

Sono mama: what goes without saying, right up until now?

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SONO MAMA WHAT GOES WITHOUT
SAYING, RIGHT UP UNTIL NOW?

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Mama / Mama / sono mama そのまま

It is when something ‘goes without saying’ that it needs to be looked at closely – and it then emerges that ‘what goes without saying’ is in fact comprised of a number of unanswered questions.[1]

I WAS MOVED TO respond to the request to reflect on my experience of the Roland Barthes Reading Group partly because of the beautiful phrasing around ‘the situation of encounter’. I had joined this group as a visitor, intent only on dipping my toe into an unfamiliar eddy of words and thoughts after a period of maternity leave from my regular role as a lecturer at an art school. The idea of being just a visitor was glorious: here was an opportunity to listen, not speak, to be a good guest, observe and appreciate, connect, perhaps respond. Really, I wanted to find out what the addition of a baby might make to my capacity to do any of those, especially at the same time.

The text excerpt we read aloud together was entitled ‘Setting a Bell Ringing’, and in the reverberation of sound and metaphor, question and response, I found myself, again, for a moment.

I was pleased by the selection and with what came along with it, recognising that my years of living and working in Japan brought some pertinent experience. The reverberations also sounded a lot like a previous life, or lives, of mine, lived in the seminar room of a university – sitting close, close reading, slow reading, aloud.

For Barthes, the virtues of Japan as he perceived them are exemplified by the haiku form's eidetic nature, and he suggests that the very function of haiku is to express the 'suchness' of things. In the text, he refers to the Japanese phrase *sono mama* in an effort to give words to this, to the startling clarity of images, sounds, seasons in haiku that carry meaning or metaphor of the condition of things, things as they are. 'Any "well executed" haiku,' he says, 'sets a bell ringing inside us'. [2] This resonates with me, provoking questions about the capacity of (this particular form of?) poetry to function outside of, or without, 'interpretation'. This possibility is complex as well as debatable, and hard to explain, though I have felt this too, through different experiences in Japan, and becoming a mother. The intensity of the bell, ringing, is captured in observing my child encounter the world with a similar quality, expressing the suchness of things in a way that is: enough.

My work in many ways is already about relations between intimate realms and pressing social and ecological issues, and I have found myself unwilling,

and indeed unable, to separate my roles (teacher/researcher/artist/anthropologist) from becoming a mother. Surprisingly, perhaps, I have found that the effort to attend to both, often at the same time, and to allow the edges of my work life and personal life to overlap, remains incontrovertibly political; indeed, it is a feminist effort, with its vulnerabilities, risking exposure, even where permission has been granted.

I asked permission to attend this reading group event, with my not-yet five-month-old son, D. It was the first of many convergences, negotiations, of work and life for me, and thus marks the start of a series of important questions and feelings, about who and *how* I am, about what it means to be an artist/thinker/teacher *and* mother, about how to exist in the conjunction. What are the politics of this participation? *How* is participation? What does it sound like? My play on *sono mama*, which follows, permits some modest musing, to consider one through another.

EVERYDAY: *sono mama*

In Japanese, *sono mama* is a rather everyday term. The noun *mama* まま (儘) means condition, or state, thus in itself can be glossed to mean: ‘as it is’ or ‘as one likes’. It is also used as *because*, or simply *as*. *Sono mama* refers to the condition that something has been (in) *right up until this moment*. (There is, in fact, a different way to describe

how things are, ‘as it is right now’: *kono mama*.) The effect of *sono* is perhaps the just-ness of the suchness, just the way things are (and always have been?) and just as they always will be.

As part of this seminar, we had each been invited to bring something to share, to read. I chose to read aloud a short piece I wrote to accompany an interdisciplinary group exhibition in 2017, called *The Unfinishing of Things*, which contains this observation:

Working through translation for me is always full of surprises and diverting tangents. This is especially the case with Japanese, and my Brobdingnagian potential for error because of how heavily homophonous it can be. (Years ago, at a formal event in Japan, I used ‘o-kazan’ 火山, literally, fire + mountain, when I wanted to say ‘o-kāsan’. Volcano took the place of Mother.)[3]

So I will admit that I find it amusing as well as interesting to explore the play on ‘mama’, here and of course *mama* means mummy in Japan, too, though it is written in katakana, ママ, not kanji especially at a juncture when my child is just beginning to develop an understanding of difference, and what he calls *mama*, or *dada*, *baba*, and so on; each of these things, or those of us, he labels confidently, his finger pointed at his father, or my breasts, or me, or, sometimes, himself.

As it happened, I was reading *Garments Against*

Women, a book of prose poetry by Anne Boyer, when a friend and sometime collaborator, Beth Dynowski, told me that Anne was going to be part of this event. I had wanted to make the trip to Sheffield anyway, where I had never been, to hear Beth present her performative poetic work ‘Phrase’, because the origins of ‘Phrase’ were in a public lecture I’d invited her to give at my art school. The work, which went on to be shortlisted for the *White Review* Poet’s Prize, is meant to be listened to, as so much poetry should. I hear the politics, hard under her soft voice, in surreal stories of ‘a self-interrupting whole, a memory full of holes’.[4]

On the train, a six-hour journey from the north east of Scotland, I met a young mother with her daughter who was the same age as my son. She was a student of the Kabbalah, and a survivor; I continue to hope, of domestic violence.

Pushing my son in his buggy to the top of an impossibly steep hill, we arrive, exhausted, at a room with an enormous bed, and tall windows. I compose fleeting poems in my head while he sleeps, breathing him in, in this large bed that I can’t feel the edges of, the sweet, clean scent that makes me hunger.

The hosts are generous and other readers, patient, while D. eats, is passed from hands to laps, from breast to banana.

A question about how metaphor works in Japanese brought to mind the text I wrote, which reflected on the phrase, or image: ‘fur on turtles and horns on rabbits’ (*kimōtokaku*, 亀毛兎角),[3] which is used to comment on things that do not exist. The metaphor has Buddhist roots, which are complicated, to do with Buddhism’s fourth ‘logical argument’, about interdependence, how all things can be shown to be connected, and *therefore to not truly exist*. It is also, I think, about how when we name a thing, describe it as this or that we must remember that words can be hollow, like a rabbit’s horns. I am reminded that Barthes believed art should not seek to *explain* things, yet still be critical.

The apparent simplicity of a haiku based on its brevity and its structure might fool readers, but for me it represents this; it is (not represents) the disregard for the need to explain. I have used other metaphors for this, and for art. But it is here in the nature of a haiku, as Barthes has it: it is not that of ‘a rich thought reduced to a brief form but [of] *a brief event which immediately finds its proper form*’: ‘The haiku wakens desire: how many Western readers have dreamed of strolling through life, notebook in hand, jotting down “impressions” whose brevity would guarantee their perfection, whose simplicity would attest to their profundity’.[5]

Indeed, Barthes spends a lot of time reflecting on the haiku in the longer text, a point often

noted, since the haiku seems antithetical to the long narrative of a novel. Perhaps Barthes is pointing to the significance of everyday events, to moments, recurring, to the *condition* that things are in. Thus, *sono mama*, how things are and have been (in) *right up until* this moment in time. Such quotidian moments, the suchness of things, can be interwoven with narrative, so that the (writing or reading) subject is ‘instantaneously struck by *the thing itself*’.[5] In this way, the haiku represents an attack on symbolism, form, and ‘substance’, aligned in a small flock of seventeen syllables enclosed in three lines, which does not describe, does not mean, but *just happens*. [6]

MAMA/ママ/WORK:TEACHER/WRITER/MOTHER/FRIEND

The unmaster class, as a seminar, seemed grounded in generosity, but also in rules: reading is still a form of work, after all. It is crucial to note that reading for Barthes is ‘not a parasitical act, the reactive complement of a writing’, but rather a ‘form of work’.[7] And this particular text is one that for Barthes, and then us, his readers, experiments, integrating teaching and writing, as the translator Kate Briggs suggested in an interview: ‘a test to see whether it’s possible to make those two activities into one and the same project’.[8] The generosity of those I met at the whole conference stays with me, and provided fertile ground for a beginning of new relationships

and collaborations and the enriching of others grown from sharing experiences of motherhood, of relationships; of education, rooted in other moments of shared, slow, embodied, reading(s).

Despite decades of feminist intervention in art and academia, the silos of disciplines, of teaching and learning, being a mother and an academic, a teacher and a writer, and so on, conjunction after conjunction, remains a challenge; perhaps more than it should; perhaps inevitably. My experience of the unmaster class, compared with regulations and responses I have faced at other moments, inspired me to go on, and to bring my son D. with me, and to write against the invisibility of mothers and mothering, of all forms and sexes and breaths. Taking time away from him to write, to find out what I think about life and work with him, makes the physical need to be close to him, and the relief when I am, urgent. I don't know if or how the vastness of that particular Barthes work, *The Preparation of the Novel*, or indeed his approach to haiku might continue to inform my evolving academic/artist/mother position. But the quality of that question, and of the sense of things, as they are, as they have been right up until now, *sono mama*, is entangled with lines of poems that will probably never be written, that I compose while my son sleeps.

NOTES

1 Roland Barthes, 'Session of February 24, 1979', *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France (1978–1979 and 1979–1980)*, edited by Nathalie Léger, translated by Kate Briggs, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011 [*La préparation du roman. I et II, Cours et séminaires au Collège de France*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2003], 78–87, p. 86.

2 Barthes, 'Session of February 24, 1979', p. 78.

3 Jennifer Clarke, *The Unfinishing of Things*, University of Aberdeen, May 2017.

4 Beth Dynowski, 'Phrase', *The White Review*, November 2019. Dynowski is making reference to the work of Eric Santner on the concept of a self-interrupting whole from *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

5 Roland Barthes, *The Empire of Signs*, translated by Richard Howard, New York: The Noonday Press, 1982 [*L'Empire des signes*, Paris: Édition du Seuil, 1970], p. 69.

6 Barthes, 'Session of February 24, 1979', p. 79.

7 Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay*, translated by Richard Miller, New York: Hill and Wang, 1974 [*S/Z*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1970], p. 10.

8 Scott Esposito, 'Four Questions for Kate Briggs on Roland Barthes' Preparation of the Novel', in *Conversational Reading* (7 April 2011); cited in Nicholas P. Greco, *Philosophy in Review XXXIII*, 2013, no. 3.