
H-France Review Vol. 13 (January 2013), No. 19

Roland Barthes, *Travels in China*. Edited and annotated by Anne Herschberg Pierrot; translated by Andrew Brown. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012. xi + 226 pp. Notes and index. \$19.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0745650807.

Review by Haun Saussy, University of Chicago.

Whatever Roland Barthes chose to write about, the immediate subject didn't matter as much as his activity around it, the fineness of the distinctions and relations he was able to discern in putting his intensely literary sensibility to work. Like Loyola, Fourier or Sade, he brought system to his perceptions, but he kept the freedom to walk away from any system he had made.

Some themes, articulations or gestures nonetheless recur throughout his thirty-year writing career. Brecht retains the status of a model and a method (the imperative to distrust, denaturalize, reframe the terms of what presents itself as self-evident). A polarity of right and left aesthetics, related to this Brechtian critical gesture, shapes many of Barthes's arguments, not only in *Mythologies* where it is fundamental, but in the books of the period of his "semiological adventure" as well.[1] The linchpins of the bourgeois understanding of art (the author, realism, universality) must be reinscribed as effects of a system, and to perceive their systematicity is to void them of their pretensions to truth. But what in other hands becomes a grouchy, predictable disenchantment is always, with Barthes, lightened by humor and the joy of discovery, of seeing what can be done with the descriptive language of semiology and narratology.

Asia was pivotal for both Brecht and Barthes as a means of discovering a good alienation, a hygiene of the sign.[2] If *Mythologies* diagnosed the sickness of signs in the bourgeois West, their hypocrisy and subservience, *L'Empire des signes* explored Japan as a realm of strong and self-sufficient signs.[3] Asia scholars have always had difficulty appreciating the experimental, responsive, hypothetical character of Barthes' travelogue: for it, Barthes has been accused of essentializing, Orientalizing, exoticizing, binarizing. It is to be feared that simple-minded readers will take *Travels in China* as a straightforward statement about China too.[4] If Barthes had anything uncomplimentary to say, even in these private notebooks, about this great and ancient civilization, there must have been something wrong with him, and a dunce cap marked "Eurocentrism" stands ready in all sizes and half sizes.

But the stakes are other. Barthes admits in his notebooks, "I feel that I won't be able to shed light on them [the Chinese] in the least--just shed light on us by means of them" (p. 8).[5] What he needs is "a sideways gaze" (p. 177), aimed neither at self nor other but at the space in between. Barthes spends a lot of time in the space in between, as the diaries record. He is repelled by his travelling companion Philippe Sollers, who is always trying to show off and debate Marxist theory with their Chinese guides and interlocutors. This behavior seems to Barthes a *prurit*, a pathological and irrational itch (p. 163).[6]

Rather than join in the futile task of converting their Lüxingshe official minders and hand-picked counterparts to a finer form of Marxism, Barthes tends to sink into the cushion of his bus seat or linger behind the group in the museums and factories they visit. He imagines and sketches a semiological analysis of the speeches they are forced to hear at every stop, speeches composed not of words but of

pre-formed paragraphs, “chunks” or “*briques*”: the exploitation of the people by the landlords, the glorious Liberation, betrayal by the Soviet revisionists, the Great Leap Forward, the repression of the retrograde conspiracy of Liu Shaoqi, the repression of the conspiracy (leftist in appearance but actually right-wing) of Lin Biao, the ever-advancing victory of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution under the banner of Mao Zedong Thought. “Us: our combinable elements are Words; them, it’s the next size up: bricks,” Barthes ventures, still seeking a formalist account of Chinese public language (p. 132). It would be an error to take these speeches at face value, as language with a content corresponding to reality; rather the communication-function of the brick derives from its place in a larger implicit ensemble, and a speaker might be able to shape a novel message by combining differently the obligatory bricks or even omitting a few. Early on in the voyage, the wish is: “Ah if I could carefully record these bricks and show their combinatorial rules” (p. 15). “The Doxa is very powerful, made up by cementing together blocks of stereotypes; but since combinatorial rules are involved, one can still read, and even decipher, the words (living, meaningful) via the *omissions* or the *marks* of certain stereotypes,” Barthes surmises (p. 19).

By the end, however, and particularly after a visit with the literature and philosophy professors of Peking University, it has become, to Barthes, “obvious that the purest production of the regime is a formidable Rhetoric: art of persuading, of convincing, i.e., leaving language without gaps, without second thoughts” (p. 183). The worst thing is that the more education a person possesses, the more his or her language consists of readymade bricks, rather than the contrary, which would indicate a development of individuality. Peking University strikes Barthes as “super-orthodox, super-radical, super-catechistic, and thus, in practice *avant-garde*—but not in our sense of the word!” (p. 191). As he confessed, “[P]ersonally, I won’t be able to live in this radicalism, in this fanatical monologism, in this obsessive, monomaniac discourse... in this fabric, this text without a gap” (p. 192). Cultural-Revolution China is a “Lacanian universe,” observes François Wahl, the editor of the *Écrits* (p. 184). Its discourse admits no gap, patch or Möbius-like reversal of dimensions.

The sense of suffocation derives, as it should, from properties of the discourse itself (its continuity, its predictability, its having a ready answer to every question) and not from the relation of the discourse to something outside it, for which Barthes reserves the tentative category of “needs,” including the need for love (something resolutely excluded from his Chinese experience).^[7] Again and again, elements that had seemed to be part of the texture of the “signifier,” for example clothes, turn out, on closer examination, to be entirely subjugated to the needs of the “signified,” the Doxa (p. 144).

The relentlessly reiterated Doxa of China (as seen by guests of the official travel agency in 1974) recalls nothing in the earlier Barthes so much as the spectacle of Billy Graham haranguing the Parisians in the Vel’ d’Hiv: “If God is really speaking through Dr. Graham’s mouth, it must be acknowledged that God is quite stupid: the Message stuns us by its platitude, its childishness....The Message is constituted by an outburst of discontinuous affirmations, without any kind of link, each of which has no content that is not tautological (*God is God*)....Dr. Graham brings us a method of magical transformation: he substitutes suggestion for persuasion: the pressure of the delivery, the systematic eviction of any rational content from the proposition, the incessant break of logical links, the verbal repetitions, the grandiloquent designation of the Bible held at arm’s length...”.^[8]

In Graham, Barthes saw U.S. political self-interest and a “McCarthyist episode” (as if turning French people away from atheism would preserve them from Communism). The Cold War made it easy to detect and diagnose hypocrisy, as the *Mythologies* repeatedly do.^[9] But in 1974, Barthes is confronted with a political language that no longer refers to things “in our sense of the word.” Behaviors that *Mythologies* had confidently made symptomatic of the mental world of the already somewhat Americanized French petite bourgeoisie were standard in this vast country, allegedly poised on the left of the Left. In 1957, Barthes could pose the question, “Does Myth exist on the left?” and answer that it had there an illustrative, not an essential function, and so might be excused.^[10] Like Nixon’s

unanticipated rapprochement with Mao, the “most obedient” discourse of Chinese intellectuals surprised.[11] It stepped out of line by never stepping out of its own line.

“Reading through my notes to make an index,” notes Barthes, “I realize that if I were to publish them as they are, it would be exactly a piece of Antonioni” (p. 195). Michelangelo Antonioni’s documentary *Chung Kuo, Cina*, made in 1972, had displeased the authorities, who had expected the director to turn out something wholly “positive.” The ritual denunciations of Antonioni as having come to China with “perfidious intention and despicable method” (pp. 29, 195) gave an idea of how an undisguised account of Barthes’ travels would be received. “In fact, one has just the choice between: – Approving. Discourse ‘in’: impossible. – Criticizing. Discourse out: impossible. – Describing a stay in no particular order. Phenomenology” (p. 195).

But what was there to describe? For example, the scene at Sun Yat-Sen Park next to the Forbidden City? “Peaceful, relaxed crowd. No hysteria, but also no eroticism, and no ‘joy.’ Nothing odd, nothing surprising, nothing novelistic. A difficult writing, except at certain points, ironic” (p. 167). The irony of *fadeur* was the most Barthes would permit himself, in the short commentary “Alors, la Chine?” and the course he taught subsequently on the Neutral.[12] Identifying himself, almost, with that *fadeur*, and exempting himself from the conflictual dynamic of most discourse, Barthes seems to have chosen to “suspend his utterance without quite abolishing it.”[13] But it was clear that “the Revolution would mean giving up everything I love: ‘free’ speech exempted from all repetition; and immorality.”[14]

French “Maoism” is often chronicled from a position of smugness, by and for people who of course know better. Before denouncing Sollers and his team for their naïveté, complicity, egomania or the like, we should pause to think about the needs that Maoism answered in the years just after 1968. The failed promise of a moment of revolutionary drama, above all of the fleeting solidarity of students and minimum-wage workers, and the willingness of the mainstream French socialist and communist parties to settle for incremental material improvements left many longing for a return to the empowering sharp lines of class and conflict. In that particular context, it was the Maoists who were still impatient, still ready to storm the citadels, still using the word “proletariat.” Now that the Left is utterly powerless, although regaining a certain voice, perhaps we can sympathize more with those who sought alliance with a party that couldn’t be bought off so cheaply. Illusion and self-intoxication there were, certainly, but it was not all so simple as it appears in patronizing narratives of Rive Gauche leftist folly.[15] And China continues to surprise: to slip from the grip of easy left/right antitheses, to be sure, but also to invent ceaselessly new forms of sinister “harmony” for its citizens.

This fascinating document, the original publication of which stirred up controversy, is ill-served by its English translation.[16] One would expect such private notebooks to be written in an elliptical, fragmentary style requiring a good knowledge of the language and of the author’s habits of mind; much is left implicit. Andrew Brown relies on the dictionary, and often looks no farther than the first English translation of a word or idiom. The effect is a vague, stumbling sort of English, a Google Translate idiom that no one would ever use to note first-hand impressions of anything. It evokes anything but Barthes the sharp observer and decoder.

Where the choice of English equivalents is not self-evident, the translator at least could have looked at the context and picked the most appropriate word for the situation; but that would require attention and care. Early in the book, we read: “How boring! To have the downsides of fame (the echo of a private trip) and none of the (financial) advantages” (p. 6). One sees more or less what Barthes is trying to say, but “echo” in English has no relevant meaning; it would have been worth while to look down the page of the dictionary and learn that *les échos* is the part of a newspaper devoted to gossip, news about celebrities, and so forth. So, rather, “newspapers commenting on a private trip.” “Four hundred visa applications have just been rejected. The hostess is surprised we’re travelling; she says: ‘Are you *in the know?*’” (p. 7). “L’hôtesse s’étonne de notre voyage; elle dit: ‘Vous êtes *branchés?*’”[17] Again, not complete nonsense,

but not much sense either. Philology to the rescue! A “hôtesse,” in the case of 1970s air travel, is the “stewardess,” today the “flight attendant.” And the *Tel Quel* group was exceptional not because they seemed to possess special information, but because their success in attaining such a rare visa gave them the appearance of privileged insiders. So: “Do you have some *special connections?*”

The example mentioned earlier, where the most intimidated intellectuals of China are said to be the “wisest,” is a vexing but not isolated case. Every page has its string of such pearls. On page ten, a Peking courtyard smells of “cheesy manure,” surely a rarity in China and worth signaling in the notebooks of the great semiologist. But no, *Carnets* (p. 24) reveals that the smell was merely of *crottin*, which Mr. Brown’s dictionary must have glossed as meaning either (a) manure or (b) a goat’s milk cheese from the Loire region shaped into little patties; being a prudent translator, he didn’t want to lose either meaning, though the result makes no sense. Lin Biao said that his parents had given him “une tête bien faite” (*Carnets*, p. 29): a good set of brains, not “a handsome face” (p. 14). Again, “all the personnel are launched on the Campaign”; bon voyage, fearless cosmonauts! But compare *Carnets*, p. 30, “Tout le personnel se lance dans la Campagne,” “the whole staff is enthusiastically taking part in the Campaign.”

Admittedly a little harder is “Notre guide appelle qu’on le taquine en lui présentant sans cesse des problèmes névrotiques” (*Carnets*, p. 33). “Our guide calls out for teasing by endlessly having neurotic problems presented to him” does not solve any problems (p. 19). Better to try a little flexibility: “our guide calls [his superiors to complain] that we tease him by endlessly presenting him with neurotic problems.” “Big Shop No. 1” (p. 20); how about “department store” for *grand magasin*, just as it’s written on the Paris bus advertisements? The pride of said Big Shop, which Brown thinks are “pictures mounted under glass” (p. 21), are, alas, only banal “coasters” for putting under drinks, “sous-verres” (*Carnets*, p. 36). The guides make repeatedly the “recommendation” to the visitors not to photograph political posters in the street. How polite of them! False friend; it was surely more like a “directive.”[18] At the circus, “Great success of a sound effects engineer” (p. 30). What was a sound engineer doing there? But no, it must have been a fellow who specializes in imitating noises with his mouth (*un bruiteur*).[19] Maybe this catalogue should stop—prematurely—with the *bruiteur*.

Barthes deserved better. Translated by the likes of Richard Howard and Annette Lavers, he reads like someone one would enjoy getting to know. In this version, he seems never to know quite what he means or to find the words to say it. The problems continue into the notes, where André Gide, poor man, is condemned to perform a *Retour à, not de, l’URSS*. [20] The notes, taken over from Anne Herschberg Pierrot’s edition, are short on information about events of the 1960s and 1970s in China, an essential piece of background to the journey of the Telquellians even if they themselves knew little about it. Readers able to understand the French should not bother with the English translation. Perhaps a scholar sufficiently familiar with the Chinese side of the story can add to the French text a set of notes and documents that would give the guides, model workers, and obedient professors who appear in this book some of the contour and life they could not, under the conditions of the time, have expressed in the encounter with a busload of visitors from France.

NOTES

[1] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957); Barthes, *L’aventure sémiologique* (Paris: Seuil, 1985).

[2] See Eric Hayot, *Chinese Dreams: Pound, Brecht, ‘Tel Quel’* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

[3] Roland Barthes, *L’Empire des signes* (Geneva: Skira, 1970).

[4] An announcement by the publisher speaks of Barthes’s “vision négative de la Chine,” following this

with a rewritten sentence from Barthes's 1974 essay "Alors, la Chine?": "un pays très vieux et très vaste aux couleurs et saveurs fades, où la signifiante est discrète jusqu'à la rareté" (<http://www.worldcat.org/title/carnet-du-voyage-en-chine/oclc/742662519>). See Roland Barthes, "Alors, la Chine?" (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1975; *Le Monde*, May 24, 1974, 2).

[5] "Je sens que je ne pourrai les éclairer en rien--mais seulement nous éclairer à partir d'eux" in the original. See Roland Barthes, *Carnets du voyage en Chine*, edited by Anne Herschberg Pierrot (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 2009), p. 22.

[6] In the original, see Barthes, *Carnets*, p. 182. For Sollers' effect on Barthes, see *Travels in China*, pp. 46-48, 102, 122-123. Sollers has responded to the publication of this private document with an article putting himself in the best light: see Philippe Sollers, "Le supplice chinois de Barthes," *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 29 January 2009.

[7] Julia Kristeva, in *Les Samouraïs* (Paris: Fayard, 1990), had sketched a morose, drooping Barthes frustrated by the unavailability of Chinese men.

[8] Roland Barthes, *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1979), pp. 64-65.

[9] Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 115.

[10] Barthes, *Mythologies*, pp. 254-257.

[11] Barthes finds Peking University, that reputed hotbed of radicalism, to exhibit "[le] discours le plus sage qu'on puisse imaginer" (*Carnets*, p. 207); the adjective is mistranslated so as to credit that institution with "the wisest discourse imaginable" (*Travels in China*, p. 187).

[12] Barthes, "Alors, la Chine?" in *Œuvres complètes*, 3: 32-34; Barthes, *Le Neutre. Cours au Collège de France (1977-78)*, edited by Thomas Clerc (Paris: Seuil, 2002).

[13] Barthes, "Alors, la Chine?" in *Œuvres complètes*, 3: 32.

[14] Barthes, *Carnets*, p. 215.

[15] Richard Wolin, *The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010) acknowledges the utopian desire behind this affiliation with China.

[16] Jean Birnbaum, "La publication d'inédits de Barthes embrase le cercle de ses disciples," *Le Monde*, 22 January 2009.

[17] Barthes, *Carnets*, p. 21.

[18] Barthes, *Carnets*, p. 36. "Recommandation" is defined as "...2. Conseil insistant; avis, exhortation. *Des recommandations minutieuses*" in *Le petit Larousse illustré* (Paris: Larousse, 2010), s.v.

[19] Barthes, *Carnets*, p. 46.

[20] André Gide, *Retour de l'URSS* (Paris: Gallimard, 1936).

Haun Saussy
University of Chicago
hsaussy@uchicago.edu

Copyright © 2013 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.