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Barthes's Imaginary Voyages

Abstract

Reading *L'Empire des signes* and *Alors la Chine* as points of departure, the article explores a network of reciprocal images of the text as voyage and the voyage as text, with Barthes as a self-styled, disinherited ethnographer/traveler.

Keywords

L'Empire des signes, Alors la Chine, voyage, text

BARTHES'S IMAGINARY VOYAGES

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Les miroirs profonds,
La splendeur orientale,
Tout y parlerait
A l'âme en secret
Sa douce langue natale.

—Baudelaire

Meeting a Zen master on the road
Face him neither with words nor
silence.

—Ekai

(from *The Gateless Gate*)

Susan Sontag describes serious thought of our time as caught between two forms of sensibility: a feeling of homelessness on the one hand, and on the other, an irresistible attraction to the exotic. These two tendencies, apparently opposed, are in fact mutually reinforcing. The search for identity and selfhood takes the form of a frantic quest for an inscrutable Other; we try to cure our «spiritual nausea» with a regimen of constant movement from place to place. Anthropologists, Sontag claims, have developed a special perspective which allows them to exploit, even institutionalize their own intellectual and physical uprootedness. For them, a vocation as outsider is transformed into a «technique de dépaysement.»* Consequently, the anthropologist is one of our few remaining heroic figures.¹ Travel, it seems, is the myth and method of such heroism.

Sontag was writing, of course, about Claude Lévi-Strauss, but

her argument applies as well to Barthes, who has imposed upon himself an intellectual discipline consisting of situating himself as outsider to every system of signs he undertakes to investigate. Following a tradition that includes Montesquieu, Voltaire, Chateaubriand, Pierre Loti, Flaubert, Malraux, Lévi-Strauss and a host of others, he approaches each «culture» he visits (Japan and the Peoples' Republic of China, but also fashion and Balzac) as if it were a curious tribe never before encountered. The best-known examples are the analyses of French habits from fried potatoes to electoral photographs in *Mythologies* (1957), where Barthes pursued his goal of seeing «bourgeois culture as an exoticism.»² When he was traveling in Japan, his approach seemed less mischievous. Speaking of his *l'Empire des signes*³ he described his position in Japan as that of a «lost tourist, an ethnographer, in short.» Able in Japan to forget, or at least set aside the oppressiveness of bourgeois mentalities, Barthes called the book a collection of «happy mythologies,» adding that his position as foreigner is what spared him any «mythological nausea.»⁴

Given his voluntary *dépaysement*, it is hardly surprising that Barthes has written frequently about travel literature and about his own travels. What follows are explorations of a reversible network of images in Barthes's writings. Stephen Heath has shown how these writings are characterized by displacement and shifting of frames.⁵ We will see below how voyage images, specifically, reappear to describe the work of the Text. Conversely, the writings about travel point to a vision of the foreign culture as a Text. In light of ongoing debate about the possibility of non-exploitative cross-cultural discourses, Barthes's invitation to travel is both semiological and political.

On Vacation

In his 1977 inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, Barthes saw fit to situate semiology within a broadly conceived notion of the human sciences, and then to offer a characteristic metaphor to describe the specific field within which he was beginning officially to profess: «Literary semiology,» he says,

would be the sort of voyage which would allow us to disembark in a landscape that is disinherited, therefore free: angels and dragons no longer defend it; the gaze can alight, not without perversity, on ancient and beautiful things whose signified is abstract, outdated: a moment that is at once decadent and prophetic, a moment of gentle apocalypse, a historic moment of the greatest bliss [*jouissance*].⁶

This voyage moves away from inherited dogmas about how things mean. It discards the link between form and an obligatory meaning (*signification*) as a puritanical morality, or as a superego watching over and reining in the physical play of surfaces (*signifiance*). All Barthes's semiological voyages are in a very literal sense vacations (vacation. fr. *vacatus*, *vacare* to be empty, free). Emptied of their obligation to mean something predetermined, signs have permission to become eroticized, even perverse.

The «gentle apocalypse» that liberates ancient and beautiful things from their worn-out interpretations is what transforms reading into an erotic voyage (and, as we shall see, turns travel into a caress of surfaces). Elsewhere, it is the search for love that is a voyage:

A love affair that ends vanishes into another world like a sailing vessel. /...But/ I am the Flying Dutchman; I cannot stop wandering (loving) by force of an ancient mark that consecrated me, in the distant times of my deepest childhood, to the god Imaginary, afflicting me with a compulsion to speak that drags me from port to port saying «je t'aime.»⁷

The voyage is the vehicle by which language and desire transform each other dialectically. Each repetition of the few gestures in love's repertory (such as «je t'aime») recreates an original need. Language moves, too, in the process, like the river you can never step in twice. «Like the Argonaut, renewing his vessel in mid-voyage without changing its name,» the Lover «will accomplish a long voyage with a single exclamation. ...The job of love and language is to give an identical phrase continually new inflection» [*RB*, p. 118].

When voyage imagery appears, its purpose is always to displace logo- (and ethno-) centric perspectives by underlining the progressive impossibility of meaning separate from form.

«Disinherited,» «adrift» [*dérive*], «wandering» [*errance*] are important arrows that point in the direction of a signifier cut loose from its moorings. Everywhere, explicitly or implicitly, it is the mythical ship Argos that provides the critical features of this traveler's/lover's discourse. That ship, according to legend, was completely rebuilt while at sea—each piece, one by one, was replaced until nothing of the original ship remained except its name. Barthes uses the Argos as «an allegory of an eminently structural object an object with no cause but its name, no identity but its form» [RB, p. 50].

Disinheritance: a (paren(t)hesis)

Describing one's profession as a quest for «disinherited» landscapes is not without importance at the level of the literal. Voyage images attest to the pains Barthes takes to avoid being trapped in a discourse. The roles of professor and author are compromising ones for an anti-logocentric semiologist: to be on stage in an authoritarian or authorial way is to arrest the productive circulation of signifiers. In contrast to the fixated position of authority is an intimate image of erasure of frames, discursive origin, the symbolic order, and the father.

An episode in *Barthes par Barthes* takes place in a grammar school classroom, where an elderly teacher solemnly inscribes on the board the names of pupils' relatives «fallen on the field of honor.» Among the students, young Roland is alone in having lost a father. His discomfort at being thus thrust into the spotlight is relieved by the end of the session, however, when the names are erased and the blackboard is bare once again. At this, an unexpected point of humor:

Yet when the blackboard was erased, nothing remained of this loudly proclaimed bereavement—except, in real life, which is always silent, the figure of a home without social anchoring: no father to kill, no family to hate, no milieu to reject: grand oedipal frustration. [p. 49]

Here, the father's absence is experienced not as a loss, but as a

refusal to frame or be framed. When the victim fails to show up at the scene of the crime, the whole oedipal paradigm collapses. The son is absolved in advance of metaphysical guilt; the father is neither forgotten nor canonized, and the erased blackboard serves as a tombstone with no inscription. Under a photograph of Louis Barthes, however, is this tender epitaph:

...died very young (in the war). Was not immobilized in any discourse of remembrance or sacrifice....His memory, never oppressive, barely brushed childhood with an almost silent gratification. [p. 19]

This father-son figure is one which Barthes might attribute to his striving for a perpetual state of paradox or para-doxa: deconstruction of the received mythologies of the *doxa* (see *RB*, pp. 41 and 143). Instead of an elaborate meditation on the absent father, we have only an erased blackboard and a collection of photographs. In that family gallery, genealogy is freed from discourses of inheritance and inscribed in the para-linguistic codes of the body. Grandfather Barthes's pensive gesture, chin on hand (p. 23), reappears in successive generations of photographs (Barthes's father, p. 19, and Barthes himself, p. 29). As in the tale of the Argos, only the shape and name remain the same. Here, there is no anxiety of influence, there is only the place (*topos*) of the father in a chain of intertexts, a message without a code.

The same vocabulary of disinheritance reappears elsewhere to distinguish between the Work and the Text. A patriarchal relationship characterizes the Work: it is «fathered» by an author, whose ownership is assured and whose intentions are respected. In the Work, the play of signifiers is chaperoned by the laws of representation. The Text, on the other hand, is disinherited and prodigal, and it

can be read without its father's guarantee: the restitution of the intertext paradoxically abolishes the concept of filiation. It is not that the author cannot 'come back' into the Text, into his text; however, he can only do so as a 'guest,' so to speak. If the author is a novelist, he inscribes himself in his text as one of his characters, as another figure sewn into the rug; his signature is no longer privileged and paternal, the locus of genuine truth, but rather, ludic.»⁴

Neither the father nor the author is murdered, but simply erased and reinscribed beyond the codes of power and appropriation. The playful text declares its independence from the Symbolic order.

The family without «social anchoring» rejoins the thematics of the voyage. Each year, as he plans his seminar, the professor (no longer a figure of authority) pilots a ship:

It is to a fantasy, spoken or unspoken, that the teacher must return, at the moment when he will decide what direction his voyage will take; that way, he deviates from the place where he is expected to be, which is the place of the Father, always dead, as everyone knows (because only the son has fantasies, only the son is alive). [*Leçon*, p. 44]

In spite of itself, though, the voyage is acquiring its own definition by negation. The Text is adrift, without destination, but it is moving *away*. The fact that the father is absent is not as important as the evidence that it was not the son who killed him. Without an anchor in oedipal obligation and guilt, that is freed from the necessity of representing (taking the place of, speaking for), the text/son can deviate from the predetermined itinerary. But if the father «in real life» is disengaged from paternal discourse, the patriarchal logos returns (the teacher's name was Monsieur B.) in the form of a transformed dichotomy. As Barthes saw in a preface to Loti's *Aziyadé*, the Orient in that novel is «the marked term in an alternative: the Occident or *something else*»⁹ (Barthes's emphasis). That «something else» colors both Barthes semiological and his geographical voyages.

In Barthes's actual travels, to which we now turn, it is important, therefore, to note that foreign cultures are consistently experienced as maternal. Modestly claiming to describe only a «fantasized Japan» (*ES*, p. 9), a «hallucinated» China,¹⁰ he situates his travel texts in the domain of the Imaginary, contrasting them with the realm of symbolic exchange of meanings and power. He experiences both cultures as non-violent. Japan's non-violence is specifically a maternal one, especially in the context of food (*ES*, p. 29). The absence, in the China he saw, of brutality in the cultural surface

...is not unrelated to the sempiternal parade of the Phallus....I wanted to link in a single movement the infinitely

feminine (maternal?) quality of the object itself *f.i.e.* China/, that manner that China has in my view of peacefully and powerfully leaving meaning behind, and the right to a special discourse: that of a gentle drifting, or again of a longing for silence.... [*Alors, la Chine?*, p. 14]

Quite clearly, both the metaphorical voyage of the signifier and the appeal of real travel are linked to the maternal. And in the case of China and Japan it is again the fact of being an outsider that offers the possibility of a special discourse. We will discuss shortly the problems encountered in constructing that discourse. For now, I want simply to underline the desire to «leave meaning behind.» It is to a fantasy of a para-linguistic or preverbal Imago that the voyage and its discourse return. This is literally the state of infancy (*infans*: incapable of speech) into which anyone adrift in a foreign country is cast. In Barthes's voyages, this preverbal, pre-mirror (and pre-phallic) stage is associated with the maternal. (Note the photo in *Barthes par Barthes*, page 25, that shows the infant with his mother before the mirror, with the caption «the mirror stage: you are that.»¹¹ That photograph is perhaps the Flying Dutchman's «ancient mark» that consecrates him in early childhood to the god Imaginary.)

Again, in an essay on Stendhal's travels in Italy, the experience of falling in love with a foreign country is described in Manichean terms. On one side is the «bad» country, the «patrie» (the domain of unhappy mythologies?), left behind in order to visit Italy, which is for Stendhal, in Barthes's view, «la matrice»—a locus of plural passions, perverse desires, a «polyphony of pleasure.» The article is about Stendhal, but it is also about travel in general and Barthes's travels in particular. It begins, in the first person, with a Baudelairian dream of Italy («...take this train, travel all night and find myself in the morning in the light, the sweetness, the calm of a distant city»), and admits, parenthetically, to a passion like Stendhal's for Italy, then for Japan. The notion of the foreign country as a non- or prelinguistic lover is reiterated in the title of the essay: «One always fails in speaking of what one loves.»¹²

Semocracy versus Ethnography

If, as we have seen, the Text is a journey in a disinherited landscape, the inverse is also true: travel itself is a form of writing. Visits to Japan and China put the visitor in the role of the infant, who sees cultural and scriptural signs rigorously from the outside, where the temptation to defer to the signified is minimized. This is a literal vacation from (or of) the Empire (in the Racinian sense) of signs. No nausea accompanies this exclusively material presence of surfaces. In the place of the terrorism exercised by familiar mythologies, a foreign culture can be read as a text of pleasure:

And so the old Biblical myth is turned inside-out, the confusion of languages is no longer a punishment, the subject can experience the thrill of the cohabitation of languages *that work side by side*: the text of pleasure is a joyful Babel.¹³

A view such as this of the pure textuality of culture sidesteps more than the problem of semocracy (the dominance of the «full» sign). It also speaks to the problem of travel and power. In our day, the *récit de voyage* is a risky enterprise. It is no longer a neutral act for a white man to visit a non-white culture, and it is even less innocent for him to write about it. Edward Said has shown the many discourses—military, diplomatic, missionary as well as literary—that constitute a colonizing stance toward West Asia and North Africa. To describe these societies is to risk «orientalizing» them according to our desires. To represent the Orient is to speak for it, in its place. By denying the subjectivity of the people described, Said argues, colonial discourses reduce them to silence.¹⁴

The only escape from Said's accusations, apparently—and this is where his book has drawn the most criticism¹⁵—is not to say anything at all. For to speak is to risk falling into one of two romantic myths, one of two colonialisms: that of Sameness (foreigners are essentially «like us,» a universal signified packaged in an exotic signifier, in short, the savage as noble) or of pure Otherness (the savage as savage, with the voyage as quest for natural man in a pre-civilized state). The philosophical impasse for the traveler does not stop there, however. For if the foreign culture is exotic, it will be illegible; and if it is familiar, then the traveler finds only a mirror or a projection of his own fantasies. Here is

how Lévi-Strauss articulates the dilemma:

The alternative is inescapable: either I am a traveller in ancient times, and faced with a prodigious spectacle which would be almost entirely unintelligible to me and might, indeed, provoke me to mockery or disgust; or I am a traveller of our own day, hastening in search of a vanished reality. In either case I am the loser—and more heavily than one might suppose; for today, as I go groaning among the shadows, I miss, inevitably, the spectacle that is now taking shape.¹⁶

Either stance—identifying with the foreign culture or objectifying it—is a power discourse, it turns out, and the anthropologist is heroic insofar as he recognizes the problem and adopts it as his own.

Barthes reinterprets the dichotomy at the level of the unintelligible or illegible spectacle which he sees instead as a «joyful Babel.» For him, to remain silent is a foreclosure of pleasure, a censorship as unacceptable as that of reducing a culture to silence by speaking in its place. But there are two possible attitudes toward the unintelligible: the hermeneutic (or semiocratic) and what I will call the ethnographic. The second of these opens the possibility of writing without representing.

The hermeneutic approach assumes a full sign, in which surfaces hide secrets; the observer's task is to interpret the surface, revealing what is hidden. Jean Ricardou proposes that this approach is in itself an exoticism, in that it interprets a «here and now» (a signifier) in terms of an «elsewhere» (a metaphoric signified).¹⁷ Whether or not one accepts Ricardou's terminology, it can certainly be argued that a hermeneutic approach invites stereotypes. Barthes is aware of stereotypic functioning as it appears in the connotations words bring along with them and which make it nearly impossible to see a foreign culture through the accumulated rhetorical baggage of one's native language.¹⁸ Stereotypic thinking is dangerous because it forgets that the linguistic sign is arbitrary. Instead, what is cultural, historical and learned is seen as inevitable and natural.

Barthes sees an antidote to the stereotype in a poetic (i.e. material, productive and playful) use of language as a «point of departure» for other signs. (Here the semiological and literal voyages converge.) By «poetic» he means:

...the symbolic capacity of a form; this capacity is valid if it allows the form to 'depart' in a very high number of directions and thus to show, potentially, the infinite progression of the symbol, to which we can never assign a final meaning and which is finally always the meaning of a new meaning (so that the true antonym of the poetic is not the prosaic, but the stereotype).'⁹

This poetic stance is what provides an answer to Lévi-Strauss' lament. An attempt to speak *in* or *from* a milieu would be less problematic than speaking *about* or *for* it. Interpreting (i.e. translating) a culture can be abandoned in favor of transcribing. What is transcribed is «the spectacle now taking place,» and whether that spectacle is intelligible or not is no longer the point. This literal ethno-graphy devolves from a state of «knowing a foreign (strange) language and yet not understanding it» (ES, p. 13). Elsewhere, Barthes notes that an ethnological book is a kind of

encyclopedia, noting and classing all reality, even the most futile, the most sensual; this encyclopedia never adulterates the Other by reducing it to the Same; appropriation is diminished, the certainty of the Ego is alleviated. In short, of all the scholarly discourses, the ethnological one appears to him to be the closest to a Fiction. [RB, p. 87].

It is in the context of this kind of ethnography that we can read *l'Empire des signes*.

Impossible Paradigm

Barthes called *l'Empire des signes* a book of «happy mythologies» because, as an outsider, he was able to put out of his field of vision the bourgeois preoccupations of both France and Japan. Industrial Japan, postwar Japan, capitalist Japan are conspicuously absent from his characterization. What he chooses to dwell on are facets of the host culture that give him pleasure, an attitude that makes him more willing to redefine himself than to take an orientalizing posture. A clipping from a Japanese newspaper (p. 120) tells of a Monsieur Baruto, noted French literary critic and

semiologist visiting Japan to give a series of lectures.²⁰ Barthes comments on the newspaper photo of himself, pointing out to what extent his own features have been «Japanized.» The clipping is emblematic of the risks of situating oneself *in* the country one visits.

The book's visual emphasis (color photos, close attention to format, initial publication by the well-known «art house» Skira) helps us see Japanese culture as a play of figure and ground akin to Mallarmé's white-on-black stellar alphabet. Two specific perspectives place *l'Empire des signes* in a poetic relationship to Japan. First, what Barthes calls Japan's «graphic mode of existing» (p. 108) pervades and structures the book: aspects of the culture are seen as forms of writing. The extremely delicate Japanese meal is a gameboard or keyboard to be played rather than consumed; gestures of politeness and the practice of giving insignificant gifts elaborately and beautifully packaged are codes that can be known and recognized from the surface without being deciphered; a request for direction is a pretext for the unfolding of a gamut of non-verbal communications including gestures and sketching of maps, thanks to the layout of Tokyo with its unlabeled streets; Bunraku (puppet theater) deconstructs theological oppositions (inside/outside, animate/inanimate, manifest/hidden) on which the European world-view rests. Each of these is a Text, in which the play of meanings is in full view, the meaning of each kind of interaction being in the play of forms.

This Japan-as-Text metaphor is intricate and clever. It avoids being, itself, a form of representation or exoticism by being doubly self-referential. If the spectacle of Japan is a series of Texts which can be known without being understood, Japan can be transcribed *as it writes itself*. Scenes to which the viewer is drawn—the meal, the gift package, codes of formality, pachinko, calligraphy—all share an esthetics of gesture. Each of these categories refers to the others, forming an interreferential network exempt from value judgment and hierarchy. By grouping together aspects of culture seen as forms of writing on the basis of their similarity of form, the book shows Japan as a series of mirrors repeating its own structures, referring to itself. Japan represents itself, and thus colonizing discourse can be avoided because, like the gift whose main interest is its wrapping, the metaphor passes from signifier to signifier, from text to text.

Furthermore, the book itself is autoreferential in that it is not

about Japan at all, as is explicitly announced from the beginning. It is about writing. And it is in this sense that we should understand cultural signs as points of departure for other signs, and the semiologist as ethnographer. To the extent that the book selects and fantasizes a place called Japan, it risks representing the real country of the same name. But that kind of discourse is contested by autoreferential structures and by the pleasure of the text, which is not an interpretation.

A second perspective by which Japan is poetized emerges from Barthes's fascination with the theory and practice of Zen Buddhism. In fact, aspects of Zen correspond remarkably to many of the themes running through all Barthes's writings, so it is not surprising that references to Zen reappear frequently after *l'Empire des signes*. The extent of this interplay is too vast to survey here. What is most relevant to the subject at hand is the fact that Zen, like Barthes's entire thematics of the voyage, sets up as its goal an escape (or at least a vacation) from discourse. The empire of the «full» sign is one of the things that Barthes and Zen seek to overcome. The practices of Zen (haiku, the *koan* or meditation paradoxes, the cultivation of *tathata* or «suchness»²¹) provide ways of thinking about that which is literally unthinkable in European terms: in-significance.

Tathata is the affirmation of things as they are, the freedom and responsibility of things to be concretely autoreferential, without symbolizing or being symbolized. This «suchness» disrupts paradigms by undermining the binarisms on which they are built: cause and effect, self and other, negative and positive, container and contents, and especially language and reality. As one Zen text explains, if one sits in meditation in order to become enlightened, one's efforts will be futile; enlightenment consists of sitting just for the experience of sitting, and for no other purpose.²² What Zen offers is a practice of the empty sign; *tāthata* is a zero degree of rhetoric which arrests the semantic projection of the signifier. This state, which Barthes calls «tel» (*ES*, p. 110; *Fragments*, pp. 261-4), is that of the infant, «who is content with an empty word to indicate something: Ta, Da, Tat....» (*Fragments*, p. 262).

The scriptural practice of *tathata* is the haiku. Barthes describes these short poems as «strokes» [*traits*] which, like the brush strokes of the calligrapher, neither define nor describe:

The work of haiku is an exemption from meaning ac-

complished by a perfectly readable discourse (a contradiction refused to occidental art, which can only contest meaning by rendering its discourse incomprehensible), so that haiku seems to us neither eccentric nor familiar: it resembles nothing and everything: because it is readable, we think it simple, known, savory, delicate, 'poetic,' in a word, offered to a whole game of reassuring predicates; insignificant nonetheless, it resists us, ridding itself of the adjectives we just used to describe it and entering into a suspension of meaning, which we find strange because it preempts our most common speech exercise, which is commentary. *IES*, p. 110/

Japan's graphic mode of existing (or Barthes's graphic mode of perceiving, or both) posits everyday activities and sights as strokes that should be read as haiku. The effort in *l'Empire des signes* to transcribe Japan (without description or definition), like his non-commentary on haiku above, adopts the form of the Zen *koan* or paradox. A *koan* is a mental exercise designed to undermine paradigmatic (i.e. linguistic) thinking by means of a logical impasse. Here is a typical one:

Tai-hui...used to carry a short bamboo stick which he held forth before an assembly of monks, and said: «If you call this a stick, you affirm; if you call it not a stick, you negate. Beyond affirmation and negation what would you call it?»²³

Barthes's rendition of a Japanese meal could serve as another such paradox: according to the text, *tempura* is neither raw nor cooked, both fried and greaseless, a lace formed of interstices without edges (p. 37-38).

The successful practitioner of Zen uses meditation to overcome mediation, and calls the resultant momentary suspension of meaning *satori*, enlightenment. Zen texts describe this state in many of the linguistic, sexual and non-theological terms Barthes will use to define *jouissance*: loss of meaning, bliss, destruction of paradigms. And the declaration in *l'Empire des signes* (p. 11) that «writing is in short, in its own way, a *satori*» is what gives the book the possibility of being a non-egocentric voyage. The center is in Japan, and the center is empty.

Much Ado about Nothing

Even more immediate and paradoxical than *l'Empire des signes*, Barthes's short essay about 1974 trip to the Peoples' Republic of China has the impact of a Zen *koan*.²⁴ It was, consequently, widely misunderstood by readers of *Le Monde*, where it first appeared,²⁵ a misunderstanding that had the tone, if not the proportions of the Barthes-Picard episode of the early sixties. Several factors conspired to keep the article from being understood, not the least of which was its immediate context. Beginning on the first page of the newspaper, most of the text continues on a later page, devoted, as its banner headline announces, to stories of «Voyages of Yesterday and Today.» Barthes's deceptively low-key essay shares the layout with reviews of two newly-published works: an «imaginary history» reconstructing the fourth century attempt Pytheas of Marseille to find the route followed by Jason's argonauts, and a translation of Henry Adams' *Letters from the South Seas (1890-1891)*. Both books are replete with myths suited to a public avid for *dépaysement*: naked natives, cannibals, exotic flora and fauna, and lost paradises of several varieties. Marked with their prices and number of pages, each review is an advertisement for the imaginary voyage as a commodity.

Next to these gems of exotica, «Alors, la Chine» is like a slap in the face. Although the editorial blurb, like a good circus hawker, precedes the article with a come-on enticing the reader to read Barthes's «first sensations» of China, hot off the press, Barthes immediately disabuses us: «No *dépaysement*,» he announces. «In a sense,» he continues, «what we returned with (other than political impressions) was: nothing.» What follows is, however, a brilliant and understated demonstration of the contrast between Western expectations and the Chinese cultural text.

In China, Barthes found an aggressive «nothing» (the Zen *mu*, see *ES*, p. 12) which is the possibility of a strong third term in the oppositions East/West, male/female, significant/insignificant. What he describes is China's active refusal to signify, or to produce meanings for consumption and for export to the Western intellectual marketplace. Again, and by necessity, Barthes's *récit de voyage* takes the form of seeing European bourgeois culture as an exoticism:

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We want there to be impenetrable obstacles so we can penetrate them: by ideological atavism, we are beings of decipherment, hermeneutic subjects; we believe it our intellectual duty always to uncover a meaning. China seems to resist delivering up this meaning, not by hiding it, but more subversively, by undoing the construction of concepts, of themes, of names; China does not distribute targets of knowledge as we do; the semantic field is disorganized; an indiscrete interrogation about the meaning of something is handed back as the Question of Meaning; our Knowledge is reflected back to us as fantasmagorical: the ideological objects our society constructs are silently declared irrelevant and impolite [*impertinent*]. It is the end of hermeneutics. [*Alors, la Chine?* p. 8]

Hermeneutic values are not abolished because questions are not answered, but because there is nothing to say, no text to transcribe. This is not a package with nothing inside; this is a background with no foreground, or a stage without a spectacle.

Expanses of countryside, the body refusing to be read as erotic, omnipresent weak green tea which makes verbal interaction superfluous—sociability seems located entirely in a backdrop or an understatement, which Barthes presents using two images of that «nothing» he announced in the first paragraph: colorlessness and peacefulness:

Did I say colorless? Another more appropriate word comes to mind: China is peaceful. Is not peace that region, utopic for us, where the war of meanings is abolished? There, meaning is annulled, exempted in all the places where we occidentals would ferret it out: but it remains armed at attention, articulate and offensive just where we are loath to put it: in politics. (*Alors, la Chine?*, p. 10).

There is simply nothing to read, then, except a non-violent refusal to signify, in all domains but the political. There are no semiological adventures, no cultural events, no traces. Only the political stage engenders readable events: outbursts of anger or humor, caricature, poetic discourse, theatricality. Other than this political signification, what Barthes describes is a zero degree of cultural textuality.

Take Only Pictures, Leave Only Footprints

In the end, all the voyages are imaginary. Efforts to find a non-orientalizing point of view are as important as they are difficult, for a non-imperialist discourse has to be imagined by poets before it can be put into practice by governments. China seems to mark a limit of some sort. Barthes's title mimics sarcastically the question asked by many: What *about* China, after all?

It is fortunately not only the reader/traveler who resists the imperialism of signs, but also the text that tells us there is nothing to be read. But what if the culture that has nothing to say to us is simply the one that best protects itself from intrusion (and China has had plenty of practice)? After all, the ultimate hermeneutic is one that is pretending not to be one. While the visitor contemplates the empty envelope, the letter may be in plain view! «What we returned with (other than political impressions) was: nothing.» Why is the political text in parentheses? We Occidentals are accustomed to deciphering hidden political agendas in texts about other things. If, in China, all signifying activity, all events take place in the political arena, this could be a clue that all textuality—including the landscape, the body, and even the lovers' discourse—is displaced to an obvious political text, but this, paradoxically, is a text we don't yet know how to read.

And in the end, it is as untenable to write about Barthes as it was for him to write about the Orient. If the pleasure of the text is the opposite of interpretation, then the best that can be done is to re-present the pleasure of reading Barthes and, in the process, become aware of the imbricated paradoxes within which we work.

NOTES

*The French word *dépaysement* has no satisfactory equivalent in English. Derived from *pays*, (home)land, it has the negative tone of «homesickness,» or «disorientation,» and the agricultural connotations of «uprootedness.» But it also appears on travel brochures, where it signifies wanderlust and the spiritual refreshment of «getting away from it all.» In short, the word points to both the impulses Sontag

describes.

1. Susan Sontag, «The Anthropologist as Hero» in E. Nelson Hayes & Tanya Hayes, eds. *Claude Lévi-Strauss: The Anthropologist as Hero* (Boston: MIT Press, 1970), pp. 184-96.

2. *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), p. 64. Further references appear in the text as *RB*. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

3. Barthes, *l'Empire des signes* (Geneva: Skira, 1970). Republished in the «Champs» paperback series (Paris: Flammarion, 1980). Further references appear in the text as *ES*.

4. «Réponses» (an interview with Roland Barthes), *Tel Quel* 47 (1971), p. 102.

5. Stephen Heath, *Vertige du déplacement: Lecture de Barthes* (Paris: Fayard, 1974).

6. Barthes, *Leçon* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), p. 41. For a discussion of the difficulty of translating the word *jouissance*, see Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* ed. & tr. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), p. 9.

7. Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), pp. 117-18. Henceforth referred to as *Fragments* in the text.

8. Barthes, «From the Work to the Text,» in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticisms*, ed. & tr. Josué Harari (Ithaca: Cornell U. Press, 1979), p. 78.

9. Barthes's preface reappeared as «Le Nom d'Aziyadé,» *Critique*, No. 296 (1972), p. 113, and subsequently in «*Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*» suivi de «*Nouveaux essais critiques*» (Paris: Seuil «Points,» 1972).

10. Barthes, *Alors, la Chine?* (Paris: Christian Bourgeois, 1975), p. 12.

11. The terms are from Jacques Lacan, «Le Stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je,» in *Ecrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), pp. 93-100.

12. Barthes, «On échoue toujours à parler de ce qu'on aime,» *Tel Quel*, No. 85 (1980), p. 33.

13. Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), p. 10.

14. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

15. See for example Benjamin I. Schwartz, «Area Studies as a Critical Discipline,» *Journal of Asian Studies* 40, No. 1 (Nov. 1980), 15-25. See also the Review Symposium (four articles) in *Journal of Asian Studies* 39, No. 3 (1980), 481-517.

16. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, tr. John Russell (New York: Atheneum, 1970), p. 45.

17. Jean Ricardou, *Problèmes du nouveau roman* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), p. 145. Barthes agrees with Ricardou to the extent that «in every sign sleeps this monster: a stereotype» (*Leçon*, p. 15).

18. A glaring example is the image of disinheritance, which is supposed to function as emblematic of a liberated semiology, but which begs the question at the level of

the sexual stereotypes it enlists.

19. Barthes, *Erté*, tr. William Weaver (Parma: Ricci, 1972), p. 60.

20. My thanks to Roland Higgins, who translated the Japanese, and to whom this paper is dedicated.

21. For discussion of the principles of Zen, I am relying on William Barrett, ed. *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D. T. Suzuki* (New York: Anchor, 1956).

22. William Theodore de Bary, ed. *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, Vol. I (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), p. 247.

23. Suzuki, p. 141.

24. Or the joke about the couple whose bedroom looked out over a railroad track. After many years, they sleep through the night undisturbed by the midnight express which rattles by daily outside their window. One night, when the train fails to pass at its habitual time, the man sits bolt upright in bed, suddenly wide awake. Startled by his sudden motion, his wife wakes up and asks, «What happened?» The man replies: «Nothing.»

25. Barthes, «Alors, la Chine,» *Le Monde*, May 24, 1974; Reprinted with a postface by Barthes as *Alors, la Chine?* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1975).