Roland Barthes *L'empire des signes* (1970)

Yasuo Kobayashi

Roland Barthes

Roland Barthes was born in Cherbourg, France in 1915. Having lost his father at the age of one, he remained extremely close to his mother throughout the rest of his life. After attending high school in Paris, he undertook his university studies at the Sorbonne. However, due to falling ill with tuberculosis at the age of 19, he spent most of his twenties fighting the disease, requiring repeated stays in sanatoria. However, he took advantage of his time in the sanatoria to read copiously. From 1948 to 1952, he was a lecturer at the universities of Bucharest and Alexandria, and worked in the Education and Culture Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 1952, he became a researcher at the National Centre for Scientific Research, where he studied, with some interruptions, a new discipline at the boundary between literature, linguistics, and sociology, which later became known as semiology. In

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1953, with the publication of *Writing Degree Zero* (Reido no Ekurichūru) he became a representative of the so-called "New Criticism" and engaged in a wide variety of brilliant critical activities. He went on to author many more works, including *Mythologies* (Shinwa Sayō, 1957) and *The Fashion System* (Mōdo no Taikei, 1967), (the fruits of his research in semiology), as well as *On Racine* (Rashiinuron, 1963), S/Z (1970), and *The Pleasure of the Text* (Tekusuto no Kairaku, 1973), which charted new directions for literary research. He was a professor at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales from 1960, and at the Collège de France from 1976. In 1977, he lost his beloved mother, with whom he had lived, and in 1980, he was killed in a car accident in Paris. After his death, his moving masterpiece, *Camera Lucida* (Akarui Heya) was published, which is both an outstanding work of theory on photography and a tribute to the memory of his mother.

Barthes' oddly titled *Empire of Signs* (L'Empire des Signes; Hyōchō no Teikoku) is a singular and unparalleled treatise on Japan, in that it is written from a perspective that completely eschews any active attempt to discuss or understand its subject. What we find in this book is neither an accurate picture nor a cohesive analysis of Japanese culture. Japan is seen there not as an object of commentary, but only as a center of endless fascination.

In fact, Barthes was not an expert on Japanese culture, did not understand Japanese, and had never spent an extended period of time in Japan. It is likely that the inspiration for the book came only from two very brief stays between 1966 and 1968. Stated bluntly, the author knew almost nothing about Japan. However, this ignorance is an essential condition for being endlessly enchanted by this unknown country called Japan. Is that not the case? About tempura, he writes "Like the Salzburg Bough, the eel (or a piece of vegetable or shrimp) crystallized as tempura becomes a small lump of emptiness, a collection of crevices." To be able to write a sentence like, "the dish here becomes the embodiment of a paradoxical dream, a paradoxical dream of a thing made purely of crevices," one should not know anything about tempura unless one encounters tempura without knowing about it, otherwise that power of enchantment is lost.

The Japan that Barthes encounters in this book is by no means a special Japan. Rather, it is a commonplace, yet superficial Japan designed for foreign intellectuals to encounter, superficial so long as they remain detached from the daily lives of we Japanese. Namely, it is Japanese cuisine like tempura and sukiyaki, street scenes like pachinko and train stations, traditional arts like bunraku, haiku, and tearooms, the Zengakuren radical student union, which symbolized the social situation of the time, and, not to forget, the faces of the Japanese people. The author, like many other foreigners, is surprised, bewildered, and fascinated by these various fragments that make up the reality of Japan. Simultaneously, however, the author tries to read each of those fragments, drawn by the power of their enchantment. It was reading that was Barthes' real field of expertise, and starting from his semiology research, he had pioneered and established a method of reading not only literary texts but also a variety of social phenomena, ranging from fashion and advertising to sports. In *Mythologies* (Shinwa Sayō), published in 1957, Barthes had already discussed a variety of French cultural phenomena such as cinema, photography, cuisine,

advertising, sports, and political speech in order to critically analyze the myth function of bourgeois ideology which is hidden behind superficial or primary semantic effects. The same method is applied here to the various signs of Japanese culture.

However, it must be reiterated again and again that while the methods are the same, there are also significant differences here. That is, in *The Empire of Signs*, that same reading technique is not used to analyze and critique Japanese culture. To be sure, Barthes reads a wide variety of signs and symbols from Japanese society and culture. However, in doing so, he neither prescribes the meaning of Japanese culture nor judges its value. Rather, the situation is the opposite: he reads Japan precisely because the general principles of such rational description (what he himself perceives as "Western" principles) are reduced to nothing. In other words, he tries to read Japan as something that cannot be read.

Let us consider this paradox a little further. In general, any thesis on Japan written by a foreign author, insofar as it is a thesis on Japan, presents a picture of a Japan that the author knows and understands, and which has, therefore, ceased to some extent, to be an unknown foreign country. Behind the rational work of commentary, the mysterious and wondrous Japan of the initial stages fades away. Barthes, however, writes about Japan while at the same time trying to maintain that first relationship of enchantment.

For example, referring to the gestures of a Japanese person drawing a simple map to indicate a meeting place, he writes, "Whenever I am told the address of a place in this way, I will always remember the way they reverse the tip of the pencil and use the eraser attached to the end to softly erase and correct the curves of the streets and the way they lead to the overpasses." He adds, "I was so mesmerized that I wished it would take hours and hours for them to draw me the map."

What we find here is the figure of a foreigner who is in a state of wordlessness, in the sense of a "rift" in meaning in which the efficacy of his native language has been reduced to nothing, and who is still infinitely fascinated by the unknown semantic action that is united with a body, which unfolds before his eyes.

For someone from a city like Paris, where a street address is all that is needed to accurately identify any point in the city, it is an almost incomprehensible experience to see the careful creation of a series of improvised symbols —what he calls "écriture" (the cauldron itself)—each time to communicate a single location to the other. There, the space appears as an opaque thickness that lacks a cohesive structure of expression, an irrational fluidity that continually changes form in response to each individual body. These encounters with something so foreign to oneself, which can be a source of irritation and bewilderment to some, fascinate Barthes, and he leisurely surrenders himself to that fascination.

So there is a kind of physical pleasure here, if I may put it this way. Encounters with the incomprehensible and the unreadable do not interrupt the reading, but rather ensure that we continue to read and write endlessly, and at the same time turn reading and writing into a kind of pleasure. It is precisely this that makes Japan a privileged experience for Roland Barthes.

In this sense, the closest thing to the author's attitude in this book is that of a collector. In fact, the book is a collage of quotations from Japanese photographs, maps, haiku, and other writings collected according to certain standards of personal taste, as well as of his own fragmentary experiences. Anyone can sense the author's attachment to each of them, just like the attachment of a stamp collector would feel to each item of their collection. Japan is, for him, more than anything else, "something to love."

As such, the Japan that emerges in this book is entirely "something to love" for one particular foreigner—Roland Barthes. This is "Japan" as one world formed imaginatively by Barthes or, in the author's own words, a world that "I have named Japan of my own accord." This world is not, as the Western world is for him, a system dominated by a unified principle of meaning (one might say a Christian "God" or a Greek "Logos"). Rather, it is an opposite world where its center is empty, and exactly because of that emptiness, it manifests a variety of symbols and signs, which are light-heartedly playing with one another. It is almost a "dream" land "beyond" the Western world to which he belongs.

If this is the case, it would be foolish to try to argue against this book by, for example, pointing out other realities of Japan that it does not mention. If the "Empire of Signs" that this book describes is, above all, a world centered around emptiness, that is the very premise of the world's boundless fascination and the innocent love he holds for it. Enchantment is something induced precisely by the absence of a center that guarantees self-identity, and love is possible only because the object of such love does not lose its appeal as something forever alien to the observer. Needless to say, it is a privileged relationship only possible for a foreigner. We Japanese, who have been deprived from the outset of the possibility of having a similar relationship with Japan, must simply rejoice, with some envy, that such a happy encounter of enchantment and love has occurred between our country and a foreigner.