

VIEWS AND REVIEWS

Zen in the Art of Reading

Roland Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text*

GERALD DOHERTY

ROLAND BARTHES articulated his pleasure in all things Japanese in his book, *L'Empire des Signes*, his celebration of its manners, its food, its gardens, its poetry, and its religion where "the signs are empty and the ritual without God."¹ In subsequent books written in the 1970's references to Buddhism, and more especially to Zen, are strewn about the text, although Barthes shows a characteristic reluctance to "nominate" Zen and in so doing force it to assume the contours of a system, another religious idelect (the text, as he puts it, "undoes nomination": "the Name does not cross its lips,"²). The haiku is perhaps *the* sign of his pleasure, the form which at once articulates the void yet remains exempt from manifest content.

Barthes's later books, particularly *The Pleasure of the Text* and *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, are themselves kinds of haiku performances, short aphoristic fragments arranged in the "unmotivated order" of an alphabetical sequence, designed to defeat expectations of a developing content or meaning (thus you can make your entrance into or exit out of the text at whatever point you please). The risk of "incoherence" is preferable to that of a "distorting order."³ In the manner of the haiku and the Zen mondos, each fragment is designed to *detonate* its "significance" in a way which precludes interpretations or conclusions arrived

¹ I have used the translation given in Philip Thody's book *Roland Barthes: A Conservative Estimate* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 122.

² Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), p. 45. Subsequent references to this work will be cited parenthetically in my text by the abbreviated title, PT, and page number(s).

³ *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 93.

at through ratio-logical processes (this is one reason why Western critics have found the later Barthes impossibly unsystematic or have endeavoured to impose the kind of structural ordering on the text which the text itself is designed to resist). *The Pleasure of the Text*, in particular, is a sequence of meditations on the "pleasure" of reading, and more especially on what Barthes calls its "bliss" whose paradoxical quality is to be "beyond words," unspeakable; "nothing separates it from *satori*, from losing," as he puts it (PT 35). This is one of the apparently casual references to Zen in the book. It seems, however, that the book's debt to Zen goes deeper than these scattered and fairly superficial allusions might suggest. Indeed it would appear that the Barthesian approaches to the "bliss" of the text bear a remarkable resemblance to the Zen approaches to the experience of reality itself (since, for Barthes, the world is an infinite text, there is a sense in which the nature of reality and that of the text coincide). More specifically it seems possible to identify in Barthes's book three levels which have striking parallels with the three "stages" of Zen realization as they are articulated in Ch'ing-yuan's celebrated mini-text ("Before I studied Zen, to me mountains were mountains and waters were waters . . .") and which are implicit in many other Zen mondos and koans. An exploration of the details of this resemblance (and debt) will form the substance of this essay (the essay itself inevitably assuming the contours of yet another "distorting order"), and more especially of the way in which Barthes's brilliant improvisations on these three basic "stages" constitute radical reassessments of the processes of reading and writing and of the means through which we re-create and reconstitute ourselves and the world in so doing.

1. *Euphoria*

It is unnecessary here to explicate in detail Ch'ing-yuan's three "stages" or to emphasize that they are not formal steps in a logico-temporal sequence. It is sufficient to recall that the first "stage" sharply discriminates the mountain from the man, the object-seen from the subject-seer, the mountain substance from the essential self. In the corresponding universe of language each signifier has its signified, each form its content, each word has its direct referent in the real world which both defines and delimits it. Word-meanings are hypostatized in the projection of a world of established structures and fixed essences (Nāgārjuna's point that words take on meaning not from any reference to "real" objects but rather through their relational identity with each other is close to that of Saussure's⁴). Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text* presents a versatile and

⁴ For a useful discussion of semantic theory in relation to Mahayana Buddhism, see Toshihiko Izutsu, *Toward a Philosophy of Zen Buddhism* (Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1977) pp. 103-106.

subversive exposé of the common-sense (or in his terms "natural") assumptions which underlie this "first-stage" reading of the text and the world.

Barthes characterizes this state of language as conformist and "canonical," that established by "schooling, good usage, literature, culture" (PT 6). It generates utopian texts for grammarians, with its syntax and functions, its tropes and modalities. Its micro-model is the sentence itself with its implicit ethnocentric hierarchies, its "subjections, subordinations, internal reactions." Through the inevitability of its completion it projects a world of closed and finalized structures through which things can be mastered and brought into subjection (it is also the state of language with which the Zen masters of the *mondos* initially confront and test their novices with such double-edged questions as "Where have you come from?" or "How far have you travelled?"). Barthes identifies it (in its political context) with the language of institutionalized power in which ideological jargons compete with each other and systematically produce an "adversary figure," who may be rejected or recuperated at will. Barthes speaks of a "warrior *topos*," a site which generates language as a weapon, and which at the same time suppresses its own doubts, contradictions, and friabilities (PT 27-29; 50-51).

The classic realist novel is the epitome of this first "stage" reading of the world, the form which domesticates artifice and naturalizes language. It is the form in which the fragility and impermanence of the self is consistently *implied* (but never explicitly acknowledged), the narrative alternately destabilizing and reinforcing the ego, leading it through those plot-crises which threaten to negate its existence on to the kind of ultimate vindication which generally constitutes the narrative's closure. And of course it is the form in which the binary oppositions (or dualisms) of stereotypical perception (good/evil, sacred/profane, etc.) are domesticated in the text and assume the familiar configurations of fiction, those "characters" who confront and master each other across the spatio-temporal site of the story (in this context it is worth noting, by contrast, the habitual resistance which Zen *mondos* and koans display to assuming a narrative sequence or progress, even that of the most elementary kind as in parable or fable; indeed any "first-stage" anecdotal accumulation of representational detail, that of time or place or rank, for example, is immediately disrupted and dispersed by a *katsu* or a blow or, as I hope to show, by language itself operating at a different ontological level⁵).

Zen of course acknowledges this "first-stage" reading and structuring of the

⁵ At this ontological level, as we shall see, acts of interpretation, which normally assume a kind of gap between the text and the world which must be filled in, become problematic. (It is hardly an accident, however, that Ch'ing-yuan's mini-text with its tripartite folktale-like structure, its semblance of a narrative order, and its peculiarly enigmatic deployment of language has attracted a host of interpreters.)

world as the indispensable basis of all mental activity (it denies, however, that this is the sole or exclusive approach to reality). Barthes too accepts the "pleasures" of this level of reading (specifically he uses the term "pleasure" in contradistinction to "bliss" to designate this level of engagement). Thus it ameliorates the constraints of existence, generating mood-pleasures associated with place or with time or with circumstance. It grants an "(e)xttraordinary ego-reinforcement (by fantasy)," repeated cultural and social reconstitutions of the self (sophisticated soundings, however, register this "self" as essentially fictive, the product of a fiat by language). This "pleasure" is linked to "a *comfortable* practice of reading"; it "contents, fills, grants euphoria." Above all it offers a "consistency" of self-hood, however precarious, a linguistic site across which both writer and reader connive to exclude the perspectives of "loss" or of "emptiness" which persistently threaten to dissolve it (PT 14, 51). Like the Zen masters Barthes employs a host of play-techniques, ruses and sleights, raptures and disruptions through which to subvert and expose the common-sense "illusions" upon which this first "stage" reading of the text/world is established.

II. *Drifting*

The opening fragment of *The Pleasure of the Text* postulates a new type of anti-hero, the man "who silently accepts every charge of illogicality," who "remains passive in the face of Socratic irony," and who, despite public ridicule, "endures contradiction without shame" (PT 3), a contemporary version of the Zen "holy fool," the man without rank or qualities. He embodies a new mode of being-in-the-world, the shift from absolute "essence" into that of *relatio*, from fixed into flowing forms. Barthes characterizes this state metaphorically as that of "drifting," "dissolving," and "losing." It corresponds to Ch'ing-yuan's second "stage" ("Mountains to me are not mountains and waters are not waters") in which the mountain substance loses its "solidity" and becomes the site of a radical "dissolve" and displacement. With the simultaneous de-centering or de-construction of the *ego-cogito*, language is freed from its stereotypical function, the semantic articulation of the real world, and becomes "transparent, permeable, flexible, and non-resistant to such a degree that it is almost non-existent."⁶ In Barthesian terms the shift initiates the "play" of the signifier, the "zero" of the signified, and the release of language itself as "a primary, spontaneous, pragmatic force" (PT 33). Freed from the constraint of "meaning" each verbal sign becomes the site of an unbounded play of significance, a vibration (or detonation) felt throughout the weave of the infinite text.⁷ Barthes

⁶ Izutsu, p. 100.

⁷ Barthes habitually employs the metaphor of the text as a network of shifting language patterns and relations in a way which resembles not only the Buddhist con-

combines the ludic with the therapeutic in his approaches to this second "level" of engagement with the text/world.

It is frequently the site of a clash, an edge of confrontation between the two levels of language. Thus, in relation to his reading of Sade, Barthes speaks of a "collision" between the old reified forms, language in its conformist and "canonical" state, and "*another edge, mobile, blank,*" permeable, "ready to assume any contours." In a manner analogous to that of the sudden disclosure of the Zen "abyss" of non-articulation, Barthes locates the site of the "collision" as "the place where the death of language is glimpsed" (PT 6-7). Indeed many of the Zen mondos enact exactly such a type of "collision," the clash between two levels of language through which the disciple "glimpses" the void and comes to enlightenment. To take two examples. When the novice monk asks the fixed-form question, "What is the Daiba school?" Haryo offers the "mobile" reply, "Snow in the silver bowl" (it is precisely to prevent any codification of such replies and thus to miss the "collision" that the Zen masters habitually require that their novices "speak, speak!"). Likewise when the disciple asks Rinzai a "canonical" question about the style of his song, Rinzai responds with a "contour-less" answer, "One cannot drive a nail into empty space" (Barthes's equivalent legend is of the soothsayer who marked off the sky with his staff, that is, traced "a limit of which immediately nothing is left"⁸).

For Zen this second "stage" involves a radical defamiliarization of the "external world" as a consequence of which "nothing may be grasped as something definite."⁹ Barthes, reading the infinite world/text, speaks of "controlled discontinuities, faked conformities, and indirect destructions" (PT 9), fractures in experience in which identity and difference coexist in a state of perceptual tension. It is a site at once "dizzying" and dangerous, but one from which the horizons of "bliss" (*satori*) may be glimpsed. It initiates the infinite "play" of the signifier (its overlappings, its dislocations, its contradictions and variations), the point at which the text not only flows, but *overflows* (one recalls Isan playfully tipping over the water-bottle and then walking out), becoming at once unbounded and ludic, in excess of any purely social or structural functioning

ception of reality but also the models used in modern biology and physics. How close the resemblance is may be judged from Barthes's own reflections on his approach to the text: "It conceives the text as taken up in an *open* network which is the very infinity of language, itself structured without closure; it tries to say no longer *from where* the text comes (historical criticism), nor even *how* it is made (structural analysis), but how it is unmade, how it explodes, disseminates—by what coded paths it *goes off*" (see *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath [Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1979], pp. 126-27).

⁸ *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, p. 47.

⁹ *Izutsu*, p. 32.

(indeed the Barthesian "erotics" or "play" of the text frequently resemble the "play" of the typical koan: it too evades all attempts at conceptualization, all impositions of a signified; it in turn attracts, teases, baffles, eludes, and finally *absorbs* the subject; and it "deconstructs" him in an explosive accession to "bliss"). At this level the Barthesian text, like the Zen mondos, always plays "at the limits of sense and nonsense," initiating a coherent argument only to reveal its absurdity,¹⁰ subverting both its norms and its conclusions.

At this level too Barthes sharply distinguishes "ideological systems" (classic realist novels, for example) in which language conceals its message and its artifice behind the transparency of a representational surface from the genuinely novelistic, a site endlessly open, "a simple unstructured contour, a dissemination of forms, *maya*" (PT 27). Such openness, he suggests, may operate at the site of the radically new (as for example in the "exception of the Mystics" where discourse is destroyed, is silenced) or at that of the radically repetitive (as for example in the Buddhist *nembutsu* where to repeat is "to enter into loss, into the zero of the signified" [PT 41]).

Zen characterizes this second "stage" as that of no-mountain and no-self, the site of dissolution of the Cartesian *ego-cogito*. Likewise the Barthesian "subject" dissolves, becoming the locus at which it is neither the writer nor reader but language itself which performs. The personal "presence" in the text, the institutionalized "subjectivity" is replaced by "a field, a vessel for expansion" (PT 5) (one recalls Izutsu's use of the term "field" to designate the point at which, though person-hood is lost in the awareness of nothing-ness, the person remains as the "place" or the Barthesian "body" of this awareness¹¹). Barthes represents it as a kind of language *samādhi* in which the person becomes the text, and the text in turn re-creates him. He characterizes this extinction of essential self-hood as a kind of motionless "pivoting" (like a cork on the waves) or like a fly buzzing "with sudden, deceptively decisive turns" (PT 18, 31). These are tropes for the radical decentering (or dislocation) of the self which calls values, tastes, and assumptions into question, and which brings language itself to a "crisis" (PT 14). Zen actualizes it as the simultaneous experience of void-ness and the voiding of the experience ("emptiness must empty itself"¹²). In parallel fashion Barthes speaks of the "dizzying schism" in the subject, "the alternation of zero and of its effacement" (PT 61), an alternation which negates the dualistic (and un-

¹⁰ Eve Tavor, "Critical Play: A Reading of Roland Barthes," *Orbis Litterarum* 36, I (1981), p. 2.

¹¹ Izutsu, pp. 50-58. See also Robert E. Carter's review of Izutsu's book in the *Eastern Buddhist* XIII, 2 (Autumn 1980), pp. 128-29.

¹² See Abe Masao, "Zen is not a Philosophy, but . . .," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 33 (1977), p. 264.

critical) disposition to judge or assess. The sole appropriate response to the text (and the world) is the recognitive and celebratory one, the Zen-like "That's it!" (PT 13).

At this zero point the traditional alienation of reader from writer is collapsed, both fabricating the text and "playing" as "bodies" of awareness within it. Indeed the writer (like the reader) becomes "the joker in the pack, a *mana*, a zero degree . . . plunged into non-profit, the *Zen mushotoku*" (PT 35), inhabiting his text here and now, speaking *in* it not *on* it, simultaneously constituted and dissolved by its energies. It is precisely at this level of pure play, of ludic recreation that (Barthes suggests) any well-ordered, straightforward, conventional text may be reversed and read "inside out" (PT 26) in a manner reminiscent of the way in which the Zen masters habitually "reversed" the straightforward questions posed by their novices. Thus to the monk's well-ordered enquiry as to where the Buddhas come from, Ummon responds with an elegant counter-statement, "Lo! the east mountain goes flowing over the water." Similarly the last line of the celebrated Zen mini-text, "The water stands still while the bridge flows," enacts a kind of Barthesian "reversal," a subversion of representation which initiates the play of the text and the world. Indeed both mini-texts point to the void-ness at the core of language itself ("its empty center of content"), negating at once its metaphorical function (which indicates what its content is like) as well as its metonymic one (the filling in and concealment of void-ness with descriptions of things¹³).

III. *Bliss*

At the third "stage" of Zen the semantic foundations of language are called into question. Thus Izutsu, for example, speaks of the proposition "the sky is blue" as representing neither an objective description of nature nor the subjective expression of a state, but as "a momentary presentation of the absolute Reality itself."¹⁴ The crisis words of the typical *mondo* emerge as pure "sounds," explosive utterances generated at the "turning point" of consciousness. They function solely as signs of that "turning," configurations of void-space beyond the site of hearer or speaker (Izutsu's poetics of this level of word-play seem, however, to be inadequate, the function of language, he suggests, being not to "discriminate" but to fuse "things one into the other" so that the "flower in poetry opens itself up to all other things in the world." However, the poetic power of a haiku image (a flower image, for example) is generated not so much by such "fusing" but by a "collision" between states of language through which

¹³ See Frederic Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 122-23.

¹⁴ Izutsu, p. 101.

the "suchness" of the flower and the void-ness of its presentation are simultaneously glimpsed. Thus the poetic form creates and de-creates itself, transmitting at once its radiance and the extinction of that radiance at the same instant¹⁵). Barthes's designations of the "bliss" production of language have close parallels with these word-manifestations at the third "stage" of Zen.

Barthes's search for what he calls a "third term" of speech goes back to his writing of *Writing Degree Zero* (1953) (there, he considered his search to have been a failure). In a later essay on Eisenstein's films he locates it as the "third" or "obtuse" meaning, identical with that of the "Japanese *haiku*—anaphoric gesture without significant content. . . ."¹⁷ This preoccupation with a "third term" surfaces once again in *The Pleasure of the Text*, where it is located, not as a "synthesizing" term but as "an eccentric, extraordinary term" like "laughter" (Barthes takes this typically Zen-like manifestation from the novelist George Bataille), oblique enough to evade all paradigmatic containment (PT 55). In *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* it becomes a "discovery" beyond any two-term dialectic, a "translation" in which "everything comes back, but it comes back as Fiction," or "an-unheard-of speech in which the sign's form is repeated but never is signified"¹⁷ (this latter designation occurs in the context of the quest for an erotic, utopian speech in which the void "core" of language, its ontological emptiness, is overcome in a "single flash," an access to jubilatory plenitude). What is the nature of this Barthesian "play" or "bliss" reading?

Like the accession to *satori* it is in no way the fruit of a "gradual ripening"; rather (and here Barthes seems to bend the traditional methodological split between Sōtō and Rinzai Zen to his own purposes) everything "comes" suddenly, "is wrought to a transport at one and the same moment" (PT 52). Poised momentarily *beyond* speaker and hearer, "words *glisten*" like "incongruous apparitions" (PT 42), their negation of meaning issuing in the play of *significance* across unbounded space, as in those Zen utterances where (as Izutsu puts it) "timeless reality glitters for a moment in a time-space dimension."¹⁸

¹⁵ Izutsu, p. 132. It is worth recording here the thoroughly Barthesian comment of a fellow-Japanese poet on Takahashi Shinkichi's method of versification: "He clashes his idea of timelessness against the temporality of all phenomena to cause a fissure, through which he lets us see personally and convincingly the reality of limitless space" (quoted from *The Penguin Book of Zen Poetry*, ed. Lucien Stryk and Takashi Ikemoto [Penguin Books Ltd, 1981], p. 27).

¹⁶ *Image Music Text*, p. 62.

¹⁷ pp. 68–69, 112–14.

¹⁸ p. 102. Mallarmé characterized this mobile, life-and-death dialectic of language as follows: "All (words) are quick, before they fade away, to glitter, reflecting against one another, with distant, oblique and contingent flashes" (quoted from Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975], p. 246).

Barthes once spoke of his "disease" as that of *seeing* language,¹⁹ the "primal scene" of *hearing* followed by a "perverse" one which engages him as "visionary" and "voyeur." The "bliss" text involves a further shift towards concreteness, an engagement with the "materiality" of language, the words themselves in their "such-ness" issuing from the flesh, impressed with the musculature of the physical substance. The normal interpretative function of language involves a deciphering of the real (which in turn creates guilt in the subject); the "bliss" phase, by contrast, "speaks 'reality' (what is seen but not demonstrated)" (PT 46), an approach to that Nietzschean innocence of perception which would register a tree in its absolute "such-ness," as "a new thing at every instant" (PT 60-61) in exactly the same sense as Jōshū pointed at the oak-tree in the courtyard or Nansen to the flower in the garden. Barthes further characterizes this "materiality" as the forging of a new "language substance," the "transmutation" (like that of "incandescent metal") not of a language but of language itself (PT 31).

In the same way too as Zen habitually collapses the boundaries between the sacred and the profane, the meditative and the active states, the Barthesian "bliss" text would "abolish the false opposition of practical life and contemplative life," at once equalizing and *materializing* the pleasure, and rendering it as concrete as that of a "dish, a garden, an encounter, a voice . . ." (PT 58-59). Ceasing to be an abstract configuration of signs, the text is substantialized as a living "tissue," a texture in which "the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web." Like the body substance itself (when the spirit-matter split is abolished) the text ceases to "veil" a hidden truth, a personal meaning; all that is, is manifest (PT 64).

The third Zen "stage" is characterized metaphorically as that of the "great return," the actualization of "the dynamic whole which embraces great negation and great affirmation at once,"²⁰ the realization of formless-form. The illusion of a temporal sequence of "stages" is itself overcome. Barthes too presents his own idiosyncratic version of the "great return" motif. Thus the "subject" returns, as he puts it, not under "the illusion of a unity," the consistency of an essential personality, but by way of "imagining oneself as *individual*," creating a "fictive identity," projecting playful, multiple and even contradictory personae as signs of the process of becoming. In much the same way as the legendary Zen-man becomes indistinguishable from the butchers and drinkers of the market-place, Barthes's re-created "fictive-identity" becomes "the theatre of society in which we stage our plural" (PT 62), an identity which may bear all the marks of a social and cultural conformity (while differing radically from it) in the same way as

¹⁹ *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, p. 161.

²⁰ Abe, p. 265.

Ch'ing-yuan's first "stage" formulation bears a surface resemblance to that of the third.

Zen frequently compares the stripping of the layers of "illusion" which constitute the ego to the process of peeling an onion (a process which negates any anticipation of reaching a core). In a well-known essay on literary style Barthes too spoke of the necessity of replacing the traditional metaphor of the text/world as a fruit with a kernel (a form with a recoverable content) with that of "an onion, a construction of layers (or levels, or systems) whose body contains, finally, no heart, no kernel, no secret, no irreducible principle, nothing except the infinity of its own envelopes. . . ." ²¹ *The Pleasure of the Text* is itself a polymorphous enactment of exactly such a transition, from an essentially dualistic, projective and judgemental encounter with the text/world to that of a ludic and celebratory one. Indeed the "fragments" themselves dis-organize the conception of the text-world as a self-subsistent entity, a cultural essence to be appropriated or even consumed (as one for example ingests the collected works of an author), replacing it with that of a reticle, the infinite set of possibilities generated by the coruscation of verbal particles which make up the weave. In parallel fashion the "readerly" site in front of the text (with its implicit assumption of a mind-body dualism, a gap between ego and object, form and its content, interpretation and meaning) is collapsed into mobile modes of being-in-the-text/world, a praxis which is at once spontaneous, a-temporal, and ecstatic.

In so doing Barthes transplants something of the deconstructive and iconoclastic activity which is native to Zen (the tearing-up of sutra scrolls, the killing of the patriarchs and the Buddha) into a contemporary Western cultural context. Thus he adapts and "plays" with Zen noetic modes of experience, using them not only to subvert particular manifestations of the structuralist enterprise (in the way for example that his essay *Jacob's Struggle with the Angel* is designed to subvert the Proppian model, and his book *S/Z* to subvert all systematic approaches to the text) but also to disengage the mind from the forms it invents. In so doing he persistently drives language to the edge of intelligibility, to that point of neologistic exhaustion at which it passes over into the constitutions of silence.

²¹ *Literary Style: A Symposium*, ed. Seymour Chatman (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 10.