Japonisme and Minimal Existence in the *Cours*

At the instant when our mental activity almost merges into an unconscious state – that is, the relationship between subject and object is forgotten – we can experience the most aesthetic moment. This is what is implied when it is said that one goes into the heart of created things and becomes one with nature.

Otsuji (Seki Osuga), *Collected Essays on Haiku Theory*

‘The Other Scene’: Barthes, his Contemporaries, and the Orient

Throughout Barthes’s *Cours* at the Collège de France we see several profound themes that reveal the influence of Oriental thought as imported into the West largely by Alan Watts and D.T. Suzuki. Barthes’s sketching of the haiku as leading to an aesthetic experience which overrides the sense of division between one’s self and one’s environment; his suggestions that we conceptualise space and time differently; his digressive, incomplete methods of exposition; and his espousal of ‘suspension’ because of his reluctance to be pinned to a specific subject-position, all stem in part from his fascination with Taoist thought and Japanese aesthetics. He frequently refers in the *Cours* to the peaceable, liberatory ideals he sees in the ‘Orient’, defined in opposition to an ‘Occident’ whose logomachy is characterised by conflict. There is a problem of conflation here, of course: Diana Knight has shown that ‘Barthes’s key utopias are projected into the “Orient”’, and pointed out that the subsumption of such ‘totally distinct parts of the world’ as China and Japan under the label of ‘the Orient’ is problematic – or rather, ‘part of the problem to be discussed’. In the *Cours*, the ‘Orient’ includes Mount Athos in Greece, the Buddhist monks of Sri Lanka, and memories of Barthes’s time spent in Morocco. However, the ‘Orient’ is mainly associated with Taoism, Zen, and the Japanese haiku. The largely Japanese slant of Barthes’s Orient stems from Barthes’s fascination with the country after visiting it in the late 1960s.

Barthes’s writing about Japan in *L’Empire des signes* (1970) and about China in ‘Alors, la Chine?’ (1974) has been covered in depth by
critics. Such criticism covers the important question of whether Barthes produces an exoticising Orientalist discourse. My view is that he does not: his writing about China and Japan is shaped, above all, by a sardonic awareness of what Westerners expect to find in these countries, and by a concomitant rejection of these expectations. The article ‘Alors, la Chine?’, notably, received hostile criticism at the time of its publication precisely because of its refusal to conform to the paradigm of Western responses to contemporary China: either dogmatism or facile liberalism. It strove instead to articulate a subjective, indirect response. In the book on Japan, Barthes openly states that his account of the ‘traits’ he finds interesting in that country is informed by the self-interrogation Japan has fostered in him, rather than by any desire to portray the country: ‘L’auteur n’a jamais, en aucun sens, photographié le Japon. Ce serait plutôt le contraire: le Japon l’a étoilé d’éclairs multiples’ (ES, 14). While such statements cannot simply absolve Barthes from the dangers of Orientalism, it is clear that his project centres upon the critique of the conventions of Western thought rather than upon any more nefarious instrumentalisation of the Eastern other. Indeed, Barthes’s explicitly imagined Japan is, as Eric Hayot points out, an effort to ‘create a third space that attempts to shed the orientalism of a knowledge-based reading’.5

Barthes’s use of a hypostatised ‘Japan’ to discuss ways of thinking unfamiliar to the West is typical of his context. During this period, many Parisian theorists were using the Orient in their work as a means of critique. This was arguably inaugurated by Foucault. Foucault opens Les Mots et les choses (1966) by discussing a story by Borges which outlines the strange system of classification used in a Chinese encyclopedia. China, writes Foucault, is for us the symbolic locus of utopian ways of thinking:

cette distorsion du classement qui nous empêche de le penser, […] Borges l’a donné pour patrimoine mythique une région précise dont le nom seul constitue pour l’Occident une grande réserve d’utopies. La Chine, dans notre rêve, n’est-elle pas justement le lieu privilégié de l’espace? […] Il y aurait ainsi, à l’autre extrémité de la terre que nous habitons, une culture vouée tout entière à l’ordonnance de l’étendue, mais qui ne distribuerait la prolifération des êtres dans aucun des espaces où il nous est possible de nommer, de parler, de penser. 6

Foucault makes the hypothetical nature of the invocation of ‘China’ clear. China as alterity becomes the sign of utopia – but it is a dream of China that allows us Westerners to conceive of our own reality differently. In the Paris of the early 1970s, this use of what Patrick ffrench calls the ‘other scene’ of thought in French theory came to a feverish head, notably in the offices of Tel Quel. 7 This journal was concerned with analysing
the workings of ideology, and one way of doing this was by referring to
non-Western signifying systems. From 1968 onwards, Philippe Sollers
became increasingly interested in Chinese thought, and thence became a
Maoist. It was at this point that the ‘Chinese dreams’ of Parisian intel-
lectuals began their downward curve into hard reality. Members of Tel
Quel, along with Barthes, made a trip to China in Spring 1974. It was
after this trip that Barthes wrote ‘Alors, la Chine?’ The real encounter
with China was frustrating as the trip was so controlled. The official
version of China offered to the French intellectuals in the form of factory
visits and speeches about China’s productivity was repetitive and flatly
political. In response to the Tel Quel-ian questions about revolution,
working conditions, Lin Piao, and so on, the same responses were always
given – what Barthes calls ‘briques’ of stereotyped opinion. Barthes’s
impressions of the trip to China, as registered in ‘Alors’ and in the recently
published Carnets du voyage en Chine (2009), are of ‘fadeur’, a lack of
interpretable signifiers, and an abundance of Maoist clichés. The visit
marked the start of Parisian Maoists’ disillusionment with China.

For Barthes, the trip to China involves a shutting down of interpre-
tation. The political text of China is enforced such that no creative or
utopian thought is possible: ‘Aucun farfelu, aucune surprise, aucun
romanesque. Écriture difficile’ (CVC, 186). Japan, however, retains all
the beneficial force of alterity that Barthes requires from the ‘other scene’.
For this reason, I have chosen to refer to Barthes’s invocations of the
‘Orient’ in the Cours as japonisme – though I am aware of the cultural
conflation involved. Jan Walsh Hokenson uses the term ‘japonisme’ in
Japan, France and East-West Aesthetics, her study of French writers’
fascination with Japan and utilisation of Japanese motifs and aesthetics
in their work. Hokenson reminds us that the term ‘japonisme’ is gener-
ally used to refer to the use of Japanese-inspired graphic techniques in
painting and drawing, but shows that though initially confined to the
visual arts, japonisme rapidly became an important current in literature
as French writers began, from the late nineteenth century onwards, to
incorporate Japanese aesthetics into their work. The goal in each case
was to rejuvenate French aesthetics. This tradition seeks to be revolu-
tionary: japoniste authors always render a Japanese-inspired aesthetic in
order to ‘critique […] the very grounds of occidental arts and letters’. It
is a project centred upon France itself, and concerned with the ‘expres-
sive problems’ attendant upon the calcification of the conventions of
French literature. Japonisme is therefore ‘only secondarily about Japan,
imagined source of proposed solutions’.

The term ‘japonisme’ eludes the value-laden connotations of Said’s
term ‘orientalism’. Hokenson has powerfully argued the case for viewing japonisme positively, since it is a triadic model whereas Orientalism is dual. Orientalist criticism cannot account for the elusive position which Barthes is trying to attain – an interstitial position outside of both French and Japanese symbolic systems, in which new possibilities of meaning are imagined. Orientalism is a binary paradigm (self/other, East/West, coloniser/colonised). Although there is a certain Manichaeism which has to exist in L’Empire des signes and subsequently in the Cours in order for Barthes to make his points about combating Western logomachy, his project here is in a profound sense not binary, as he struggles against dualistic conceptions of the world and of our place in the world. This struggle seeks the complex; the operation of the neutral requires at least a third position.

Japonisme from L’Empire des signes to the Collège de France

Barthes is fascinated by Japan because it is the country where ‘il a rencontré le travail du signe le plus proche de ses convictions et de ses fantasmes’. Another way of putting this is that it is ‘le [pays le] plus éloigné des dégoûts, des irritations et des refus que suscite en lui la sémiocratie occidentale’ (ES, blurb). A critique of the ‘West’ frames the glowing representation of Japan. The text is thus typically japoniste in manifesting its perception of marked differences between French and Japanese systems of meanings, which are, as Hokenson puts it, ‘discovered just in time to rescue if not supplant the always dying Cartesian, Christian, and bourgeois modes of French thought’. The opening paragraph of L’Empire des signes makes it clear that Barthes is less interested in the ‘représent[ation]’ or ‘analyse’ of ‘la moindre réalité’ than he is in evading the ‘gestes majeurs du discours occidental’ with their mimetic and hermeneutic imperatives. In fact, he writes, ‘l’Orient m’est indifférent’. What he is interested in is a ‘jeu inventé’, a selections of ‘traits’ drawn from his conception of the Orient which would give rise to ‘l’idée d’un système symbolique inouï, entièrement dépris du nôtre’ (ES, 11). Barthes examines the Japanese relationship to the symbol (insofar as he can) in order to bring about a ‘secousse’ and ‘un certain ébranlement de la personne’. In this way ‘la compacité de notre narcissisme [occidentale]’ can be exposed (ES, 12–14).

Japonisme is by this time the form of Barthes’s utopianism, for its tenets correspond to Barthes’s deeply felt belief – expounded upon in several interviews given after the publication of L’Empire des signes –
that the French relationship to the sign, as well as its tradition of criticism, requires a problematisation and rejuvenation. Japan is used as a gauge for the arbitrary but naturalised problems of the Western relationship to meaning. He tells Raymond Bellour in 1970 that ‘il faut maintenant porter le combat plus loin, tenter de fissurer […] l’idée même de signe […] [ainsi que] le discours occidental en tant que tel, dans ses fondements, ses formes élémentaires’.14 Barthes’s talk of ‘fissuring’ the symbolic in this interview is rather over-stated: it bespeaks a pugnacity – perhaps inspired by 
Tel Quel
 – which has been left behind by the time Barthes accedes to the Collège de France. The idea of broadening the scope of criticism, though, remains, and this is due to the effects of Barthes’s encounter, while visiting Japan in the late 1960s, with a symbolic system he sees as being radically different to our own. Inter-cultural comparison furthers his awareness that the forms of our language limit our comprehension of the world. By 1970 Barthes no longer wishes (exclusively) to undertake demystificatory criticism limited to individual uses of signs within French culture.

L’Empire des signes is an important precursor to the Cours. For it is the encounter with Japan that crystallises Barthes’s desire to shake up the foundations of our relationship to language and its dictation of how we view our sense of being in the world. We must recognise the arbitrariness (or even paradoxicality) of our own semantics and social expectations. We see a critique of these in the Cours. Japanese poetics and aesthetics are vital to Barthes in his elaboration of a reconciliation between the subject and the world. The use of Oriental philosophy and Japanese aesthetics enables Barthes to move beyond merely ideological criticism and actually into a new mode of criticism, which involves the rethinking of the most fundamental aspects of Western thought – space, time, the position of the subject and its intersection with the environment.

In the 1970 interview with Bellour, Barthes explains his sense of the relevance and urgency of what I am calling his japonisme. After his encounter with Japan, he wants to grapple with ‘notre Occident, notre culture, notre langue et nos langages’ in order to arrive at ‘une nouvelle façon de sentir’, une “nouvelle façon de penser” (OC, III, 669.) Bellour argues that this conception of criticism is no longer political, implying that it is an insular utopianism, and accusing Barthes of shutting himself up in a Mallarmean ‘cabinet [de] signes’.15 Barthes replies censoriously, saying ‘je ne pense pas qu’attendre soit s’enfermer’. We are habituated to viewing enclosure as something negative, in accordance with a romantic mythology which values openness. Yet ‘contre-clôture’ is not
openness, he states, but rather ‘l’exemption du centre’. It is this which we should work towards in our thought, and a logic of decentring is precisely the instructive complex that we can find in Japanese culture. Barthes’s conviction of this is extensively apparent in *L’Empire des signes*. We can use this decentring to figure the utopianism which will help us to tolerate our own society. He uses the Japanese house as a metaphor: ‘C’est précisément ce que j’ai cru apprendre du Japon: l’habitat, telle la maison japonaise, est supportable, délicieux même, si l’on parvient à le vider, à le démeubler, à le décentrer, à le désorienter, à le désoriginer’ (*OC*, III, 670). The space we live in now can be made bearable by the idea of its being emptied out.

The importance of the metaphor of the house is clear when we look at Barthes’s references to Japanese interior architecture in *L’Empire des signes*. This space is not merely the exemplar of ideals of delicacy and mobility – though these are, of course, important, as we will see in our discussion of the *Cours*. Japanese spaces such as the ‘corridor de Shikidai’ also constitute for Barthes the locus of aesthetic values which run counter to the most fundamental aspects of Westerners’ way of interacting with our environment. These spaces have much to teach us about the limitations of our hermeneutic and dualistic ways of seeing, according to which the human subject understands and masters the object which is the world.

An image of the ‘corridor de Shikidai’ appears on pages 68–69 of the Seuil edition of the text. The caption beneath it, though entirely in keeping with the thematics of the void that operates throughout the text, is rather too cryptic to seem to be making any point concerning aesthetics or epistemology. ‘Renversez l’image,’ the caption simply tells us: ‘rien de plus, rien d’autre, rien’ (*ES*, 69). When he discusses the ‘corridor de Shikidai’ in the final section of *L’Empire des signes*, entitled ‘le cabinet des signes’, the critical import of the nothingness of the corridor becomes clear. This corridor is ‘encadré de vide et n’encadrant rien’. ‘Il n’y a en lui de place pour aucun meuble. […] Dans le corridor, comme dans l’idéale maison japonaise, privé de meubles (ou aux meubles rarifiés), il n’y a aucun lieu qui désigne la moindre propriété’ (*ES*, 149–50). This space, therefore, frustrates the most deep-seated interpretive impulses and orientation mechanisms of the Westerner: ‘Ni siège, ni lit, ni table d’où le corps puisse se constituer en sujet (ou maître) d’un espace: le centre est refusé (brûlante frustration pour l’homme occidental, nanti partout de son fauteuil, de son lit, propriétaire d’un *emplACEMENT* domestique)’ (*ES*, 150). This has implications that go beyond the issue of domestic comfort. Barthes is problematising here the Westerner’s interaction with his environment, and his sense of himself as a subject in opposition to (in
mastery of) his surroundings. The Japanese house, in giving this subject nothing which allows him to ‘se constituer en sujet’, acts as a reminder that that mode of being is not the only possible one. In fact, given that that mode of being is based on a dualism between subject and surroundings, it is potentially combative. Barthes’s use of the word ‘maître’ implies our sense that our environment is subjugated to the will we impose on it. The ‘corridor de Shikidai’, Barthes suggests, is instructive in figuring to us a non-dualistic mode of experience based on an acceptance of and sense of integral union with one’s environment. In this room, as he writes in the final line of *L’Empire des signes*, there is ‘rien à saisir’ (ES, 150).

Implicit in this is Barthes’s sense of an ideal ethics of interaction. In the Skira edition of the text, this becomes clear. For here, within the ‘cabinet des signes’ section that closes the text, there is a photograph of a ‘tokonama’ alcove in the corner of a Japanese room. Normally used to display art, such alcoves traditionally have transom windows to maximise light. Beneath the photograph of this empty space, whose internal lines create yet more empty spaces, appears the caption ‘Aucun vouloir-saisir et cependant aucune oblation’ (ES Skira, 149). This space is the model of how our presence in the world, and our interaction with others, should be; the ideal is one of acceptance, without any connotation of ownership (‘[sans] la moindre propriété’).

The fact that Barthes sketches this ideal by referring to a space whose ‘centre est refusé’ (ES, 150) is no accident: to refuse the centre is to offend a deep-seated Western sense of propriety and priority. Concomitantly, to call for a ‘decentring’ is in line with an anti-Occidental deconstructive tendency very much in vogue in poststructuralism. The apparently cryptic words with which Barthes concludes *L’Empire des signes* – ‘Rien à saisir’ – can be read as the motto for Barthes’s japonisme. His employment of the terms ‘vouloir-saisir’ and ‘non-vouloir-saisir’ in later work immediately preceding the *Cours* indicate that it is in these terms that he conceptualises the subtle combat against dualism. An examination of the japoniste ideal of ‘non-vouloir-saisir’ is necessary before we turn to japoniste figures in the *Cours*.

‘Non-vouloir-saisir’ in *Fragments d’un discours amoureux* and *Leçon*

Two statements in *Leçon* can be seen as revealing in advance the centrality that the combat against dualism will have in the subsequent *Cours*. The first comes at the end of the first section of the lecture. Having explained that the Collège de France is an institution which allows great
freedom in teaching, Barthes says that this freedom means we must interro-
gate the assumptions in play in our own intellectual discourse: ‘[il faut] se demander sous quelles conditions et selon quelles opérations le discours peut se dégager de tout vouloir-saisir’. This ‘interrogation’ of his own discourse will constitute ‘le projet profond de l’enseignement qui est aujourd’hui inaugurée’ (L, 10).

The ‘vouloir-saisir’ had been discussed in *Fragments d’un discours amoureux*, prepared for publication during the months preceding the delivery of the inaugural lecture. That text concludes with the figure ‘Sobria ebrietas’ which meditates on the importance of ‘non-vouloir-saisir’ for the lover. The idea of ‘non-vouloir-saisir’ is an expression ‘imitée de l’Orient’, writes Barthes. To achieve this state is to manage not to seek to assimilate the beloved’s fundamental alterity: ‘Je décide: dorénavant, de l’autre, ne plus rien vouloir saisir’. If this is successful, the resolution not to ‘seize’ the other will exist without being apparent: ‘Il faut que le vouloir-saisir cesse – mais il faut aussi que le non-vouloir-saisir ne se voie pas: pas d’oblation’ (FDA, 285). This is almost an exact repetition of the caption beneath the image of the tokonama alcove in *L’Empire des signes*: ‘Aucun vouloir-saisir, et cependant aucune oblation’ (ES Skira, 149).

Worth noting here is how the *Fragments* figure the ‘NVS’ as being achievable only if the subject manages to fall outside language – that is, to overcome dualism. The resultant non-dualistic state is exemplified, for Barthes, by a Zenrin poem he has taken from Watts: to achieve NVS, he writes:

Il faut que je parvienne (par la détermination de quelle fatigue obscure?) à me laisser tomber quelque part hors du langage, dans l’inerte, et, d’une certaine manière, tout simplement: m’asseoir (‘Assis paisiblement sans rien faire, le printemps vient et l’herbe croît d’elle-même’). (FDA, 286–87)

Outside language, a silent and harmonious space is imagined – one that encompasses a peaceful relationship with both nature and the beloved. We will see the same harmony in the epigraphs to *Le Neutre* and in the haiku in *La Préparation du roman*. This, writes Barthes in the *Fragments*, is a Taoist idea: ‘De nouveau l’Orient: ne pas vouloir saisir le non-vouloir-saisir; laisser venir (de l’autre) ce qui vient, laisser passer (de l’autre) ce qui s’en va; ne rien saisir, ne repousser rien: [...] produire sans s’approprier, etc. Ou encore: “Le Tao parfait n’offre pas de difficulté, sauf qu’il évite de choisir”’ (FDA, 287). Watts explains the harmony that Barthes is describing in terms that make its critical import more apparent:

*Taoism, Confucianism, and Zen are expressions of a mentality which [...] sees man as an integral part of his environment. Human intelligence is not*
an imprisoned spirit from afar but an aspect of the whole intricately balanced organism of the natural world.²⁰

A figuring of such non-dualistic harmony, writes Watts, is based on the important insight that binary conceptions of meaning do not actually reflect the reality of being in the world: ‘The insight which lies at the root of Far Eastern culture is that opposites are relational and so fundamentally harmonious’.²¹ Stark, value-based binarisms therefore become irrelevant.

If we understand the non-vouloir-saisir at the end of the Fragments as implying the utopian attainment of a non-dualistic harmony, we can conjecture what it means to make, as Leçon states, the same ideal the ‘projet profond’ of the Collège de France teaching. A teaching based on the non-vouloir-saisir will concertedly work against the intimidations inherent to the arrogant or ideological use of discourse: as we are told elsewhere in Leçon, ‘la méthode ne peut porter ici que sur le langage lui-même, en tant qu’il lutte pour déjouer tout discours qui prend’ (41). The method of the Cours will employ digression and suspension as a means of encouraging interpretive response: this is non-vouloir-saisir in action as an ethics of noncommittal which seeks not to influence the train of the listener’s subsequent engagement with the material. Non-vouloir-saisir also implies a thematics of tact, lightness, and suspension. The non-vouloir-saisir is reflected in the Cours in figures such as ‘délicatesse’ and the idea of the ‘aération’ of the haiku. It informs the ‘moralité’ (a term used in Barthes’s articles on Cy Twombly) that Barthes seeks to elaborate during the Cours.

A second statement from Leçon heralds those ideas in the Cours which can be productively placed within a matrix of Japanese ideas. This occurs during the build-up to the infamous statement ‘la langue […] est tout simplement: fasciste’ (L, 14). In Nietzschean fashion, Barthes discusses the grammatical and, by extension, existential and interpersonal choices forced upon him by the structures of the French language: ‘Dans notre langue française […], je suis astreint à me poser d’abord en sujet, avant d’énoncer l’action qui ne sera plus dès lors que mon attribut: ce que je fais n’est que la conséquence et la consécution de ce que je suis’ (L, 12–13). An absolute schism, in other words, is posed between the subject and his surroundings (in which both he and his actions in fact exist in synthesis). This is pure Cartesianism: the ego is isolated. What Barthes is intimating here is the absurdity of this conception of ourselves. Our languages have made this style of individuality so fundamental, however, that the absurdity is hard to spot, and harder still to combat.
Barthes’s recognition of the ‘paradox’ of the ego-feeling in *Leçon* marks the starting-point of his subsequent articulation of different modes of consciousness in which the interrelation of the self and the environment will be emphasised. The other points he makes about the choices enforced by language emphasise the sense of paradox:

Je suis obligé de toujours choisir entre le masculin et le féminin, le neutre ou le complexe me sont interdits; de même encore, je suis obligé de marquer mon rapport à l’autre en recourant soit au *tu*, soit au *vous*: le suspens affectif ou social m’est refusé. (*L*, 13)

The impossibility of ‘le complexe’ in our language results in a sense of extreme frustration, for it is clear that the harmonious complex (i.e. the non-dual, the unisolated ego) *does* exist, but is veiled. As Watts puts it, ‘the separation, the difference [i.e. dualism] is […] what we notice; it fits the notation of language, and because it is noted and explicit it is conscious and unpressed’.22 Our language as social institution represents the world as ‘an assemblage of distinct bits and particles’, thereby holding us at arm’s length from our environment, and imprisoning us within our ego-feeling. ‘The defect of [such a worldview] is that [it] screens out or ignores (represses) interrelations’.23 Barthes says the same thing: ‘Ainsi, par sa structure même, la langue implique une relation fatale d’aliénation’ (*L*, 13).

Overcoming the power inherent to language, then, involves not only employing a tactic and ethic of the non-vouloir-saisir (an idea drawn from Tao), but also the combating of the ego-feeling which imposes fixed subject positions and requires, in terms of linguistic interaction, opinions which are clear-cut (based on the binarism of meaning) and not neutral. We must change our consciousness so that the ego-feeling is exposed and what it represses revealed. This, according to Watts, is the central goal of Eastern ‘ways of liberation’.24 Altering the ego-consciousness (or decentring the subject, as a poststructuralist idiom might have it) requires an effort to overcome the dualism between self and surroundings. This effort, if successful, would achieve what Bernard Comment calls ‘un rapport transparent du sujet au monde (sur le mode, peut-être, d’une fusion qui rendrait caduques ces dernières catégories)’.25

According to Watts and Suzuki – Barthes’s main sources on these subjects – if we manage to see the workings of linguistic and social convention for what they are, i.e. as configurations that *do* occur, rather than configurations that *must* occur (culture, not nature), we will achieve a radically new consciousness. For Suzuki, this is satori itself: ‘Intellectually, [satori] is the acquiring of a new viewpoint. The world now appears as if dressed in a new garment, which seems to cover up all
the unsightliness of dualism, which is called delusion in Buddhist phraseology’.26 Zen, in Suzuki’s account, consists in the eradication of the alienation caused by the ego-feeling and the divisive dualities it constructs between self and environment. Overcoming dualism is also at the forefront of Japanese aesthetic consciousness. Barthes displays his understanding of this inextricability of aesthetics from philosophy in *L’Empire des signes*, as we have seen in his appraisal of the ‘corridor de Shikidai’. Indeed, when considering Japanese thought, it is impossible to separate aesthetics from philosophy: while aesthetic theories tend to be regarded in the West as peripheral to the more ‘central’ philosophical matters (epistemology, metaphysics, ethics), no such marginalisation of the aesthetic viewpoint has occurred in East Asia, where aesthetics are considered to be integral to philosophy.27 It is the awareness of the problems of dualism that makes the Japanese aesthetico-philosophical complex so interesting to Barthes. It may be that the Japanese language itself predisposes the subjects who speak it to a consideration of these problems: Japanese is intrinsically more ambiguous than most Indo-European languages. Barthes remarks in *L’Empire des signes* on the way complex Japanese syntax makes the speaking subject seem like ‘une grande enveloppe vide de la parole’, as opposed to the ‘noyau plein qui est censé diriger nos phrases’ (*ES*, 16). The ego-feeling itself is demonstrably imbricated in Japanese syntax to a far lesser degree than is the case in the Indo-European languages. Maurice Coyaud, in a collection of translated haiku used by Barthes for *La Préparation du roman I*, points up this fundamental difference: ‘Le sujet (nom, pronom), facultatif en japonais, ne peut pas être purement […] éliminé en français’.28

Kenneth Yasuda, in his writings on the haiku, provides a concise digest of the radical differences between the conceptions of dualism in Japan and in the West. His questioning of the categories of subject and object resonates with the excerpt from *Leçon* quoted above. These categories, he writes, ‘have never become as rigidly dualistic in Japan as in Occidental thinking and their oneness in experience is generally understood and accepted [in Japan]’. Conversely, ‘due to the historical associations around words such as *subject* and *object*, or *form* and *content*, the English [or French] words themselves seem immediately to suggest separate entities rather than distinguishable aspects of a whole’.29

We must overcome these categories at a certain point, writes Yasuda, for otherwise we will be disbarred from a true experience of reality. He discusses the unity of subject and object in the haiku’s poetics:

What then are the uses of such words as *subject* and *object* – a dualism that has long plagued Western philosophy – in dealing with aesthetic experience?
They are useful terms, as long as it is remembered that, in the aesthetic experience, the subject cannot exist without the object, nor the object without the subject, since they are one. Only as they are one, in a concrete and living unity, is there an aesthetic experience.  

‘A true aesthetic moment’, as understood by Yasuda and the classical haiku theorists whose work he channels in his essay, depends upon a transcending of ‘what we call the subjective or objective attitude’. Barthes is aware of the intersection of Eastern aesthetics with existential and ethical questions: by examining these issues we can assess the import of Barthes’s articulations of new modes of consciousness and of criticism in the Cours and in other late texts.

Japoniste/Japanese Aesthetics

Suzuki gives us a brief digest of the most vital aspects of Japanese aesthetics. He writes that ‘imbalance, asymmetry, the “one-corner”, poverty, sabi or wabi (incompletion, imperfection) simplification, aloneness, and cognate ideas make up the most conspicuous and characteristic features of Japanese art and culture’. What we notice here is that Japanese aesthetics often valorise concepts that in Western thought would be regarded as the weaker aspect of any paradigm: perishability as opposed to permanence; economy of means (e.g. light, sparse brushwork) as opposed to impressively demonstrated technique (e.g. oil-painting that covers the canvas); monochrome as opposed to colour; brevity as opposed to length; silence as opposed to sound, and so on. Japanese aesthetics, as Hokenson points out, are thus in sharp contradistinction to ‘traditional Western arts’ which value ‘symmetry, complication, integral completion or unity, monumentality or perdurance in time, and, not least, symbol’. To assent to the interest of these tenets is easily done, but as Barthes continually points out during Le Neutre, to actually espouse similar values in one’s conduct – for example by being silent or without opinion in a discursive situation that requires the lengthy exposition of a certain point of view – is generally inadmissible in the Western logomachy. Donald Keene emphasises a similar point when he outlines the principles of Japanese aesthetics using the foundation text Tsurezuregusa (Essays in Idleness) written by the priest Kenkō in 1330–33. Kenkō advocates transitoriness as an aesthetic principle. ‘In all things, it is the beginnings and ends that are interesting,’ he writes. ‘Are we to look at cherry blossoms only in full bloom, the moon only when it is cloudless? […] Branches about to blossom or gardens strewn
with faded flowers are worthier of our admiration’. \(^{35}\) Barthes is aware of this principle; as he remarks in one of the haiku sessions in *La Préparation du roman*, ‘pour les Japonais, dit-on, ce n’est pas, à proprement parler, la fleur de cerisier qui est belle; c’est le moment où, parfaitement épanouie, elle va faner’ (*PR*, 93). But, as Keene observes, such a principle ‘contradict[s] commonly held Western views on the same subjects. The Western ideal of the climactic moment – […] when the soprano hits high C, or when the rose is in full bloom – grants little importance to the beginnings and ends’. \(^{36}\) In this respect Japanese aesthetics subvert Western conceptions of value, prestige and even of time (the ‘time’ of the artwork ascends to an apex or climax). It is for this reason that they constitute the logical base upon which to consider Barthes’s attempts to counter these Western assumptions.

We have seen with Yasuda that the Japanese idea of the oneness of artist with her material works against the ego-feeling, as there is no sense, as there is in Western language and aesthetics, of the subject (artist) having control over the material (object): there is ‘rien à saisir’. Rather, artist and material, or organism and environment, become one – a *field*, as Watts would call it. \(^{37}\) We have the same field-perception in Barthes when he discusses, in *La Préparation du roman I*, hyper-consciousness and diffusion of the self into one’s surroundings. As we shall see, identification is sought between our subjective consciousness and the dynamic of our environment; the goal is to express such identification in a work which seeks to provoke a comparable perception.

Also, the haiku brings about a different conception of time: the interplay between its ephemeral brevity and a sense of the infinite is one of its central characteristics. Even the smallest thing, of course, can contain the infinite. This is why the haiku is the most cultivated poetic form in Japan: brevity is seen as the privileged access to liberation from limiting ideas of duration. Much Japanese art seeks to express infinity – or marvellous reality – by escaping from the constraints of space and time. The twentieth-century Japanese theorist Shūzō Kuki (1888–1941) writes that ‘the most eminent characteristic of Japanese art in general [is] the expression of the infinite’. \(^{38}\) In his lecture ‘The Expression of the Infinite in Japanese Art’, Kuki employs the classical haiku (of Bashō’s school) as the exemplification of Japanese aesthetics in their pure form. The haiku’s principle of suggestion – a principle it shares with most other Japanese art forms – is essential also in allowing the dynamism of imaginative force to overcome dualistic constraints: ‘the élan […] of the infinite can be expressed in poetry not only by an asymmetric and fluid form, but also by the employment of suggestive expression which outstrips time in a kind of
anticipation’, Kuki points out. ‘It is not necessary to express and disclose everything; it is only necessary to indicate with several essential lines and leave the rest to the active play of the imagination’. Suggestiveness creates vital silences. We see here a foundational similarity between these principles and Barthes’s own pedagogical imperatives.

Barthes is fascinated by the haiku’s inherent ability to outstrip conventional modes of signification and perception. In *L’Empire des signes*, he describes the haiku as a liberation from occidental ideas regarding subjectivity, space and time, and the connotative layers of language. The haiku is the means to escape from dualism. In arresting our incessantly descriptive, interpretative language, it problematises our very systems of meaning. Thus with the haiku (and the Zen ideal of satori) we arrive at ‘une suspension panique du langage, le blanc qui efface en nous le règne des Codes, la cassure de cette récitation intérieure qui constitue notre personne’ (*ES*, 101). Our ego-feeling is destabilised by the haiku’s preclusion of metalanguage. At a deeper level, the preconditions of the haiku’s existence force us out of rigid subject positions and make us approach a more holistic conception of the world as an all-encompassing *thisness*: ‘Le haïku, […] articulé sur une métaphysique sans sujet et sans dieu, correspond au *Mu* bouddhiste, au *satori* zen, qui n’est nullement descente illuminative de Dieu, mais “réveil devant le fait”, saisie de la chose comme événement et non comme substance’ (*ES*, 105). The ‘réveil devant le fait’, which comes about through a rupture of the symbolic codes constitutive of our sense of self, is a vitally important ideal for Barthes in *Le Neutre* and *La Préparation du roman I*. At the root of this necessary rupture is the twin imperative to problematise the most fundamental frames for the ego feeling: our sense of time and our sense of space. For a true apprehension of the world itself (the overcoming of dualism) must be, as Kuki shows, dependent on ‘the expression of the liberation from time and space’.

1. **Ma: the interval**
Barthes’s critical relationship to the codes of Western meaning (and subjectivity) brings about a sense of *distance* vis-à-vis these codes. This
is a distance which Barthes employs thematically in *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* under the rubric of marginality. Distance becomes a vitally important value in the *Cours*. A light-handed regulation of (inter-social) distance is at the heart of *Comment vivre ensemble*’s ideal of idiorrythmie. The vivre-ensemble is characterised by ‘aération, distances, différences’ (72), and he concludes the course by emphasising the importance of ‘la distance inter-individuelle’ (178). ‘La distance critique,’ he tells us, ‘serait sans doute le problème le plus important du Vivre-Ensemble: trouver et régler la distance critique, au-delà ou en deçà de laquelle il se produit une crise’ (178). In today’s society, he continues, it is space itself ‘qui coûte cher’, which constitutes ‘le bien absolu’ (179). To be surrounded by a certain amount of space and to be comfortable with the limits thereof constitutes idiorrythmie itself, or a certain utopia: ‘Don de place: serait constituant de la règle (utopique)’ (179). *Comment vivre ensemble* concludes by figuring ‘la distance comme valeur’ and imagines the perfect idiorrythmie as ‘une distance qui ne casse pas l’affect […]; une distance pénétrée, irriguée de tendresse’ (179).

Distance is conceived as the locus of both practical and affective concerns. The figuring of idiorrythmie itself as distance also imbues the idea of distance with the subversive attributes of the idiorrythmic impulse. Critical distance is a complex ideal, given its imbrication with emotional interaction: it is both an objective and a subjective category, involving ‘la bonne distance entre les repères (y compris les repères humains de l’espace affectif)’ (N, 13 May, 189). We should use the Japanese attitude as an ideal, Barthes says: ‘Prolongeons l’attitude japonaise […] qui ne conceptualise ni le temps ni l’espace, mais seulement l’intervalle, le rapport de deux moments, de deux lieux ou objets → essayons de concevoir […] l’espacement entre les sujets’ (N, 190). This idea of distance as encompassing both the external and the internal (emotional) life is one that can be usefully glossed by the uniquely Japanese consciential concept of *Ma*, to which Barthes refers frequently in the *Cours*. By problematising our demarcation of temporal and spatial categories, the idea of *Ma* or ‘the interval’ allows us to figure ‘la bonne distance’ as the shorthand for a non-dualistic ethical ideal involving relationships with others as well as one’s relationship to power. In giving us a more complex sense of the interaction and succession of moments and of states, and by figuring a positive emptiness, *Ma* provides an interesting ground upon which to examine the *Cours*’ exploration of alterations of our consciousness (our ego-feeling) and of modes of conduct which promote the overcoming of dualism.

*Ma* is the Japanese understanding of space/time. This concept is
without parallel in Indo-European languages, which strictly separate the categories of space and time. The architect Arata Isozaki explains this difference as follows:

We do not traditionally have a concept of space or a concept of time like in Western philosophy or thought. We only have ‘ma’, no space, no time. When the philosophical concepts of space and time arrived in Japan [...] somebody had to translate the words time and space. [...] ‘ma’ was added chronos: chronos plus ‘ma’ means time; and emptiness plus ‘ma’ means space.

In Japan, then, to think about space means to think about time, and vice versa. ‘The direct meaning of “ma”,’ Isozaki tells us, ‘is the in-between, the space between object and object, and at the same time, the silence between sound and sound’.41

Isozaki created an exhibition entitled ‘Ma. Espace/temps au Japon’ which was shown at the Musée des arts décoratifs in Paris in Autumn 1978. Isozaki claims that the ideas in the exhibition subsequently influenced Foucault and Derrida.42 They certainly interested Barthes, who was already aware of the concept of Ma, having mentioned it in Le Neutre in May 1978.43 Barthes’s short report on the exhibition written for the Nouvel Observateur in October of that year explains the concept of Ma to readers. Ma is any interval in either space or time – any linking distance, in other words: ‘toute relation, toute séparation entre deux instants, deux lieux, deux états: Ma’. The exhibition on Ma constitutes, he says, a ‘méditation’ on ‘cette idée d’intervalle’. We discover herein the principle of “‘discrétion’ (mot approximatif)” (OC, V, 476). The exhibition is ‘discreet’ in that its displays are sparse, characterised by ‘rareté’ and by a very subtle symbolism. Barthes’s implicit point here is that the sensitive display of objects illustrating such aesthetic principles as sabi (the beauty of imperfection) or utsuroi (transitory beauty) reveals an approach to meaning that is different to ours in being more subtle. This, of course, has always been Barthes’s point about Japan; he believes that in this respect the Japanese relationship to signs is ‘superior’ to our own: ‘là-bas, le symbole ne se réduit pas à un emblème: c’est un passage, fluide, délié, instantané, qui ne relève d’aucun lexique’ (OC, V, 477). In this exhibition, the discretion of the displays involves for Westerners ‘[une] difficulté d’appréhension’ but also an ‘apaisement’, which occurs in the viewer because ‘le symbolisme des arrangements est extrêmement elliptique’ (OC, V, 477).

The exhibition on Ma has underlined for Barthes a subtle Japanese aesthetic of fluidity and lightness. Barthes’s use of the word ‘discrétion’ to describe this implies the tipping over of the aesthetic into an ethical
(or interactional) value: as we already know, aesthetics in Japan tends to be inseparable from ethico-philosophical questions, and thus the consideration of Ma – a relational concept – naturally involves a reflection upon relations between human subjects. For this reason, Barthes’s description of Ma as discretion is an extension of the issues at the end of Comment vivre ensemble in May 1977 when he refers to the utopian ideal of ‘la bonne distance’ as ‘délicatesse’. ‘Délicatesse’ as a relational value involves the same light, balanced interaction as does Ma or discretion. It also suggests a comparably fluid use of the symbolic, whereby what Barthes calls ‘images’ (a negative term for Barthes, implying reductive pigeon-holing) are renounced: ‘renoncer activement aux images (des uns, des autres). […] = Utopie proprement dite, car forme du Souverain Bien’ (CVE, 4 May, 179–80). This imagined goodness, then, is premised upon a respect for the interval between oneself and the other – a respect which does not preclude emotion – and upon a renunciation of the intrusion of the symbolic into the relationship. Barthes says the same thing when he announces that utopia itself is ‘le bon rapport du sujet à l’affect, au symbole’ (CVE, 177).

Ma can be viewed as aiding our understanding of relationality as the latter is figured in Comment vivre ensemble and, more implicitly, in Le Neutre. It is another avatar of the non-vouloir-saisir, which valorises a certain willed distance (the interval) from the other. This runs counter to our Western impulse to possess (saisir) through interpretation. Instead of seeking to embody the other with our interpretive assumptions of knowledge about him/her (our image of the person), we must instead be willing to accept the person as uncategorisable, or neutral.

2. Ma: receptive emptiness
Robert Pilgrim, in an article that discusses Ma as a ‘religio-aesthetic paradigm’, convincingly demonstrates that Ma is a liberatory – or non-dualistic – concept: ‘Ma ultimately deconstructs all boundaries (as mind-created constructs and orders imposed on the chaos of experience)’. Ma involves both observable phenomena as well as experiential or emotional states, and in both cases is at the edge of thought. The founding breakdown of temporal and spatial distinctions, according to Pilgrim, entails a breakdown of other categories, such as subject/object divisions. Commenting on Isozaki’s definition of Ma, Pilgrim writes that

The collapse of space and time as two distinct and abstract objects can only take place in a particular mode of experience that ‘empties’ the objective/subjective world(s); only in aesthetic, immediate, relational experience
can space be ‘perceived as identical with the events or phenomena occurring in it’.\(^{47}\)

Ma, then, encompasses more than the idea of the intervallic. Ultimately, it brings us to ‘the edge of all processes of locating things by naming and distinguishing’;\(^ {48}\) via the figuring of emptiness as receptivity. Barthes figures the emptying of the self into the world: he approaches ideas concerning this state in his use of the Rousseau and Tolstoy epigraphs to *Le Neutre* as well as in his discussions of the haiku and of Baudelaire’s *Les Paradis artificiels*. Throughout the *Cours*, also, he demonstrates an awareness of the philosophical base of Taoism, which understands nothingness as the ultimate context of our being. He had hinted at this idea of a nourishing void several times in *L’Empire des signes*; one striking example of this is the description of Tokyo as being held together by the empty space at its centre: this void ‘donn[e] à tout le mouvement urbain l’appui de son vide central’ (*ES*, 50).\(^ {49}\)

In his first lecture on the haiku (the fourth lecture of the first *Préparation* series), Barthes emphasises the importance of ‘aération’ in the haiku. This is in the first instance to do with the typographical ‘disposition de la parole sur la page’ (*PR*, 6 January 1979, 59), but also runs deeper than this. Barthes sees ‘aération’ as being axiomatic in the haiku given that it is a form of ‘oriental’ art. All oriental art, he says, demonstrates a ‘respect’ for space. Barthes frequently invokes Japan to figure a beneficial void, particularly with regard to the symbolic. His understanding of satori, for example, emphasises the manner in which Zen teaching points constantly to ‘the void’. Hokenson deftly underscores the link between Barthes’s (correct) understanding of Zen and the use of its tenets in his own writing: ‘A discourse [is] written by Zen in figures pointing to the nothingness of all things in order to enable illumination, sudden shocking perception that void – as non-meaning – is a site of cognition’. Barthes’s ‘sleight of hand’, Hokenson states, is shown by his construction of a ‘correspondence’ between Zen and his own writing. This is ‘less an ethnological than an aesthetic figure for writing outside the occidental mode, free […] from constructed meanings. As Zen writes, from a metaphysics of void, so Barthes will write, from a poetics of deficit’.\(^ {50}\)

In the first *Préparation* lecture on the haiku, we find that Barthes’s understanding of the ‘oriental void’ has been inflected by his awareness of *Ma*. It is now the relational aspect of space which he finds interesting:

\begin{quote}
Tout l’art oriental […]: respect de l’espace, c’est-à-dire […] de l’espacement.
\end{quote}
The haiku, then, embodies this relationality. In line with this, its ‘aeration’ hints at a happy state of the recognition of difference and respect for an implied ‘distance critique’. For, he says, ‘quand on parle du “Vide” (oriental), ce ne doit pas être dans un sens bouddhiste mais plus sensuellement comme une respiration, une aération et […] une “matière”’ (PR, 59). To conceive space itself as matter is to respect the interval and its subversion of stereotype and generalisation: ‘Mot d’un physicien: “S’il n’y avait pas d’espace entre la matière, tout le genre humain tiendrait dans un dé à coudre” → Le haïku: c’est “l’anti-dé à coudre”, l’anti-condensation totalisante, et c’est cela que dit le tercet haïkiste’ (PR, 59). This is the essential point, Barthes implies, though it rests on other ‘interprétations thématiques’ of the ‘protestation de Vide’ – the void understood as ‘pulsion respiratoire, désangoisse de l’étouffement, fantasme de l’Oxygène, de la Respiration Euphorique, Jubilatoire’ (PR, 59).

Barthes’s references to the ‘oriental’ void as a notional space which allows him to ‘breathe’ are less fanciful than they may at first appear. The theme of aeration is used critically, in a manner similar to the employment of the terms ‘rien à saisir’ and ‘vouloir-saisir’. The sense of aeration is brought about for Barthes when he witnesses values or conducts which operate within a non-dualistic conception of the world. Hence the importance of Japan. The most minute aspects of Japanese culture can bring about destabilisation and aeration of our own assumptions, as Barthes shows in L’Empire des signes when he discusses, in a section entitled ‘L’interstice’, the cooking of tempura. The batter coating of tempura, he writes, is so light as to become abstract: ‘l’aliment n’a plus pour enveloppe que le temps […] qui l’a solidifié’ (ES, 40). Thus even here Ma is at work, bringing about an alteration of Barthes’s attitude to this food. The best way we can describe this, writes Barthes, ‘en raison de nos ornières thématiques’, is that it is ‘du côté du léger, de l’aérien, de l’instantané, du fragile, du transparent, […] du rien, mais dont le vrai nom serait l’interstice sans bords pleins, ou encore: le signe vide’ (ES, 40). The desire sketched here for a permeability of boundaries between spaces, and for a concomitant sense of aeration, will be seen again when Barthes discusses the transparency of the border between self and world, with reference to Rousseau, Tolstoy, and the photographs of Daniel Boudinet.

3. Ma: the interstice
Recognising the interval means recognising negative space but construing it as positive. The most profound endeavour of the first three of Barthes’s
*Cours* is arguably the positive rendering of conducts generally viewed (in Barthes’s socio-linguistic sphere) as negative and weak: solitude, neutrality, ephemerality. Barthes proceeds by highlighting the apparently empty spaces skirted by the linear, goal-obsessed Western logomachy. These spaces are not valorised or obvious, but subtly present – hence Barthes’s method. Such spaces, as Pilgrim puts it, are ‘referred to as creative/substantial negative spaces, imaginative spaces, or emotional spaces that the positive spaces, narrative sequences, or forms of [a discourse] help create but into which they dissolve’.

The *Ma-*inspired figuring of empty space as liberatory is an excellent emblem for the aesthetic and ethic Barthes is working towards. We see this in the last essay Barthes completed before his death. ‘Cher Antonionio’ addresses the director Michelangelo Antonioni directly and praises his brave artistic principles. Barthes commends the filmmaker for the ‘subtilité’ of his work: ‘votre art consiste à toujours laisser la route du sens ouverte, et comme indécise, par scrupule’. This principle – akin to the Japanese aesthetic principle of suggestion – is vital for ‘l’artiste dont notre temps a besoin’, as it staves off dogmatism. Antonioni’s art meets Barthes’s criteria for the efficacy of the modern artist’s methods. When Barthes insists further on Antonioni’s use of subtlety he illustrates it by using the idea of the productive empty space. Meaning always goes further than what is directly said, writes Barthes; artists ensure this by imbuing their work with a sort of ‘vibration’: ‘L’objet représenté vibre, au détriment du dogme’ (*OC*, V, 902). Barthes thinks of Matisse drawing an olive tree and discovering that observing the empty spaces between the branches led to ‘[une] nouvelle vision’ and allowed him to escape from ‘l’image habituelle de l’objet dessiné, [le] cliché “olivier”’. This was a discovery running counter to the tenets of Western art: ‘Matisse découvrait ainsi le principe de l’art oriental, qui veut toujours peindre le vide, ou plutôt qui saisit l’objet figurable au moment rare où le plein de son identité chois n’abrutit nous, celui de l’Interstice’ (902). Barthes is perhaps alluding here to the ‘one-corner’ style of Oriental painting, in which the sparsely painted object is prized for its evocation of infinity. Barthes states that Antonioni’s art too has interstitial qualities, and it is this that gives it a relationship with ‘l’Orient’ that runs deeper than mere content (he mentions here Antonioni’s film *China* (1972)). Note the conjunction here between the interstice and non-Western thought: ‘Votre art est lui aussi un art de l’Interstice […] et donc, d’une certaine manière aussi, votre art a quelque rapport avec l’Orient’ (902, my emphasis).

Barthes’s association of the interstice with the Orient is linked to his
understanding of *Ma* (not directly mentioned here). *Ma*, in what Barthes refers to as its ‘non-Kantian’ elision of time and space, indicates not just the interval between identifiable objects, but the interval in thought that permits the figuring of more nuanced modes of being than we have hitherto imagined – in short, utopianism. For Barthes to think his way out of the logomachy of his own linguistic sphere, he needs such an interval. His understanding of *Ma* is, then, a more specific or nuanced version of his setting-up of the inverted-commas ‘Japan’ in *L’Empire des signes*. *Ma* is the gap between ‘Orient’ and ‘Occident’, a space for thinking that seeks to be unprescribed. Barthes is of course perfectly aware of the constructed nature of the gap between his imagined Orient and his Occident, and aware too that the artifice does not diminish its use-value. ‘La langue inconnue’, he tells us near the beginning of *L’Empire des signes*, gives him a sense of ‘respiration, aération émotive’. The haiku and the idea of *Ma* give him this sense too. He feels the slight ‘vertige’ of being surrounded by a ‘vide artificiel, qui ne s’accomplit que pour moi’. In a certain sense, he floats: ‘je vis dans l’interstice, débarrassé de tout sens plein’ (*ES*, 21).

It is clear from the essay on Antonioni that the interstice is for Barthes an important figure for sketching both the ethical and the aesthetic value of the artwork. In *Leçon*, it is literature as ‘tricherie’ that allows language continually (if infinitesimally) to elude the empire of ideology as it extends itself through stereotype and dogmatism. In the *Cours*, the same goal is sought through a practice of openness which we could describe as the valorisation of the interstice. The interstice is both the recognition and outlining of the ‘creative/substantial negative spaces’ ignored by the French logomachy – idiorrhythme, the neutral suspension of judgment, silence, weariness, tact, the unwillingness to interpret – and the manner in which these ‘spaces’ are presented to the audience. ‘Je ne suis pas là quand on m’attend,’ as Barthes says in *Le Neutre*; ‘je réalise une atopie de langage (mais ne soyons pas triomphant: cette atopie sera récupéré sous la nomination du “farfelu”)’ (*N*, 29 April, 160). To be regarded as precious or silly is both a result and an expedient of the interstitial technique. We can infer this from a statement at the end of *Comment vivre ensemble*, when Barthes says that the ideal lecture-course (‘le rêve’) would be characterised by ‘une sorte de banalité non oppressante, aérée (cf. ‘Délicatesse’ )’ (181). Banality is itself an interstice, an un-value, something not supposed to be recognised. To assume it is to enter into the interstice fully, a space unrecognised by one’s socio-linguistic sphere and therefore freely creative. In line with this, the imagined space that the writer must figure to himself is the interstice. Barthes posits this at the

We see in this quotation the caution that one’s position should not be ‘arrogant’. The point is to distance oneself from the ego-feeling, from the hermeneutics of the image, from position-taking itself (‘la proposition doit être incomplète – sinon c’est une position’ (*CVE*, 181)). Leçon heralds this tendency to deny the construction of a positive image. We find out there that Barthes’s semiology from now on will focus on emptiness rather than plenitude: ‘La sémiologie dont je parle est à la fois négative et active,’ Barthes announces. ‘Quelqu’un en qui s’est débattue, toute sa vie […] , cette diablerie, le langage, ne peut qu’être fasciné par les formes de son vide – qui est tout le contraire de son creux’ (*L*, 35).

The idea is that the sign should *vibrate*, in the sense in which Barthes employs that word in the Antonioni essay. It follows from this that the ‘image’ of the practitioner of such a semiology must itself vibrate, as it were: there is a logic here which dictates Barthes’s digressive practice and its (attempted) refusal of the prestigious role of the leader who has an obvious and socially sanctioned goal. This methodology is also reflected thematically in the *Cours*, appearing frequently under the rubric of the Taoist idea of *wu-wei*.

4. *Wu-wei, xéniteia, Twombly*

Tao and Chan (Zen) had different roots in China, but were exported to Japan, where both philosophies gained specifically Japanese inflexions. The Tao principle of *wu-wei* literally means ‘not-making’ or non-action. This does not mean simple idleness, though idleness, as we will see, is a concept Barthes derives from it and valorises in the way he valorises banality. *Wu-wei* is part of Barthes’s japoniste complex of ideas, given that his understanding of it is closely linked to his understanding of (Japanese) Zen as gleaned from Suzuki and especially Watts – the latter mingles Tao with his discussion of Zen in *The Way of Zen*.

Taoism involves the assimilation of the ways (the *tao*) of nature into one’s own conduct. *Wu-wei*, in eschewing ego-based choosing, works towards the harmonisation of self with environment. Barthes’s understanding of *wu-wei* is drawn from Grenier’s *L’Esprit du Tao* (1957), though he would also have read about it in the contemporary text by Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen* (1957). Watts encapsulates the radical
otherness of *wu-wei* to Western systems of thought when he mentions the religious and ontological principles underpinning it: ‘whereas God produces the world by making (*wei*), the Tao produces it by “not-making” (*wu-wei*) – which is approximately what we mean by “growing”’.\(^{61}\) This leads to a complex (non-dualistic) conception of our place in the world, based on an organic sense of being which precedes linguistic divisions: ‘A universe which grows utterly excludes the possibility of knowing how it grows in the clumsy terms of thought and language’.\(^{62}\) Categorisation has no place in the Taoist worldview.

This bypassing of the divisions of language is what appeals to Barthes; he also takes an evident delight in the ‘scandale’ of the idea of *wu-wei* in a culture which makes value judgments about people’s status based on their levels of action and decisiveness. ‘*Wou-wei*’ is mentioned frequently during the *Cours*, and, as one of the figures of the *neutre*, takes up one and a half of the lectures in that series. During his first mention of it in *Comment vivre ensemble*, Barthes comments that ‘[le] *Wou-wei* [aurait] des incidences politiques parfaitement scandaleuses’. As a mode of conduct, it is ‘inconcevable’ for us, he explains, because ‘toute notre civilisation est dans le Vouloir-Agit’ (*CVE*, 124). It requires a discipline that is extraordinarily difficult to achieve. Non-action as harmonisation is an interstitial space that is constantly threatened by the active margins surrounding it. The challenge, as Barthes sees it, is ‘non seulement [d’]éviter l’événement, mais encore ne pas le susciter. […] S’abstenir d’exercer une autorité, de remplir une fonction. […] Ne pas juger, parler peu, ne plus connaître les oppositions logiques et morales, et d’une manière générale toute distinction’ (*CVE*, 16 March, 124). One’s abstinence from dualistic choosing has somehow to be accompanied by a genuinely non-dualistic thought. Barthes returns to this ‘acte-limite’, as he calls it, in *Le Neutre*, using Grenier’s text: ‘Initiation au Tao: “commencer par ne plus juger ni parler; puis on ne juge plus ni ne parle mentalement”’ (*N*, 58). This would be a sort of ‘silence intégral’, says Barthes, which would become one with the profound silence of nature: ‘silence de toute la nature, éparpillement du fait-homme dans la nature: l’homme serait comme un bruit de la nature’ (*N*, 58). This intermingling of organism and environment is the goal at the heart of Tao.

Barthes’s desire to foil the construction of an ‘Image’ (understood as a recognisable, stereotypical social role) means that *wu-wei* – and Taoism generally – is a useful model for him. Tao’s practices reveal that it does not confuse our social role with our fundamental identity, in the manner to which we in the West (or indeed in the societies within which Tao developed its spirit of critique) are so prone. Taoism refuses any prestige
accruing through or from one’s social role – hence its abstinence from judging. The *Tao Te Ching* demonstrates this causality: sociality is based on reductive, dualistic naming, and so in order to remain in sync with the complexity of nature one must not choose between these dualisms: ‘The whole world recognises the beautiful as the beautiful, yet this is only the ugly; the whole world recognises the good as the good, yet this is only the bad. [...] Therefore the sage keeps to the deed that consists in taking no action’. Barthes understands the thought underlying this as a profound refusal of social prestige, which facilitates a wisdom the more nourishing for being unknown. It is in these terms that he discusses Tao in *Comment vivre ensemble* under the figure of ‘xéniteia’ or exile.

The desire for ‘xéniteia’ is the very Barthesian desire to shift position as soon as ‘un langage, une doctrine, un mouvement d’idées [...] commence à prendre, à se solidifier, [...] à devenir une masse compacte d’habitudes [...] (un sociolecte)’. He wants to be ‘exiled’ from stereotype: ‘aller ailleurs, vivre ainsi en état d’erreur intellectuelle’ (*CVE*, 27 April, 175). In order for this exile not to turn into another (solidifiable) position, however, Barthes needs an assistant concept: that which – utopically – would allow him intellectual freedom without being noticed. He names this concept ‘sténochôria’ (‘espace étroit’). Through the idea of *sténochôria*, xéniteia becomes internalised, along the lines laid out by Taoism’s ‘conduite profonde qui vise à ne pas se faire remarquer’. The exile is then ‘un exil si intérieur que le monde ne le voit guère. Sagesse qui reste inconnue, intelligence non divulguée, vie cachée, ignorance qu’ont les autres du but que je poursuis, refus de la gloire, abîme de silence’ (*CVE*, 172). For Barthes, this self-effacing conduct is desirable because it represents the opposite of arrogance, whether in discourse or in conduct. Implicit here again are ideas of tact and discretion – which Barthes frequently associates with Japan:64 ‘Xéniteia n’est pas sans rapport avec la politesse. Non la “politesse” superficielle et mondaine (de classe) de l’Occident, mais la politesse de l’Orient’ (*CVE*, 173). This ‘politesse’ is part of a positive, japoniste complex of values that for Barthes includes the terms ‘discrétion’, ‘délicatesse’, ‘l’interstice’, and ‘non-vouloir-saisir’.

These values, disseminated throughout the first three *Cours*, can seem elusive. Such ideas, because paradoxical to our socio-linguistic habits, are difficult to speak of. Barthes is aware of the aporetic problem, and links it again to Tao. He quotes Lao-Tzu: ‘Celui qui connaît le Tao n’en parle pas; celui qui en parle ne le connaît pas’, and adds in parenthesis ‘C’est bien mon cas! Noter toujours la même aporie du Neutre. [...] Neutre = impossible: le parler, c’est le défaire, mais ne pas le parler, c’est
manquer sa “constitution”’ (N, 25 February, 57–58). Given that no definition of the sought-for values can be given, it is helpful to see them in action in Barthes’s criticism. Barthes sees the work of the American abstract painter Cy Twombly (1928–2011) as illustrating the principle of ‘délicatesse’.

Twombly’s work is layered with scribbles, graffiti, illegibilities. His canvases are large, often airy, lending themselves to being read but then frustrating that impulse. Some of Barthes’s own watercolours, probably not coincidentally, bear a certain resemblance to Twombly’s graphomaniacal work. Both of Barthes’s 1979 essays on Twombly were produced for catalogues of Twombly’s paintings, with some of the material common to both essays.65 Barthes’s thinking about Twombly is partially inflected by his understanding of Ma. In the Préparation du roman lecture of 10 March 1979, he mentions Twombly as an exemplar of sparseness. Twombly’s work, like Anton Webern’s short musical pieces, is characterised by what Barthes calls ‘Rarus’. This, he says, is similar to ‘le Ma: notion qui, elle, permettrait de parler de la peinture: Twombly, les Orientaux’ (PR, 147). The end of the near-contemporary essay on Twombly, ‘Sagesse de l’art’, demonstrates a deft rhetorical causality whereby it is posited that Twombly shares qualities with ‘the Orient’ by virtue of his non-dogmatic style of painting. The logic here is clearer if one bears in mind Barthes’s association between the interstice and the Orient, in which (notional) realm alone are the values of discretion and suggestion truly valorised. Twombly’s canvas or page, though ‘silent’, is lent its significance by the sparse ‘trait[s], hachure[s], forme[s]’ that are dispersed upon it. We are reminded not just of the one-corner style of Japanese painting, but of the general Tao principle of nothingness as the most profound context of being. Barthes quotes the Tao Te Ching here: ‘L’être, dit le Tao, donne des possibilités, c’est par le non-être qu’on les utilise’. This phenomenon, which renders inapplicable the ideas of ‘le nombre et l’unité, la dispersion et le centre’ is, we may infer, anti-interpretive. The aesthetic of Twombly’s work is quite other to those ‘peintures excitées, possessives, dogmatiques [qui] imposent le produit’. Twombly’s sparse work is remarkable for Barthes in displaying an ethic that, though common in Eastern philosophies, is unique in our logosphere: ‘L’art de Twombly – c’est là sa moralité, et aussi sa grande singularité historique – ne veut rien saisir; il se tient, il flotte, il dérive entre le désir […] et la politesse; qui est le congé discret donné à toute envie de capture’ (OC, V, 701–702). Twombly’s work, then, exhibits the relational values that Barthes is working towards in the Fragments and in Comment vivre ensemble and Le Neutre. He sees Twombly’s success
in demonstrating the ‘délicat’ (701) as being without parallel in Twombly’s own culture (‘l’Occident’). ‘Si l’on voulait situer cette moralité,’ writes Barthes in conclusion, on ne pourrait aller la chercher que très loin, hors de la peinture, hors de l’Occident, hors des siècles historiques, à la limite même du sens, et dire, avec le Tao Tö King: ‘Il produit sans s’approprier, /Il agit sans rien attendre, /Son œuvre accomplie, il ne s’y attache pas, /Et puisqu’il ne s’y attache pas, /Son œuvre restera’ (OC, V, 702).

Twombly’s work is, for Barthes, the most thoroughgoing embodiment of an ethic-aesthetic that is generally inadmissible in the West. There are other figures who gesture more fleetingly towards a conduct reminiscent of wu-wei: Barthes discusses these in ‘Wou-wei’, towards the end of the Neutre course. Wu-wei problematises the ‘morale de la volonté, du vouloir (saisir, dominer, vivre, imposer sa vérité)’, and is, therefore, ‘structuralement un Neutre: ce qui déjoue le paradigme’ (N, 27 May, 223). The attainment of this neutral in the West can only ever be brief, ‘rare et surtout partielle’ says Barthes; we see it only in ‘des moments, des tendances, des aspects de quelques individus’. The examples he provides here are Leonardo da Vinci as seen by Freud, John Cage, and Prince Andrei from Tolstoy’s War and Peace.66 He quotes War and Peace. The Prince is going on a journey in the springtime, and sees an oak tree: ‘La vue de cet arbre provoqua en lui une éclosion de pensées nouvelles, désespérées mais pleines d’un charme mélancolique’. The conjunction between the contemplation of nature and the imagining of a new mode of living is important here. The excerpt continues:

Au cours de ce voyage, il soumit sa façon de vivre à un nouvel examen approfondi et aboutit […] à cette conclusion désenchantée mais apaisante, qu’il ne devait rien entreprendre, mais achever tout bonnement sa vie sans faire le mal, sans se tracasser, sans rien désirer. (N, 224)

Barthes presents this excerpt almost without comment, his only remark being that Christian morality lends a slightly ‘masochiste’ tone, as the prince sees his new, simple life with a certain ‘désenchantement’. For Barthes, the imagining of this unified life, the accomplishment of a profound wu-wei, and the manner of its apprehension, are deeply envi-

At the start of La Préparation du roman I, Barthes describes an epiphanic moment of wu-wei or of satori that occurred to him in April 1978. This description appears to be rhetorically modelled on the War and Peace excerpt that he had quoted on 27 May 1978. The first Préparation lecture opens with Barthes explaining that he desperately wants a new writerly goal, as he is becoming overwhelmed by the ‘pres-
sion sociale’ (PR, 2 December 1978, 29) and repetition he now associates with his work, which seems to involve largely ‘la gestion’ of former ideas. The decision to radically change his goals and to work towards a ‘vita nova’ happened suddenly, he says, on 15 April 1978. We see here precisely the same markers as in the Prince Andrei excerpt – here is the peacable natural setting: ‘Lourdeur de l’après-midi. Le ciel se couvre, un peu frais. Nous allons [à un] joli vallon de la route de Rabat’. And here, the sense, on his return from the outing, that his life must change: this is the liberatory realisation that ‘il ne devait rien entreprendre’, just like the prince:

Seul, triste → Marinade. […] Éclosion d’une idée: […] entrer en littérature, en écriture; […] ne plus faire que cela. […] Faire cesser la division du sujet, au profit d’un seul Projet, le Grand Projet: image de joie, si je me donnais une tâche unique. […] Tout instant de la vie fut désormais travail intégré au Grand Projet. (PR, 32)

This idea of the unification of his goals is a moment of pure insight, and as such it is a liberation from the more atomised generic and social codes which have been governing his work and his attitude to it. ‘Ce 15 avril en somme’, Barthes concludes, ‘[c’est une] sorte de Satori, d’éblouissement’ (PR, 32).

The mention of satori, as well as the natural setting of Barthes’s ‘realisation’, also implies that the unification at stake here is not only that of Barthes’s work; there is a hint here at the idea of a non-dualistic unification of the subject with his environment. Though Barthes does not pursue this further at this juncture of the Préparation lecture, he returns to it later in his discussions of the haiku. However, for a more thorough sketching of the idea of the diffusion of the self into its surroundings, we must return first of all to the opening of Le Neutre.

5. ‘Je n’avais nulle notion distincte de mon individu’
In the first Neutre lecture, Barthes reads four short texts ‘en guise d’épigraphes’ (N, 18 February, 27). The first of these, by Joseph de Maistre, is an indication of the arrogance from which the neutral seeks to distance itself. The other three epigraphs, from texts by Tolstoy, Rousseau, and Lao-Tzu, bear witness to the neutral. All four excerpts are read by Barthes without comment. The ‘portrait de Lao-Tzeu par lui-même’ relates specifically to the theme of wu-wei. It invokes the Taoist valorisation of negativity, which Taoists believe to be far less limiting than the use of positive terms. Hence the negativity of Lao-Tzu’s description of himself; what is valued is the idea of an unknown wealth of meaning lying behind a bland exterior. Our knowledge of Barthes’s
desire for xéniteia and stenochôria allows us to understand his affinity with these lines:

Moi seul, suis calme, mes désirs ne se manifestent pas; je suis comme l’enfant qui n’a pas encore souri. […] Les autres ont tous du superflu; moi seul semble avoir tout perdu; mon esprit est celui d’un sot. […] Les autres ont l’air intelligent; moi seul semble un niais. (N, 30)

The Tolstoy and Rousseau epigraphs announce a related idea, hitherto unseen in the Cours but which gains significance in Le Neutre and La Préparation du roman I. Both these excerpts involve an experience wherein Prince Andrei and Rousseau respectively experience a sudden and astonishing peace of mind, which is linked in both cases to a sense of oneness with the surrounding environment. Pierre Hadot speaks of such moments as being central to the ancient ‘exercices spirituels’: what is at stake here is a ‘conscience cosmique’ which allows one to escape all worry.68 Indeed, just like Barthes, Hadot finds evidence of this ‘conscience cosmique’ in Rousseau’s Rêveries du promeneur solitaire.69 In Tolstoy’s text, Prince Andrei falls on the battlefield at Austerlitz and, instead of being aware of the hue of battle around him, experiences a great calm:

Il ne vit plus rien. Il n’y avait plus au-dessus de lui que le ciel, un ciel voilé, mais très haut, immensément haut, où flottaient doucement des nuages gris. ‘Quel calme, quelle paix, quelle majesté! songeait-il. Quelle différence entre notre course folle, parmi les cris et la bataille, […] et la marche lente de ces nuages dans ce ciel profond, infini!’ (cited in N, 18 February, 29)

Andrei realises that the immense sky represents the real significance of existence, as the futility of battle and the ‘rage stupide’ of men cannot: ‘Comment ne l’ai-je pas remarqué jusqu’alors? […] Oui, tout est vanité, tout est mensonge en dehors de ce ciel sans limites. Il n’y a rien, absolument rien d’autre que cela’. It may even be that the sky itself is a mask for the ultimate nothingness that surrounds us: ‘Peut-être même est-ce un leurre, peut-être même n’y a-t-il rien, à part le silence, le repos’ (N, 29). The prince is diffused into his surroundings: the abolition of division between his self and his environment entails the realisation that all dualistic division – anything that is not nothingness, space or silence – is pointless. He experiences, in a very precise sense, satori: the revelation of the this-ness of the world.

Barthes has found a description of a remarkably similar revelation in Rousseau’s Rêveries du promeneur solitaire – a text in which Hadot tells us we see ‘à la fois l’écho de la tradition antique et le pressentiment de certaines attitudes modernes’.70 Rousseau experiences this as he gazes at the sky after an accident on the road. There is the added element here of the sense of loss of individuality:
Rousseau’s *satori*, then, goes a step further than Prince Andrei’s, in explicitly attaining the loss of subjectivity.71

Barthes’s use of Tolstoy and Rousseau here to figure the *neutre* can be called a japoniste idea, though its implications go beyond the aesthetic considerations that define japonisme for Jan Walsh Hokenson. The figuration of a non-dualistic, intersubjective conception of the world is, as we have seen, central to Japanese aesthetics. The Tolstoy and Rousseau excerpts testify to an experience which is entirely consistent with *satori* as it is written about by Zen masters and commentators on Zen such as Watts and Suzuki. For *satori* involves not the apprehension of a mysterious doctrinal truth, but rather the realisation that self and world are one. As Prince Andrei puts it, ‘Il n’y a rien, absolument rien d’autre que cela’ – or, as the Zen master Hakuin exclaims at the moment of his *satori*: ‘How wondrous! There is no birth-and-death from which one has to escape, nor is there any supreme knowledge after which one has to strive!’72 Barthes fully grasps the import of *satori* as the revelation, once the filters of language which had coloured our view have been done away with, of the world itself. Discussing *satori* in *Le Neutre*, he points out that using the word ‘illumination’ to describe *satori* is not quite appropriate, for the illumination is of nothing – or of everything: ‘on ne voit rien sinon peut-être qu’il n’y a rien à voir’. Rather, by virtue of the ‘ébranlement de la logique du moi-social’ (*N*, 29 April, 156), one attains a realisation of the interconnectedness of phenomena, a relationality that our divisive language-forms and social codings had hitherto screened from our consciousness. There is no intervening symbolic code between self and world; there is nothing to interpret. *Satori* and its literary form, the haiku, allow immediacy of relation and experience. There is a certain overlap here with some of the concerns of phenomenology. Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, for example, envision a return to such a heightened perception of the world. For Merleau-Ponty – as for Hadot, incidentally – philosophy is the means by which one can ‘rapprendre à voir le monde’.73 Barthes’s understanding of *satori* involves not only perception of the world, however, but a concomitant loosening of subjectivity. As Bernard Comment puts it, ‘une pareille expérience *immédiate* du réel implique une destitution du sujet, l’effacement de son enveloppe constitutive, la sortie du rapport duel sujet-objet pour tenter une
expérience indistincte de l’événement’. He concludes that ‘C’est le monde phénoménal en son ainsité, et sans projection du moi (désormais obsolète), qui doit être atteint’. So the self is diffused. The mid-twentieth-century Zen master Sokei-an Sasaki describes this phenomenon: ‘One day I wiped out all the notions from my mind,’ he writes. ‘I gave up all desire. I discarded all the words with which I thought’. He describes satori as a movement inwards:

Zit! I entered. I lost the boundary of my physical body. I had my skin, of course, but I felt I was standing in the center of the cosmos. [...] I had never known this world. I had believed that I was created, but now I must change my opinion: I was never created; I was the cosmos; no individual Mr Sasaki existed.

Barthes is aware of the complexity of the notion of individuation and its intersection with the environment in the Zen worldview: he devotes the whole of his third lecture on the haiku to these issues. Individuation, he suggests, consists precisely in the conjunction of ‘l’irréductibilité, la nuance fondatrice, le Tel [...] de l’individu (sujet civique et psychologique)’ and ‘tel moment de cet individu: [...] [le] Temps qu’il fait, [la] couleur, [le] phénomène’ (PR, 20 January 1979, 78). The apparently banal question of the weather becomes fundamental to our non-dualistic sense of self. Barthes uses a quotation from Baudelaire’s Les Paradis artificiels to illustrate this: ‘Ceux qui savent s’observer eux-mêmes [...] ont eu parfois à noter, dans l’observatoire de leur pensée, de belles saisons, d’heureuses journées, de délicieuses minutes’. If we take this a step further, says Barthes, we leave metaphor behind, and we become our surroundings: ‘vous serez la saison, la journée, la minute; votre sujet: comblé et épuisé par elle vous devenez baromètre’ (PR, 78). He goes on to conclude the lecture by suggesting that individuation, understood as the relationship between our self and our environment, seems both to strengthen our sense of our own quiddity, and to weaken our ego-feeling altogether:

L’individuation [...] est à la fois ce qui fortifie le sujet dans son individualité, son ‘quant à moi’ [...] et aussi, à l’extrême contraire, ce qui défait le sujet, le multiplie, le pulvérise et en un sens l’absente → oscillation entre l’extrême impressionnisme et une sorte de tentation mystique de la dilution, de l’anéantissement de la conscience comme unitaire: très classique et ultra-moderne. (PR, 79)

6. L’intraitable
The Préparation lectures on the haiku represent a continuation of L’Empire des signes’s conception of the haiku as entailing a ‘réveil devant
le fait’. As we already know from *L’Empire des signes*, the haiku is the object of Barthes’s writerly desire because of the manner in which its *tel*, its distilled and indivisible representation of a moment, repels interpretation and seems to forbid any symbolic substitution. The haiku ‘stops’ language and confronts us with the world. In the *Préparation* lectures, Barthes still insists on this. The haiku, he says in his lecture on the haiku and the photograph, gives us, as the photo does, the ‘effet de réel’, the certainty that the evoked moment did exist.77 Language is jolted: ‘J’entends par effet de réel l’évanouissement du langage au profit d’une certitude de réalité: le langage se retourne, s’enfouit et disparaît, laissant à nu ce qu’il dit’ (PR, 17 February 1979, 113). It is this stripped quality which makes the haiku a model for the ‘moments de vérité’ which Barthes wants his imagined novel to consist of. As we will see in Chapter 5, Barthes focuses on two excerpts from Proust and Tolstoy to figure the pathetic force of ‘moments de vérité’. Their ‘truth’ is analogised by recourse to Japanese aesthetics: why are these moments so ‘vrai (et non seulement réel ou réaliste)’, he asks? Because they render fragility: ‘Parce que cette radicalité du concret désigne ce qui va mourir: plus c’est concret, plus c’est vivant, et plus c’est vivant, plus cela va mourir; c’est le *utsuroi* japonais → sorte de *plus-value* énigmatique donnée par l’écriture’ (PR, 10 March 1979, 158). We hear him add in the lecture that this value <justifie intégralement, en dehors de toute théorie, l’écriture>. The haiku and the aesthetic principles it mobilises are an essential propaedeutic to the focus on the ‘Intraitable’ of life and emotion which Barthes imagines representing in his fantasised novel – and which he does represent in *La Chambre claire*: the final words of *La Chambre claire* designate its anguished core: ‘l’intraitable réalité’ (CC, 885). The real itself is found, laceratingly, in the Winter Garden photograph of Barthes’s mother. This discovery is akin to the ‘moments de vérité’ which Barthes discusses in the *Préparation*. These are ‘moment[s] de l’Intraitable’. No dialectic is possible, as with grief: ‘on ne peut ni interpréter, ni transcender, ni régresser; Amour et Mort sont là, c’est tout ce qu’on peut dire. Et c’est le mot même du haïku’ (PR, 159).

The haiku – and Zen thought generally – encourage a serene acceptance of what Barthes calls ‘l’intraitable’ and what Watts calls *now*: ‘There is only this *now*’.78 *Satori* represents a secular revolution in our understanding, whereby we finally realise that there is no possible transcendence of any kind, and no interpretation necessary. ‘When Fa-ch’ang was dying,’ writes Watts in the concluding lines of *The Way of Zen*, ‘a squirrel screeched on the roof. “It’s just this”, he said, “and nothing else”’.79 We are familiar, from *La Chambre claire*, with Barthes’s
version of this: ‘c’est cela!’ ‘Le satori,’ he states in *Le Neutre*, ‘rompt avec la vision courante qui acclimate, apprivoise l’événement en le faisant rentrer dans une causalité, une généralité, qui réduit l’incomparable au comparable’ (*N*, 221). If we experience the *satori* that reveals to us the ‘intraitable’ of the world, then we are in the realm of the ‘incomparable’, which is also the banal: experiences (love, death) that happen to everybody, about which nothing can be said to transform them: they just happen. Barthes describes the neutral as a ‘mouvement’ which would allow one to accept ‘une certaine pensée de la mort comme banale, car dans la mort, ce qui est exorbitant, c’est son caractère banal’ (*N*, 25 March, 119).

Barthes employs Suzuki’s ‘Zen dialectic’ in both *Le Neutre* and *La Préparation* to insist on this matteness of understanding. Suzuki tells us that as we follow Zen teaching, we go through two stages of looking at the world, in order to reach a third. At first, the mountains are merely mountains. This stage, says Barthes, is the stage of ‘bêtise, tautologie’. This stage is followed by a period of interpretation and questioning: ‘à la suite d’un bon enseignement Zen les montagnes ne sont plus des montagnes’; this is the stage of ‘intelligence, paranoïa’. Finally, however, we attain the ‘asile du repos’ wherein ‘de nouveau les montagnes sont des montagnes’; this, Barthes tells us, is the desirable state of ‘innocence (mystique), sapience, “méthode” (= Tao)’ (*N*, 6 May, 164–65). If we have reached the Tao itself (the ‘way’), we have reached an acceptance of nature’s workings, and of ‘l’Intraitable’. This acceptance, Barthes reminds us in the *Préparation*, is only possible ‘si l’on a traversé l’interprétation – souffrir d’une mort = il faut traverser toute une “culture” du deuil; et la culture = ce qui vient d’abord, l’absolument spontané’ (*PR*, 127). The final stage is a ‘sagesse’: this word is resonant in Barthes’s late work, from *Leçon* to the essay on Twombly. Here, ‘sagesse’ consists in acceptance, which is also ‘la saisie de la naturalité de la chose. […] Et ici, on retrouve Bashô, le haïkiste […] : “Vous aurez beau regarder toutes choses, rien n’est semblable au croissant de la lune”’ (*PR*, 127). We are simply here – this is the banal, incomparable teaching of Zen: ‘L’être manifesté existe. […] Ici, pas de doctrine de l’illusion, ni de l’ignorance, de Maya, ni d’Avidya. Les phénomènes existent’ (*N*, 217).

By means of the Zen dialectic, Barthes emphasises a literal, naturalistic reading of the world in which singular response is respected. Crucially, there is a refusal of the Hegelian dialectic. A reading of *La Chambre claire* makes it clear that Barthes feels the synthesising dialectic is a force which traduces the intensity of personal response. His study of photography angrily resists such a synthesis: ‘Je ne puis transformer mon
chagrin [...]… aucune culture ne vient m’aider à parler cette souffrance que je vis à même la finitude de l’image [...]: ma Photographie est sans culture: lorsqu’elle est douloureuse, rien, en elle, ne peut transformer le chagrin en deuil. […] La Photographie est indialectique’ (CC, 862).

Barthes’s grief leads him to an Adornian position of the rejection of the totalising force of the dialectic. Hegelian dialectics, in Adorno’s reading, reduces particularity by subsuming it under a general movement. Adorno advocates a focus on that which resists such levelling:

The matters of true philosophical interest at this point in history are those in which Hegel […] expressed his disinterest. They are nonconceptuality, individuality, and particularity – things which ever since Plato used to be dismissed as transitory and insignificant, and which Hegel labeled ‘lazy Existenz’. Philosophy’s theme would consist of the qualities it downgrades as contingent.81

‘Lazy Existenz’ is the vital core of Barthes’s late thought.

7. L’existence minimale
Having arrived at an understanding of the Intraitable that results from a rejection of dualism, Barthes seeks to elaborate an ethic-aesthetic which will accommodate this understanding. It is the idea of the non-dualistic field and of individuation as attendant upon weather which informs Barthes’s sketchings of an ‘existence minimale’ (and an attendant imagined ‘discours minimal’) from 1978 onwards. The ‘existence minimale’, though utterly subjective, is a repudiation of Western egotism, and a defence of what Adorno would call the ‘non-identical’.

The haiku aesthetic is again the ideal propaedeutic here. The classical haiku always has a reference to the season or weather within it – the kigo, or season-word. In rendering the ‘charge existentielle’ of the surrounding environment it puts in play, says Barthes, ‘le sentir-être du sujet, la pure et mystérieuse sensation de vie’ (PR, 20 January 1979, 72). In tandem with this, the haiku’s mobilisation of the absolute individuality of a situated moment seems to involve the diffusion of the subject into the surroundings so arrestingly evoked. This is how Barthes sees a Zenrin poem which he quotes frequently in his late work, stating in le Neutre that he has often wanted to use it as an epigraph for his texts.82 He almost certainly read it first in Watts. The French translation of the poem is ‘Assis paisiblement sans rien faire, le printemps vient et l’herbe croît d’elle-même’. Watts sees this as reflecting the ideal of the unified mind: ‘this “by itself” is the mind’s and the world’s natural way of action’.83

The ego has been abolished. Discussing the poem under the rubric of Wou-wei in the final Neutre lecture, Barthes discusses the importance of
its syntax. The poem’s serenity is the result not only of the still, natural setting, but also of the anacoluthon which removes the subject from the poem, just as Barthes wishes the Western ego to be neutralised in writing: ‘anacoluthon: entre la désignation de la posture et l’évidence cosmique, le sujet disparaît: il n’y a pas d’ego: il y a une posture et la nature’ (N, 3 June, 233). In La Préparation II, he sees the poem as being the embodiment of a fantasy of idleness: ‘fantasmer une certaine expérience, sinon du néant […] du moins du Nul’ (PR, 8 December 1979, 216). Discussing the poem in the interview ‘Osons être paresseux’ in December 1979, Barthes says that the ‘rupture de construction’ whereby it seems that it is springtime that is sitting, rather than the human subject, indicates the dispersion of the subject’s consistency: ‘Il est décentré, il ne peut même pas dire “je”. Cela serait la vraie paresse. Arriver, à certains moments, à ne plus avoir à dire “je”’.84

The ‘Assis paisiblement’ poem, then, represents a non-dualistic existence, wherein the constraints and illusions of the ego-feeling are overcome, and one attains a oneness with nature. Barthes discusses this in the Neutre lecture, where he tells us that the poem always reminds him of seeing a child sitting on a wall in a ‘village marocain “oublié”’ in the late 1960s:

<J’ai vu assis sur un mur un enfant qui était ‘assis paisiblement sans rien faire’, et j’ai eu une sorte de satori. C’est-à-dire que m’est venu brusquement l’évidence de la vie pure, sans vibration de langage. L’enfant m’a servi ici de guru, de médiateur.> (N, 3 June, 233)

This ‘pure life’ could be called ‘existence minimale’: this is the term Barthes employs elsewhere in Le Neutre to designate a fully neutral life which would be untouched by the arrogance of a conflictual logosphere. ‘L’existence minimale’ would be a state of ‘unicité vague, indécise du corps’ (N, 18 March, 110). This could be seen negatively – as lethargy, perhaps – or have a positive epistemological charge, as in the Rousseau and Tolstoy epigraphs. This state could be defined in terms of strength and autonomy, he implies: ‘l’existence minimale la plus forte: l’existence non pas simple (il ne s’agit pas d’un sentiment primitif) mais dépouillée d’attributs’ (111). In April 1978, Barthes writes a short text on Voltaire and Rousseau for Le Monde where he repeats the same points more clearly, and defines ‘l’existence minimale’. In such a state, as in the ‘Assis paisiblement’ poem, the subject is problematised. Time itself becomes individuated, while the subject is diffused – much as in Sasaki’s satori. Hadot has noted that in Rousseau’s Rêveries, there is a close link between Rousseau’s ‘extase cosmique’ and ‘la transformation de son attitude intérieure à l’égard du temps’.85
Rousseau, after his accident reported in the second ‘Promenade’ of the Rêveries, is the cosmos: ‘je remplissais de ma légère existence tous les objets que j’apercevais’. Barthes discusses this: ‘Le sujet “déconstruit”: […] l’ego est bien là, mais c’est pour mieux dire qu’il se quitte, […] se porte au bout de lui-même, là où il se dissout dans le moment: c’est le moment qui est subjectif, individuel, ce n’est pas le sujet, l’individu’. Rousseau reaches a state with which we in the West are still unfamiliar, Barthes continues; a state of ‘l’abandon de tout paroxysme, l’éloignement de cette violence de langage, que nous croyons “moderne”’. We are mistaken in placing our faith in the ‘violence’ of language, and we repress the reality of existence in so doing. This violence is rien d’autre que le refoulement d’une valeur pourtant bien connue d’autres civilisations (je pense à l’Orient): l’existence minimale: car ‘exister’ ne se sent pas forcément dans la violence, mais aussi dans ce peu de ciel, d’étoiles, de verdure, qui permit à Rousseau de ‘partir’, c’est-à-dire de raconter.  

‘Existence minimale’, is, of course, wu-wei itself – or, as Barthes shorthands it in the Vita Nova plans, ‘le rien faire philosophique’ (OC, V, 1008). It is a state which, as it reveals no apparent desire, tends to be negatively characterised. It is laziness, in fact. Barthes, in the 1979 Le Monde interview, suggests that we revalorise such laziness. He tells Enthoven that real laziness ‘serait au fond une paresse de “ne pas décider”, de l’“être là”. Comme les cancre. […] Ils ne participent pas, il ne sont pas exclus, ils sont là […] comme des tas.’ Sometimes this is an enviable state: ‘être là, ne rien décider, […] ne rien déterminer’ (OC, V, 764). This peaceable indolence is in line with Tao teaching, but is a conduct frowned upon in our society, which, as we have seen, is defined for Barthes by the ‘vouloir-agir’. He has used the image of the ‘tas’ two days previously in the second L’Œuvre comme volonté lecture, when he muses on wu-wei as running counter to the desire to write. Wu-wei, he says here, is the desire for a life ‘qui extérieurement ne bouge pas, où l’on ne lutte pas’. This desire is represented in our society by ‘des images discréditées. […] Celle du Tas: être comme un Tas’. He rather comically adds ‘pourquoi pas comme une bouse? […] Ou encore comme une larve [?]’ The emphasis, he adds, must be on sensibility. We return here to the idea of individuation as the intersection between a subject emptied of its ego feeling, and its surrounding environment: ‘une larve – mais – tout est là […] – une larve sensible, c’est-à-dire en un sens – […]: l’intériorité rendue à son absolu, à son affirmation nue’. This is wu-wei itself, he continues, quoting the Tao Te Ching: “sorte de passivité humble”, éloignée de tout désir de violence ou de rivalité […], mais au fond une espèce d’“activité spontanée et inépuisable”. Larve sensible, Tas pensant:
seul contact du Tas avec l’extérieur: pression de l’atmosphère, sensibilité barométrique’ (PR, 8 December 1979, 217). We have seen the idea of the self as barometer before: it is the key to Barthes’s appreciation of the haiku in De la vie à l’œuvre – and, as we begin to realise, it is crucial too to Barthes’s imagining of a neutral, non-dualistic existence, which repudiates the codes and values of a social and linguistic sphere determined by action and the conflict of paradigms.

The haiku renders the ‘nuance’ of a given moment, and in doing so reminds us of the ‘intraitable’ of life itself beneath the vibrations of language. Barthes figures this state in his fourth lecture on the haiku. Here we see that the state of minimal existence is concomitant with the form that renders it (the haiku), for both require no commentary. There is a ‘défaillance de discours’:

Ce chemin de la Nuance (qui est parti du Temps qu’il fait et qui le suit): quoi donc, au bout? Eh bien la vie, la sensation de la vie, le sentiment d’existence; et nous savons que ce sentiment, pour être pur, intense, glorieux, parfait, il faut qu’un certain vide s’accomplisse dans le sujet; même lorsque la jubilation (d’amour) par exemple est la plus intense, c’est parce qu’il y a dans le sujet un vide de langage; lorsque le language se tait, qu’il n’y a plus de commentaire, d’interprétation, de sens, c’est alors que l’existence est pure. (PR, 27 January 1979, 84)

What he has realised, Barthes explains, is the vitality of the banal. Its minimalist is liberatory: ‘En somme, découvert à fond, le Temps qu’il fait suscite en nous ce seul discours (minimal): qu’il vaut la peine de vivre’. He cites here an excerpt from the diary he kept at Urt during the summer of 1977, which was later to be partially published in ‘Délibération’, Barthes’s essay on the diary form:89 ‘De nouveau, après des jours bouchés, une matinée de beau temps, éclat et subtilité de l’atmosphère: une soie fraîche et lumineuse; ce moment vide (aucun signifié) produit une évidence: qu’il vaut la peine de vivre’ (cited in PR, 84). This, he implies, is writing that hints at the haiku aesthetic as well as indicating ‘existence minimale’. Were he a haiku poet, he adds, he would have said the same thing ‘d’une façon plus essentielle et plus indirecte (moins bavarde)’ (PR, 84). Interestingly, another entry from the Urt diary, published in ‘Délibération’, refers to another such moment of calm. Here Barthes explicitly links his sense of integration with the environment to a Japanese aesthetic principle:

La fenêtre est grande ouverte sur la fin plus claire d’une journée grise. J’explore alors une euphorie de flottement; tout est liquide, aéré, buvable (je bois l’air, le temps, le jardin). Et, comme je suis en train de lire Suzuki, il me semble que c’est assez proche de l’état que le Zen appelle sabi. (OC, V, 674)
It becomes clear that Barthes is working towards a minimalist ethic which is inspired by Japanese aesthetic principles and Taoist philosophy, and which implicitly critiques the Western, Cartesian logomachy for its repudiation of such an ethic. This existence can be attained if one reduces as much as possible one’s complicity with ‘l’arrogance du monde’. This desire is mandarinal, perhaps; impractical, probably; utopian, certainly – yet admirable nonetheless for its figuring of a mode of existence which has no adverse effect upon others. In a figure on ‘Intensités’, destined for but not given in the Neutre series, Barthes describes this minimalism: it is a ‘style de conduite qui tend à diminuer la surface de contact du sujet avec l’arrogance du monde [...] et non pas avec le monde, l’affect, l’amour, etc’. It is an ethical minimalism, then – ‘mais nullement [minimalisme] esthétique ou affectif’ (N, 249). Though it is the haiku – an extremely pared-down form – that mobilises Barthes’s conception of the ‘existence minimale’, the aesthetic to be worked towards is not minimal. It contains, rather, the incomparable complexity of the ‘intraitable’ – which, paradoxically, is rendered through writing the banal discourse of the weather and the subject’s environment at a given instant. Such pastoral contemplation – wu-wei itself – engenders a serenity that may be at odds with writing: for how can one write if one is within wu-wei? Barthes approaches this question in L’Œuvre comme volonté, when he discusses how wu-wei inhibits the desire to write. Here we see the question answered: wu-wei elicits a contemplation of nature which is itself as powerful as the desire to write:

Ce sentiment [le wou-wei] a pris un soir une forme ‘romantique’ [...] le soir du 14 juillet, [...] tour en auto dans la campagne; sur un chemin de hauteur [...] nous arrêtons l’auto et nous descendons; nous sommes entourés d’un paysage vallonné, vers l’Adour d’un côté, et de l’autre vers les Pyrénées; l’air était absolument paisible, inerte même: pas un bruit, quelques fermes blanches et brunes piquées au loin [...], une odeur de foin coupé. [...] Je vivais [...] une sorte de point zéro du Désir; tout en moi était aussi étele que le paysage: force, splendeur, vérité aussi souveraine que le Vouloir-Écrire. (PR, 15 December 1979, 220)

It is possible, then, that the cultivation of a non-dualistic conception of one’s being in the world will lead to a blank state (the ‘point zéro du Désir’ mentioned here, or the ‘non-vouloir-saisir’ taught by the Tao) which will be the productive beginning of a new aesthetic. This, then, would be the answer to the question posed in the 1978 text on Voltaire and Rousseau, ‘D’eux à nous’. Barthes has shown us Rousseau, in the Rêveries, falling out of the violence of language and into a state of serenity. Existence, he writes, need not be felt only in the ‘vouloir-agir’; it inheres also ‘dans ce peu de ciel, d’étoiles, de verdure’. It is these
surroundings which permit Rousseau to “partir”, c’est-à-dire [...] racon-
ter’. And so we reach, Barthes concludes, the question of narrative: ‘voici
de nouveau le Récit, et voici de nouveau la question moderne qui nous
est posée – ou la contrainte qui nous est rappelée: comment écrire sans
ego?’ (OC, V, 455). Perhaps, within the confines of our own linguistic
forms, we can only ‘write without ego’ in snatches, as Rousseau and
Tolstoy struggle to.

It seems, however, that the aesthetic of the ‘existence minimale’
remains utopian, at least for writing. It may exist in visual form – perhaps
in Twombly’s paintings, whose ‘rareté’ reminds Barthes of the aerating
spaces between the branches in Japanese flower-arranging. It is not only
in non-representational art, though, that Barthes finds this aesthetic. In
an untitled article from 1977, he indicates that Daniel Boudinet’s pastoral
photographs also embody the aesthetic of the ‘existence minimale’.90
Boudinet’s ‘géorgiques’, as Barthes calls them (OC, V, 322), are without
ideological vibration: they tread the ‘ligne de crête’ between the two
‘abîmes’ of naturalism and aestheticism (317). They are, then, an art of
the interstice. They are as serene as the haiku, and similarly indirect:
‘L’auteur dit indirectement le paisible, pour que nous nous reposions.
[...] D’ordinaire, la photographie affirme; ici, elle produit la paix’ (320).

There are many correspondences between the qualities Barthes sees in
these photographs and the tenets of Japanese aesthetics and philosophy
that he values. The serenity he finds in the photographs is replicated in
his text. There is, as Barthes says, ‘nul combat’ here; rather, ‘quelque
chose d’austère et de neutre’ (322). In these photos he finds repose and
space. We see here again the idea of aeration: ‘Les photographies de D.B.
 sont très musicales. Elles ont un effet d’apaisement, opère une sorte de
catharsis subtile, jamais violente: le corps respire mieux, il boit ce que
Baudelaire appelait l’ambroisie végétale’ (327). These photos, it is
implied, are as free of ideology as the haiku is. It is for this reason that
even the darkest photograph, of foliage and undergrowth, still engenders
a sense of freedom: ‘Ces frondaisons verticales sans air, sans ciel,
 inexplicablement, me donnent à respirer; elles m’élèvent l’âme […]
et pourtant, je veux aussi m’enfoncer dans l’obscur de la terre: bref, une
moire d’intensités’ (318). The ethic may be minimalist, but there is
maximal experiential intensity. This can happen in an aesthetic space
which is devoid of dualism and of any endoxal use of the sign.

Barthes uses a Polaroid photograph by Boudinet as the frontispiece of La
Chambre claire. It is the only colour photograph in the book, and one of
only two photographs in the book not to feature a human subject.⁹¹

Taken inside a darkened room, it is a photograph of blue curtains, through which the light from outside the window is diffused. There is a gap of purer white light. This photograph seems an apt emblem of the ethic and aesthetic that Barthes is working towards from 1977. We see in this photograph suggestion, the interstice, the banal. We glimpse brightness. Barthes uses Japanese aesthetic principles – sometimes very loosely – to imbue his late work with values he sees as running counter to the tenets of the Western logomachy. He hopes these values will lead to an enriched and peaceable sense of existence within the world. The critical force of this work, though diffuse, is potent nonetheless: Barthes makes us question the very grounds of our subjectivity. It is the use of Japanese aesthetics that gives this critique its positive and affirmative charge. It is the arresting nature of the haiku and the Japanese conception of space-time that aids Barthes in resisting category thinking. That is why japonisme is important for him as for other French writers. As Hokenson puts it, Barthes uses the Japanese aesthetic ‘as a means of rethinking the Occident via Japan. This art can [...] teach Westerners how to resist [...] the sectarian ideology of “Je” and thereby “l’Homme”. Postmodern negatives and unnamables become, in a japoniste aesthetics of plenitude, unique means to affect and presence, subtended with postmodern aesthetic pleasure’.⁹²

The aim of Barthes’s japonisme is to encourage, if not effect, a transformation of our relationship to the world. In this, it can be seen as sharing the aims of Tao and Zen. In a more immediate sense, Barthes’s teaching itself, with or without the japoniste themes it contains, can be seen as exemplifying certain Japanese aesthetic principles in its suggestive, ‘one-corner’ style. He meets Shūzō Kuki’s criteria of the ‘true artist’ who is an ‘educator of humanity’ in revealing the beauty and complexity which is attainable once we overcome our restrictive understanding of time and subjectivity. ‘He teaches man to liberate himself from time’, says Kuki, describing this artist:

But he does not model himself on the unpracticed educator who takes pleasure in showing off his ideas. [...] He believes in the value of suggestion, in the power of the imagination. He knows how to bring about an active spontaneity on the part of spectators. Thus it is that he gives indication only of those points of view in which the latter may place themselves; he only traces lines and only points out directions in order that the spectators themselves may themselves follow these. [...] The task of the spectators remains intact: it is incumbent upon them to make the great leap.⁹³

Barthes’s Cours concertedely mobilise both an aesthetic and a pedagogical ethic of suggestion. We have seen in this chapter the manner in which
Barthes seeks a minimal existence in which subjectivity would be fused with the ‘intraitable’ of the world. In the next chapter, I shall examine Barthes’s attempts to figure the writing of the ‘intraitable’ of his emotions.

Notes


2 Knight, Barthes and Utopia, pp. 14–15.


4 Barthes noted the negative reaction to ‘Alors, la Chine?’ in a postface added to the article when it was published in booklet form by Christian Bourgois in 1975. It was originally published in Le Monde on 7 June 1974. OC, III, 516–26.


6 Foucault, Les Mots et les choses, pp. 10–11.

7 ffrenc, The Time of Theory, p. 171.

8 See ffrenc, The Time of Theory, pp. 115–16. In a note, ffrenc notes the preponderance of articles on Chinese and Japanese subjects appearing in Tel Quel from late 1968 through 1971 and beyond. Sollers’s Maoism was partly premised on opposition to the Parti communiste français. A major influence on Sollers was Maria Antonietta Macciocchi’s book De la Chine (Paris: Seuil, 1971). Macciocchi was banned from both the French and the Italian communist parties because of her Maoist allegiances. It was she who organised the Tel Quel trip to


I understand dualism as encompassing more than Manichaeism. ‘Dualism’, as Watts, Suzuki and other theorists of Zen understand and employ the term, implies much more than the binarism of meaning; it has a profound existential dimension. For these theorists, it is the division between our selves and our environment that is dualistic, and it is this sense that must be overcome in order for enlightenment to be achieved.


There is a distinction to be made between the currently available Seuil edition of *L’Empire des signes* and the original Skira edition, which is laid out more lavishly, and contains nine extra images as well as supplementary information in the ‘Table des illustrations’.

Steve Odin points out that the decentring, disoriginating principles of post-structuralism are frequently used, post-Barthes, to account for the radical differences between Eastern and Western systems. ‘Over the past decade,’ he writes in 1990, ‘we have seen […] poststructuralism, along with its critical strategy of deconstruction, emerge as an important new transcultural method for East-West comparative philosophy […]. Against the background of the differential logic of acentric Zen Buddhism, the art, literature, cinema, and other sign systems in the Japanese text have been analyzed as a fractured semiotic field with no fixed centers’. Odin, review of *Postmodernism in Japan* by H.D. Harootunian and Miyoshi Masao, *Philosophy East and West*, 40.3 (1990): 381–87 (pp. 381–82).


24 In *Psychotherapy*, Watts refers to Taoism, Zen Buddhism and Confucianism as ‘ways of liberation’. The liberation is from the damaging conventions imposed by our social institutions, including the convention of the ego-feeling.

25 Comment, *Roland Barthes, vers le neutre*, p. 27.


33 Hokenson, *Japan*, p. 32.


37 Throughout *Psychotherapy East and West*, Watts refers to the necessity of coming to a new and healing worldview of our organism as being an integral part of its environment. He is partially indebted to Dewey and others in his conclusion that ‘organism/environment is a unified pattern of behaviour […] – not an interaction but a transaction’ (p. 33).


40 Kuki, ‘Considerations on Time’, p. 51.

42 ‘[The] exhibition was very well received in Paris,’ Isozaki told Hans Obrist: ‘Michel Foucault [became] interested in Japanese culture and came to Japan afterwards and went to the Zen temple, tried to practice meditation […]. And Jacques Derrida also found his key concept espa[c]ement is similar to “ma”’. The exhibition subsequently travelled to the US and northern Europe.

43 See N, 190: ‘l’attitude japonaise (# kantisme) […] ne conceptualise ni le temps ni l’espace, mais seulement l’intervalle, le rapport de deux moments, de deux lieux ou objets’.


45 See Barthes’s paper ‘L’Image’ given at the conference on his work at Cerisy in June 1977 for more on his ideas concerning the negative image of the person as constructed by others (OC, V, 512–19).


49 Much of the critical literature on Barthes’s ‘orientalism’ focuses on his fascination with the ‘vide’ he sees as characterising oriental thought. This fascination can be easily fitted into an Orientalist critique when aligned with traditionally Orientalist figures of the passive, inscrutable Orient. Thus Dalia Kandiyoti writes censoriously about the ‘aesthetics of the void’ that Barthes sees in Loti’s Aziyadé. She is concerned that ‘in constructing a utopia of absolute difference, based on liquidation and absence’, Barthes permits the ‘return’ of a repressed ‘exoticism’. ‘Roland Barthes Abroad’, p. 236.

50 Hokenson, Japan, p. 353.

51 In Barthes’s interview with The French Review in February 1979 (a month after this lecture), he again describes ‘les cultures orientales’ in terms of breathing. The Orient, he says, is useful because it represents an absolute alterity to Western cultures. This alterity is vital to his intellectual life: ‘Ce que je peux percevoir, par reflets très lointains, de la pensée orientale me permet de respirer’. OC, V, 741–42.


54 The essay on Stendhal, ‘On échoue toujours à parler de ce qu’on aime’, is Barthes’s final piece of work, but had not been fully corrected before the accident in February 1980 which led to his death a month later.

55 ‘Cher Antonioni…’, Cahiers du cinéma, May 1980. OC, V, 900–905 (p. 901). See the discussion of this text in Ch. 2 above.

56 Compare L’Empire des signes, where Barthes discusses Japanese flower-arranging as an art of the interstice: ‘[C]e qui est produit, c’est la circulation de
l’air, dont les fleurs, les feuilles, les branches [...] ne sont en somme que les parois…’ (ES, 63).

57 China [Chung Kuo / Cina], dir. Michelangelo Antonioni (Radiotelevisiona Italiana, 1972). Antonioni was invited to China by Mao. The filmmaker’s visit was controlled in much the same way as the Tel Quel delegation’s visit. The documentary’s settings are thus restricted to the locations which Antonioni was allowed to visit, such as factories, a collective farm, and Shanghai port. However, the film was denounced as anti-Chinese, and was not shown in China until 2004.

58 Tao was exported to Japan from the seventh century onwards, Zen from the twelfth century. For more on the assimilation of Chinese philosophies into Japanese culture, see David Pollack, *The Fracture of Meaning: Japan’s Synthesis of China from the Eighth through the Eighteenth Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).


60 Watts is in the bibliography of * Fragments d’un discours amoureux*, whereas Jean Grenier’s *L’Esprit du tao* (Paris: Flammarion, 1957) makes a first appearance in *Comment vivre ensemble*. Barthes presumably (re)read both texts during the winter of 1976 as he was preparing his lectures and readying the *Fragments* for publication.


64 See for example the figure of ‘Délicatesse’ in *Le Neutre*: Barthes discusses the Japanese art of tea (*chanoyu*) as an example of ‘délicatesse’ (p. 59); he also uses Suzuki’s explanation of *sabi* to define the principle (p. 65).


67 This is a belief which Taoism shares with Christian negative theology, as Barthes is aware.

68 Hadot, *Exercices spirituels*, p. 27.


71 A passage from Rousseau’s fifth promenade makes this beneficial loss even clearer: ‘Le temps n’est plus rien pour [moi] […] le présent dure toujours sans néanmoins marquer sa durée et sans aucune trace de succession, sans aucun autre sentiment de privation ne de jouissance, de plaisir ni de peine, de désir ni de crainte, que celui seul de notre existence’ (Rêveries, p. 102). Hadot comments on this: ‘Le sentiment de l’existence, dont par[e] Rousseau, c’est ce sentiment de l’identité entre l’existence universelle et notre existence’ (*Exercices spirituels*, p. 358).


Comment, Roland Barthes, p. 188.

Watts, Way of Zen, p. 121.

Michael Sheringham notes the importance of the weather as an ‘indirect mode of utterance’ which Barthes uses in the rendering of his incidents, and reminds us that there are discussions of ‘le temps qu’il fait’ in Barthes’s 1972 essay on Pierre Loti’s Aziyadé and in the ‘Quotidien’ figure in Le Plaisir du texte. Sheringham, Everyday Life, p. 200.

This is a very different ‘effet de réel’ to that analysed in Barthes’s 1968 essay, ‘L’Effet de réel’, which discusses the connotative effects of the ‘détail concret’ in realist fiction. OC, III, 25–32 (p. 31).

Watts, Way of Zen, p. 41.

Watts, Way of Zen, p. 201.


Adorno, Negative Dialectics, p. 8.

N, 3 June, 232. The ‘Assis paisiblement’ poem appears in the following texts: Incidents (written 1968–69) (OC, V, 974); Fragments d’un discours amoureux (p. 287); Le Neutre, 3 June 1978 (p. 232); La Préparation du roman II, 8 Dec. 1979 (pp. 216–17); and the ‘Osons être paresseux’ interview, 10 December 1979 (OC, V, 763). It is also referred to obliquely in sketches three and four of Vita Nova, August 1979 (OC, V, 1011, 1013). In the third Vita Nova sketch, the conflation of the child with the poem itself is made explicit: ‘L’Enfant marocain du Poème Zenrin’.

Watts, Way of Zen, p. 134.


Hadot, Exercices spirituels, p. 356.

Rousseau, Rêveries, p. 49.


See Knight, Barthes and Utopia, pp. 93–96 for an exploration of the idea of idleness and the ‘tas’ in the Vita Nova sketches.

The Urt diary is also quoted in Le Neutre, 1 April (135). ‘Délibération’ was published in Tel Quel, Winter 1979. OC, V, 668–81.


The other is ‘la première photo’ by Niepce (1822), depicting a laid dinner-table.

Hokenson, Japan, p. 375.

Kuki, ‘Considerations on Time’, p. 62.