count up these events would be a Sisyphean enterprise, for they glisten only at the moment when one *reads* them, in the lively writing of the street, and the Westerner will be able to utter them spontaneously only by charging them with the very meaning of his distance: he would in fact have to make haiku out of them, a language which is denied us (*Empire of Signs* 79; emphasis in original).

Not by chance, in some later pages – published on *Tel Quel* in 1980 and originally meant to be read at the Milanese *Colloque Stendhal* – Barthes explicitly assimilates Japan to ‘what is loved’ on the defaulting premises stated by the title, “On échoue toujours à parler de ce qu’on aime” (“Any attempt to talk about the object of our love is doomed to failure” – *Œuvres complètes*, V vol.). Japan is qualified there as a loved body that arouses multiples feelings and produces the same emotions that Italy gave to Stendhal. It is in fact the subject of an irrational exuberance and physically coincides with an hedonistic space dominated by the maternal image of the Woman, in dialectical polarity with France, place of the Father, of His law and His mythical impositions; and becomes the place of the Supreme Good, producer of an inner enjoyment unspeakable with the means of the ordinary language, through which – again – not even the text of pleasure can be efficiently described:

If I agree to judge a text according to pleasure, I cannot go on to say: this one is good, that bad. No awards, no “critique,” for this always implies a tactical aim, a social usage, and frequently an extenuating image-reservoir. I cannot apportion, imagine that the text is perfectible, ready to enter into a play of normative predicates: it is too much *this*, not enough *that*; the text . . . can wring from me only this judgement, in no way adjectival: *that’s it!* And further still: *that’s it for me!* (*The Pleasure of the Text* 13; emphasis in original).

Of the enjoyment we can only say that it exists, that it is *precisely that*, affirmative variation of the tautological formula that we have seen Barthes use to indicate both the *haiku* and the loved one, for they evade any classification or adjective in their absolute irreducibility. This recalls the eccentric premise of *A Lover’s Discourse*:

The necessity for this book is to be found in the following consideration: that the lover's discourse is today *of an extreme solitude*. This discourse is spoken, perhaps, by thousands of subjects (who knows?), but warranted by no one; it is completely forsaken by the surrounding languages: ignored, disparaged, or derided by them, severed not only from authority but also from the mechanism of authority (sciences, techniques, arts). Once a discourse is thus driven by its own momentum into the backwater of the "unreal," exiled from all gregariness, it has no recourse but to become the site, however exiguous, of an *affirmation* (I; emphasis in original).

The loving discourse appears that of an extreme and outdated situation – due to a solipsism that requires identity to be understood – which is frustrating, but is also meant as an ideal way to escape the oppressive constraints of the social word. The *Empire of Signs* would then once more confirm its qualities of a loved body/text, ineffable for the lover, intractable and therefore excluded from any form of sociality: the mother tongue's alienation is replaced by an unknown language and the communicative obligation by the pleasure of a writing made of a code offered in its external elements (eyes, smiles, clothes), without being explained. The third fragment of the essay is called, not surprisingly, *Without Words*.

Now it happens that in this country (Japan) the empire of signifier is so immense, so in excess of speech, that the exchange of signs remains of a fascinating richness, mobility, and subtlety, despite the opacity of the language, sometimes even as a consequence of that opacity. The reason for this is that in Japan the body exists, acts, shows itself, gives itself, without hysteria, without narcissism, but according to a pure – though subtly discontinuous – erotic project. It is not the voice (with which we identify the "rights" of the person) which communicates (communicates what? our – necessarily beautiful – soul? our sincerity? our prestige?), but the whole body (eyes, smile, hair, gestures, clothing) which sustains with you a sort of babble that the perfect domination of the codes strips of all regressive, infantile character. To make a date (by gestures, drawings on paper, proper names) may take an hour, but during that hour . . . it is the other's entire body which has been known, savored, received, and which has displayed (to no real purpose) its own narrative, its own text (9-10).

Beyond the idea of a writing separate from the word, it is clear that Japan is a space of expression more than of communication, in which the lover reveals not only his status of semiologist, but his nature as poet: hermetic bearer of an opaque language, in which the judgment is suspended, the fear of meaning abolished, the uniqueness of feeling protected.

So enduring is the Japanese poetical metaphor for Barthes, that the *haiku* suggestively shapes «his works and his thoughts through the last decade of his life»: he mentions it on every possible occasion «from photography to contemporary novels», also making it «a focus of his last two years of courses at the Collège de France» (Hokenson 362). Its most fascinating reference, however, is to be found (twice) in *Camera Lucida* (1980). There, Barthes first establishes the difference between *studium* – cultural participation to the information conveyed by a photograph – and *punctum*, a surprising and involuntary element which strikes the observer and belongs to the realm of desire: it is an unexplained detail, that disrupts the reading of the photo; a feature whose origin we don't recognize; an essence that cannot be transformed but only repeated; therefore, really a *haiku*.

A detail overwhelms the entirety of my reading; it is an intense mutation of my interest, a fulguration. By the mark of *something*, the photograph is no longer “anything whatever.” This *something* has triggered me, has provoked a tiny shock, a *satori*, the passage of a void (it is of no importance that its referent is insignificant). . . . A trick of vocabulary: we say “to develop a photograph”; but what the chemical action develops is undevelopable, an essence (of a wound), what cannot be transformed but only repeated under the instances of insistence (of the insistent gaze). This brings the Photograph (certain photographs) close to the Haiku (49; emphasis in original).

Barthes experiences something similar when, searching for photos of his mother (who had passed away shortly before) that can reveal her very essence, he runs across a picture that portrays her as a child, standing on a wooden bridge, in a winter garden:

The distinctness of her face, the naïve attitude of her hands, the place she had docilely taken without either showing or hiding herself, and finally her expression, which distinguished her, like Good from Evil, from the hysterical little girl, from the simpering doll who plays at being a grownup—all this constituted the figure of a sovereign *innocence* . . . all this had transformed the photographic pose into that untenable paradox which she had nonetheless maintained all her life: the assertion of a gentleness. . . . this photograph collected all the possible predicates from which my mother's being was constituted and whose suppression or partial alternation, conversely, had sent me back to these photographs of her which had left me so unsatisfied. These same photographs . . . were merely analogical, provoking only her identity, not her truth; but the Winter Garden Photograph was indeed essential, it

achieved for me, utopically, *the impossible science of the unique being* (69-71; emphasis in original).

This photo finally guarantees the revelation of something that cannot be described and does not belong to any system: it is indeed a vague aura of sweetness to evoke the essence of Barthes's mother, causing him a feeling as strong as a memory. It is something that goes beyond the technical results of photography, as it is the mediator of an intractable truth that cannot be proved, but seems to lead to the individual soul of the beloved person. This utopian combination implies the end of any language and the vacuum of «a *satori* in which words fail» (109), transferring the discourse on love from an abstract level to a private one; while the return of the Zen metaphor closes Barthes's circular parable on the only moral he can conceive: a loving one.

##### 5. At the End of the *Empire*: Countless Meanings of Utopia

A loving moral is also what is left to the reader at the end of the *Empire of Signs*'s seductive journey. Throughout Japan, the concepts of *texte* and *écriture* have found suggestive embodiments in an irreducible plurality of forms, which all belong to the field of desire; both of them have also proved to be bound to the notion of *utopie*, whose many declinations should now be briefly recalled. There is the utopia of a world without coercions, of a language cleansed of the encrustations of Power. Utopia is also a *minutiense* (composed of details) and *romanesque* (private and fictional) vital practice, opposed to the myths that heavily settle around us. Utopia is that of a world strictly semantic and radically atheist, dotted with signs from side to side, but totally exempt from sense. Utopia is a liberating shift from the conception of a literature-as-institution to a literature-as-writing: it embodies the deconstruction of representation and the poetics of the fragment; it is a form of metalinguistic inquiry, a phantom of discourses, a glimmer of desire. Utopia is everything and nothing and that is why the *Empire of Signs* eventually realizes the *frisson du sens* («the thrilling of meaning»), which in *R.B. by R.B.* is conceived impossible to achieve in Western society:

The ideal state of sociality is thereby declared: an enormous and perpetual rustling animates with countless meanings which explode, crepitate, burst out without ever assuming the definitive form of a sign grimly weighted by its signified: a happy and impossible theme, for this ideally thrilling meaning is pitilessly recuperated by a solid meaning (that of the *Doxa*) or by a null meaning (that of the mystiques of liberation) (98).

*Countless meanings:* Japan's textual metaphor conveys much more than sole linguistic means could ever communicate. It is this intimate surplus – destined otherwise to remain hidden in the labyrinths of the soul, to be trivialized by socio-linguistic restrictions – which makes the *Empire of Signs* one of Roland Barthes's most enchanting, valuable books.

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