Roland Barthes

Empire of Signs

TRANSLATED BY RICHARD HOWARD

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Illustrations

2 The actor Kazuo Funaki

5 The character 『』, signifying "nothing," "emptiness,"
drawn by a student

21 Yoko Yayu (1702–83): Mushroom picking. Ink on paper
When they hunt for mushrooms, the Japanese take with
them a fern stem or, as in this painting, a wisp of straw,
on which they string the mushrooms. Haiga painting,
linked to the haiku
He becomes greedy
his eyes lowered
on the mushrooms

31 Map of Tokyo, late eighteenth century

34 Map of the Shinjuku district, Tokyo: bars, restaurants,
cinemas, department store (Isetan)

35 Orientation sketch

36 Orientation sketch on the back of a calling card

40-1 Sumi wrestlers

44 Sake kegs
If I want to imagine a fictive nation, I can give it an invented name, treat it declaratively as a novelistic object, create a new Garabagne, so as to compromise no real country by my fantasy (though it is then that fantasy itself I compromise by the signs of literature). I can also—though in no way claiming to represent or to analyze reality itself (these being the major gestures of Western discourse)—isolate somewhere in the world (faraway) a certain number of features (a term employed in linguistics), and out of these features deliberately form a system. It is this system which I shall call: Japan.

Hence Orient and Occident cannot be taken here as “realities” to be compared and contrasted historically, philosophically, culturally, politically. I am not lovingly gazing toward an Oriental essence—to me the Orient is a matter of indifference, merely providing a reserve of features whose manipulation—whose invented interplay—allows me to “entertain” the idea of an unheard-of symbolic system, one altogether detached from our own. What can be addressed, in the consideration of the Orient, are not other symbols, another metaphysics, another wisdom (though the latter might appear thoroughly desirable); it is the possibility of a difference, of a mutation, of a revolution in the propriety of symbolic
systems. Someday we must write the history of our own obscurity—manifest the density of our narcissism, tally down through the centuries the several appeals to difference we may have occasionally heard, the ideological recuperations which have infallibly followed and which consist in always acclimating our incognizance of Asia by means of certain known languages (the Orient of Voltaire, of the Revue Asiatique, of Pierre Loti, or of Air France). Today there are doubtless a thousand things to learn about the Orient: an enormous labor of knowledge is and will be necessary (its delay can only be the result of an ideological occultation); but it is also necessary that, leaving aside vast regions of darkness (capitalist Japan, American acculturation, technological development), a slender thread of light search out not other symbols but the very fissure of the symbolic. This fissure cannot appear on the level of cultural products: what is presented here does not appertain (or so it is hoped) to art, to Japanese urbanism, to Japanese cooking. The author has never, in any sense, photographed Japan. Rather, he has done the opposite: Japan has stared him with any number of "flashes"; or, better still, Japan has afforded him a situation of writing. This situation is the very one in which a certain disturbance of the person occurs, a subversion of earlier readings, a shock of meaning lacerated, extenuated to the point of its irreplaceable void, without the object's ever ceasing to be significant, desirable. Writing is after all, in its way, a satori: satori (the Zen occurrence) is a more or less powerful (though in no way formal) seism which causes knowledge, or the subject, to vacillate: it creates an emptiness of language. And it is also an emptiness of language which constitutes writing; it is from this emptiness that derive the features with which Zen, in the exemption from all meaning, writes gardens, gestures, houses, flower arrangements, faces, violence.