

**Reading at the Threshold of Writing:
Roland Barthes and Haiku in
*The Preparation of the Novel***

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The two lecture courses that Roland Barthes taught as *The Preparation of the Novel* form two stages in his readying himself for the moment of sitting down to write a Work. The second stage, *Preparation II*, is about the nervous approach of the writing desk; the first stage, *Preparation I*, is about leaving behind habits of reading that work against readiness for writing. In this article I will concentrate on *Preparation I*, on the new way of reading Barthes adopts there as he experiences haiku, the Japanese genre of 17-syllable poems that Barthes has always liked for how it notes down a miniscule occurrence against a nuanced background of weather, season, or time of day. In *The Preparation of the Novel*, Barthes sees a possibility of extending his unhurried way of reading haiku to an overall new way of reading, one that holds the promise of him becoming a Writer as well. Reading in the new way exchanges Barthes's earlier strengths of interpretation and intelligence for affection and mysticism.

Haiku gives Barthes the 'thingness' of objects in absolute clarity and in directly available suddenness as a sensation free from the obscuring need of laborious interpretation. Reading becomes the immediate, exhilarating grasping of 'semelfactive' truth: the truth of 'what took place [only] once'.¹ This semelfactive presence of a felt absence becomes an event: some tiny, lost moment retrieved as both nearly nothing and momentous, an irruption of the absolutely unique into a world of routine and repetition.

As he reads haiku, Barthes scrubs himself of the accretions of his earlier life as a reader – intellectually astute, ideologically critical, politically engaged – that would absorb any novel he attempted into 'a metalanguage (scientific, historical, sociological)'.² Instead of putting faith in reading with cerebral acuity, Barthes gives free rein to a mystical and affective temperamental turn. *Preparation* is an account of Barthes attempting a personal renewal, that Vita Nova of a new form of writing that begins in a new way of reading.

Of the two courses of *Preparation*, *Preparation I* is the one explicitly about reading, but nowhere in the entire course is Barthes someone who writes; all along he is someone who *wants* to write. Wanting-to-Write is a being suspended between reading and writing, a condition acknowledged by language, Barthes notes in linguistic delight, since there is a word for it, ‘*scripturire*’, even though that word is used only once in only one phase of only one language long since out of use: the ‘decadent, late Latin’ of a fifth-century French bishop.³

The Barthes we encounter in *Preparation* is, by his own definition, not a writer but a reader, one who approaches the threshold of writing, analyzing and describing it, without crossing it. Wanting-to-Write, in Barthes’s book, is a kind of reading whetted by being poised for Writing. The Writing poised for (the kind deserving a capital ‘W’) is to be that of a literary work in the sense of Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, a work that gives a reader the Wanting-to-Write as overriding theme in the shape of Writing – and is thus both threshold and crossing, failure and success, drive and practice.⁴ The two can come together only after ‘a renunciation of metalanguage’⁵ because the metalanguage of commentary and interpretation will crush the language of novelistic Writing. This renunciation pushes aside intellectualism and opens up avenues into the significance of Writing allowed by affect and mysticism.

Barthes’s mysticism is a *receptivity* to certain kinds of mysticism rather than an active pursuit of it. Like for all mystics of no matter what culture, so for Barthes too what is to be achieved is the experience of the sacred in immediate communion with it. Barthes’s sacred is the realm of Writing, not that of God, but these realms are analogously experienced by their respective devotees. Etymology, always delivering strong arguments in Barthes’s estimation, teaches that the Greek word ‘*mystes*’ means ‘initiate in a mystery’. Initiation can be a painful process for ‘*mystai*’, but mystic bliss comes painlessly to Barthes: the Zen-like stillness he effortlessly draws into himself he finds in reading the 17 syllables of haiku. Receptive to mysticism, Barthes turns himself into its receptacle. Barthes characterizes his mysticism as a form of ‘the Oriental *Wou-wei* (Non-Action), desire for a life that, seen from the outside, is unchanging, where there is no struggle, no ambition that anything should change’. The image for this sort of life, ‘not especially flattering’, is ‘to be like a *Heap* – why not like a *Cowpat*?’⁶ For Barthes not the clamor, urgings, prayer, fasting, pains, self-abasement, and exhaustion of the mystic’s reaching out, but just the bliss; not the many words that end in beatific doing without words, but just aphasia all along.⁷ With Barthes resting so peacefully in his

receptive passivity, it feels he will never turn himself from cowpat into cow, from blissful reader into straining Author.

For this to happen, Barthes would need to be like Proust. Barthes approaches this task by adding up a composite of notions insufficient on their own to achieve the shading of wordlessness into words, but suggestive of possible sufficiency taken together. The notions he cobbles together are fantasy, simulation, writing as an intransitive verb, and absolute writing.⁸ Each of these will feature below.

The way he now reads haiku offers Barthes a way of easing, not struggling, into mystic oneness. This ease mirrors the quality of fantasy that taking up a new life as a Writer assumes for Barthes. In this respect *Preparation* resembles his earlier lecture course *How to Live Together*. The title of that course is neither fully a question searching for an answer nor fully a proclamation itemizing ways of achieving a life of both community and individuality. More than question and proclamation it is an animating desire, a fantasy of what such a rewarding life would be like. *Preparation* continues this fantasy with a sharpened focus on the desire to be author of a Work. *Preparation*, too, is part quest, part proclamation driven by desire: the course's title could have been *How to Be a Writer*. Barthes himself, in greater modesty, suggests *The Impossible Novel* as alternative title.⁹

Reading haiku in a way that gets rid of metalanguage – language about language – precedes the stage of total devotion of one's life to the writing of the Work. That devotion is Barthes's concern in *Preparation II*, and he handily summarizes what he means at the very end of that course:

This course [i.e., *Preparation II*] = leisurely analysis of all the efforts, sacrifices, perseverances that literature (or Writing) demands of you from the moment you give yourself up to it, that is to say, from the moment you devote yourself to it, under the active figure of the *Work to be written*.¹⁰

This characterization of *Preparation II* sounds strenuously practical: preparation is the dedication of one's life – its practical habits and its unique purpose – to writing the Work. Barthes speaks of this as the overcoming of trials that threaten to waylay you. Elements in the various trials include, in Barthes's 'simulation' of experience, choices of genre and form; layouts of rooms, desks, and lighting; handwriting and writing speed; patterns of filling in one's days and nights; writing schemas or the foregoing of them; dealing with break-downs and the 'pangs of style' (Flaubert's term); ways of acceptably being chary of one's time through eccentricity or egoistic brusqueness; positioning oneself at the margins of

one's culture and its myths; Nietzschean emphases on nutrition, climate, and exercise, and much else. But this itemization of efforts, sacrifices, and perseverances is given in a 'leisurely analysis', an analysis that can be 'leisurely' only because Barthes contemplates all this as a reader at the threshold of Writing. Is Barthes taking into consideration that this leisure, once the threshold of Writing is passed, turns to strain? Would Barthes have crossed this threshold if he had lived beyond 26 March 1980? The question is moot.¹¹

Underlying this practical (and often engaging and confessional) emphasis on imagined trials of writing lies a deep dejection about literature: it is dying in contemporary France. 'The book, sacred site of language, is desacralized, flattened: books get bought, admittedly, a bit like frozen *pizzas*, but the book is no longer *solemn*.'¹² Authors no longer think of the book as a 'Grand Sacred Object'; readers no longer reverently 'cover their books with coated paper'.¹³ This desacralizing of literature and the book is related to the French no longer loving and respecting their own language, shaping it instead into an instrument of "universal reportage" that severs all sacred links with the past, and is 'an absolutely secular language'.¹⁴ *Preparation II* is much more a dramatization of failure (as registered by an ageing literary man getting to feel out of step with the times) than a route to success: failure of literature, times, society, the French language, nobility of mind: little wonder that there are no "great" novels anymore'.¹⁵

These contemplations in *Preparation II* on the death of writing as a sacred pursuit chime with the somber first session of *Preparation I*: there Barthes places the signature of death, Dante, and middle age over *Preparation* as a whole. '[D]eath is real', Barthes comes to realize in 'the middle of my life', and a choice for 'my last life' needs to be made.¹⁶ Barthes's mood lightens in subsequent sessions of *Preparation I* as he unfolds in loving detail his desire for haiku, taken up by that 'fantasy' of a last life in which he allows himself to jettison the shackles of the positivism and Marxism of his earlier life for the radical subjectivism of his current one.¹⁷ Still, in *Preparation I* too, Barthes mourns the French language: unlike Japanese, it cannot even express the weather in any of its shimmering nuances, or the times of day in their individuating color.¹⁸ Barthes is ready, with Flaubert, to adopt Saint Polycarp as his patron saint, the saint who called out: "Oh God! Oh God! In what age hast thou made me live!"¹⁹

Barthes wants to write by simulating the writing attitudes, practices, and circumstances of his admired 'romantic' authors – his

romanticism running ‘from Chateaubriand (or even from the late Rousseau) up to and including Proust’.²⁰ Barthes feels a vitality in such romantic literature that he wants to rekindle in his own new writing. Simulation of the work and attitudes of that past aliveness is his mystical devotion, against the grain of despair, to work. Barthes speaks of a “simulation drive”, ‘the impulse to liberate an Other within myself’, a passing from reading to Writing ‘to draw out from the imaginary Identification with the text, with the beloved author [. . .] not what is different to him [. . .] but what, within me, differs from myself: the beloved stranger urges me, actively compels me to affirm the stranger who is within me, the stranger I am to myself’.²¹ With the intense yearning of a medieval mystic for oneness with the godhead Barthes strives for *ekstasis*, for standing outside of himself. Becoming that stranger to himself would allow him to produce ‘a new, *accurate* writing, one that really expresses the *whole* of me’. Barthes notes ‘with sadness’ that he is seen as a writer who lacks ‘instinct, warmth’ and he dreams ‘of a counter-Writing’ that ‘I can feel bubbling up inside me: emotivity, sympathy, indignation, etc’.²²

The mystical idea of affirming the stranger he is to himself animated Barthes in the last years of his life. He writes about this in the final essay he ever wrote, on Stendhal, the second page of it still scrolled in his typewriter at the time of his death.²³ Stendhal, in his passion for Italy, can no longer abide French compatriots; his passion is ‘the passion for that other which is in himself’.²⁴ To readers like himself, Barthes notes ‘mournfully (or tragically)’, Stendhal’s passion makes him tongue-tied in the pronouncement of his love: ‘*one always fails in speaking of what one loves*’.²⁵ Writing of Italy in his journals, Stendhal sounds flat, clichéd, platitudinous, subject to the mystic’s speechlessness in his excess of love: ‘Any sensation, if we want to respect its vivacity and its acuity, leads to aphasia.’²⁶ It is only when Stendhal in *The Charterhouse of Parma* makes the shift from Journal to Novel, i.e., from Album to Book – the very shift Barthes is contemplating in *Preparation II* for himself – that he finds the words that fire up a reader.

In *Preparation I* Barthes assumes the mystic inwardness so longingly expressed in *Preparation II*. In that earlier course Barthes escapes his familiar self and works toward renewing himself by differing from himself, by liberating the Other in himself. This is how that ‘counter-Writing’ assumes its intensity of ‘*Pothos*, poignant desire for the absent thing’, the ‘Pleasure of reading that’s tormented by a lack: desire to write’.²⁷

In his desire to renew himself as a reader, Barthes takes the genre of the haiku for his guide. Barthes tells his reader how he has always been

enchanted by haiku, something his 1970 book *The Empire of Signs* already attested to. Haiku offered an exemption from meaning in that book, and it still does in *Preparation*. Barthes deals with haiku as an amateur, the sort of lover that he rates above scholar and connoisseur. His elevation of the amateur to the level of essential guardian of literature as a sacred object is Barthes's striking act of liberation, releasing the hope that Writing can come through an apprenticeship to something desired for its beauty. Haiku is the desired object waiting for Barthes's rewriting, not as haiku but as novel. Any novel Barthes reads with love, or any he would write, should offer what haiku offers, sprinkled through that far greater quantity of words, helping it turn motley (*poikilos*), dialogic, all-encompassing, multi-voiced, and stylistically pluralistic in the way of the Absolute Novel that the German Romantics theorized.²⁸

For the notion of the Absolute Novel Barthes was probably thinking of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean Luc Nancy's 1978 book *The Literary Absolute*.²⁹ Nathalie Léger, editor of the French original *La Préparation du roman*, suggests this in a note and Kate Briggs takes over this note in her translation of *Preparation*.³⁰ Léger added to her note by way clarification (not reproduced by Briggs) a partial paraphrase of a statement about romanticism by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy that appeared on the back cover of their book. Barnard and Lester, translators of the book into English, give that statement in English in their 'Note on the Text':

Because it establishes a period in literature and in art, before it comes to represent a sensibility or style [. . .], romanticism is first of all a *theory*. And the *invention* of literature. More precisely, it constitutes the inaugural moment of literature as the *production of its own theory* – and of theory that thinks [of] itself as literature.³¹

Léger adds to this that this inaugural moment constitutes the actual advent of romanticism's Absolute.³²

Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's title *The Literary Absolute* may well have been in the back of Barthes's mind, but their deeply theoretical notion and treatment of romanticism feels too far removed from Barthes's approach of literature in *Preparation*.³³ *Preparation* inaugurates Barthes's Vita Nova; Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy belong to his Vita Vetus. More helpful on the Absolute in Barthes's projected Vita Nova is, to my mind, Dalia Nassar's 2013 *The Romantic Absolute* (to which, obviously, Barthes could not have referred). Nassar sees the German Romantics object to the idea that the absolute 'is distinct from and opposed to the individual mind

or self'. This objectifies the absolute, separates it from the knowing mind, and in this very move diminishes the absolute into something relative, something that no longer *'inheres* in all beings, including the knowing subject'. Knowing subjects, in the myriad acts of knowledge and intuition of their lives, participate in the absolute, and help make it active rather than static. In this manner, the absolute is 'a living nexus composed of different but related parts, or better, an internally differentiated unity'.³⁴ Barthes himself characterizes *'Absolute writing'* (he detects it in Flaubert, Chateaubriand, and Montaigne) as 'the essence with which the writer burns and identifies, in a sort of mysticism of the Purity of Writing, uncorrupted by any end'.³⁵

To see the absolute, 'uncorrupted by any end', as a living nexus with the kind of reading that is a Wanting-to-Write fits that intriguing idea of Barthes's of intransitive writing. Reading haiku stimulates the desire to write but Barthes leaves the verb 'to write' intransitive, with writing foregrounding desire rather than product.³⁶ Jacob Bittner discusses Barthes's notion of writing as an intransitive verb in connection with the literary Absolute and romanticism in a complex argument, taking in Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger along with Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's *The Literary Absolute*. He begins with Barthes's declaration of his inability to not-write and his inability to desire that he not-desire writing. In this inability, writing is an absolute presence in the life of the subject – Barthes himself. In such a life, writing becomes an intransitive verb: life is already its product (along, perhaps, with the novel that such a life prepares for).³⁷ Reading, Wanting-to-Write, desiring never not to desire to Write are just as much part of the 'internally differentiated unity' as Writing would be, if ever it came.

Desirous reading shortens the distance between reading and Writing and, indeed, Barthes explains (quoting René Sieffert's 1961 book *La littérature japonaise*) that haiku in Japanese culture is, still today (i.e., in the 1960s and 1970s), a kind of 'classless "national sport"'. Barthes mentions the many magazines and newspaper columns devoted to haiku produced by amateur poets as proof of the 'ardent desire for haiku' in Japanese society.³⁸ '[I]n haiku, ownership trembles',³⁹ and Barthes associates the haiku with an older genre of poems – the renga – that worked as a parlor game: one person made the first 17 syllables and a second added 14 syllables to finish the poem in a spirit of fun, one-upmanship, sparring, and teasing. In the course of time, the second part fell away, and haiku became the individual notation it is today.⁴⁰ If writing a novel is the 'absent

thing' poignantly desired, can something learned from the pleasure of reading haiku close the gap with Writing?

Barthes wants the answer to be 'yes'. He takes pleasure in haiku, aware that his pleasure derives from his private emotional loan of a form that has neither an authentic presence nor a possible counterpart in current French culture. French culture has no longer room for a home-grown equivalent to haiku: no living metrical code, no way of referring to actual objects around us that still carry poetical strength the way 'the ears of corn, the sparrows, the flowers, the leaves etc.' still do in Japan.⁴¹ For lovers of haiku in France haiku has to be a 'linguistic fantasy'.⁴²

So, by 'playing at "haiku"'⁴³ Barthes wants to transfer what is desirable in haiku to the novel he would want to write. That genre may still have form in the West, but Barthes holds out little hope that the novel can be made vital again now that 'filiation' with 'a kind of heredity of noble values' is scorned by contemporary novelists.⁴⁴ To Barthes, Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* and Tolstoy's *War and Peace* stand out as storehouses of noble values; those values exist in concentrated fashion in haiku. *Preparation* celebrates, defines, and returns to those values as 'Moments of Truth' experienced by a reader:

a sudden knot in the path of reading that assumes an exceptional character: conjunction of an overwhelming emotion (to the point of tears, to the point of distress) and a self-evident truth giving rise, within us, to the certainty that what we're reading is the truth (has been the truth).⁴⁵

In a moment of truth the reader's body 'rejoins the metaphysical', a system of values that tries to 'transcend human suffering'.⁴⁶ A writer wanting to fold back into Writing such a reader's experience of transcendence will find out that the presence of the metaphysical presumes the absence of the metalinguistic: writing the moment of truth is 'the sudden *bursting forth* of the uninterpretable, of the last degree of meaning, of the *after which there's nothing more to say*'.⁴⁷

Barthes brings together many of his favorite haiku for his students in a fascicule and reads them out but, true to his renunciation of metalanguage, never explains them. What he speaks about instead is how reading haiku affects him: confirming him as a sacralized reader, silenced by metaphysical truth. The many words in *Preparation I* surround that silence without disturbing it. The words reflect on the form and place of haiku in Japanese life and the poetic lostness of France; they are professorial words necessitated by the educational setting of a lecture course. After the

‘nothing more to say’ at the very end of *Preparation I*, there still is a full semester of more to say in *Preparation II*. But those words, too, are not metalinguistic: they are not secondary words to other, primary ones that oppress their truth, but simulate aspects of the lives of beloved writers so that these words become performative approaches to a life – Barthes’s – that backs Writing in that sacred sense. At the outset of the second session of *Preparation I*, in an italicized introduction before the session proper goes underway, Barthes announced that he wants to ‘*acknowledge the personal – and even fantasmatic – origins of this Course*’.⁴⁸ Indeed, Barthes characteristically bends the didactic nature of the course into a hushed approach of the personal. Thus, speaking sideways as it were, he can keep making sense of what he must leave void.

Preparation I shows us Barthes making reading an intransitive verb, an act without object, counterpart to Writing as intransitive verb in *Preparation II*. Reading and Writing shade into each other to form that ‘living nexus’ of an ‘internally differentiated unity’ that Nassar defined as the Absolute. Absolute writing takes a writer into that ‘sort of mysticism of the Purity of Writing, uncorrupted by any end’.⁴⁹ *Preparation I* develops a matching mysticism of the Purity of Reading, uncorrupted by any end: that of absolute Reading. Purity has nothing to do with a single-minded adherence to a particular system of belief, on the contrary: such a system of belief, congealed into an ideology, is the agent of corruption, it is what prevents a reader, as much as a writer, from expressing ‘the whole of me’. Ideology generates meaning, an unwanted gift, because it is a meaning *imposed*, an intervention that destroys the uniqueness that makes haiku, and by extension all literature, sacred.

Truth can defend itself against incursions of ideology by being something that is not language. In one of the densest sections of *Preparation*, that on ‘The Void, Life’, Barthes draws on traditions of mysticism to bring to mind the hermetic silence into which ideology cannot penetrate, and thinks of it as a ‘Poetics of the Void’, “‘impenetrable except (for) itself’”. Unencumbered by the need for the consecutive word-after-word that applies in language, the void is where all can be said all at once in “‘a total, peaceful, intimate and ultimately uniform flash’”.⁵⁰ This flash of epiphanic significance cannot find expression in the system of discrete differences that language is. It calls upon a level of nuance provided only by a metaphysical jolt that proclaims, ‘that’s it!’ From the perspective of Barthes as a (most singular) reader of haiku, this jolt of instantaneous significance unchains it from the sequence of words. Haiku is depthless in both senses of this auto-antonymous word: at once ephemeral shallowness

and measureless depth. Because it works without calling on other words that delay and dilute its force, haiku is ‘completely readable’ as an “eternity” [. . .] perceived all at once’.⁵¹ Nuance thus absolutely fine-grained has at its end ‘*life*, the sensation of life, the feeling of being alive’. Of this correspondence of silence, nuance, and the bursting forth of the feeling of life Barthes says:

as we know, if that feeling is to be pure, intense, glorious, perfect, a certain *void* has to form within the subject; even when the jubilation (of love), for example, is at its most intense it’s because there’s a language void within the subject: it’s when language is silent, when there’s no longer any commentary, interpretation, or meaning that existence is pure: a ‘full’ (‘overflowing’) heart = knowledge of a certain void (eminently mystical theme); the *failure*, the breakdown of discourse relates to two extreme states: the absolute wretchedness of someone who feels ‘distanced’ from the world, the ardent jubilation of someone who feels ‘alive’ to it → the Nuance – if not kept in check – is Life – and the destroyers of nuances (today’s culture, our popular press) = dead men who, from the depths of their death, take their revenge.⁵²

Barthes makes the failure of discourse a watershed in culture: jubilation on the side of those who rather than keeping nuance in check give it its full power of differentiation beyond the remit of language; wretchedness on the side of those who feel bereft without the indifference to nuance that gives them their standing in ‘today’s gregarious culture’.⁵³ For the former, life; for the latter, death. For the former, the void that has room for the ‘overflowing’ heart, that bubbling up of ‘emotivity, sympathy, indignation’ that Barthes wants to inform his new writing;⁵⁴ for the latter, the destructive neurotics of commentary.

Barthes’s opposition between nuance liberated by the failure of discourse and bluntness imposed by gregarious chatter is heart-felt. But sometimes the world needs to be backed, if only to avoid causing others uneasiness. In such a circumstance, bluntness is not a spiteful revenge on subtlety but a form of polite subtlety itself. Barthes shows awareness of this in *The Neutral* where he cites Franz Kafka who, according to Blanchot, wondered ‘at what moment and how many times, when eight people are seated within the horizon of a conversation, it is appropriate to speak if one does not wish to be considered silent’.⁵⁵ Here, in this passage in *Preparation*, Barthes chooses to be blunt: he enters the crudeness of discourse by positing a binary that castigates others’ crudeness of discourse.

That he does what he would not do is an instance of self-contradiction of a kind that, *vide* Kafka, can and should not always be avoided. Self-contradiction is not rare in Barthes's work but also something he swerves away from. With the help of a three-stage Zen-dialectics – thus relying on a mystical manner of reasoning – he recuperates self-contradiction as a form of imperfection that produces true nuance.⁵⁶ Like the flaw in ceramics that, having been fired too long, produces incomparable nuances, so a fault that harms an argument's perfection can make it gain in nuance.⁵⁷

This is a beautiful image but still, Barthes's allowance of self-contradiction as an access to deeper nuance, truth, and life feels a bit facile. The third turn of the screw affords him a painless achievement of mystic depth. Avoiding ideology-laden language by the purity of silence while saying that this is what one does discounts valiant attempts of struggle in which mystery (with an acknowledged degree of incomprehensibility) is illuminated through a use of language. Enconced in mystic receptivity, Barthes cannot pass the threshold into *establishing* mystical truth: mysticism remains intransitive for him. Not that this is reprehensible per se: just like the crux of Writing lies in the devotional respect for absolute Writing kept alive in transitivity, so intransitive mysticism realizes that its crux lies in seeking, not in finding. In Barthes's mysticism, too, a 'simulation drive' is at work that preserves its ultimate object by keeping it aloof. Barthes's vehicle of simulation is forms of Eastern mysticism – Zen, Tao – that do not have an end or rather, have a negative end: the all-encompassing void that misses nothing of what would get lost in language.⁵⁸ But there is also a cultural substratum of Christian mysticism in Barthes's attitude to truth. Christian mysticism does have an end: it is to know and love God. In the words of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, God is calling on all men, 'scattered and divided by sin', 'to seek him, to know him, to love him with all [their] strength'.⁵⁹ For Barthes the end is to know and love Writing, and modern gregariousness is what scatters and divides all men. If God's call falls on deaf ears, it blocks all knowledge and love of Him; if 'today's culture, our popular press' no longer heed the call of Writing, all knowledge and love for it go extinct.

Nuance means heeding the call of Writing. Writing allows one to be attuned to the mystery of human desire and purpose. *Preparation* holds out a Vita Nova for Barthes, a new way of channeling desire and purpose through a new practice of writing. Wanting-to-Write – that desire for writing as an intransitive verb – is animated by 'the idea that death serves some purpose', that 'writing serves as a salvation, as a means to vanquish Death'.⁶⁰ That one can vanquish death – one's own or that of others – by

desiring to Write, that death gives purpose to life by generating love, that death and love are the Moments of Truth, and the only ones, that can sacralize a Work: those are the pivotal and surprising notions that require the nuance Barthes foregrounds in his lecture course.

Barthes's turn away from worldliness to the sacred reveals, he realizes, a clear connection between the ambition of a Vita Nova of writing and the 'religious: the writer "sacralizes" the Work'.⁶¹ Literature, if conceived of as producing a 'Grand Sacred Object', cannot shun those old-fashioned words and notions whose truth now becomes apparent to Barthes, words from the vocabulary of mysticism that he needs to express 'the whole of me': 'essence', 'purity', 'sacred', 'metaphysics', 'truth', 'pity', 'the wretchedness of man', 'concupiscence', 'presence'. These words shed their ideological shudder for Barthes and, as they turn to the inwardness of the full heart, come to replace words from the discourse of worldly referentiality and textual explication. The Purity of reading activates a reader's simulation drive, that drifting toward the 'beloved stranger' that makes one a stranger to oneself, installing the reader within the '*as if*' of Writing.⁶² And the writing that Barthes, reading haiku in that key of mystic purity, simulates is that novelistic motley that has room for 'the whole of me'.

Thinking of his transition to a Vita Nova that liberates previously disregarded elements of his writerly life, Barthes imagines himself as substituting 'one moral authority for another, in other words, to undergo a *conversion*. Affinity with the *mystical* movement'.⁶³ Writing is the surrender to the moral authority of the Work rather than to that of the World. Haiku initiates that conversion in a way that suggests the Roman Catholic idea of transubstantiation: through the ink and paper that manifest those few syllables of haiku the real presence of 'Life' emerges. This flash of real presence comes from the notational immediacy and referential particularity Barthes notices in haiku, with particularity being of such an absolutely subjective nature that referentiality is whittled down from intersubjective generality to a subject's purely individual circumstance.⁶⁴ In terms of the insights of Christian mysticism that Barthes simulates in their 'as if' presence, his religious sensibility of *scripturire* goes toward Roman Catholicism rather than his earlier (just as 'as if') receptivity to Protestantism's 'sola scriptura'. The 'as if' proviso is crucial: Barthes's vigilance against religion's susceptibility to ideology is unflagging: in an aside observation on a favorite Basho haiku Barthes notes: '(the religious is not ideological in itself, but it *turns* very quickly – like milk turning sour)'.⁶⁵ Barthes's chosen manner of preventing this

religious milk from turning sour is to find his strongest mystic influences in the stimulating voids of Japan (*Ma*, *Yami*, *Utsuroi* as spaces of emptiness in between states or objects) and China (Tao, Buddhist koans as ways of suspending meaning).

Barthes's mysticism of the void is an embrace of the literal regained. It is by cutting through the second turn of commentary, interpretation, metaphor,⁶⁶ and meaning that moments of truth achieve their real, absolute presence: 'Love and Death *are here*, that's all that can be said.'⁶⁷ But is Barthes right to regard love and death as the only occurrences in life that are moments of truth? And are haiku really ultimately – without the aid of interpretation – about either love or death, or both? For him, Barthes tells us, haiku are. Other readers may experience that haikist 'that's it!' as noting down other aspects of reality, its other truths or charms. Barthes's particular responsiveness to haiku makes him unresponsive to what else haiku might be for others outside of his own desire for haiku: Barthes does not give us a theory of haiku that could have general application. Absolutely singular as a reader, Barthes makes his observations on haiku double as self-observations, and reading Barthes means either taking up this invitation to his exclusive private pathos in communion with his mystical certainty or closing the book – leaving his lecture course – and finding more inclusive and interpretative dealings with haiku elsewhere. Barthes is close to apologetic for the privacy of his truth, the 'extreme imprudence in speaking of truth outside of a system that tells us how to ground it'.⁶⁸ Haiku to him is a 'pregnant form' and he finds (for who demands it) a sort of systematic grounding in an observation by the brilliant French mathematician René Thom: 'A form is pregnant if it provokes reactions which, from a quantitative point of view, are of an entirely disproportionate intensity when compared to the intensity of the stimulus.'⁶⁹ The stimulant form is haiku; the provoked reaction is tears and distress as love and death assume their truth; this reactive intensity is disproportionate to haiku's quantitative tininess.

Barthes dates his turn to theoretical solipsism and the mysticism of Purity to around the time, 1973, he published *The Pleasure of the Text*. That text marks the beginning for him (and, Barthes, thinks, 'here and there' for others too) of the 'theoretical superego' giving way to the desire for warm affection and curiosity for authors, their lives, and their texts.⁷⁰ The simulation drive overtakes the desire for closure in interpretation. In *The Pleasure of the Text* Barthes explained that he writes 'by subtraction' because 'I do not like the words I find'. The words he finds, dislikes, and then subtracts from his own writing are words that express an ideology.⁷¹

In *Preparation I* Barthes expresses his relief in reading haiku, the genre that subtracts words that express an ideology: haiku is ‘the art (an art) that “skims” reality of its ideological resonance, that is, of its *commentary*, even when that commentary is virtual’.⁷² With ideology subtracted, Barthes feel that many words and notions that were encased in heavy, essentialist ideology become available to him again as he seeks to express the real, existentialist presence of moments of truth in life.

The chief element in Barthes’s own private haiku is its ‘semelfactive’ essence: haiku shows ‘what took place [only] once’. In this way, haiku resists generalization, the force ideology would exert on what it wants to subsume under its interpretation. Haiku says ‘*That has been*’, but not in an objective historiographical sense (for which French grammar uses the *aorist* tense) but by establishing an affective connection between what happened and who cares for it (the *perfect* tense).⁷³ Haiku draws readers into a Real that feels applicable to their particular experiences: “‘*That’s it!*’”; that ‘*sets a bell ringing* inside us’.⁷⁴ The ‘That’s it!’ goes, ‘in its perfect moments’, for literature as a whole. Interpretation, on the other hand, makes us say “‘It’s not quite that’” and draws us into a shadow discourse that compromises the semelfactive and with it our affective participation in its absolute uniqueness.⁷⁵ Haiku is the maquette of ideal engagement with literary works.

In her manifesto-essay ‘Against Interpretation’, Susan Sontag wrote of the ‘perennial, never consummated project of interpretation’ as a form of translation that codes chosen elements of a work into what they ‘really’ mean – and is against it.⁷⁶ Barthes is against it too, and Sontag’s congeniality with the thinker she introduced to the English-speaking world with such panache is to a large extent based on this shared disdain for the ‘revenge of the intellect upon the world. To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world’.⁷⁷

Sontag’s animus against interpretation fits the Roland Barthes she knew, the Barthes of the 1960s and 1970s, but in *The Preparation of the Novel* Barthes’s ‘against interpretation’ goes further than hers, or than his own in earlier work. Sontag steps back from her intrepidity when she is ‘not saying that works of art are ineffable, that they cannot be described or paraphrased’⁷⁸; in *The Preparation of the Novel* Barthes says exactly that. To Barthes, literature is an overwhelming mystery that can be experienced, but not expressed. Sontag demands more control of her experience of art

and holds fast therefore to expression. Expression should concern form rather than content, and Sontag drafts in Barthes as an ally in the cause for formal analysis (in his *On Racine* and Robbe-Grillet essays.)⁷⁹ And he was. But the coolness of formal criticism (in the estimation of Barthes's 'last life' at least) ends up offering only an illusory gain over ideological retellings of content. To Barthes, in his *Vita Nova*, ideology must be canceled along with coolness; language needs to be replaced by the poetics of the void.

At the end of her essay, Sontag approaches that void: she calls it 'transparence' and defines it as 'the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are'.⁸⁰ Adopting this transparence means dwelling in the literalness of art, showing '*that it is what it is*'.⁸¹ Sontag touches here Barthes's literalness of the third turn, but it still differs from his 'that's it!' The difference is in the exclamation mark. For Barthes, the surprise of suddenly being taken up, via language, to moments of truth outside of language; for Sontag, a daring cancelation of secondary language that obscures primary language. Barthes's void gives him a counter-life of unworldliness, an 'increase in being'.⁸² Sontag's transparence gives us back the world by making 'works of art – and by analogy, our own experience – more, rather than less, real to us'.⁸³ In her closing rallying cry Sontag calls for 'an erotics of art'.⁸⁴ Yes, that's Barthes! But there is a new twist in the spiral of Barthes's erotics, one that takes him to the point of tears.

Notes

¹ Roland Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France (1978–1979 and 1979–1980)*, ed. by Nathalie Léger, trans. by Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 72. This quote appears in the first of the two courses, one I will subsequently abbreviate as *Preparation I*. When I quote from the second of the two courses, I will refer to it as *Preparation II*. If I refer to the course as a whole, I'll abbreviate it as *Preparation*. The word 'semelfactive', referring to something that occurs only once, occurs only once in *Preparation* and thus is a mise en abyme hapax legomenon in the context of the course. Léger defines it in her French edition of Roland Barthes, *La Préparation du roman I et II: Notes de cours et de séminaires au Collège de France 1978–1979 et 1979–1980* (Paris: Seuil/Imec, 2003), p. 116, n. 13; Briggs takes it over in her English translation, p. 422, n.13.

² *Preparation I*, p. 12.

³ *Preparation I*, p. 8. Barthes returns to the notion of 'scripturire' ('Wanting-to-Write') often throughout the course. Barthes's delight in the word is not just that it lends reality to something so vital to his idea of Writing, but also that the word is a hapax legomenon of the rarest kind having lain dormant for fifteen centuries before he gave it life again.

⁴ *Preparation I*, pp. 8–9.

⁵ *Preparation I*, p. 9.

⁶ Barthes, *Preparation II*, p. 156. Barthes's imagining the good life as a cowpat can also be seen as an instance of 'radical passivity'. For this, see Thomas Carl Wall, *Radical Passivity: Levinas, Blanchot, and Agamben* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999).

⁷ For the word-driven reaching out of Christian (Catholic) mystics, I am particularly thinking of English ecstatic mystics such as Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, neither of whom Barthes refers to. In *The Neutral*, his 1977–1978 lecture course at the Collège de France, Barthes does refer to Meister Eckhart, and both Eastern and Western mysticism are important reference points in *How to Live Together*, his 1976–1977 lecture course at the Collège. As one of the three 'logothetes' (inventors of language) of *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, Ignatius is another word-driven (and tear-stained) mystic. For all these mystics, wordlessness is the fulfilling outcome of their many words.

⁸ This strategy of stitching together insufficiencies into increased probability is quite familiar in Christian apologetics that makes believing in God not as irrational (or as much of a Pascalian wager) as non-believers assume. On their own, accounts of Jesus' historical life, witness accounts of his miracles, accounts of near-death and out-of-body experiences, and of extrasensory perception, along with scientific theories such as Rupert Sheldrake's 'formative causation' (according to which life develops not necessarily in genetically pre-programmed

manner but also sometimes according to habits organisms have established) do not convince of the need of supernatural agency. But in combination it may be, statistician David J. Bartholomew argues, that ‘belief is a risk worth taking’ (p. 267). See Bartholomew’s fascinating book *Uncertain Belief: Is It Rational to be a Christian?* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

⁹ Barthes, *Preparation I*, p. 20.

¹⁰ Barthes, *Preparation II*, p. 302. Unless otherwise specified, italics (like in this quote) are Barthes’s.

¹¹ It is moot not only because of the practical difficulty of making leisure last in strain. Elsewhere I speculate that Barthes probably would not have become a Writer for a fundamental reason: ‘the novel appealed to him only in its unattainable, utopian “classical” form. No writer can renew this form: it is the reader, made fragile as he reels from loss, who must make the fragile new’. Rudolphus Teeuwen, “‘What’s Fragile is Always New’: The Truth of Literature in Roland Barthes’ *Preparation of the Novel*”, *Symplokē*, 28.1–2 (2020), 207–223 (p. 223).

¹² Barthes, *Preparation II*, p. 179.

¹³ Barthes, *Preparation II*, p. 179.

¹⁴ Barthes, *Preparation II*, p. 293.

¹⁵ Barthes, *Preparation II*, p. 286.

¹⁶ Barthes, *Preparation I*, p. 5.

¹⁷ Barthes, *Preparation I*, p. 3.

¹⁸ Barthes, *Preparation I*, session of 20 January 1979, pp. 37–44. Barthes, always thinking etymologically, notes that the word ‘Nuance’ is linked with ‘*Weather, coelum* in Latin → *nuer* in old French = to compare shades of color to the play of light in the clouds’ (*Preparation I*, p. 45).

¹⁹ Barthes, *Preparation II*, p. 284.

²⁰ Barthes, *Preparation II*, p. 147.

²¹ Barthes, *Preparation II*, p. 137. The term ‘simulation drive’ Barthes borrows from Severo Sarduy, Nathalie Léger (*La Préparation du roman*, p. 195, n. 17) assumes from a text collected in Sarduy’s 1982 book *La Doublure*.

²² Barthes, *Preparation II*, p. 164.

²³ Roland Barthes, ‘One Always Fails in Speaking of What One Loves’, in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), pp. 296–305. The striking detail of a page of the essay still scrolled in Barthes’s typewriter is given in a note on p. 914 of Roland Barthes, ‘On échoue toujours à parler de ce qu’on aime’, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Éric Marty, 5 vols (Paris: Seuil, 2002), vol. V, pp. 906–14.

²⁴ Barthes, ‘One Always Fails’, p. 298.

²⁵ Barthes, ‘One Always Fails’, p. 304. (In the French of *Œuvres complètes*, this sentence is not italicized, one of a few small differences between the translation in *Rustle* and the version in *Œuvres*.)

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- ²⁶ Barthes, 'One Always Fails', p. 301.
- ²⁷ Barthes, *Preparation II*, p. 132.
- ²⁸ Barthes, *Preparation II*, pp. 143–44.
- ²⁹ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. by Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1988).
- ³⁰ Barthes, *Preparation*, pp. 430–31, n. 20.
- ³¹ Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, pp. xxi–xxii.
- ³² Barthes, *La Préparation du roman I et II*, pp. 195–96, n. 19.
- ³³ And besides, does literature really only start when it is theorized? And is romantic literature really the first instance of this? Didn't, for instance, Aristotle or Sir Philip Sidney theorize other kinds of literature, many centuries earlier?
- ³⁴ Dalia Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute: Being and Knowing in Early German Romantic Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 5.
- ³⁵ Barthes, *Preparation II*, 147. Bryan Counter perceptively observes how Barthes's 'investment in writing that has no goal, or whose goal is in permanent abeyance, is an indicator that he takes Kant's aesthetics seriously'. Bryan Counter, 'Intoxication: Reading Between Proust and Barthes', *Barthes Studies*, 7 (2021), 85–109 (p. 105, n. 20).
- ³⁶ Barthes, *Preparation II*, pp. 144–48.
- ³⁷ See Jacob Bittner, 'Roland Barthes and The Literary Absolute: The Conditions of the Necessity to Write Intransitively', *Barthes Studies*, 3 (2017), 2–24.
- ³⁸ Barthes, *Preparation I*, p. 31.
- ³⁹ Barthes, *Preparation I*, p. 33.
- ⁴⁰ Barthes, *Preparation I*, p. 64. In one of the classic novels of twentieth-century Japan, one about a family whose life values are falling into desuetude (a notion Barthes associates with the classic novel), something of this collaborative poem-writing persists. Three family members, a sister, her daughter, and her husband, each write a haiku to console an absent, unmarried sister. Once each has written their poem, 'Teinosuke [the husband] suggested changes in Sachiko's [his wife's] poem [. . .] and in Etsuko's [their teenage daughter's]'. Junichirō Tanizaki, *The Makioka Sisters*, trans. by Edward G. Seidensticker (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 113. Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (a Tolstoian novel Barthes would have loved) features the Chatterji family who communicates through clever couplets to the delighted amazement of niece Lata Mehra (for whom, as for Yukiko in *The Makioka Sisters*, a suitable husband must be found). Vikram Seth, *A Suitable Boy* (London: Phoenix House-Orion, 1993).
- ⁴¹ Barthes, *Preparation I*, p. 31.
- ⁴² Barthes, *Preparation I*, p. 32.
- ⁴³ Barthes, *Preparation I*, p. 32.
- ⁴⁴ Barthes, *Preparation II*, p. 301.

⁴⁵ Barthes, *Preparation I*, p. 104. Barthes's sympathy with tears, although not yet his own, is evident already in *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*. Of these three 'logothetes' (inventors of language), Barthes cares less for the Jesuit Ignatius of Loyola than for the other two, but finds his 'beautiful eyes, always a little filled with tears' endearing. Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, trans. by Richard Miller (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 8.

⁴⁶ Barthes, *Preparation I*, p. 106.

⁴⁷ Barthes, *Preparation I*, p. 107.

⁴⁸ Barthes, *Preparation I*, p. 10.

⁴⁹ Barthes, *Preparation II*, p. 147.

⁵⁰ Barthes, *Preparation I*, pp. 46–47. Barthes quotes Maurice Blanchot's *The Book to Come* here as the latter quotes and discusses Joseph Joubert.

⁵¹ Barthes, *Preparation I*, p. 82.

⁵² Barthes, *Preparation I*, p. 47.

⁵³ Barthes, *Preparation I*, p. 45.

⁵⁴ Barthes, *Preparation II*, p. 164.

⁵⁵ Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977–1978)*, trans. by Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 108. Barthes takes this anecdote from Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 76.

⁵⁶ The three-stage Zen dialectics is a favorite notion of Barthes's. In the first stage, mountains are literally mountains ('Stupidity'); in the second stage, mountains are no longer mountains ('interpretation'); in the third stage, mountains are mountains again (in a wisened-up 'return of literality'). Barthes, *Preparation I*, p. 81. In this third 'turn of the screw', mountains are no longer subject to either common sense stupidity or interpretational arrogance, but safe in the glow of a communing mind's silence. Barthes also uses this dialectics in *The Neutral*, p. 125. There he characterizes the third stage as 'abode of rest'.

⁵⁷ Barthes makes this point of the nuance-saving flaw with reference to a passage in Maurice Blanchot's *The Book to Come*. Barthes, *Preparation I*, p. 46.

⁵⁸ An intriguing account of the 'stimulating void' of Taoism can be found in Kristofer Schipper's *Le Corps taoïste* (1982), translated by Karen C. Duval as *The Taoist Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). In 1968 Schipper, a Dutch sinologist, became a Taoist priest and writes in his book of his training and practice. There is no conceptual knowledge that Tao imparts, he writes: a Tao Master never explains any teachings; they are simply passed on by a repeated, rhythmically concentrated reading of texts. Understanding of Tao is up to individual students according to their efforts and capacities. I refer more extensively to this book in "The Dream of a Minimal Sociality": Roland Barthes' Skeptic Intensity', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 37.4 (2020), 119–34.

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- ⁵⁹ 'Prologue: I. The Life of Man – To Know and Love God', in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), paragraph 2. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P2.HTM [accessed 25 August 2024].
- ⁶⁰ Barthes, *Preparation I*, p. 9.
- ⁶¹ Barthes, *Preparation II*, p. 224.
- ⁶² For Barthes's proviso of the 'as if', see *Preparation I*, pp. 20–21.
- ⁶³ Barthes, *Preparation II*, p. 224.
- ⁶⁴ I paraphrase here *Preparation I*, session of 27 January 1979, pp. 48–54.
- ⁶⁵ Barthes, *Preparation I*, p. 68.
- ⁶⁶ 'Metaphors are one among many things that make me despair of literature'. Barthes, *Preparation II*, p. 193.
- ⁶⁷ Barthes, *Preparation I*, p. 107.
- ⁶⁸ Barthes, *Preparation I*, p. 107.
- ⁶⁹ Barthes, *Preparation I*, p. 107. Barthes quotes René Thom's 'Entretien sur les catastrophes, le langage, et la métaphysique extrême', *Ornicar?*, 16 (1978), 73–109 (p. 75). ('Ornicar' is part of the French mnemonic 'Mais où est donc Ornicar?' for school children to remember coordinating conjunctions: 'mais', 'ou', 'et', 'donc', 'or', 'ni', and 'car'. *Ornicar? Bulletin périodique du champ Freudien* was the journal of the University of Paris's Department of Psychoanalysis, a witty name for a journal serving a discipline based on bringing to consciousness coordinations of feelings, thoughts, memories, and desires.)
- ⁷⁰ Barthes, *Preparation II*, pp. 208–11.
- ⁷¹ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 40. For Barthes's retreat from ideology, see my "'What's Fragile Is Always New'", pp. 212–13.
- ⁷² Barthes, *Preparation I*, p. 68. 'Virtual' ('virtuel' in the original French) I take to mean here 'implied', 'non-explicit': haiku skims even implied commentary. The French text makes it clear that Barthes thinks here of the skimming of cream from milk ("écrémer"). Barthes, *La Préparation du roman I et II*, p. 110.
- ⁷³ Barthes, *Preparation I*, p. 74.
- ⁷⁴ Barthes, *Preparation I*, p. 78.
- ⁷⁵ Barthes, *Preparation I*, p. 80.
- ⁷⁶ Susan Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 2001), pp. 1–10 (p. 3).
- ⁷⁷ Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', p. 4.
- ⁷⁸ Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', p. 8.
- ⁷⁹ Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', p. 9.
- ⁸⁰ Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', p. 9.
- ⁸¹ Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', p. 10. Italics are Sontag's.
- ⁸² 'Increase in being' is a translation of Hans-Georg Gadamer's 'Zuwachs an Sein'. Gadamer uses the term to refer to the effect of being intensely immersed in

something – a work of art, a thing of beauty, a form of play. Swept up in something like this, one becomes what one is swept up in and experiences a (temporary) loss of self. The self emerges again changed and increased by what it gained from its temporary otherness. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd revised edn, trans. revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1994), p. 140.

⁸³ Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', p. 10.

⁸⁴ Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', p. 10.

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