Writing travel/travelling writing: Roland Barthes detours the Orient

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Abstract. This paper offers a contribution to the recent emergence in geography of studies of travel writers and the production of other representations of the non-Western world. I consider a rather different text to those normally studied in that the book, Empire of Signs by Barthes, purports not to represent any real place. A number of writers, influenced by Said's pathbreaking work Orientalism, have considered whether Barthes perpetuates Orientalist images. Rather than structure my argument around the binary of Orientalist/not-Orientalist I will consider the ways that Barthes subverts the structure of Orientalism from within. Barthes counterfeits travel: playing with the concept of ‘wonder’ which halted the representational language of more conventional travellers. Through the construction of his own ‘hyper-Orientalist’ account, Barthes produces a poststructural ethics which I argue offers some important reflections on the politics of representation both of travel writing and of academic critiques of it.

There has been a great deal of interest of late in the role of travel writing in constructing colonial and post-colonial identities and spaces. Travel writing apparently offers an alternative to the scientific treatises of explorers as its narrative structure allows for the presentation of more personal, subjective accounts. Nevertheless, these writing strategies are not so separate as those who deploy them might like us to believe (Pratt, 1992): the traveller cannot be the ‘accidental tourist’ if by this it is meant that he or she stumbles innocently upon discoveries of other places, or unproblematic revelations about other people. To refer to a recent collection, travel writing can be “analysed as an ensemble of textual practices that can be made to disclose the characteristic gestures of an ‘imperial stylistics’” (Duncan and Gregory, 1999, page 3). Despite their best intentions, travel writers write through a web of discursive constraints, in the case of Western travellers, formed around various discourses of Otherness, most clearly exemplified in what Said (1978) has called Orientalism.

Much of the work undertaken on the representation of others in travel writing and other texts has analysed and critiqued the imagined geographies that are produced through structures of Orientalism both in the colonial past and into the neo/post-colonial present. Indeed, as Said and those who have been influenced by his writings have argued, it is important to challenge the effects that specific representations of places and peoples have on Western geographical imaginations. Nonetheless, such a politics often leaves intact the structure of the imagined geography because of the way in which the engagements are presented; however critically the position of the traveller is read, a space of ‘us’ and ‘them’ is maintained, only now it is ‘us’ rather than ‘them’ who become suspect. In Orientalist discourse, the Other was the essentialised location of degeneracy and difference, post-Said it is the space of the self which is reduced to an essence, here of Western power/knowledge. As a result, various studies have looked to travel writers for insight into the ways in which gender, sexual, and class identities have been constructed (see, for instance, Blunt, 1994; Mills, 1992; Philips, 1996; Pratt, 1992). Such accounts offer a more complex imagined geography of the Orient, not only structured around the inside/outside boundary of Orientalism, but fractured along these lines of gender, sexuality, and class. 
In this paper I want to consider a rather unconventional travel text, *Empire of Signs* by Roland Barthes (1970, English translation 1982) which engages not with the content of any specific representation but with the process of representation. This travel account is unconventional because, despite its apparently representational narrative, the account claims not to be about any real place. *Empire of Signs* appears to be a book about Barthes’s observations of Japan and Japanese culture, and yet the author clearly states that he is not describing a real place, that this is not a book about Japan. Barthes’s appropriation of the signs of the Japanese cultural system for the construction of his own system is then exactly what other Orientalist travel writers were doing, whether consciously in the cataloguing of explored territories for empire (Godlewska, 1994) or more innocently in the reconstruction of Otherness in children’s books and other tales of the Orient as moral tales for their readers (see Philips, 1996). But it claims to be nothing else. Various commentators have debated whether Barthes is complicit with the geographical violence of Orientalism or whether he challenges this (see Bartowski, 1995; Célestine, 1996; Lowe, 1991). Barthes, of course, was writing before Said and the great interest in Orientalism that followed the publication of his work. Nevertheless, the areas he chose to study certainly fall into that territory now associated with Said’s work (Knight, 1997). This suggests an anticipation of Said’s critique, although Barthes’s work is on the matter of representation more generally rather than a specific analysis of the geographical violence of the imaginative geographies of the Orientalists. It is perhaps inappropriate to try to read Barthes through Said when he refuses to accept the inside/outside of critique, that would characterise Orientalism. Rather than a politics of Orient versus Occident, we have simultaneously an acceptance and a subversion of Orientalism, a strategy that might bear closer resemblance to Bhabha’s (1993) notion of ambivalence.

In this paper I will consider the politics of Barthes’s critique through an examination of the textual strategies deployed in *Empire of Signs*. I will conclude with a consideration of the effects of this form of poststructural critical writing compared with more direct or obvious political critiques, and on the ways in which those who critique the content of Orientalist representations may nevertheless be perpetuating their form.

**Beginnings of the journey**

Barthes started his career in the late 1950s analysing the mythologies structuring culture (see Barthes, 1986). His work, based upon the insights of the linguist de Saussure, exposed the historically constructed rather than natural linkages between reality and that word associated with it. But in his later writings, following a period where he switched interest to semiotics and semiology, Barthes moves beyond structuralism. It is this last period of his work that includes *Empire of Signs*, written in 1970. This change, he explains, was because of a shift he perceived in French politics after 1968:

“...arrogant discourse came only from the right when I wrote *Mythologies*, whereas now we can see the growth of arrogance on the left…. I’m divided between my situation within a political site and the aggressions of discourse coming from this site” (1985, page 219).

Rather than demystifying ideology to reveal the truth beneath, Barthes realised that he was remystifying, offering not the truth but a different interpretation of it. Not only did he see the limitations of this approach but found the whole exercise offensive. The leftist accounts he had helped to produce were, he argued, structurally as constructed and limiting as those employed by the right. Barthes did not abandon his desire to denaturalise cultural systems, yet he did not want to become part of the new, and in his eyes all too disciplined, leftist *doxa* which opposed culture as if from outside, and
without sensitivity to the discursive structuring of its own critique. His solution was to move beyond direct political critique and the goal of revealing hidden meaning, to follow more transgressive methods and to adopt a poststructuralist approach. This allowed a fundamental questioning of the accepted images of Western culture without recourse to the relentlessly homogenising narrative structure around questions of equality and humanism he saw in French leftist politics.

The opening lines of *Empire of Signs* place the text within a poststructural frame, in the transgressive space of what Derrida (1982) has termed *differance*. Barthes claims that he can “isolate somewhere in the world (faraway)” from which to draw a certain number of features, “and out of these features deliberately form a system. It is this system which I shall call: Japan” (page 2). He does not claim to “represent or analyze reality itself”: it is not a text about Japan that he created, but instead it is Japan that afforded him the opportunity of writing (page 4). Barthes chooses not to write about a truly fictive place because he does not possess sufficient mastery of language to create anything truly original. Further, this strategy continues the subversion of binary logic: by consciously blurring fact and fiction, Barthes denaturalises both: fiction must draw on ‘reality’ to make itself intelligible and so bears the trace of ‘fact’, and factual accounts are based on narratives, conventions, subjectivities, just as are works of fiction. He is left then to choose among the elements of a (culturally) distant place to create his own order. The text describes Japanese food, customs, writing, and cities amongst other things, so covering elements that traditional travel accounts (and regional geographies) might also describe. The book is not constructed overtly as a critique of travel writing or representation. It is through the construction of his own situated text that Barthes achieves his shrewd critique. Because he uses familiar symbols, signifiers which are normally used within a sign system describing Japan, there is a tension in his work which would not exist if his text were read simply as fiction.

As it is produced within the structures of Western material and representational domination, a question which might be asked of Barthes’s *Empire of Signs* is if it is an Orientalist text. Barthes describes symbols of Japanese culture but claims that his work does not represent the real place called Japan. Barthes has isolated certain features and claims that “out of these features [I can] deliberately form a system. It is this system which I shall call: Japan” (page 3). This claim that he has written his own place rather than attempting a mimetic representation of a real place is central to any judgment of the ideological content of his text. If this statement is not credited with significance, then Barthes produces an intelligent and elegant text but one nevertheless firmly situated within the structure of Orientalism; a discourse describing the other culture as unchanging, sensuous, nonrational, and so on. Barthes makes his indifference to the notion of an Oriental essence quite clear and central to his work:

“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” (page 3).

What this means is that, as Duncan and Duncan (1992, page 29) have suggested, Barthes “succumbs to that long-standing European temptation, which Baudet (1988) traces back to classical Greece to appropriate the Other for European purposes”. His goal then is to study himself through a manipulation of the “reserves” of the Japanese cultural system, to ask himself what “Japan enables[s] me to discover by distancing me from myself and my culture” (Porter, 1991, page 297) appears to be entirely self-conscious. Barthes does not sidestep or ignore this decontextualisation because he regards it to be an inevitable outcome of description. By centring this previously
silenced element of travel writing he places this process in the open and exposes it, again resisting the representational burden of travel writing.

On the other hand, if we accept Barthes’s claim, can Empire of Signs be Orientalist? If he appropriates the texts and discursive practice of Orientalism but states quite cate-gorically that the text subsequently produced is not describing a place implicated in the Orientalist tradition, can he be labelled an Orientalist? This is a question that has concerned a number of commentators. Bartowski (1995, page 26) suggests that Barthes is resisting Orientalism in his attempt to “jump out of his Orientalist’s skin”. Similarly Célestine (1996, page 144) argues that Barthes “manages to avoid...the production—one more time—of the traditional exoticism...language that does not know and display itself as language”. However, Lowe (1991) is sceptical of the possibility of this freedom from the structure of Orientalist representation, arguing, just as more conventional writers do, that Barthes projects into the space(s) of the Orient a utopic, illusory space.

Rather than engage too fully in this debate over whether Barthes was or was not an Orientalist writer, I will argue that, although he cannot ever truly step outside it, Barthes indeed transgresses the Orientalist tradition. He affords an internal critique by pushing Orientalism to its limits, by becoming ‘hyper-Orientalist’, Barthes’s text does not derive a ‘truth’ from its correspondence with an external reality called Japan but a poetics produced within the system of his text itself. Thus, any judgment of its success or failure is centred upon the disclaimer made within the text. Like Magritte’s painting which juxtaposes an image of a pipe with the painted words “ceci n’est pas une pipe”, Barthes produces an image of a country which ‘looks’ like Western expectations of the country Japan, and yet he too questions the possibility of the representation he creates by writing “this is not Japan”.

Barthes’s ironic narrative may not have the obvious political efficacy of Said’s (1978) work on Orientalism and yet in a way it is a more thorough challenge to the established Orientalist discursive structuring of cultures. Said’s opposition to Orientalism exposes the West’s systematic distortion of Eastern cultural systems, but by homogenising the producers of Orientalism into a more or less independent presence, he leaves its discursive structure intact. In many respects there is a reversal of value in this manoeuvre. Now the Orient has the positive valorisation and the Occident is the space of distortion, political manipulation, and misrepresentation. There is no profound challenge to the geopolitics of Orientalism. The space between Occident and Orient remains. For Barthes this binary of Occident and Orient must be sidestepped:

“Meaning cannot be attacked head-on, by the simple assertion of its contrary, you must cheat, steal, refine—parody, if you must, but, better yet, counterfeit” (1985, page 119).

Barthes consciously works within the inherited discourses of the tradition of travel writing yet by stating that his work is not about that place called Japan he draws attention to the more general construction of the Orient and the question of representation itself.

Young (1990, page 127) has argued that an objection to Orientalism “has always been that it provides no alternative to the phenomenon it criticizes”, for to do so would be to acknowledge the existence of the very thing in dispute. However, as Young continues,

“the entirely correct refusal to offer an alternative to Orientalism does not solve the problem of how Said separates himself from the coercive structures of knowledge that he is describing. What methods can he use to analyse his object that escapes the terms of his own critique?”
This is an issue that has proved central to some of the most important debates in postcolonial theory. Spivak (1988) warns of the inability of the voice of the subaltern ever to be heard because of these ‘coercive structures’ of power/knowledge that frame representation. Bhabha (1993), however, sees the seeds of resistance within dominant representational structures. For him, there is no inside/outside to negotiate and so he avoids Said’s dilemma. Bhabha shows the ubiquitous possibility of resistant meanings in the enunciation of metropolitan texts—in the performances and readings other meanings can be made. It is the process of creating and recreating representation and not the product that is important. Like Bhabha, rather than resisting Orientalist representations, Barthes shows their possibility and instability. The difference is that, whereas Said is determined to hold onto the idea of a politics of resistance that requires a knowing agent, a figure with possibilities outside the text (a position which he must himself occupy to produce his critique), Barthes’s text is a resoundingly posthumanist one. Bhabha and Barthes cannot recognise an extratextual position and Barthes illustrates this through his attempts to talk about a place without being caught up in the reductive language of representation. He highlights the process of representation, a process which is always present, which is unavoidable. There is no fixed representation that is the product of Barthes’s travels: he likens his reaction to Japan to a camera which flashes but is not loaded with film. The process is enacted, but there is no final product.

Barthes discredits the ability of the Orientalists’ system to reflect reality by refocusing attention on the constructed intertextual nature of the Oriental tradition and thus its various European origins. His text therefore constructs an alternative way of understanding what constitutes ‘representation’ in travel accounts by silencing the usually dominant narrative of progress through space and replacing this with the usually marginal story of what this structure excludes: Barthes offers a series of detours through the culture of Western representations of the Orient. His utopian construction is of a system in which there is no ‘deadweight’ of an ultimate signifier, something to which Western discourse has traditionally made recourse in order to explain ‘in the last instance’ (God, science, man, nature etc). His language is not one in which stabilisation around the ultimate signifier forges, or at least makes symmetrical, the relationship between signifier and signified. Instead, it is one in which he abandons any concern for the weighty materiality of signifieds in favour of the poetic pleasures of a textual production.

There are several reasons why I think Barthes chose Japan for this account. First, it is particularly ironic to describe late 1960s Japan as a timeless, traditional system. His description, he admits “is detached from what constitutes the very specialty of Japan, which is its modernity” (Empire of Signs page 79). Oriental modernity is a trend which the binary logic of Orientalism cannot acknowledge. Thus, if Barthes is to continue to write within this tradition, to recuperate only this textual strand of ‘Japan’, he too can write only the traditional. To readers knowledgeable of contemporary Japanese life this produces an ironic narrative structure. As with others of the Oriental tradition, he does not lie about Japan. His observations are of cultural practices encountered. Yet unlike other Orientalists, he does not claim to offer a representational account of the essence of the country “I never claimed to be offering a photograph of Japan” (1985, page 229). He is thus able to highlight the selectivity necessarily involved in the construction of a system of signs to create a place.

Second, I believe that Barthes may have chosen Japan because of Zen metaphysics, an acentred philosophy which is performed without what he regarded as the deadweight of an ultimate signifier (required in the structuralism of the West). The system he describes resonates with his own play of signs.
Third, I think that it is important that the country he chose to recreate has a different alphabet. To non-Japanese readers its characters are as opaque as other elements of Japanese culture (indeed, the first Japanese character that is illustrated in the book is the sign for ‘emptiness’). Japanese characters can be transcribed into the Western alphabet without affording understanding—we are now familiar with the figures in front of us as words, but their meaning is no clearer. This supports Barthes’s desire to represent language as a cultural sign-system like any other. Language is not a transparent communicator available for direct translation. Meaning from one system cannot be directly related to another. But he does not wish to replace the hegemony of the written word with any other sign. Instead, the representational abilities of all symbols of the cultural system are placed into question through a juxtaposition not unlike that of the painted text and image in Magritte’s work. In this pictorial detour through the Japanese cultural system Barthes illustrates both the textual nature of signs and the operation of written language as sign. Like Magritte, Barthes highlights the constructed representations of painting and writing through the juxtaposition of the two. In the first in the series Barthes presents a Japanese linguistic symbol as an illustration. The difference of this symbol from the Western canonical printed word points to language as an opaque sign, it conveys the exoticism of an unknown symbol rather than the efficiency of written communication. In the second, a photograph of handwriting also points to the symbolic qualities of language, the translation below is like a caption to an illustration. In the third, the translation is also pulled into the symbolic space of illustration with both written by hand. Translation is thus written as the exchange of signs rather than the elucidation of underlying meaning.

Barthes’s choice of Japan over other Oriental countries is apparently more personal. In an interview in 1975 he was asked why his explorations of Chinese culture, equally permeated by signs, had not produced a similar analysis:

‘...signs are important to me only if they seduce or irritate me. Signs in themselves are never enough for me, I must have the desire to read them. I’m not a hermeneutist.... In China I found absolutely no possibility of erotic, sensual, or amorous interest or investment’ (1985, page 265).

Still firmly within the Orientalist tradition then, Barthes’s journey is to a great extent motivated by desire, and like the Orientalists he has the power as author to write his desire into his sign system; the Japanese cannot intervene. But his is not a desire scripted through the masculinist metaphors of penetration and possession characteristic of the literary tradition in which he is located. He is not a detached, independent observer with the agency to move into and out of cultural systems as his desire dictates. Rather he is submersed in the playful exchange of Japanese cultural signs which arouse him through an all-enveloping surface sensuality. There are places in which Barthes’s homoerotic desire is clearly articulated (in the photographs in particular) but this is not limited to his descriptions of people. Desire is suffused through language in descriptions of all sorts: the playing of pachinko, preparing and eating a meal, in writing.

Desire and meaning then are superficial. Barthes challenges the notion that languages can be readily translated because meanings are immanent to a word. He thus challenges the centrality of mastery of local language to the institution of area studies. Barthes is quick to state that he knows no Japanese and indeed celebrates the protection offered to the foreigner by the “murmuring mass of an unknown language” (*Empire of Signs* page 9). This insulates Barthes from a deeper understanding of the system which might force him to translate, to seek deeper meaning, to anchor language to the deadweight of signification: “The dream...to perceive the difference in [the
foreign land] without that difference ever being recuperated by the superficial sociality of discourse” (Empire of Signs page 6).

By viewing only signs he can (only) operate at the surface. Signs are empty for him; not filled with inherent meaning or reference to reality, but instead they achieve their meaning intertextually, from their ability to fill themselves with symbols from elsewhere (Duncan, 1993). They have no reference to reality; only to their position within his system: “It is, in other words, a privileged space in which signifiers are exchanged in virtual absence of signifieds” (Porter, 1991, page 290).

Barthes makes this point in his description of Japanese transvestites and gift wrapping. For transvestites, the signifier of ‘woman’ does not refer to a signified (the female sexed body) in Barthes’s Japan. The ‘man’ is not the original, who transgresses norms to look female. He does not have to ‘fake it’ because gender is an empty sign reflecting other signs when freed from the mooring of a norm. As Butler later put it,

“The replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original. Thus, gay is to straight not as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy” (1990, page 31).

In the case of gift wrapping, there is no correlation between the luxury of the wrapping (signifier) and the gift which lies concealed beneath (signified). The wrapping is an opaque sign; it defers the meaning of the gift inside. Indeed, Barthes interprets what lies below the exotic wrapping as unimportant, even vulgar:

“[when opened] it appears insignificant, laughable, vile: the pleasure, field of the signer, has been taken: the package is not empty, but emptied: to find the object which is in the package or the signified which is in the sign is to discard it” (Empire of Signs page 46).

Put another way, not only does Barthes desire to transgress the tradition of mimetic writing because he considers it untenable, he also regards it as a trivialising and tasteless goal; “an unknown language constitutes a delicious protection” (page 9) from the literal distinctions of the system, internal differences which can only detract from the undomesticable difference he seeks between his own culture and the one he is constructing as ‘Japan’.

As language is thus made as opaque as other texts there is no hierarchy of signs. Language cannot be the privileged recorder of culture. Like the Medieval traveller John Mandeville, who sought the divine significance of all he encountered, for whom it was difficult to believe that “a sign, any sign, does not have some legitimate claim, however marginal, to reality” (Greenblatt, 1991, page 41), for Barthes “nothing is left to the nonsign” (1985, page 83):

“...if everything does not signify, then there would be some insignificance in a text. What would be the nature of this insignificance? Nature? Futile?” (1985, page 73).

To underscore this, in Empire of Signs, writing is not privileged over illustration: indeed the two are often impossible to separate—is his photograph of French and Japanese handwriting an illustration or writing? Throughout the text, writing and illustration are not intended to complement each other, to move toward an ever greater fullness of meaning in the way they might be used in a guidebook. Instead, illustrations interrupt the written text which ignores them, sometimes referring to them at later stages, hinting back faintly, as if trying to remember the image. Illustrations are left to follow their own routes; posing changes in direction, they map out their own detours through the system of ‘Japan’.

In Barthes’s Japan, signs are used quite differently from Western systems of signification. The Japanese puppet theatre, he argues, does not endeavour to hide the puppet masters to make the show more realistic. He suggests that here “it is futile
to wonder, as certain Europeans do, if the spectator can ever forget the presence of the manipulators” (*Empire of Signs* page 62). Here spectators do not seek the same singularity and linearity of cause and effect as do Westerners. Barthes writes a place in which the question of enjoyment remains at the surface, on the play of images.

Similarly the hierarchy of author and text is erased. Barthes illustrates this in his chapters on food. The Japanese meal is “a product whose meaning is not final but progressive” (page 26). The cook is not the author taking the final product to the consumer (Porter, 1991). The cook (who cooks nothing at all) presents the diners with a palette of food, “a collection of fragments” with no specific order, no Western taxonomic structure: there is no menu, no rigid division between the raw and cooked. The diners do not passively consume, silenced by the authorial figure of the food creator, but add to the polyphony, writing Japanese cultural signs by creating their own gastronomic texts. As with the puppet example, the performance itself is the main reason for consumption.

Barthes’s flattening out of the signs to an equal exchange or play mocks the Western taxonomic impulse. To him the streets of Tokyo are at once ordered and disordered. There is no timeless pattern which can be reproduced outside its context. Barthes claims that “the largest city in the world is practically unclassified, the spaces which compose it in detail are unnamed” (page 33). But he continues that this is only the case if one seeks a timeless, perhaps Cartesian, sense of mapped streets centred around the core of the city. Like all other signs in his system Tokyo has an empty centre, so destabilising its relationship with other parts of the city. He recognises a *bricolage* of gestural practices and personal knowledges which orients people in this place as they write themselves into it:

“This city can be known only by an activity of an ethnographic kind: you must orient yourself in it not by book, by address, but by walking, by sight, by habit, by experience; here every discovery is intense and fragile, it can be repeated or recovered only by memory of the trace it has left in you: to visit a place for the first time is thereby to begin to write it: the address not being written, it must establish its own writing” (page 36).

The creator of the ordering taxonomy is dethroned in Barthes’s empire—the city is written by a multitude of personal taxonomies created through their own detours through the urban space.

The resultant system created in *Empire of Signs* displaces the relationship between signifiers and signified which make up dominant Western linguistic structures. His use of this mode of writing exposes it as a mode of writing. Barthes was a reader of, and not a visitor to, Japan. Japan emerged from the process of reading—a process that Barthes himself set in motion—rather than having an a priori existence independent of him, waiting to be found by the intrepid or attentive traveller. Barthes’s presence in the text is not silenced. The reader is constantly reminded that *Empire of Signs* is a constructed text. This is achieved through subversions of established tropes of author-ity traditionally expressed in Western travel writing.

**Wonder**

It is now accepted by many academics that travel texts explore as much of the travellers’ or researchers’ cultural context as that of the other, if for no other reason than the impossibility, as Levi-Strauss (1974) realised, of representing real difference, a moment of descriptive paralysis, speechlessness, a moment of wonder beyond words. After this moment of wonder, the other is captured into the travellers’ descriptive system: difference becomes domesticated into this linguistic order.
Greenblatt argues that halting the system of representation in ‘wonder’ presents theorists and explorers with a moment outside of moral judgment. He posits ‘wonder’ as the central figure in initial European responses to the New World, “the decisive emotional and intellectual experience in the presence of radical difference” (1991, page 14). At the moment of first contact, Greenblatt argues, there is an absence of meaning. For travellers, "The object that arouses wonder is so new that for a moment at least it is alone, unsystematized, an utterly detached object of rapt attention" (page 20).

He shows that it presented philosophers with anxiety. For Descartes, for example, "A moderate measure of wonder is useful in that it calls attention to that which is ‘new or very different from what we formerly knew, or from what we supposed it ought to be’ and fits it in the memory, but an excess of wonder is harmful, Descartes thought, for it freezes the individual in the face of objects whose moral character, whose capacity to do good or evil, has not yet been determined" (Greenblatt, 1991, page 20).

A prediscursive moment such as Greenblatt describes in wonder is a fiction. As many writers have shown, travellers to new places may have been traversing that space for the first time, but were not going to an unknown place. Various texts had situated places for the traveller, whether these demonstrate the nature of the native population and their culture, or the characteristics of the environment. However, in *Empire of Signs*, the question of wonder loses its naivety, instead producing an ethics of difference. Rather than being the end of his writing, ‘wonder’ for Barthes offers its possibilities. Wonder disrupts the flow of signs in the travel text he produces and perhaps ironically forms the basis of a poststructural ethics of difference. In *Empire of Signs*, Barthes freezes the operation of representational language in wonder like travellers who are stunned by an encounter with absolute difference, something quite literally beyond words and thus beyond domestication into the observer’s linguistic taxonomy. His desire for complete untranslatability is a desire for wonder, a desire to dissolve the discursive apparatus of Occident and Orient. Barthes wants to prolong the moment of wonder and the radical difference which this allows for. His form of Orientalism refuses to domesticate the difference he perceives into a Westernised explanation. In an important respect Barthes’s postmodern ethics offers the more radical challenge to the politics of representation than do more straightforward accounts.

**Travel(ing) writing**

How then can *Empire of Signs* be situated in relation to the genre of travel writing? Stratton defines the space of travel writing in the modern world thus:

“The world of the era of representation is a world which thinks, and thinks itself, in terms of a fracture. Writing is constructed in the space of this fracture which... is also the productive space of travel...” (1990, page 87),

“Writing, the representational site of knowledge provides the space within which travel occurs” (page 56).

*Empire of Signs* is not a travel text in that it is structured by the unfolding narrative of Barthes’s journey through a foreign place. Instead the narrative structure of the book suggests something more like a number of detours into elements of his cultural system than a journey through space, writing in the space of the fracture. For Barthes like Mandeville, “the journey is a virtual succession of detours; indeed the very concept of the ‘right way’ begins to seem a mirage for there is no longer a clear destination” (Greenblatt, 1991, page 30). The notion of travel writing needs to be seen as a metaphor, a deferral of linguistic meaning. Barthes’s sense of travelling is that of meanings moving...
between the sign systems of Japanese culture, the Orientalist reconstruction of a sign system of Japan, and the system which he creates.

Barthes has attempted to create a space of absolute, irreconcilable difference. Like the Orientalists, he has to silence parts. Throughout *Empire of Signs* he has attempted to halt the exchange or production of representational meaning as it has flowed too easily in more traditional travel accounts. Like the haiku, Barthes's writing of 'Japan' is at once readable (in the sense that it produces an image of a place which we understand to resemble Japan) but underneath this there is no meaning (as Barthes refuses to allow his text to mean Japan). Or if there is any meaning, like the meaning of a haiku it is insignificant:

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Hence the haiku reminds us of what has never happened to us; in it we recognize a repetition without origin, an event without cause, a memory without person, a language without mooring'' (1985, page 119).
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As I have argued, Barthes's politics is one of sidestepping the one-to-one correspondence which descriptions have traditionally been seen to have with the reality which they are attempting to describe. In this move, Barthes can write a new ethics which refuses universal morality, code, or standard as its guide. By creating a sense of wonder, his poststructural politics halts the exchange of the language of the sign. The incomensurability of complete difference paralyses the translatable, domesticatable, and comparable qualities of linguistic representation.

**Destination**

“Mandeville's work...embracing everything, laying claim to nothing, seems linked to the inescapable errancy of language, an errancy that inscribes difference everywhere, not only at the margins but at the center, not only in the other but in the self.”

Greenblatt (1991, page 50)

In his rejection of mimetic representation and his suspicion of taxonomy, Barthes is closer to Mandeville than he is to Enlightenment travel writers. But his constructed wonder displaces Western canonical authority upon which the legitimating narratives of travel writers depend. This project is not a naïve one of return to the moment of contact. Like the act of Japanese writing, no inscribed discourse is erasable; its effects are indelibly written into cultural systems. The Orientalist discourses of self and other cannot merely be removed from the discourses creating the implicated cultures. They are fundamental to cultural production. Thus Barthes's text can be read as raising the question of what representational structures such as 'Orientalism' actually are. His poststructural position critiques the opposition of Orient and Occident, colonial and postcolonial, here and there, just as do Said's work and that which follows it. However, unlike these works, Barthes challenges the structure of representation with an elliptical critique which subverts the basis of more overtly political arguments. This destabilising critique places radical politics within the process of writing/reading rather than in the content of the resultant critique.

Barthes appears to accept Orientalism as a *structural* limitation on the writer, inherent in her or his socioeconomic and cultural location. Barthes is aware that he cannot escape his positionality and the interpretative baggage which this involves. He cannot decide whether or not to be Orientalist when talking of Japanese signs. Discourses of Orientalism write Barthes as much as he writes Orientalism. Thus he does not deny his heritage and his situation—not because he is trying to reclaim voices lost because of the history of Orientalism, nor because he is trying to let the subaltern speak, but because of the limits of representation. His is an internal critique of representation via the ironic rhetoric of *détouring* around Japan, by disclaiming it as
his object of study. In addition, this posthumanist account includes no selves and characters with which the traveller can interact. Barthes is not the centre around which the narrative is structured, but he is decentred by Japan.

Barthes’s rejection of the Western canon is executed from within the exchange of the signs of this canon. His politics are not radical because he opposes the Western canon but because he takes it to an extreme. Barthes renders visible the mode of production of representational language showing the constructedness of the object of study. Barthes has turned the Orientalists’ disembodied gaze back on them, and this reflection of their own cultural situatedness shows that it is the Orientalists themselves and not the territory and people written as the Orient which anchor their system of signs. Barthes offers important—if elliptical—warnings of how it is that writings that seek to critique the content of Orientalism all too easily end up replicating its forms.

However, in some respects this is a complacent ethics; one which assumes both Barthes’s location within circuits of academic knowledge production, and an educated audience aware of the traditions of travel writing and cognisant of poststructural literary theories. Barthes’s whole project depends upon readers cognisant of both contemporary Japan and theories of representation. The rhetorical structure of his narrative would not operate as irony without this implied readership. This form of critique is always in danger of complicity with the discourses it seeks to challenge in that it repeats images and symbolism central to the power/knowledge structure of Orientalism. As Barthes would no doubt argue, all representations can be analysed and critiqued for their exclusions and constructions. However, not all discourses operate with the same institutional power, and it is in this area of critique that Said and those who have followed him have made such important interventions. There is always the possibility in Barthes’s work of misreading: if his readers are not cognisant of the intellectual traditions to which he refers, the effect of Barthes’s work could be to reinforce Orientalist stereotypes in the minds of his readers.

Barthes’s Japan is lovingly crafted, but his Japan is written for one purpose. Japan becomes for Barthes the space of poststructuralism to oppose the structuralism of the West. Every aspect of Japan reinforces this: the halting of language in haiku, the polyphony of the theatre, the city, the restaurant, the emptiness of the sign…Knight (1997, page 140) argues about Barthes’s writings more generally that “We should surely have realized that a desire to decentre the Western subject is simply the latest avatar of the Orientalist imaginary”. Empire of Signs is thus an elite/elitist work, one concerned not with realpolitik but with the elegance of the text and of Barthes’s readers’ interpretations of it. Anticipating Bhabha, Barthes recognises the importance of the performative, the inevitability in the process of representation of the opening up of texts to contradictory, and thus always multiple, interpretations. Others have begun to acknowledge the complexity of Orientalism, going beyond the binary of inside/outside to recognise the cross-cutting and ambivalent identities that are always formed. Barthes’s writing illustrates how these theoretical ideas can be put into practice in the writing of a place: an ambivalent geography that is and is not Japan, that offers an Oriental essence that stars him, but also a multiplicity that is always beyond his grasp.

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