

For Roland Barthes "Japan" is a system of distribution (traits), all of which are *mat* (without luster, dead of Signs has no gloss: that is, it neither comments which is why RB calls it "the country of *écriture* (i calls for an absent zero-degree, not of *écriture* (i the word), but of language itself. Reading the "P ment, one experiences the exquisite undecidab —subject and object, active and passive, assim cretion—all of these dichotomies lose their focus. All is translation, ceaseless displacement; subj (among others) get lost.

Barthes

looking at his neighbor, yet brushing up against him. Only the humming of the propelled marbles is heard (the rhythm of insertion is very rapid); the hall is a bee-hive or workshop; the players seem to be working on an assembly line. The imperious sense of the scene is that of an applied, absorbed labor; never is there a lazy, cavalier, or coquettish attitude, none of that theatrical idleness of our Western players, dawdling in idle little groups around an electric pinball machine, ever so conscious of transmitting to the other clients of the café the image of an expert and disillusioned god. As for the art of the game, it also differs from that of our machines. For the Western player, once the ball has been shot, the path of its descent has to be corrected by degrees (by banging on the machine); for the Japanese player, everything is determined at the moment of shooting, everything depends upon the energy transmitted by the thumb to the clapper; the player's touch is immediate and definitive, and in it alone his talent resides, as he prepares and tends his shot in a single movement; this hand is therefore that of an artist (in Japanese fashion), for whom the (graphic) trait is a "controlled accident." In sum, Pachinko reproduces on the mechanical order the very principle of painting *alla prima*, which demands that the trait be drawn in a single movement, once and for all, and that on account of the very quality of the paper and ink, it

Jay Caplan / Nothing But Language:
on Barthes's Empire of Signs

Visible Language, XI 4
(Autumn 1977), pp. 341-362.
©1977 *Visible Language*,
Box 1972 CMA, Cleveland,
Ohio, USA 44106.
Author's address:
Department of French,
University of Minnesota,
Minneapolis, MN 55455



Photo:
Feed-troughs and latrines.
Pachinko players (photo: Zauho Press,
Tokyo).

never may be corrected; just as the little ball set in motion may not be deflected (it would be shamefully rude to ill-treat the machine, as our Western cheaters do): its route is predetermined by the sole flash of its firing.

What is the use of this art? To regulate a nutritive circuit. The Western machine supports a penetration symbolism: by taking a good "shot" at her, one tries to possess the pin-up girl who, all lighted up on the instrument panel, arouses and waits. In Pachinko, there is no sex (in Japan—in that country I call Japan—sexuality is in sex and not elsewhere; in the United States, it is the other way around: sex is everywhere, except in sexuality). The machines are feed-troughs in rows; the player, with a nimble gesture, so rapidly renewed that it seems uninterrupted, feeds the machine with marbles; he crams them in as one force-feeds a goose; from time to time, the machine, gorged, discharges its diarrhea of marbles: for a few yen, the player is symbolically spattered with money. One then understands the seriousness of a game which combats the constriction of capitalist wealth, the constipated parsimony of salaries, with the voluptuous debacle of silver marbles which, all at once, fill the player's hand.

The Incident

Western art transforms "impression" into description. Haiku never describes: its art is counter-descriptive, insofar as every state of the thing is immediately, obstinately, victoriously converted into a fragile essence of appearance, into a literally "untenable" moment, when the thing, even though already just language, is about to turn into speech, to pass from one language to another, and takes form as the memory of what thereby becomes a future anterior. For in haiku not only does the event itself prevail,

(I saw the first snow.
 That morning I forgot
 To wash my face.)

Caplan

What is Japan for Roland Barthes? Not someplace real, he writes, yet not an imaginary place either, but rather "a system of *traits*." Since the French word *trait* means "feature" (of a face, for example), "distinctive feature" (as in phonology), and "stroke" or "line" (in drawing), we can see that Barthes's Japan forms a complex set of visual, linguistic, and spatial markers. In his view, it would be irrelevant to evaluate *Empire of Signs* either as a description or analysis of reality (as ethnography) or as an imaginative transformation of reality (as utopian literature).

In the *Empire of Signs* (by which I mean both "Japan," in the sense defined above, and Roland Barthes's book), signs do not call attention to themselves, they do not ask that we pay attention to them, interpret them or analyze them. A "fragile essence of appearance" distinguishes every moment of Barthes's "semiological adventure" in Japan. He likes to call these moments "mat": that is, "without lustre, dull, 'dead'" (*OED*). Unlike the ("Western") signs we know, the distinctive features, or rather, the *traits* which make up "Japan" have no *gloss*: they neither gleam nor comment, have neither highlights nor sheen. A gloss always reflects (it "throws back"), reflects upon something. Whether commentary or sheen, the gloss always follows (temporally, spatially) what it reflects, and hence is subject to the

but, even what to us seems made for a painting, for one of those small pictures which are so numerous in Japanese art, as in this haiku of Shiki:

With a bull on board,
A small boat crosses the stream,
Through the evening rain.

Caplan

ambivalence which we feel for everything which is not "original": to gloss is to annotate, to interpret, but also to cover (to "gloss") over. Glossy surfaces make objects look valuable, and hence desirable, and yet their very heightening of surface appeal, of "superficiality," simultaneously elicits our suspicion. If we find glossy surfaces suspicious, is it not because they have something, literally, *specious* about them, because they are appearances? Their way of drawing our attention to objects (such as in magazines and photographs) which would probably otherwise have passed unnoticed exemplifies the techniques of "subliminal seduction" with which advertising agencies allegedly try to manipulate consumers. Moreover, glossy surfaces seem to reflect the appearances which, according to our metaphysics, separate us from reality.

"All that glisters is not gold," says the Shakespearean variant of a Western proverb. Recalling this famous casket scene in *The Merchant of Venice*, along with the well-known Freudian gloss upon it (in "The Motif of the Three Coffers")¹; one may easily establish an analogy between metals and surface finishes, as follows: gold:lead: :glossy:mat. Moreover, since Freud also connects the paleness of the lead coffer with the silence of Cordelia in *Lear*, a third (vocal) link may be added to our analog-

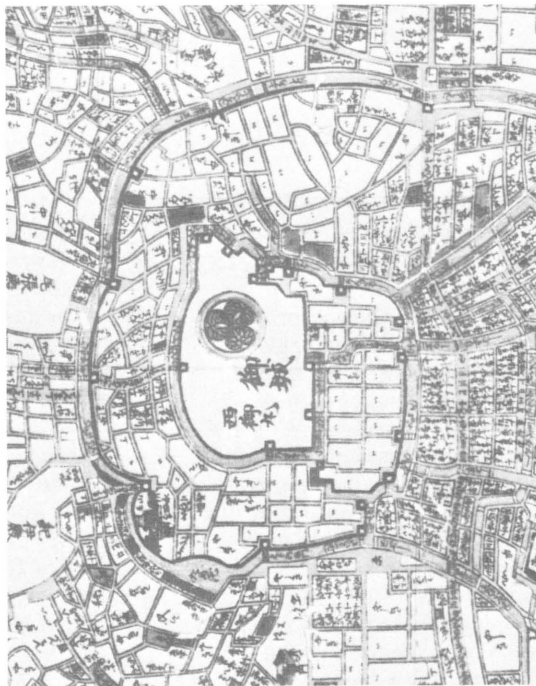
Even this becomes, or is only a kind of, absolute stress (which Zen attaches to every thing, futile or not), a soft crease out of which the page of life, the silk of language is deftly squeezed. Description, a Western genre, has its spiritual counterpart in contemplation, a methodical inventory of the divine predicates or of the episodes of the Life of Jesus (in Ignatius Loyola, the practice of contemplation is essentially descriptive); haiku, on the contrary, articulated upon a metaphysics without subject and god, corresponds to the Buddhist *Mu*, to the Zen *satori*, which is nothing like an illuminative descent of God, but rather an "awakening before the fact," a grasp of the thing as event and not as substance, an arrival at that anterior edge of language, contiguous with the matness (which besides is entirely retrospective, reconstituted) of adventure (that is, what befalls language, even more than the linguistic subject).

The number and varieties of haiku on the one hand, and their brevity and closure on the other, seem to divide and classify the world to infinity, to form a space of pure fragments, a fine dust of events which (through a sort of escheat of meaning) nothing can or ought to coagulate or construct, to direct or terminate. For haiku time has no subject: reading has no other *self* than the totality of the haikai, and this *self*, through infinite refraction, is never anything other than its reading-place; as in an image proposed by the Hua-Yen doctrine, one could say that the collective body of the haikai is a network of jewels, where each jewel reflects all the others and so on to infinity, without there ever being a center to be grasped, a primary nucleus of irradiation (the most appropriate Western image for this reverberation without motor and stop, for

Caplan

ical chain—gold:lead::glossy:mat::speech:silence. Forging this chain has the effect of locating the thematics of *Empire of Signs* among the *topoi* of Western literature: “eloquent (or golden) silence” is indeed a common oxymoron.

This analogical chain indicates that it is *voice* which, on the level of what Barthes calls “myth” (that is, ideology), provides the link between the two etymologically unrelated meanings (commentary, sheen) of “gloss.” The mythical category of “gloss” underlies Barthes’s assertion that voice is “the stake of modernity” (*l’enjeu de la modernité*). Truly modern writing, he would argue, must manage to lose its gloss: that is, it must become mute (be pronounced with a temporary stoppage of breath—that is, of the soul.) The status of this writing would then be roughly analogous to that of Chinese or Japanese ideograms: for it would appear that, although these characters may be pronounced, their component parts have no coded phonetic basis (which is why the characters are pronounced differently in each language). A modern writing would no longer seek *animation* from all the life-giving qualities which we attribute to the Logos. It would be lacking in luster, in sheen. This new mode of writing, then, will be defined in terms, not of Logos, but of *low gloss* (we shall deliberately disregard the separate origins of these two meanings



these sparkling reflections without origin, would be the dictionary, in which words can only be defined by other words). In the West, the mirror is an essentially narcissistic object: man conceives the mirror only in order to picture himself in it; but in the East, it seems, the mirror is empty; it is the symbol of the very emptiness of symbols (“The mind of the perfect man,” says a Tao master, “is like a mirror. It neither grasps nor rejects. It receives but holds on to nothing.”): the mirror catches only other mirrors, and this infinite reflexion is emptiness itself (which we know is form). Thus haiku reminds us of what has never happened to us; in it we *recognize* a repetition without origin, an event without cause, a memory without anybody, a word without moorings.

What I am saying here about haiku, I could also say about everything which *comes to pass* when one travels in that country which here is called

Photo:
The City is an ideogram: the Text continues on.
Tokyo street-plan; around 1800. Document belonging to Nicolas Bouvier, Geneva.

Caplan

and consider them as one; Barthes, alluding to Nietzsche, calls this procedure, by which one asserts a value without concern for origins, "affirmative philology").

High-gloss writing, like everything dialectical, is essentially continuous; one glosses in order to draw out logical implications; whereas low-gloss, mat writing is fragmentary. The former shines, and the latter just sparkles, but without having anything disruptive or incisive about it. In *écriture*, as in haiku, "what is posited need not be developed either in discourse [in the Logos] or in the end of discourse—what is posited is *mat*, and all one can do is go back over it." Nothing can be made of *écriture*; it is not "about" anything, does not have a hold over anything (from the standpoint of *écriture* there is no metalanguage).

In *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), *écriture* meant something very different: it referred to the rhetorical signifiers used by traditional French writers in order to label their work as literature and themselves as writers; while the more recent use of this term rather resembles what in *Writing Degree Zero* was called "style." Strangely enough, no more apt or beautiful definition of *Empire of Signs* can be found than in the concluding sentences of Barthes's first book:

"Feeling permanently guilty of its

Japan. For over there, in the street or in a bar, in a store or on a train, something is always *coming to pass*. This something—which is etymologically an adventure—is of an infinitesimal order: it is an incongruous way of dressing, a cultural anachronism, a lack of constraint in behavior, something illogical in one's route, etc. To count these events would be a Sisyphean undertaking, for they sparkle only at the moment when they are *read*, in the live writing of the street; and the Westerner could spontaneously utter them only by charging them with the very sense of his distance: one would have precisely to make them into haikai, a language denied to us. It can be added that these minute adventures (the accumulation of which, during the course of a day, induces a kind of erotic intoxication) never have anything picturesque about them (the Japanese picturesque is a matter of indifference to us, for it is detached from that which makes up the very specialness of Japan, its modernity). Nor do these adventures have anything novelistic about them (in no way lending themselves to the chatter which would turn them into narratives or descriptions); what they lead one to *read* (over there I am a reader, not a visitor) is the forthrightness of the trace, without wake, margin, or vibration; so many minute ways of conducting oneself (from clothing to smile) which in our part of the world, through the Westerner's inveterate narcissism, are but the signs of an inflated self-confidence, become, among the Japanese, simple ways of moving along, of tracing something unexpected in the street: for sureness and independence of gesture no longer refer to an affirmation of the self (to a "self-satisfaction"), but only to a graphic way of existing. The result is that the spectacle of the Japanese street (or more generally of the public place) appears as stimulating as the product of a secular esthetics, from which all vulgarity is decanted, and never depends upon a theatricality (on an hysteria) of bodies, but, once again, upon this writing *alla prima*, where sketch and regret, manoeuvre and correction are equally impossible, because the trait, freed from the advantageous image which the scriptor wishes to

Caplan

own solitude, [literary writing] is none the less an imagination eagerly desiring a felicity of words, it hastens toward a dreamed-of language whose freshness, by a kind of ideal anticipation, might portray the perfection of some new Adamic world where language would no longer be alienated. The proliferation of modes of writing brings a new Literature into being in so far as the latter invents its language only in order to be a project: Literature becomes the Utopia of language."²

That utopia of language is what Barthes calls "Japan . . . the land of *écriture*." Not another language, but "the possibility of difference, of a mutation in the properties of symbolic systems." The *Empire of Signs* points to a zero degree of language; that is, not an absence of language, but *that which is absent to language*: a state of pure symbolic difference. In order to explain the value of a zero-degree sign, Saussure remarked that, "Language is satisfied with the opposition between something and nothing."³ A sign such as *watchamacalit* does not mean nothing, but designates a "nothing" opposed to a "something." Likewise, the "nothing" designated by the *Empire of Signs* only has meaning in opposition to the "something" which is language.

Properly speaking, a mat surface does indeed reflect light (only a

convey of himself, does not express, but simply causes to exist. "When you walk," says a Zen master, "be content with walking. When you are sitting, be content with sitting. But do not equivocate!" It is what a young cyclist, carrying a tray of bowls on his outstretched arm, seems, in his way, to be saying to me; or the young girl, who, with a gesture so profound, so ritualized, that it loses all servility, bows before the clients of a department store running off to storm an escalator; or the Pachinko player inserting, shooting, and receiving his marbles in three gestures whose very coordination is a sketch; or the dandy who, at the café, bursts open with a ritual, virile snap the plastic envelope of the warm napkin with which he will wash his hands before drinking his Coca-Cola: all of these incidents are the very stuff of haiku.

The Three Writings

Bunraku puppets are between one and two meters high. They are little men or little women with moveable limbs, hands, and mouth. Each doll is manipulated by three visible men who surround it, prop it up, and follow it around. The master holds the top of the doll and its right arm; his face is bare, smooth, clear, cool, cold like "a white onion which has just been washed" (Basho); his two assistants are in black, a piece of cloth hiding their face; one, wearing gloves but with bare thumbs, holds a large stringed scissors with which he moves the doll's left arm and hand; the other fellow, crawling along, props up the body and steadies its walk. These men move along a shallow pit which leaves their body in view. The scenery is behind them, as in the theater. On the side, a platform supports the musicians and the narrators, whose role is to *express* the text (the way juice is squeezed from a fruit); half-spoken, half-sung, and punctuated by great spectrum strokes of the shamisen players, this text is both measured and thrown away, with violence and artifice. Sweating and immobile, the narrators are seated behind small lecterns on which rests the great writing which they vocalize and whose vertical characters can be glimpsed from a distance

when they turn a page of their libretto. A triangle of stiff cloth, attached to their shoulders like a kite, frames their faces, which are subject to all the throes of voice.

Caplan

black hole reflects nothing), but its microscopic irregularities cause the light to be reflected in a diffused fashion. The light which a mat surface reflects is therefore not focused, it is dissipated without even calling attention to the reflective surface. A mat surface thus resembles that "vague" literature advocated by Mallarmé: "Le sens trop précis rature/Ta vague littérature." Barthes puts it this way:

[T]he Japanese thing is not hemmed in, illumined; it is not made of a distinct outline, which color, shadow, or stroke would proceed to "fill in"; around it, there is: *nothing*, an empty space which makes the thing mat (and therefore in our eyes: reduced, diminished, small). (p. 59)

Because the mat object does not define or emphasize itself, it can serve very well as an example of value-neutrality: it does not claim to be worth any more (or any less) than anything else. The mat object, the "Japanese" sign, just happens: "So!" ("Tel!"), it says. Philologists tell us that the word "mat" comes from the Latin *mattus* ("stupid, drunk"), which in turn probably derives from the Persian *mât* ("at a loss, helpless": as in the expression *shah mât*, "The king is helpless"). Barthes's blissful ignorance of Japanese language and culture is such that he cannot read what to a Japanese would probably be glossy, ideological signs: for Barthes they are delightfully mat. There is no

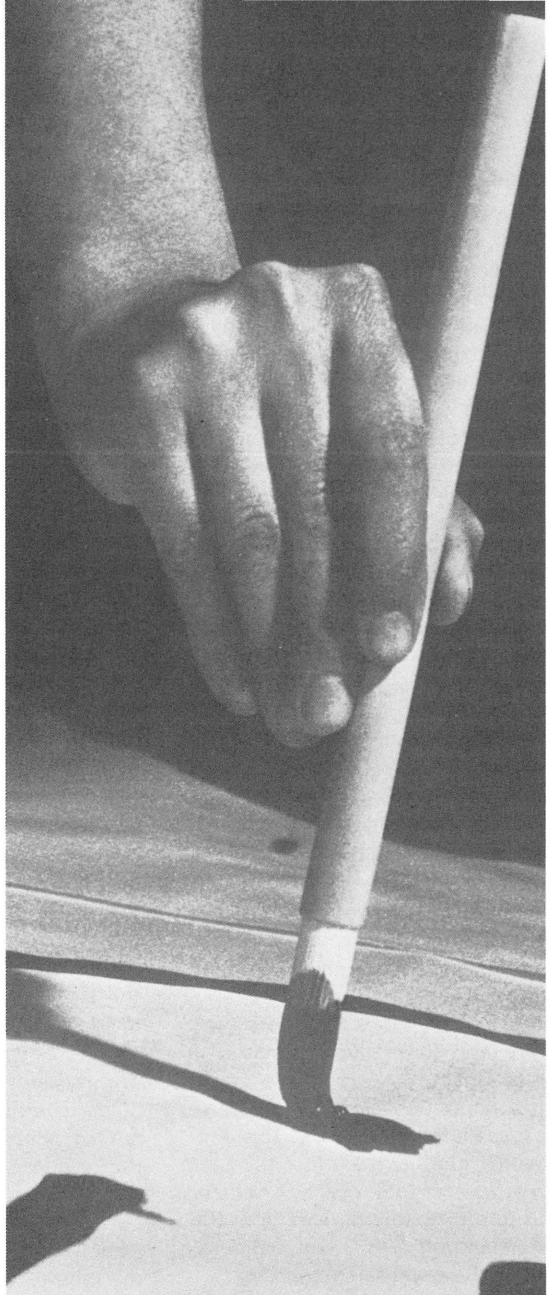
So *Bunraku* puts three separate writings into play and leads one to read them simultaneously at three points of the spectacle: the marionette, the manipulator, the vociferator; the effected gesture, the effective gesture, the vocal gesture. Voice, the real stake of modernity, that particular language substance, whose triumph is everywhere promoted. Quite to the contrary, *Bunraku* has a *limited* idea of voice; it does not suppress it, but assigns it a limited, essentially trivial function. In the narrator's voice, there indeed do combine outrageous declamation, tremolo, hypershrill, feminine tone, broken modulations, tears, paroxysms of anger, of moaning, of entreaty, of astonishment, indecent pathos—all the little tricks of emotion openly elaborated at the level of that internal, visceral body of which the larynx is the mediating muscle. For all that, this overflow is transmitted only in the very code of overflow: the voice travels only through a few discontinuous signs of storm. Thrust out of an immobile body, triangulated by the clothing, linked to the book which guides it from the stand, and curtly studded by the shamisen player's strokes—all slightly out of phase (and hence impertinent)—the vocal substance remains written, discontinuous, and coded, subject to an irony (if we agree to divest this word of all caustic meaning); therefore, what voice exteriorizes is finally not what it conveys ("feelings"), but itself, its own prostitution; the signifier astutely does nothing but turn itself inside out like a glove.

Without being eliminated (which would be a way of censoring it, that is, of designating its importance), voice is accordingly put aside (scenically, the narrators occupy a lateral platform). *Bunraku* provides a counterweight to voice, or better, a countermarch: that of gesture. This gesture is double: an emotive gesture at the level of the marionette (some people weep at the suicide of

Caplan

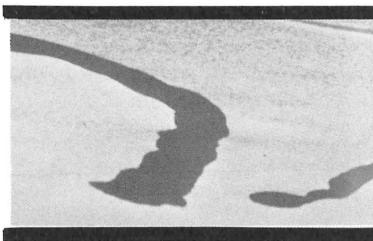
more "father tongue" (no more ideology) for him to overhear (people cannot sound stupid, aggressive, pompous), and therefore no reason to be bored. No more reactivity, nothing but affirmation. Everything has become equally desirable. At the end of a day in the *Empire of Signs*, Barthes finds himself spent, checkmated, in a state of "erotic drunkenness."

How many of these "happy mythologies" read like elegant little cultural essays, and yet waver on the brink of obscenity! Take the Pachinko fragment, for example. Entirely composed of description and analysis (which Barthes in his first fragment had labeled "the major gestures of Western discourse"), this fragment (or at least the "well-behaved" side of it) describes the game and its players, and contrasts its art and utility with the way in which pinball is played in the West. So far so good, however. . . . In the first place, the reader is slowly, but forcibly led to identify with the Pachinko player ("one inserts each marble," and later in the same sequence, "a shower of marbles [falls] into *your* hand" [my emphasis]) and thereby to enjoy, first the "shower" and, finally, the "diarrhea" of silver marbles which stream into his hand. Although the reader's position in fact fluctuates (I identify with the Pachinko player at the beginning and at the end of the fragment; in the middle



Caplan

paragraph I am a comparative anthropologist, observing the differences between Japanese and Western players; occasionally, my "hysteria" vanishes, and instead of identifying with the referents, I savor the sumptuousness of Barthes's language), only such a process of symbolic identification can account for the varying intensity of the reader's pleasure. At the end, I have satisfied the machine (it is *complée*: that is, full to overflowing with food and with sex), and the machine has satisfied me, with a "voluptuous debacle of silver marbles." Machine and player are satisfied, but who has been feeding, who has been satisfying whom? At the beginning of the fragment, we read, "[O]n enfourne chaque bille dans une bouche": *enfourner* means "to place something in the oven"; so that the mouth (*bouche*) becomes an oven, and the marbles, bread or rolls. (I translated this phrase as, "[O]ne



inserts each marble into a slot.") A similar reversal occurs in the last paragraph, where we read that "[T]he machines are feed-troughs," and that the player "crams in [the marbles] as one force-feeds a goose": now are the

the female doll-lover), a transitive act at the level of the manipulators. In our own theatrical art, the actor feigns acting, but his acts are never but gestures: there is nothing but theater on stage, and yet shameful theater. *Bunraku* (this is its definition) separates act from gesture: it shows the gesture, it allows the act to be seen, it exposes both art and work and reserves for each of them its writing. Voice (and then there is no risk in letting it reach the excessive regions of its range), voice is doubled and dubbed by a vast volume of silence, in which other traits, other writings are written with proportionately more finesse. And here, an unheard-of effect is achieved: far from voice and almost without mimic, these silent writings (one transitive, the other gestural) produce an exaltation as special, perhaps, as the intellectual hyperesthesia which is attributed to certain drugs. Speech being, not purified (*Bunraku* has no concern with *askesis*), but, as it were, massaged on the side of play, the sticky substances of Western theater are dissolved: emotion no longer inundates, no longer submerges, it becomes reading; stereotypes disappear, yet for all that without the spectacle's degenerating into originality, into the "find." All of this connects, of course, with the alienation-effect advocated by Brecht. This distance, reputed in the West to be either impossible, useless or ridiculous, and then eagerly abandoned—even though Brecht placed it precisely at the center of revolutionary dramaturgy (and the latter probably explains the former)—*Bunraku* makes us understand how it might function: through the discontinuity of codes, through this caesura imposed upon the different traits of the representation, so that the copy elaborated on stage may be, not destroyed, but as if broken and striated, conveyed beyond the reach of the metonymic contagion of voice and gesture, of soul and body, which ensnares our actor.

A total but divided spectacle, *Bunraku*, of course, excludes improvisation: to return to spontaneity would be to return to the stereotypes of which our "depth" is composed. As Brecht had seen, here *quotation* reigns, the pinch of writing, the fragment

Caplan

players eating a feed-troughs, or are the machines being fed by the players? The confusion is compounded by the caption to the picture (showing two rows of Japanese men, back to back, playing Pachinko) included in *Empire*; it reads, "Feed-troughs and latrines" (my emphasis). Now, one may ask, who is excreting on whom? Is the goose-machine discharging a diarrhea of marbles into the reader-player's hand, or is the reader-player urinating on (or into) the machine? One really cannot distinguish one end of what Barthes calls Pachinko's "nutritive circuit" from the other (which is quite a sorry state of affairs, since a rational being is supposed to know the difference between those two orifices).

This brief analysis provides us with a sense of what Barthes has been talking about when he writes of *écriture* as a kind of *satori*. In the course of our reading, we may have learned something about Western culture (about who we are), but we also have been taken for a ride, as it were: as Barthes says of Japan, we have been "spangled with multiple bursts of light."

Our experience, however brief, of *écriture* resembles that of Roland Barthes, getting "wasted" by the "graphic mode of existing" (p. 108) in Japan, an experience which is meant by him to be exemplary of the modern reader's relationship to avant-garde texts

of code; for no one of the game's originators can ever accept personal responsibility for what he is never alone in writing. As in the modern text, the braiding of codes, references, detached observations, and anthological gestures multiply the written line, not by virtue of some metaphysical call, but through the play of a combinatory system which opens up in the entire space of the theater: what one begins, the other ceaselessly continues.

Kowtowing

Why is politeness viewed with suspicion in the West? Why does courtesy imply distance (if not evasion) or hypocrisy? Why is an "informal" relationship (as we greedily say) more desirable than a coded relationship?

The impoliteness of the West presupposes a certain mythology of the "person." Topologically, Western man is reputed to be double, composed of a social, factitious, false "exterior," and a personal, authentic "interior" (*locus* of divine communication). Following this pattern, the human "person" is that place filled with nature (or divinity, or guilt) and girded or enclosed in a social envelope which is more or less looked down upon: the polite gesture (when it is postulated) is the sign of respect which one plenitude exchanges with another through a social limit (that is, in spite of and through this limit). However, when it is the interior of the "person" which is judged respectable, it is logical to recognize the person by denying all interest to his social envelope: it is therefore the supposedly frank, brutal relationship (cut off, so we think, from all social labels, indifferent to any intermediary code) which will best respect the individual worth of the other: to be impolite is to be true, Western morality logically says. For if there were indeed a human "person" (dense, full, centered, sacred), it would probably be that person



Please enter the following subscription to **VISIBLE LANGUAGE**

	<i>One year</i>	<i>Two years</i>	<i>Three years</i>
Individual	() \$15.00	() \$28.00	() \$39.00
Institutional	() \$25.00	() \$47.00	() \$66.00

Foreign subscribers add \$1.00 for postage for each year.

- () Payment is enclosed. () Bill me later.
() New subscription () Renewal subscription
() Please also send me a list of the contents of all back issues.

Name _____

Address _____

_____ Zip _____



Enter a subscription to **VISIBLE LANGUAGE** for yourself.



Recommend a subscription to **VISIBLE LANGUAGE** for your library.

A Special Request to the Library

I request that **VISIBLE LANGUAGE** be added to your collection of scholarly periodicals on a regular subscription basis.

Now in its tenth year of publication, **VISIBLE LANGUAGE** is a quarterly journal concerned with research and ideas that help define the unique role and properties of written language.

Signed _____

Department _____

Date _____

Use this form to recommend **VISIBLE LANGUAGE** to your departmental or other institutional library.

Order through your subscription agency or directly from
VISIBLE LANGUAGE
Box 1972 CMA
Cleveland, OH 44106 USA

One year	\$25.00
Two years	47.00
Three years	66.00

Foreign subscribers add \$1.00 for postage

All orders must be prepaid.

A limited number of all back issues is available on a first-come first-served basis. A list of the contents of all back issues will be sent on request.

BUSINESS REPLY MAIL

FIRST CLASS

Permit No. 5957

Cleveland, Ohio

No postage necessary if mailed in the United States

Postage will be paid by

Box 1972
c/o The Cleveland Museum of Art
Cleveland, OH 44106

Visible Language



Caplan

(this is what he means when he remarks [p. 102] that the specialness of Japan resides in its modernity). The reader of a modern text must abandon all hope of mastering that text, and allow the boundaries between those two rival kingdoms which are reader and text momentarily to lose their definition. Reading a modern text, these boundaries (along with their allies: sensible/intelligible, signifier/signified, etc.) briefly lose their focus. Yet Barthes insists that these moments of *satori* are not moments of illumination, but of insemination ("Japan has spangled [the author] with multiple bursts of light") or, better still, of light-headedness: for then, the head suddenly becomes light. Likewise, as a reader of Barthes's *Empire of Signs*, I sense that the writing of this book was indeed for him a "bonheur parfait d'écriture," and I find myself wanting, in turn, to write: *Empire of Signs* has put me *en situation d'écriture*, in a situation to write.

When translating this book, I have been rewriting what is already a translation. It is a translation because, in the first place, it inevitably (like all travel literature) converts the unknown into the known; in fact, Barthes says of those events which compose his Japanese semiological adventure that they "sparkle only at the moment when they are read, in the live writing of the street" (Barthes' emphasis), and that for this reason, "to count

whom we at first claim to "greet" (with the head, lips, and body): but my own person, inevitably joining battle with the fullness of the other, will be able to win recognition only by rejecting all factitious mediation and by affirming the integrity (precisely an ambiguous word: physical and moral) of its own "interior"; then later on, I shall shorten my greeting, and make it look natural, spontaneous, relieved and purified of all code: I shall be scarcely gracious, or I shall be gracious according to an apparently fanciful invention, like the Princess of Parma (in Proust), who draws attention to her ample income and to the eminence of her station (that is to say, to her way of being "full" of things and of forming a person) by the studied "simplicity" of her manners, rather than by being stiff and difficult to approach: how simple I am, how gracious I am, how frank I am, how I am *someone* is what the impoliteness of the Westerner says.



This other politeness, through the minuteness of its codes and the clear graphism of its gestures, appears to us exaggeratedly respectful (that is to say, in our eyes, "humiliating"), because we read it, as is our wont, according to a metaphysics of the person; but this politeness is a certain practice of emptiness (as one might expect from a strong

◁ Photo:
Who is greeting whom? On the Yokohama dock. Document excerpted from *Japon Illustré*, 1915.

Caplan

them would be a Sisyphean undertaking." Short of repeating these incidents (which he knows a Westerner can no more accomplish than write haiku), Barthes must rewrite them, translate them.

Moreover, it is characteristic of the modernist activity in which Barthes is engaged (albeit "at the rear guard of the avant-guard")

code, but which signifies nothing). Two bodies bow down quite low before each other (the arms, knees, and head always remaining at a fixed place), according to subtly coded degrees of depth. Or yet again (after an antique image): to offer a gift, I bend down flat, stooping down to the inlaying, and to answer me, my partner does the same: a single low line, that of the ground, joins the offerer, the receiver and the stake of the protocol, a box which perhaps contains nothing—or ever so little. A graphic form (written into the space of the room) is thus lent to the act of exchange, in which, through this form, all greed is cancelled out (the gift remains poised between two disappearances). The greeting may here be put beyond all humiliation or vanity, because literally it greets no one; it is not the sign of a closely-watched, condescending and wary communication, between two autarkies, two personal empires (each reigning over its



to consider writing and translation as one and the same gesture. James Joyce, who more than anyone else in recent years has been a literary model for the *Tel Quel* group and whose *Finnegan's Wake* already reads like a vast and mad translation, seems to have devoted his final writing days to translating an episode of that great novel into Italian. Another exemplary writer for this group has been Maurice

Self, a little domain to which it has the key); it is but the mark of a network of forms where nothing is fixed, tied down, profound. *Who is greeting whom?* Only such a question justifies the greeting, inclines it toward kowtowing, spurs the graphism and not the meaning to triumph in it, and imparts to a posture which we read as excessive the very

Photo:

The gift is alone: it is touched neither by generosity nor gratitude; the soul does not contaminate it.

Presentation of a gift; document excerpted from *Japon Illustré* of Felicien Challaye, Librairie Larousse, Paris 1915

Caplan

Blanchot, who has written that a writer must remember:

to be in his turn a translator . . . to make his language [*langage*] undergo the transmutation which must get two languages [*langues*] from one, one language which is plainly understood, and another which remains unknown, unrevealed and inaccessible, and whose absence . . . is all we grasp of it.⁴

In the manner of Blanchot, for whom an "original" text should already read like a translation, Barthes experiences no regret at his capacity to recreate the qualities which someone else might attribute to "the real Japan"; on the contrary, he describes *Empire of Signs* as a "*pur bonheur d'écriture*," and, elsewhere, as "happy mythologies."

From this allusion to his *Mythologies* (1957) we may infer that a different conception of writing separates *L'Empire des signes* from the "unhappy mythologies" of its predecessor. As ideological criticism, *Mythologies* provided an ethical reaction to historical products (detergents, Einstein's brain, toys . . .) to which "myth" had lent a natural appearance. The essays sought to divest these products (signifiers) of the layers of meaning (of signifieds) which had adhered to them. Although he identifies signifiers as cultural products, Barthes has often tended to consider them as a

restraint of a gesture from which all signifieds are inconceivably absent. *Form is Empty* says, and repeats, a Buddhist saying. That is what is stated, through a practice of forms (a word whose plastic and social meanings are here indissociable), by the politeness of the greeting, the bending of two bodies which write themselves but do not grovel. Our speech habits are quite vicious, for if I say that over there politeness is a religion, I convey the idea that there is something sacred in it; the expression should be misread so as to suggest that religion over there is but an act of politeness, or better still: that religion has been replaced by politeness.

Translated by Jay Caplan. From Roland Barthes, *L'Empire des signes*. Geneva: Skira, 1970. The translator wishes to thank Roland Barthes and the Editions Albert Skira, Geneva, for their kind permission to translate these excerpts. He also would like to express his thanks to Stephen B. Davidson, Charles Sugnet, and Steven Ungar for their assistance with various aspects of this translation.

Caplan

natural substratum. It is as if he sometimes thought that his critical task were essentially caustic, and consisted of dissipating the accumulated layers of mythological (or ideological) film which, according to this view, separate us from the sensuous surface of reality. For example, Barthes asserts in his preface to the 1970 re-edition of *Mythologies* that semiology has become the theoretical locus where "a certain liberation of the signifier [*du signifiant*]" may be carried out, at least in the West. The title, "L'Empire des signifiants," which Roger Laporte gave to his review of the book, finds ample justification throughout the writings of Roland Barthes.⁵ Here, Barthes does seem to consider the set of traits which he invents ("Japan") to be truer, ontologically superior to their French translation.

That such an ideal notion of translation (according to which a translation has always lost some of the original's "life") should find its way into an avant-garde text would hardly be surprising, since the very notion of the sign (Beveniste: "the sign is the representative of something else which it evokes as a substitute") is itself a theological proposition (cf. St. Augustine, *De Trinitate*), if not indeed, as Louis Marin has contended, the founding proposition of Christian theology. Nonetheless, the ontological superiority of "Japan" to its French translation is merely

- Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* (Paris: Seuil, 1953; rept., Paris: Seuil "Points," 1971); trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith, *Writing Degree Zero* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1970).
- Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957; rept., Paris: Seuil "Points," 1970); trans. Richard Howard, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972).
- Sur Racine* (Paris: Seuil, 1963); trans. R. Howard, *On Racine* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964).
- Essais critiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1964); trans. R. Howard, *Critical Essays* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972).
- Éléments de sémiologie* (Paris: Gonthier, 1964); trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith, *The Elements of Semiology* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1970).
- Système de la mode* (Paris: Seuil, 1967).
- S/Z* (Paris: Seuil, 1970; rept., Paris: Seuil "Points," 1976); trans. Richard Miller, *S/Z* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974).
- L'Empire des signes* (Geneva: Skira, 1970).
- Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (Paris: Seuil, 1971); trans. R. Miller, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976).
- Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: Seuil, 1973); trans. R. Miller, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975).
- Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (Paris: Seuil, 1975); trans. R. Howard, *Roland Barthes* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).
- Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (Paris: Seuil, 1977); trans. R. Howard, *A Lovers Discourse* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).
- Image-Music-Text*, essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang 1977).

Book-Length Studies on RB

- Calvet, Louis-Jean. *Roland Barthes: regard politique sur le signe* (Paris: Payot 1973).
- Heath, Stephen. *Vertige du déplacement: lecture de Barthes* (Paris: Fayard, 1974); trans. forthcoming.
- Mallac, Guy de and Margaret Eberbach. *Roland Barthes* (Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1971).
- Thody, Philip. *Roland Barthes: A Conservative Estimate* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1977).

*For additional bibliography, see the study by Stephen Heath listed here. ■