



# “The Haiku of Urt”: Migrations of Roland Barthes

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Concepts of cultural hybridity and de-territorialization are familiar to Barthes' readers and many critics have commented on the fundamental dispersion of his writings. The excursions and digressions in his texts have been well noted and it is indeed true that time and time again, his work voices its enthusiasm for the displacement of issues, words, problems : “Barthes' writing lives and progresses, it would seem, only by its capacity to overhaul and displace established patterns”<sup>1</sup> says Leslie Hill. The question I want to address however is that of permanence and personal idiom *within* this displacement and dispersion.

*Empire of Signs* (published in 1970) presents itself as a kind of migratory essay which explores a plurality of ideas and cultures, free from Occidental meaning and discourse. It is a semi-imaginary account of three trips that Barthes took to Japan in 1966 and 1967. Japan is presented as a utopia, a “fictive nation”: “I can [...] isolate somewhere in the world (*faraway*) a certain number of features [...], and out of these features deliberately form a system. It is this system which I shall call: Japan”<sup>2</sup>. But, in the largest modern city of the world, Barthes encounters what he calls the *anamnesis*: the childhood province of the Pays Basque. Within this utopia, consistently apparent and veiled at the same time, are signs of Barthes' own provincial region, the South-West, to which he was extremely attached<sup>3</sup>.

The childhood province is not an inner core, a history of which the province would form the primary language. It runs in parallel like a river which freely adds or removes elements<sup>4</sup> and acts as a *textual refractor* more than a theme, an object of desire and fantasy. I want to suggest that there is, in a text about Japan, a relationship with provincial France, in



particular the southern region of Barthes' childhood and that Barthes uses his contact with Japan to explore an intercultural dialogue which contains a representation of home and self.

In the city of Tokyo, Barthes collides with an ideal world of childhood sounds and smells, of spaces and emotions. Writing about Tokyo does indeed provide an escape from Eurocentric ideology, which he describes as an expurgation of his Occidental being, but in order to reconnect with another tradition: the Zen of the southern region, the satori of Bayonne, the haiku of Urt.

In order for this passage/flash (Japan, he says, "has starred him with any number of 'flashes'"(4)) to occur, several things must happen. I will focus on 2 steps:

1. Decontextualisation: out of Europeanism (Japan must become a utopian land and Tokyo an anti-Paris of a sort)
2. Reconnection with the provinces: into the maternal land (There must be an echo in the rites and rituals of Japan of the customs of the bourgeoisie from old Bayonne)

### 1. Japan as a utopian land and Tokyo as an anti-Paris

Tokyo appears as the polar opposite of Paris, the city where meaning never sleeps. In *Mythologies* (1957), Paris features as the birthplace of semiology. It is an urban jungle, in which the ethnologist leads the quest for the connotations of urban signs. This is not a "flânerie" but a dense, active quest for signs in all their density and richness (famous trials of the time, newspaper headlines, posters, advertisements, food, architecture, fashion, road signs). Paris is saturated with signs. Meaning becomes a kind of urban disease, an eczema: the desire to find meaning seems to burn, the desire to interpret is like an irritation on the skin. Paris also conveys an impression of perpetual ingestion and indigestion, something heavy, greasy, like a soup laden with fat and meat. Paris calls for descriptions, developments and leads to a kind of divagation, a verbal prowess, a logorrhoea which always wants to surpass itself. Leslie Hill says of *Mythologies* that it is Barthes' attempt to "vomit the language of petty-bourgeois culture while anthologizing it"<sup>5</sup>.

In Japan, on the contrary, meaning is suspended in a quiet insignificance. Barthes orients himself not by using books, guides or maps but by immersing himself in sight, habit and experience, circularly, by detours and returns. If Paris is loaded with meanings, Tokyo offers a bubble freeing the language and the body by 'ungluing' them from their heavy and sticky coat. What is essential within this utopia is a lack of core, depth, divinity, that are the characteristics of the Occidental world: "the metaphysical link that the West cannot help establishing between body and soul, cause and effect, motor and machine, agent and actor, Destiny and man, God and creature"(62). On the contrary, this land has refined and brought to a high art the techniques of "cancellation and exemption"(25): "what the Japanese carry, with a formicant energy, are actually empty signs"(46). Thus the title: "Empire of Signs? Yes, if it is understood that these signs are empty and that the ritual is without a god"(108)<sup>6</sup>.

Barthes contrasts for instance the centre of European cities and the centre of Tokyo, enclosed around an empty core: the imperial palace (one never sees the emperor). In the text "Centre-ville, centre vide" ("Centre-City, Empty Centre"), Barthes establishes a structural opposition between the circular occidental cities, true to the metaphysical conception of the centre as the site of truth, where spirituality (churches), power (offices), money (banks), merchandise (shops), discourses (cafes, market-places) converge, and the centre of Tokyo, which hides the sacred nothing of the imperial palace: "the entire city turns around a site both forbidden and indifferent, a residence concealed beneath foliage, protected by moats, inhabited by an emperor who is never seen, which is to say, literally, by no one knows who"(30).

Similarly, the stations, organised around an area or a suburb, do not represent their core but a place of passage, of mobility. The station is "stripped of that sacred character which ordinarily qualifies the major landmarks of our cities"(30). It is a void, "an empty point-of-affluence of all its occupations and its pleasures"(39). It would be fair to say that, in such a place, the ethnologist becomes as mute as the city: a look, a fragment, an observation passes but does not persist. Japan is the utopian land for which Barthes always yearned, hence the effort he expends to find a way

through. Barthes is the inhabitant of Paris (condemned to meaning) who dreams of Tokyo (suspension of meaning):

*It is possible to delight in the codes, yet at the same time to dream nostalgically of their future abolition: like an intermittent outsider, I can enter-into oppressive sociality or step-outside of it, depending on my mood-desire for integration, desire to keep a distance<sup>7</sup>.*

Above all, Japan is not measured by its philosophy or socio-political context but by the criterion of 'way of life': Japan is for him a lesson in elegance and sensuality. Rituals impregnate the social networks of Japanese life. Their major virtue is temperance. Lightness, delicacy and subtlety in the situations and in the description of the food and architecture, the inherent poetry of language or way of life, all lead to a process of pacification. There are no conflicts, no violence, as there is little or no meat in the food.

In Tokyo, this atmosphere of protected politeness is rendered in the roundness of things: a bowl of soft white rice forms an emblem of ultimate protection. Eating with a knife and fork becomes as gross and rude as speaking too loudly or brashly. The comparisons with the Western world (the gestures, the proportions, etc.) contain an element of aggressiveness: the West is too loud, primitive and coarse, paternalistic. In the Oriental delicacy, in the dainty and the fragmentary, Barthes sees the maternal: "in the gesture of chopsticks, further softened by their substance – wood or lacquer – there is something maternal, the same precisely measured care taken in moving a child" (16). It is a world without violence and impulses, a world that does not have to be raped and conquered but to be cherished and enjoyed. As Japanese food contains no blood – just as the characters in a play contain no life or even the wrestling matches no crisis and no drama<sup>8</sup> – this absence of depth, of secrecy, of interiority characterizes a land that is "a ball of air". But this ball of air or lace (lightness, freshness) has an envelope, a contour. There is, in this lightness, a protection.

The unknown language itself constitutes "a delicious protection [that] envelops the foreigner [...] in an auditory film which halts at his ears all the alienations of the mother tongue" (9), because the only element he can perceive is its 'breathing'. No sound needs to be uttered, no communication

satisfied, giving the elegant pleasure of not understanding while providing a feeling of safety within this loss:

*to descend into the untranslatable [...] until everything Occidental in us totters and the rights of the 'father tongue' vacillate, that tongue which comes to us from our fathers and which makes us, in our turn, fathers and proprietors of a culture (6).*

In order to make the father tongue vacillate, he opens himself to a very remote language, the maternal language.

On one hand, Barthes provides an overview of some features of traditional Japanese culture, presenting Zen haikus, gardens, the tea ceremony and architecture. On the other hand, he reflects on things past, on Mallarmé (the suspension of meaning is indeed a mallarmean experience of the end of language, composed of repetitions, fragments, short observations, haikus), on Proust and Balzac, and in particular, within the context of an Orient/Occident opposition, on his own province. Because Japan is above all an imaginary land of infinite pleasures and subtlety, it collides with an ideal world of childhood sounds and smells, of spaces and emotions. Barthes is an inhabitant of this world inasmuch as Mallarmé inhabits the haiku or a suburb of Bayonne resides within a district of Tokyo: not as a part or a fragment but as an inhabitant of a metaphorical world, in a relationship with language, in a system of correspondences or echoes. Such a decontextualization is primordial for the passage from one place to another to be achieved: space is also reversible. You can turn it inside out or upside down because ultimately, there is nothing to grasp, in particular the sense of ownership must be abandoned: "(painful frustration for Western man, everywhere 'furnished' with his armchair, his bed, proprietor of a domestic *location*)" (109).

## 2. Into the maternal

From within Tokyo, Barthes travels back to the experiences of his maternal land: "here every discovery is intense and fragile, it can be repeated or recovered only by memory of the trace it has left in you" (36). The particles of Tokyo act as a self-reflective site where the writer rewrites his childhood through Japan. If Paris "moistens everything with

meaning, like an authoritarian religion which imposes baptism on entire peoples" (70), the regional, on the contrary, produces codes and traditions rooted in a more archaic past. Despite his fascination for airy habitats like a Japanese room with delicate partitions and movable furniture and his disdain for ownership, there is, within Japan, a designated domestic site: his southern origins. While projecting and adopting an alternative strategy in order to abandon the Occidental enclosure and its 'pantouflard'<sup>9</sup> values, there remains solid, comfortable and provincial furniture, as, within Barthes the Parisian intellectual (pronounced Bart), there is also Barthès, with its roundness and exotic consonance. The southern child in which the "terroir" (territory), its accent, its milieu, persist<sup>10</sup>.

As is usually the case with Barthes, one is not going to find clear childhood references, obvious personal comparisons, but a 'spirit of the place' and scattered clues that link both experiences by a system of values or principles: delicacy, respect, absence. It will be manifested in quite discreet and localised forms of gestures and customs. If everything glutinous, heavy and solid is European, then lightness, fragmentation and airiness will be the characteristics of this "other" world. In the virtue of the exquisite politeness and the etiquette of Japanese life, one can see a reflection of his own provincial and old-fashioned values that he will discuss more openly in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*: "(Might it not be possible to take one's pleasures in bourgeois [deformed] culture *as a kind of exoticism?*")<sup>11</sup> he asks. That is, why not make of the bourgeois culture the stranger that one voluptuously and fortuitously encounters in the street, without burdening it with the picturesque, the romanesque? Or: can I visit the bourgeois customs as a transitional mode of being, just as if I was passing through them without formulating judgement?

His own inimitable style<sup>12</sup> is, in a sense, more 'way of life' than argument, more wisdom than criticism, *savoir et saveur* (knowledge and flavour), a style which generates a system of values. The critic Alain Buisine calls it a 'moral of style' (an austerity that stems from Barthes' protestant background), which can be detected in his art of writing: never a polemicist, he does not attack or insult. Alain Buisine says: "His writing always keeps the senses of convention and good manners [...]. It respects a decorum

transmitted and refined by generations of provincials"<sup>13</sup>. Order, method and protocol, rigor and ascetism are the core values of his imaginary Japan (a certain number of chapters have to do with social conventions) and also his own values, as inheritor of the ancestral and domestic values that Proust called a "provincial cake"<sup>14</sup>. These 'provincialisms' appear in his quest for tidy spaces and his love of fine stationery - he would go as far as describing himself as having "all the false occupations of a middle-class maiden in the nineteenth century"<sup>15</sup>.

I would like to follow through Tokyo, in whom he transports some old-world charm of a bourgeois life and reclaims his provincial origin, this middle-class maiden. For example, if we consider the ritual of tea in Japan, we find not a palimpsest made of other rituals (which would imply layers and depth) but a shimmering of codified situations: the bourgeois tea-time in the garden of his grand-parents, the smells and flavours and protocol of old provincial France, resolutely old-fashioned (and proud of it). It is precisely the feudality of Japan, the continual presence of aspects of feudal culture that creates an attraction: Japan remains, as does his provincial childhood and society, undiluted by mass culture and highly codified in forms and protocols: both worlds constitute a network of fragile and antiquated *forms* (a word whose concrete meaning and linguistic meaning are indissociable).

Alain Buisine mentions that "in the barthesian milieu, knowledge is inseparable from a certain way of being together, a sociability"<sup>16</sup>. This 'outdated' mode of behaviour, says Buisine, takes us back to "the small intellectual communities", salons, clubs, societies, cafés, small groups of like-minded people. In the same way as Barthes' books extend courtesy to the reader, *Empire of Signs* possesses a certain 'outdated' politeness. It is this process of pacification that welcomes the reader at the start of *Empire of Signs*: welcome to my world, says Barthes, have a tour of the place, look at my customs, my origins, share my food. Here, in this land, brutality and rudeness are simply "not done". Although Barthes' methodology and references might come and go as fads do, he will always keep the same "savoir-vivre", the same moral of style, "the ethical faithfulness to his duties":

His 'ideas' have some relation to modernity, i. e., with what is called the avant-garde (the subject, history, sex, language); but he resists his ideas: his 'self' or ego, a rational concretion, ceaselessly resists them. [*Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*] is a recessive book<sup>17</sup>.

Contrary to Proust however, these fragments of memories do not start a fabulous huge novel of reminiscence but little snippets of banal and discreet nostalgia: "a dust of events which nothing [...] can or should coagulate, construct, direct, terminate" (78). What Barthes sees in Tokyo is this very insignificance erected as a general value, preceding the meaning that calls for interpretations and the war of words. And where else do we find this insignificance if not in the provinces? A place where, traditionally, nothing happens, where life is slow and uneventful, mediocre, boring, dull to the point of stupidity, neutral<sup>18</sup>. These are for Barthes positive features because "... 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 behaviour, an illogicality of itinerary etc." (79). Compare this last observation from *Empire of Signs* with an extract from his journal relating his day to day life in Urt:

*July 16, 1977. Again, after overcast days, a fine morning: lustre and subtlety of the atmosphere: a cool, luminous silk. This blank moment (no meaning) produces the plenitude of an evidence: that it is worthwhile being alive. The morning errands (to the grocer, the baker, while the village is still almost deserted), are something I wouldn't miss for anything in the world<sup>19</sup>.*

His days in the South-West are empty because they surrender to the simple movements of the body and the contemplation of the sky. Even though realist writers have made provinces romanesque, by transforming the local idiom into narratives or descriptions, in conformity with an Occidental law of hysteria and theatricality, Barthes maintains that the provinces are a denial of expansion, the novelistic subject-matter without the novel ("a pure tellability divorced from the narrative"<sup>20</sup> as Ross Chambers says) like the haiku: "it's that, it's thus [...], it's so" (83), and this neutrality can also produce an epiphany or even a "satori" (a "seism which



causes knowledge, or the subject, to vacillate"(4): "This village [Urt] is a world so natural, so exempt from any extravagance, that the impulses of sensibility seem entirely out of place"<sup>21</sup>.

In Japan as in the South-West, one does not find the "internal radiophony continually *sending* in us, even in our sleep"(74) the Occidental babble, but the thought of thought, at the root of meaning "so that this meaning will not melt, run, internalize, become implicit, disconnect, divagate into the infinity of metaphors, into the spheres of the symbol"(75). In a sense, Barthes finds in Tokyo a lighter, simpler and more legible form of writing which may be a solution to the problem of how to write about childhood. The events are captured in a figure which appears frequently in his later work, the *tel!* (so! or just so!), like some young child pointing at a random object which has caught his attention<sup>22</sup>: "To write by fragments: the fragments are then so many stones on the perimeter of a circle: I spread myself around: my whole little universe in crumbs; at the center, what?"<sup>23</sup>. In *Empire of Signs*, he will say about public space: "the public space is a series of instantaneous events which accede to the notable in a flash so vivid, so tenuous that the sign does away with itself before any particular signified has had the time to 'take'"(108).

Barthes will use later, in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, these minimal happenings that suspend description and definition, to describe moments of things past, the tramway, the smells of a suburb, the river l'Adour, that constitute his own regional haikus, detached from the overall narcissistic experience of childhood. He calls them "anamnèses": "I call *anamnesis* the action – a mixture of pleasure and effort – performed by the subject in order to recover, *without magnifying or sentimentalizing it*, a tenuity of memory: it is the haiku itself"<sup>24</sup>. They are written in a style that is 'matt', ascetic, neutral, just as if they were empty of meanings or as if the subject was irrecoverable: "Coming home from his grand-parents' house on the streetcar, Sunday nights. Dinner was taken in the bedroom, beside the fire – soup and toast"<sup>25</sup>.

His world is contained in these historical and cultural stereotypes, the "biographic without the biography"<sup>26</sup> as Françoise Gaillard puts it. Nothing major, nothing important, nothing, above all, that helps detect the

future writer in these scenes. The traces of an old-world charm overrule the meanings:

*At the afternoon snack, cold milk with sugar in it. At the bottom of the old white bowl there was a defect in the glaze; he never could tell if the spoon, as it turned, was touching the defect or a patch of sugar that had not dissolved or had not been washed.*

*The old white bowl, like the ball of white rice, testifies to a moment in time, a simple poetic memory that links by their absence of depth and meaning, through time and space, Tokyo and Bayonne. One is the passage to the other (and vice versa).*

For this reason, some critics, like Rolf J. Goebel, have seen in *Empire of Signs* an example of the indifference and unconcern for Oriental reality typical of the Occidental gaze:

*Barthes's language betrays the (unacknowledged) return of the Western construction of a passive Orient that has no bearing on the author's existential situation other than the function of serving as the fictitious playground of the visitor's freely associative, non-committal discourse<sup>27</sup>.*

That may well be<sup>28</sup>. But the same unwillingness to let the Asian country express the meaning of its own sociocultural identity applies to the South-West of France, as it applies also to Morocco, where Barthes spent a lot of time as a sex tourist. When talking about his childhood region, Barthes always marginalizes the socio-political (as he marginalizes the colonial context in Morocco) in favour of a reserve of features "whose manipulation [...] allows [him] to 'entertain' the idea of an unheard-of symbolic system" (3): the aesthetics of the light or the accent. In an extract from his diary, he talks about the light as being "drinkable (I drink the air, the moment, the garden)"<sup>29</sup>. He adds: "And since I happen to be reading Suzuki, it seems to me that I am quite close to the state that Zen calls *sabi*".

In "The Light of the South-West", a newspaper article written for *L'Humanité*, the French communist newspaper (10/09/1977), he displays a distinct emotional, even sentimental streak. In this text, Barthes contemplates nature, the countryside and above all his own village. He curiously cannot seem to find here an example of the centrist French urbanism that he mentioned in the *Empire of Signs*. On the contrary, his

village, Urt, is distinctive, it has "a sort of whim that defies the apparent laws of human geography"<sup>30</sup>. His village is more complex, a "contradictory space", both "centred" and centrifugal, with a central square, yet scattered with distant pockets of habitation. The road that passes his house "meanders off to irrigate a whole outlying district of the village"<sup>31</sup>. It is at the same time grounded in tradition and luminous, suspended between earth and light.

Remembering that he is writing for an audience of communist readers who would want to know about the people and the economy of the region, he goes on to say that he cannot help but enter this region with his body, and his body is his childhood "just as history made it". He is a bourgeois (though of a poor family) from the southern provinces who remembers above all the smells and sounds: "To 'read' a country is above all to perceive it according to the body and the memory, according to the memory of the body"<sup>32</sup>. In order for the region to acquire substance, it is necessary to reject everything that is not ingrained in the body and that cannot be told by looking at a bowl of tea or the light in the sky. In this way, Tokyo and Japan can be linked in some obvious, human way to Barthes' physiology and middle-class regional identity.

Among the many connections, two major themes intertwine in Tokyo and Bayonne, two corporeal experiences or "provinsèmes" (as there are "morphemes", "phonemes" etc.) as Buisine calls them. Smell ("names, like voices, like odors, would be the terms of a langor: desire and death: 'the last sigh which remains of things' says an author of the last century"<sup>33</sup>) and movement: the markets and the stations. The popular Tokyo markets of Asakusa and Ikebukuro contain in transformed guise scenes of Barthes' past: "the idea of a village, furnished with a population as individual as that of a tribe" (39, 42), that is to say the markets of Bayonne, in the movement and the colours. They will never aggregate to form a story but they contain an enclosed essence<sup>34</sup>:

As with the odor of my childhood in Bayonne: like the world encircled by the *mandala*, all Bayonne caught up in a composite odor: that of Petit-Bayonne (the neighbourhood between the Nive and the Adour): the rope used by the sandal makers, the dim grocery shop, the wax of the old wood,

the airless staircases, the black of the old Basque women, black to the cloth cap holding their braided hair, Spanish oil, the dampness of the artisans' workshops [...], the glue of pianos being repaired at Bossière's shops, a certain aroma of chocolate, a city product, all this consistent, historical, provincial, and southern.<sup>35</sup>

The Tokyo stations, and their means of transportation, contain the nostalgia of the original tramway, "la baladeuse", which ran between Bayonne and Biarritz, in which one could rejoice in the "panorama, the movement, the fresh air", all euphoric properties in Barthes' cosmogony, but it is now gone and with it "a way of life" that takes with it a pleasure which has vanished for good. Similarly, "Japan enters in the Occidental 'mue': it loses its signs, as one loses one's hair, one's teeth, one's skin".

The whole process of walking through Tokyo becomes a complex experience whereby the particular brand of nobility and familiarity which is particular to the South-West is recognised. We have said that Japan gives to Barthes a form, "the brief event which immediately finds its proper form", of the haiku to condense childhood experiences. But in order to transform Japan into a utopian text, Barthes has to play throughout with the memories and echoes of sights and smells. Discussing the passage of time in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, he says: "For it is not the irreversible that I discover in my childhood, it is the irreducible: everything which is still in me, by fits and starts"<sup>36</sup>.

It is as if these specific corporeal memories in two different places had become a microcosm of *la province* (provincial life), incarnated in its atmosphere, its daily rhythms, its social and behavioural codes: "Primordial image-hoard of childhood: the province-as-spectacle, History-as-odor, the bourgeoisie-as-discourse"<sup>37</sup>; "Part of his childhood was spent in a particular kind of listening: listening to the proper names of the old bourgeoisie of Bayonne, which he heard repeated all day long by his grandmother, infatuated by provincial worldliness"<sup>38</sup>. In the same way as Barthes observes in his diary that he seems to learn more about France on a single circuit of his village than during weeks of life in Paris, there is more to learn about the provincial codes and the subtleties of social dialectics of the South-West in Japan than anywhere else. It is a

vestibule of socio-historical knowledge, not least because it is constantly contrasted to the Occidental way of life. The haikus might lack narrative energy but they refer to a physical experience, a *punctum*<sup>39</sup>, that holds the key to their significance.

There appears to be a genetic link beyond his control between Barthes, his region and Tokyo, a lineage, a filial devotion, an umbilical cord made by rays of light. An emotional force seems to take over, pushing the mental aside and translating a hunger for presence which enters into the paper's depth as if it was a skin. This principle of continuity connecting both cities is indeed an empty centre that acts as "a primary core of irradiation" (78), "an opaque ring of walls, streams, roofs, and trees whose own center is no more than an evaporated notion" (32): the presence of the maternal. It is the mother, the maternal language, that gives the sense of belonging to a place, the feeling of being anchored<sup>40</sup>. What is this object wrapped in an elaborate package if not the presence of the mother, who is ever present in the South-West? Here again the sign at once conceals and designates the object it contains: as Barthes becomes Barthes, the mother is within, only silent and secret.

"Each reader is left to construct his or her personal itinerary through Barthes' writings"<sup>41</sup> says Leslie Hill. It is possible that I have indeed constructed such a reminiscence, or at least that my antenna has picked up the profound nostalgia and love for a place emitted by *Empire of Signs*. Barthes' sentiments of belonging and declarations of affiliation to the South-West sensibilities take the form of an arabesque – a free composition – that links Tokyo to Bayonne through time and space. One might say, paraphrasing Barthes talking about the eroticism of the veiled body that the most fantasmatic part of Japan is that part where the provinces are glimpsed but not seen.

## Notes

- 1 Leslie Hill, "Barthes's body", *Paragraph*, 11/2 (July 1998), pp. 107-126, (p. 111).
- 2 Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, translated by Richard Howard (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982), p. 3.
- 3 Even though Roland Barthes has found himself in the situation of French Parisian Intellectual, defender of the structuralist movement, inevitably governed by his intellectual practice (constantly "cut off from the popularity of language", Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 123), one notes that

- he was also attached to his provincial region in his childhood land of Bayonne in the Pays Basque, and the village of Urt, where he lived and where he is now buried.
- 4 As usual the importance is given to the surface and its flash of light. The haiku, which will form the base of his comparison, is "a network of jewels in which each jewel reflects all the others and so on, to infinity, without ever being a center to grasp, a primary core of irradiation", *Empire of Signs*, p. 78.
  - 5 "Barthes's body", p. 116. The Ego is at ease, reassured about its existence, because signs of its presence are everywhere: Paris is the center of the self.
  - 6 The art of bowing, for example, "is not the sign of a communication – closely watched, condescending and precautionary – between two autarchies, two personal empires (each ruling over its Ego, the little realm of which it holds the 'key'), it is only the feature of a network of forms in which nothing is halted, knotted, profound", *Empire of Signs*, p. 68.
  - 7 *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, p. 135.
  - 8 In a text on the Bunraku, titled "Animated/Inanimated", Barthes contrasts the tradition of French puppetry and its Japanese counterpart. In France, the puppet is a caricature of the actor who remains the only true form of life. But it is the actor who becomes a puppet because he is under the illusion of life: a collection of signs, of grimaces and gymnastics that pretend to imitate life. The actor pretends to be one and unique but he succeeds only in preserving the division of his body: here the voice, there the look, here the movement, there hysteria, there the soul. His true emblem is the puppet. The Bunraku, on the contrary, gets rid of the actor, does not try to animate what is not. It is the discretion, the elegance and subtlety of the movement that makes it become "the aesthetic envelope of efficiency".
  - 9 "Pantouflard" derives from "pantoufle", slipper, and refers to domestic cosiness confined in the home.
  - 10 The southern accent is also the accent of the rugbyman, whose strength can be measured by his body. Barthes also recognizes the southern intonations in his own pronunciation of certain words (he immediately wonders if this means that there are two meanings to the same word if pronounced differently).
  - 11 *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, p. 60.
  - 12 Barthes sees the style of a writer as the organic product of a body and a biology: "under the name of style a self-sufficient language is evolved which has its roots only in the depths of the author's personal and secret mythology". Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, translated by A. Lavers and C. Smith (New York: Hill and Lang, 1968), p. 10.
  - 13 Alain Buisine, "Barthes et les noms", Philippe Bonnefis and Alain Buisine (eds), *La Chose capitale* (Université de Lille 3: P.U.L., 1981), pp. 71-103, (p. 89). Buisine suggests that it would be interesting to read the complete works of Roland Barthes as "an amplification of the provincial nucleon".
  - 14 "Un gâteau provincial", Marcel Proust, *Du Côté de chez Swann, A la Recherche du temps perdu* (Paris: Folio-Gallimard, 1954), p. 64.
  - 15 *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, p. 52. And what is structuralism if not the division, classification, fragmentation and the 'everything in its place' of domesticity?
  - 16 "Barthes et les noms", p. 90.
  - 17 *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, p. 119. One cannot help thinking here about the French Symbolist poet Mallarmé (Japan is a mallarmean habitat) who was, at the end of the nineteenth century, at the edge of modern poetry and at the same time extremely aware of social protocol, polite and considerate and passionate about minutiae (bibelot, word, etc.). Similarly, Mallarmé is Bashō, the Japanese haiku master, who discovered the "end of language", *satori*, "this state of a-language", *Empire of Signs*, p. 75. "The haiku is not a rich thought reduced to a brief form, but a brief event which immediately finds its proper form", *Empire of Signs*, p. 75.

- 18 On one of his 'cards', we find this formula: "In sum, the Neutral, it is me". Cited by Guillaume Bellon, "L'écriture du moi, du Journal aux Cours", *Fabula*, (5/2/2007), <http://www.fabula.org/actualites/article17157>.
- 19 "Deliberation", translated by Richard Howard, *Partisan Review*, 47 (1980), pp. 532-543 (p. 536). In *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, we find this expansion on the theme of the neutral: "Figures of the neutral: white writing, exempt from any literary theater – Adamic language – detectable insignificance – the smooth – the empty, the seamless – Prose (a political category described by Michelet) – discretion – the vacancy of the 'person', if not annulled at least rendered irretrievable – absence of *imago* – the suspension of judgement, of due process – displacement – the refusal to keep oneself 'in countenance' (the refusal of any countenance whatever) – the principle of delicacy – drifting – pleasure in its ecstatic aspect: whatever avoids or thwarts or ridicules ostentation, mastery, intimidation" (p. 132).
- 20 Ross Chambers, "Pointless Stories, Storyless Points, Roland Barthes Between 'Soirées de Paris' and 'Incidents'", *L'Esprit Créateur*, 34 (2), Summer 1994, pp. 12-30, (p. 19). Several critics make this art of "notations" the starting point of gay narratives and/or cruising.
- 21 "Deliberation", p. 535.
- 22 In *Camera Lucida*, he says that photography "suggests the gesture of the child pointing his finger at something and saying 'that, there it is, lo!' but who says nothing else". *Camera Lucida, Reflections on Photography*, translated by Richard Howard (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982), p. 5.
- 23 *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, p. 93.
- 24 *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, p. 109.
- 25 *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, p. 107.
- 26 Françoise Gaillard, "Le biographique sans la biographie", *Revue des Sciences humaines*, 98 (4) (Oct-déc. 1991), pp. 85-103.
- 27 Rolf J. Goebel, "Japan as Western Text : Roland Barthes, Richard Gordon Smith, and Lafcadio Hearn", *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol 30, n°2 (1993), pp. 188-205, (p. 192). Ross Chambers goes further: "there is a name, of course, for European descriptive practices that take "the East" as their object while forgetting their embeddedness in the history of colonialism. That name is Orientalism – and in (mis)naming his "incidental" practice of the "romanesque" as an art of *haiku* it's almost as if Barthes had forewarned us to expect it to be, like his naming of it, an Orientalist practice". "Pointless Stories, Storyless Points..." , p. 19.
- 28 But Barthes clearly says that "Orient and Occident cannot be taken here as 'realities' to be compared and contrasted historically, philosophically, culturally, politically", *Empire of Signs*, p. 3.
- 29 "Deliberation", p. 537.
- 30 Roland Barthes, "La lumière du sud-ouest", *L'Humanité*, (10/09/1977), *Œuvres complètes*, t. III (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), p. 719. My translation.
- 31 There can be however, when he talks about the villages of France in *Mythologies*, irony and sarcasm. The French village (and Paris might be the largest of them all), a mixture of bourgeois life and feudal culture, is the place where everything stops, paralyzed by domestic cosiness, dominated by women householders, a dead end that destroys invention, imagination, utopia, by the corrosive values of comfort and ownership. The little French town, the cafés and grocery shops all evoke petty bourgeois reality and existence. There is indeed something fixed and unchangeable about provincial life, dark ages of archaism and immobility where one stagnates. The asphyxia, the drowning, render the small town or the village as a kind of 'panopticon', in the Foucauldian sense, a place where one can die in the stickiness of the bourgeois ideology of the "pantouflard".
- 32 "La lumière du sud-ouest", p. 722.
- 33 *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, p. 51.
- 34 "Comme dans ce jeu où les Japonais s'amuse à tremper dans un bol de porcelaine rempli d'eau,



"The Haiku of Urt": Migrations of Roland Barthes

de petits morceaux de papier jusque-là indistincts qui, à peine y sont-ils plongés, s'étirent, se contournent, se colorent, se différencient, deviennent des fleurs, des maisons, des personnages consistants et reconnaissables...". *Du côté de chez Swann*, p. 61.

35 *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, p. 136.

36 *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, p. 23.

37 *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, p. 7.

38 *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, pp. 50-51.

39 The punctum is a barthesian concept which arises in connection with photography in *Camera Lucida*.

40 When Barthes's mother dies, he will confess to a "sense of being at a loose end, of existing desultorily and randomly", writes Ross Chambers, "Pointless Stories, Storyless Points..." p. 23. Then, even the banal moments will appear pointless, as though having lost the key that holds them together.

41 "Barthes's body", p. 107.

