

Amateurism, Now: Roland Barthes and the Contemporary Stakes of the Amateur

Eyal Bassan
University of Haifa

ABSTRACT: This essay proposes a conceptual inquiry into the stakes, implications, and continued relevance of amateurism as a contemporary form of life and thought. Taking a cue from Roland Barthes’s fascination in his later years with the amateurish disposition—as a type of activity that is carried out “without the spirit of mastery or competition”—I identify two modalities of amateurism. The first, explored here through Barthes’s profound yet problematic relation to Japan and the haiku, is implicit and relational, concerned with forms of knowledge and thought. The second, more explicit and practical, and more directly opposed to the capitalist ethos of the professionalization of everything, is experienced as an intervention in forms of living. Tracing the paradoxical fate of the amateur in our contemporary neoliberal, post-COVID-19 moment, the essay argues for the need to conceptualize the simultaneous availability and precarity of the amateur praxis today, the elusive intersection of amateurism and politics, and, ultimately, amateurism’s modest yet persistent liberatory horizon.

The Amateur (someone who engages in painting, music, sport, science, without the spirit of mastery or competition), the Amateur renews his pleasure (*amator*: one who loves and loves again); he is anything but a hero (of creation, of performance); he establishes himself *graciously* (for nothing) in the signifier.

—Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975)¹

When I have the time, I paint or play music in the completely assumed role of a simple amateur. [...] When one draws or paints as an amateur, there is no preoccupation with the *imago*, the image one will project of oneself in making the drawing or painting. It’s thus a liberation, I would almost say a liberation from civilization.

—Roland Barthes, interview with Jean-Jacques Brochier (February 1975)²

¹ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 52.

² Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*, trans. Linda Coverdale (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 216–17.

WHAT IS THE LESSON OF THE AMATEUR? Or rather, if the term designates a certain way of doing certain things—“without the spirit of mastery or competition”—what, in turn, can *amateurism* do, conceptually? How can it operate as a practical, theoretical, even political intervention in the ways we think and act?

It is hardly coincidental that Roland Barthes starts talking about the allure of the amateur around 1975, at a particularly crucial phase in the idiosyncratic evolution of his thought. This intellectual evolution—as the story is often told in the histories of twentieth-century critical thought—readily submits itself not only to the familiar, overarching narrative of a momentous theoretical transition from the structuralism of the 1960s to the post-structuralism of the following decade, but also to a corresponding narrative of Barthes’s depoliticization—from the early engaged social critic, author of *Mythologies*, to a thinker distancing himself from immediate politics who in his late work sets out to pursue dreams of withdrawal from the demands of sociality. As recent scholarship has shown, however, with Barthes the very process of depoliticization assumes a rather elusive sense of a search for a new relation to politics.³ In the same 1975 interview cited above, for example, he introduces a distinction between the political (*le politique*), as “a fundamental order of history, of thought, of everything that is done and said,” and politics (*la politique*), “the moment when the political changes into the same old story, a reiterative discourse.” “My profound interest in the attachment of the political,” he goes on to confess, “is equaled only by my intolerance of political discourse. Which doesn’t make my situation very easy. My position is somewhat divided, and often guilt-ridden.”⁴ The three courses that Barthes delivered at the Collège de France in the period between his appointment as professor in 1976 and his death in 1980—*How to Live Together* (*Comment vivre ensemble*), *The Neutral* (*Le Neutre*), and *The Preparation of the Novel* (*La Préparation du roman*)—can thus be seen as an ongoing experimentation with modes of being political while retreating from politics, of thinking politically without subjecting oneself to the repetitive, formal, all too decisive and opinionated *doxa* of *la politique*. *The Neutral* in particular, the most theoretical of the three, attempts to conceptualize the sort of desire that sidesteps the possessiveness and violence normally associated with desire; such “*désir de Neutre*,” desire for the neutral, manifests itself in the course through a myriad of figures that outplay and baffle the normative discursive injunctions to produce meaning, to enter into conflict, to position oneself and claim one’s worth. What Barthes calls “the neutral,” then, far from being a simplistic stance of resignation or indifference, emerges as an elusive style of nondogmatic, nonemphatic critique. Its ethos, as Christophe Bident has put it, is that of “the just measure of a relation to the world which seeks constantly to free itself of all aggression and all oppression, which displays differences without hierarchy, which touches by dint of not touching.”⁵ But what for the most part gets glossed over in the broad narratives of Barthes’s intellectual development is that alongside the axis of depoliticization, even and especially when understood as a process of negotiating the relation between *le* and *la politique*, a parallel trajectory may be traced, one of a growing investment in the promises of amateurism—which, ironically, emerges most intensely precisely around the highpoint of Barthes’s *professional* career. The unassuming, scattered, and seemingly incidental appearances in Barthes’s late writings of the figure of the amateur, as an

³ See Yue Zhuo, “The ‘Political’ Barthes: From Theater to Idiorrhythmy,” *French Forum* 36, no. 1 (2011): 55–74; Lucy O’Meara, *Roland Barthes at the Collège de France* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), 2.

⁴ Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice*, 218, translation modified.

⁵ Christophe Bident, “R/M, 1953,” trans. Michael Holland, *Paragraph* 30, no. 3: 76.

explicit theme but more so as an implicit practice or performance, should be understood within this trajectory as typifying a vaster, ongoing, and more cohesive project—a project whose stakes are as pressing today as ever—of conceptualizing nonpossessive and non-appropriative modes of life and thought.

Barthes of the Collège de France is thus to a large extent, albeit for the most part implicitly, a thinker of the amateur if not an amateur thinker. Certain moments in both *The Neutral* and *The Preparation of the Novel*, for example, may be reread, as I suggest below, vis-à-vis a shadow-concept of amateurism that operates in their background. In the case of the former, amateurism seems to be contained in, and in turn to broaden, the theory and catalog of neutral modalities that the course lays out; and in the case of the latter, an unacknowledged amateurish stance is acted out in a way that explicates and complicates the course's politics. My aim here, however, is not primarily to invoke the notion of amateurism in order to argue for a revisionary alternative account of Barthes's career or thought. Barthes, to paraphrase his own words on the amateur, is not the hero of this essay. If he is nonetheless its protagonist, it is mostly on a performative level, as a practitioner, either consciously or unwittingly, of an amateurish impulse that may teach us something essential—essential for our present moment—about the simultaneous availability and precarity of the amateur praxis, about the intersection of amateurism and politics, and, ultimately, about what amateurism can and cannot do.

While amateurism is most commonly defined in socioeconomic terms as the oppositional counterpart of professionalism—i.e., as a category of attachment to leisure activities that are pursued as a pastime rather than as a means of generating income—its significance as a contemporary mode of being and acting bridges, as I show below, questions of desire and affect, of ability and potentiality, of knowledge and authority, of relationality and self-perception, and of the types of liberation available to the subjects of neoliberalism. Amateurism, in all these contexts, emerges as a benign form of the affective, social, and relational dispositions that are associated nowadays with participating in the world of professional work, or, more broadly, in our era's pervasive ethos of professionalism. Following the theoretical and performative articulations of the amateur in late Barthes—that is, rereading and refracting some key moments in Barthes's late writings through an amateurish conceptual lens—this essay proposes an inquiry into two modalities of amateurism. One is implicit and relational, an intervention in forms-of-thinking (of reading, writing, and teaching, of relating to one's outside); the other is explicit and practical, concerned with forms-of-living. Initiating this inquiry with the more indirect and metaphorical of the two, my essay thus begins with a detour: that is, with a reflection on Barthes's relation to the East during which the whole terminology of amateurism would disappear for a few long pages, only to reemerge with renewed conceptual import as the underlying logic of Barthes's pedagogical and intellectual performance—if not of his politics.

I. AMATEURISM, FIRST APPROXIMATION: FORMS OF THINKING

Around the mid-1970s, rumors began circulating in the Parisian intellectual scene: Roland Barthes is writing a novel. For many, this was an exhilarating idea: the prominent literary critic, who taught us how to turn the Readerly into the Writerly, was now apparently about to cross the very lines that he himself, more than anyone else, had striven to blur, and take up proper novelistic writing. The provocative purveyor of the death of the Author was now wishing to become, so it seemed, an author himself. Barthes, on his part, was not shying away from these rumors. In June

1977, at a colloquium in his honor organized by Antoine Compagnon in Cerisy, he enigmatically alluded numerous times to a newfound yearning “*d’entrer dans le roman*,” to enter into the realm of the novel.⁶ The following year, in his famous lecture on Proust, “*Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure...*” [For a long time, I went to bed early], delivered in October at the Collège de France, these vague insinuations assumed a far more explicit and concrete form. In this personal, poignant address, Barthes, who was about to turn sixty-three in a few weeks, openly confessed not only his deep identification with Proust but also a growing sense of having reached what he called, following Dante, “the middle of the journey of my life.”⁷ A need for change thus presented itself, he said: “There occurs all of a sudden this obvious situation: [...] I no longer have time to try several lives: I must choose my last life, my new life, ‘*Vita Nova*.’”⁸ What will this new life look like? Barthes explained that for any “subject who writes,” the only way to energize such *Vita Nova* is through the discovery of a new practice of writing;⁹ and for him, for the subject named Roland Barthes, reflecting on his writerly journey from this “middle-of-life” vantage point, this discovery can only be achieved by actively engaging with the amorous, affective power of the Novel.

Barthes, it seemed, was indeed entering the realm of the Novel. The admission made in the Proust lecture—the announcement of a somewhat vague yet nonetheless determined intent to explore a new practice of novelistic writing—was later elaborated into the constitutive, guiding principle of *La Préparation du roman*, the last course Barthes would ever teach, delivered in two installations at the Collège de France during the 1978-79 and 1979-80 academic years. Assuming as its point of departure the idea of a desire-to-write whose object is the Novel form, the course is designed at one and the same time both as a literary-historical investigation of the habitual and practical aspects of the writing process and as a potential acting-out of its own title, functioning itself as a preparation of a future novel to be composed by Barthes.

Yet, while in “*Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure...*” it is Proust’s masterpiece, *In Search of Lost Time*, that is posited as not only the inspiration for taking up the new writing project but also as a possible model for novelistic composition, in *The Preparation* it is coupled with an additional—and quite surprising—literary model: the model of haiku poetry. As Barthes described it in one of the introductory sessions—

That, broadly speaking [...], is how this year’s course will be organized = two—seemingly disparate—pivots [...] of a certain circumvolution of the Novel to be written, of the fantasized Novel: the *Haiku / Proust* [...] I’m convinced of the validity of this opposition but was nevertheless afraid that you’d find it a little abrupt, a little elliptical, a little casual—or farfetched.¹⁰

Haiku/Proust—At least from a structural or generic point of view, Barthes’s concerns are far from unfounded: the turn to the succinct, fragmentary, and relatively static form of the haiku as something that could somehow direct the composition of a Novel—perhaps the most free-flowing and dynamic of literary forms—may indeed seem somewhat abrupt, elliptical, even farfetched. For Barthes, who admits a stronger “affective link” with the present than with the past, the turn to

⁶ See O’Meara, *Roland Barthes at the Collège de France*, 165–67.

⁷ Roland Barthes, “*Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure...*,” in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 285.

⁸ Barthes, “*Longtemps*,” 285.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 286.

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France, 1978–1979 and 1979–1980*, trans. Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 19.

the haiku stems from a fantasy “to make a Narrative (a Novel) out of the Present”—tackling the problem of “how to write *at length, fluently* [...] with one eye on the page and the other on ‘what’s happening to me.’”¹¹ Though difficult, he says, the task is not impossible—for “you can write the Present *by noting it*.”¹² And so the fantasized novel would need to bring together, to merge and compromise, a form of Notation (of which the haiku is “the very essence”) with the breadth and fluidity of the Novelistic. Hence: *Haiku / Proust*.

This organizational logic is reiterated by Barthes toward the end of the semester as he looks back at the first half of the course:

Let’s now go back, little by little, to our initial task: how to pass from a fragmented Notation of the present (of which we’ve taken the haiku as the exemplary form) to a plan for a novel? That is: what, of haiku, can pass in(to) our Western thinking, our writing practice?¹³

Having dedicated multiple sessions to the study of haiku, Barthes now grapples with the challenge of the passage between the two “pivots” of the course, the necessary reconciliation of the two distinct literary forms into one Novel. Yet while this problem is presented throughout the course as primarily one of structure and genre, of varying scales and temporalities of writing, his language here also implicitly indicates another reason to consider his turn to the haiku “a little abrupt, a little elliptical”—if not outright scandalous and literally “*far-fetched*.” For the “*Haiku / Proust*” does not denote only a formal opposition between the short and the long, the contained and the ongoing, the fragmentary and the smooth, the momentary and the continuous; it also brings together—combines and confronts—Japan and France, the East and the West. When Roland Barthes, perhaps France’s leading literary critic at the time, decides to write a novel—to fantasize and “prepare” a Novel—he turns, first and foremost, to the Orient.



Barthes’s long-lasting intellectual fascination with the Orient—evident in the proliferation throughout his late writings of references to Taoism, Buddhism, Zen, and, of course, the haiku—can be dated back at least to his visit to Japan in 1966. “Japan,” as he declares in the opening pages of *Empire of Signs*, the book that was inspired by that trip, “has afforded him a situation of writing [...] one in which a certain disturbance of the person occurs, a subversion of earlier readings, a shock of meaning.” For writing, says Barthes, invoking the notion of the Zen occurrence, “is after all, in its way, a *satori*.”¹⁴ Yet, what already this brief introductory maneuver demonstrates, is how Barthes—who presents his writing *about* Japanese culture as an *effect and event* of that very culture—is no exception to Said’s famous generalization that “everyone who writes about the Orient must locate himself vis-à-vis the Orient.”¹⁵

Indeed, a disquieting hint of lurking Orientalism unavoidably permeates and weighs on a project such as *Empire of Signs*. And Barthes, ever self-aware, devotes the opening section of the

¹¹ Ibid., 17.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 90.

¹⁴ Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 4.

¹⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 20. A little later Said adds in a similar vein: “Every writer on the Orient (and this is true even of Homer) assumes some Oriental precedent, some previous knowledge of the Orient, to which he refers and on which he relies.”

book to what Eric Hayot has aptly described as an attempt “to deflect an antiorientalist criticism *avant la lettre*.”¹⁶ The very first page of *Empire of Signs* thus features a disclaimer of sorts:

Hence Orient and Occident cannot be taken here as “realities” to be compared and contrasted historically, philosophically, culturally, politically. I am not lovingly gazing toward an Oriental essence—to me the Orient is a matter of indifference, merely providing a reserve of features whose manipulation—whose invented interplay—allows me to “entertain” the idea of an unheard-of symbolic system, one altogether detached from our own.¹⁷

The critical stance that Barthes outlines here—and then attempts to put into practice throughout the book—treats the gaze eastwards not as a means for probing the Orient but as primarily an occasion to gaze *back westwards*, a foil for a critique of Western ways of thinking, knowing, and being.¹⁸ If writing about the Orient is according to Said always a matter of locating oneself vis-à-vis the Orient, Barthes, in not untypical manner, does so by shuffling the expected coordinates, distancing himself from any real Orient and thereby striving to position himself at a critical distance from the Occident as well, ultimately locating his writing vis-à-vis both.

Not all of Barthes’s readers, however, are entirely convinced by either his intentions or their application. While some, like Lucy O’Meara, hold the view that in the final analysis *Empire of Signs* eschews “an exoticising Orientalist discourse” because “Orientalist criticism cannot account for the elusive position which Barthes is trying to attain—an interstitial position outside of both French and Japanese symbolic systems,” others have argued that Barthes’s “perhaps well-meant excuse soon wears thin. The warning of the first page is not repeated or incorporated into the book’s deep structure, and so it is forgotten by the fascinated reader, say, ten pages later.”¹⁹ Or, much more bluntly, that “such an approach may seem disingenuous in the extreme, and for good reason,” and that despite assurances to the contrary, Barthes’s book remains “firmly in the tradition of orientalism—literary, artistic, ethnographic,” while his opening concession “is less an admission than a mystification.”²⁰ Barthes’s disclaimer, then, highlighting the issue of his relation to the Orient via the very gesture that tries to sidestep it, seems to have the ironic

¹⁶ Eric Hayot, *Chinese Dreams: Pound, Brecht*, Tel quel (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 125.

¹⁷ Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, 3.

¹⁸ Thus, for instance, while considering Tokyo’s empty city center Barthes promptly reverses the direction of his gaze when he notes how “in accord with the very movement of Western metaphysics, for which every center is the site of truth, the center of our cities is always *full*: a marked site, it is here that the values of civilization are gathered and condensed” (Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, 30). In a similar vein, in his analysis of Bunraku theater, Barthes draws attention to “that exemption of meaning (that exemption *from* meaning as well) which we Westerners can barely understand, since, for us, to attack meaning is to hide or to invert it, but never to ‘absent’ it” (62). Bunraku, he adds, “rids the actor’s manifestation of any whiff of the sacred and abolishes the metaphysical link the West cannot help establishing between body and soul, cause and effect, motor and machine, agent and actor, Destiny and man, God and creature” (62). This sort of differential and reflective critical approach informs the entire book. To cite one more example, the chapter on the Japanese practice of bowing opens with the simple question, “Why, in the West, is politeness regarded with suspicion?”—which, in fact, flips the suspicious directionality and situates from the outset as the object of critique not Oriental politeness (bowing) but “Occidental impoliteness” (63).

¹⁹ O’Meara, *Roland Barthes at the Collège de France*, 119, 121; Darko Suvin, “The Soul and the Sense: Meditations on Roland Barthes on Japan (à propos of *L’Empire des signes*),” *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 18, no. 4 (1991): 503.

²⁰ Scott L. Malcomson, “The Pure Land Beyond the Seas: Barthes, Burch and the Uses of Japan,” *Screen* 26, no. 3–4 (1985): 23–24.

effect of perpetuating in the forefront of the discourse around his book the critical question, here quoted from Diana Knight, “Does Barthes himself become an Orientalist exhibit for analysis?”²¹

The problem of “Barthes and Orientalism” or “Barthes and Asia,” to cite the titles of two important studies (in both the “and” could perhaps also be read as “vs.,” an oscillation that captures precisely what’s at stake here), thus inevitably hovers over any writing about Barthes’s engagement with Japan or its literature—including, as it turns out, that of the present essay as well.²² In what follows, my aim is not to delve deeper into this problem, certainly not to resolve it, but rather, taking cue from Barthes’s own vocabulary in *The Neutral*, to displace or baffle the question itself, to outplay it to some degree, by proposing to reframe it as a question about Barthes’s professionalism.



When Barthes invokes the model of the haiku in his Collège de France course, several years after the publication of *Empire of Signs*, he does so no longer from the perspective of writing *about* Japan, of interpreting or experiencing Japan, but from that of the project of “preparing” a novel. Beyond the question of representation, therefore, the Orientalist inflection of Barthes’s relation to the haiku might manifest itself here on the plane of praxis, as an acting out, or a pedagogical dramatization of sorts, of a certain logic of Orientalism. A concise example of this logic at work can in fact be found even in the short recap of the course’s task already quoted above:

Let’s now go back, little by little, to our initial task: how to pass from a fragmented Notation of the present (of which we’ve taken the haiku as the exemplary form) to a plan for a novel? That is: what, of haiku, can pass in(to) our Western thinking, our writing practice?²³

For—at least on a certain level of analysis—what is this gesture, this “task,” if not one of turning to the Oriental resource in order to capitalize on it, to put it into use for “our” purposes? Just as in the classic scheme of the Orientalist, it is a gesture extended from Europe eastward with the aim of utilizing the Eastern object for the interests of the first-person-plural Western subject (i.e., “our Western thinking, our writing practice”)—and in this case for the distinctly European, unmistakably French, project of writing a novel à la Proust. Within this kind of suspicious analysis, then, Barthes’s approach indeed seems to perform—or to provide a metaphor for—what Said describes as Orientalism’s “*elaboration* not only of a basic geographical distinction (the world is made up of two unequal halves, Orient and Occident [read: Haiku / Proust]) but also of a whole series of ‘interests’ [...] ; it is, rather than expresses, a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world.”²⁴

Yet, it is precisely on the plane of performance that this line of critique can be further complicated, recharged, unraveled even, by considering more closely the particular position that Barthes takes vis-à-vis his supposed Oriental resource, the haiku poem. In *Empire of Signs*, he

²¹ Diana Knight, “Barthes and Orientalism,” *New Literary History* 24, no. 3 (1993): 619. For a fuller account of the ongoing polemic around the question of Barthes’s Orientalism, see O’Meara, *Roland Barthes at the Collège de France*, 157, n3.

²² Knight, “Barthes and Orientalism”; Trinh T. Minh-Ha, “The Plural Void: Barthes and Asia,” trans. Stanley Gray, *SubStance* 11, no. 3, issue 36 (1982).

²³ Barthes, *Preparation of the Novel*, 90.

²⁴ Said, *Orientalism*, 12, his italics.

concludes one of the chapters on haiku by declaring, rather enigmatically, that the haiku “is spoken twice, in echo”:

To speak this exquisite language only once would be to attach a meaning to surprise, to effect, to the suddenness of perfection; to speak it many times would postulate that meaning is to be discovered in it, would simulate profundity; between the two, neither singular nor profound, the echo merely draws a line under the nullity of meaning.²⁵

With the kind of paradoxical flair that would be most characteristic of his writing in *The Neutral*, Barthes here draws a particularly strict rule—a poem should be read twice and twice only—that at the same time, like the haiku itself, has nonetheless a whiff of weightlessness to it, seeming effortlessly accessible and easy to follow, demanding very little of its addressees. Nominating, if somewhat arbitrarily, the precise number of desired haiku appearances (exactly two!), it undoes the pressure attached to any singular reading (which would turn the poem into something sacred, a revelation, a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence) while relieving the subject of the duty and labor of performing multiple, accumulating readings (which in turn would bestow the poem with a promise of inexhaustible depths of meaning). As Anne-Lise François, perhaps the most attentive reader of such “minimal affirmatives,” suggests, the notion of reading a haiku *just twice* evokes (again, like the haiku itself) a sense of “*justesse*”—barely yet positively justified by its own justness: “the second time, as second time, deprives the haiku of its exceptionality, confirms its ordinariness, while, as last time, it lets go of the illusion of a correctable obscurity or improvable illumination.”²⁶ You read it once, you read it twice—the second reading intended not to add anything but to liberate the first one—and that is it.

Consistent with the *raison d’être* of the entire book, the haiku is implicitly contrasted here with the Western text and its reliance on promises of meaning, depth, and endurance. But what is even more implicit in Barthes’s proposal is a scandalous undermining of one of the most foundational tenets of the discourse of literary criticism as we know it. To settle for reading a text just twice marks the conceptual limit of the very notion of Reading (or Interpretation or Hermeneutics) as it has been variously theorized throughout the past century, from psychoanalytic to Marxist criticisms, from Close Reading to deconstruction and their diverse political successors.²⁷ Whether in our classrooms or in our written works of interpretation, the gesture of letting go of a poem immediately after citing it for just the second time, of lightly setting it aside in order to nonchalantly yet happily move on, would seem bizarre and capricious, randomly abrupt. As a practice, the casual line-drawing that follows a second reading which itself is no more than an echo—with the line marking not finality and achievement but a sense of modest contentment, the indifferent relinquishment of the object, a light dropping of the pen—this sort of casual line-drawing is nigh unthinkable within the accepted methodologies of professional

²⁵ Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, 76.

²⁶ Anne-Lise François, “Late Exercises in Minimal Affirmatives,” in *Theory Aside*, ed. Jason Potts and Daniel Stout (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 39.

²⁷ In this sense, Barthes’s stance can be understood as foreshadowing the turn in twenty-first-century literary criticism to the non-possessive, unsuspecting attitude of such approaches as surface reading, post-critique, or uncritical reading. As François persuasively shows in “Late Exercises in Minimal Affirmatives,” however, this supposedly simple theoretical analogy is in fact quite problematic, and the ethos of the *Neutral*—like that of Sedgwick’s reparative reading—should be at least partially distinguished from the more complacent one of surface reading.

criticism, even in its most radical manifestations.²⁸ Indeed, it is unthinkable precisely because it is unprofessional.

The reading method implicitly developed in *Empire of Signs* in response to the minimal demands of the haiku—a very slight act of reading that by merely echoing itself takes away its own potential force while refusing any further development—would thus be considered naïve, unsophisticated, indeed *amateurish*, from the perspective of Western reading practices. However, in the *Preparation*, where Barthes brings his haikus into the Parisian lecture halls, he seems to move beyond this methodology and any amateurish discomfort it may induce by attaching a broader goal to the act of reading a haiku. At stake is no longer the meaning of the single poem. Rather, as we have seen, the haiku is transformed into a sort of resource whose particularities do not matter—only the essential form or lesson one can extract from it: “how to pass from a fragmented Notation of the present (of which we’ve taken the haiku as the exemplary form) to a plan for a novel? That is: what, of haiku, can pass in(to) our Western thinking, our writing practice?” And still, a general air of amateurism—and not just Orientalism—hovers over Barthes’s treatment of the haiku in the course as well. After all, Barthes, who dedicates most of the first semester (eight sessions out of thirteen) to teaching haikus, does not read or speak Japanese and has no formal training or any special expertise in Japanese literature. He reads the poems in translation, uses for the course’s primary materials a few popular French anthologies of Japanese poetry, and, when needed, provides the students with his own translations—which are doubly removed from the original, based as they are on already existing English versions of the Japanese primary sources. Indeed, when introducing the course’s approach to this subject, Barthes candidly describes the haiku as “what comes to me from a very foreign (very strange) language whose basic principles elude me,” and goes on to confess that it “still manages to touch me, interest me, enchant me (yet I’m in no position to check the translation, even from a distance).”²⁹ And what might seem most surprising, if not disturbing, from a professional point of view—that is, from the point of view of Literary Studies *as a profession*—is how unapologetic Barthes is about it all. In fact, he embraces this position, incorporating it into the course’s scheme: “I’m entirely in the hands of the translator, but he *doesn’t present an obstacle*”; “my concern is the haiku *for me*; me, a French subject who reads collections of translations (it’s the practice of this lecture course to always start from the *subject*: enunciating, reading).”³⁰ The practice of this course on haiku, in other words, whose professor is merely “a French subject who reads collections of translations,” has the unwitting effect of destabilizing the deeply ingrained etymological and semantic affinity between *professor* and *professionalism*, undermining the taken-for-grantedness of this association,

²⁸ Even when the idea of a second reading *is* theorized, as, for example, in Menakhem Perry’s “Literary Dynamics: How the Order of a Text Creates Its Meanings” (which, incidentally, was composed during the very same period of Barthes’s writing on Japan), this “second reading” is in fact a code name for an infinite, ever more accurate and exhaustive accumulation of more and more readings—the very opposite of the non-exhaustive, modest, and generous approach that Barthes wishes to entertain: “A second reading of a text,” Perry writes, “is a sort of conscious reconstruction of the naive reading. [...] The second reading is the one where the reader is not only *manipulated* by the rhetoric of the text, but can also *construct* the reader-oriented motivations. Each additional reading will narrow the gap between the reader of the text and the one describing it.” See Menakhem Perry, “Literary Dynamics: How the Order of a Text Creates Its Meanings,” *Poetics Today* 1, no. 1–2 (1979): 357.

²⁹ Barthes, *Preparation of the Novel*, 24.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 24, 28.

and imbuing the disposition of the former with a sense of what could be described as casual inexperience or professorial amateurism.³¹

II. AMATEURISM, SECOND APPROXIMATION: FORMS OF LIVING

Of course, what might have otherwise seemed pejorative—i.e., describing the methodology and pedagogy of a literary academic as amateurish—takes on a much more nuanced sense when it comes to someone like Roland Barthes, who, in his later years, though never conceptualizing it at length, confessed several times to the practical and theoretical appeal of amateurism. For, as Barthes remarks in the passage from *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* already cited above, the amateur embodies both a rejection of mastery and an embrace of love:

The Amateur (someone who engages in painting, music, sport, science, without the spirit of mastery or competition), the Amateur renews his pleasure (*amator*: one who loves and loves again); he is anything but a hero (of creation, of performance); he establishes himself *graciously* (for nothing) in the signifier.³²

Paradoxically, it is precisely the modesty—and graciousness—of that assessment that charges the figure of the amateur with a conceptual and critical force. The amateur may indeed be “anything but a hero (of creation, of performance),” in the sense that the amateur’s creation and performance are by definition amateurish, imperfect, unexceptional. Yet, at the same time, though on a slightly higher level of abstraction, the amateur may emerge not only as the actual hero of Barthes’s late pedagogical and theoretical experiments—but also, I wish to suggest, as the unheroic hero of our own troubled times.

My engagement with Barthes’s late work here thus participates in—and responds to—a contemporary resurgence of scholarly interest in amateurism, primarily within the fields of literary and critical studies, where the last few years have seen the publication of such titles as “Amateurism,” *The Amateur: The Pleasures of Doing What You Love*, “Obliteration: Toward an Amateur Criticism,” and *The Critic as Amateur*.³³ As all of these discussions demonstrate, with varying degrees of critical self-awareness, the notion of amateurism is almost always discursively caught up within a complex, multivariate, and deep-seated oppositional relation to that of

³¹ On this matter, too, Anne-Lise François is the critic most attuned to the lively nuances of Barthes’s amateurism, even if not naming it as such: “Everything in academic training,” she writes apropos of *The Neutral*, “prepares us to receive the seminar as the ‘work’ of the late Barthes, the anecdotal ramblings of a scholar who has earned his right to *be fanciful, to relax, even go to sleep on the job*—except that the power to sleep [...] emerges in the course of these thirteen weeks as a power, as a gift if not a talent or achievement, and not simply a lapse or checking out” (François, “Late Exercises in Minimal Affirmatives,” 50)—an insight that will continue to resonate through my own reading into the subtleties and potentialities of Barthes’s amateurism in the following sections of this essay.

³² Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, 52. For an excellent and comprehensive account of the meanings of the figure of the amateur for Barthes, and the practices and values that this figure has come to represent for him, see Adrien Chassain, “Roland Barthes: ‘Les pratiques et les valeurs de l’amateur’” [The practices and values of the amateur], *Fabula-LhT* 15, “‘Vertus passives’: une anthropologie à contretemps,” ed. Matthieu Vernet and Alexandre de Vitry, October 2015, <http://www.fabula.org/lht/15/chassain.html>. Though the conceptual aims and historical trajectories of the current essay are quite different than Chassain’s, my understanding of this figure in Barthes is to a large extent in line with his.

³³ Julia Bryan-Wilson and Benjamin Piekut, “Amateurism,” *Third Text* 34, no. 1 (2020): 1–21; Andy Merrifield, *The Amateur: The Pleasures of Doing What You Love* (London and New York: Verso, 2017); Melanie Micir and Aarthi Vadde, “Obliteration: Toward an Amateur Criticism,” *Modernism / modernity* 25, no. 3 (2018): 517–49; Aarthi Vadde and Saikat Majumdar, ed., *The Critic as Amateur* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

professionalism, in which, for the most part but not always, amateurism is located in the derogated, inferior pole.³⁴ What sometimes gets lost within this dualistic way of thinking, however, is the extent to which the very idea of amateur practice in fact forms itself around a core of self-containment, around a refusal of—or rather, indifference to—any claim about its own image or status. Amateurism, in its essence, cares much less about professionalism than professionalism feels threatened by amateurism.

If such a claim might sound counterintuitive, it is because the amateur's activity is often popularly yet misguidedly considered from the point of view of—and in comparison to—professional standards and agendas (amateurs, we are told, are not as good, not as capable, not as trained). But, as even the first sentence of Barthes's quick gloss on the amateur in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* makes clear, the amateur's motivation has to do more with pleasure and love than with expertise or achievement. Importantly, though, the invocation of the etymological source of *amateur* (“*amator*: one who loves and loves again”), while crucially defining the amateuristic pursuit as an ongoing operation of love, still leaves out an intriguing part of the term's significance in Latin, which, according to the OED, includes the senses of “lover, devoted friend, enthusiastic admirer.” Being an amateur involves the intensely charged affective dispositions of devotion and enthusiasm; it involves, in other words, *an active operation of desire*. Indeed, Barthes's simple yet apt description of the amateur as “someone who engages in painting, music, sport, science, without the spirit of mastery or competition” foreshadows the conceptualization a few years later in *The Neutral* of a paradoxical desire—“*le désir de Neutre*”—that, while animated by something like an active and persistent will, is nonetheless free from the competitive possessiveness and inherent conflictuality that are normally associated with desire; it is an “ardent, burning activity” that aspires rather “to outsmart mastery” and, like the amateur, turns it back on what Barthes terms *vouloir-saisir*, the “will-to-possess.”³⁵ In other words, to the extent that the amateur is driven by desire, it is, in its essence, a desire for the Neutral. Think, for example, of the avid amateur swimmer who jumps out of bed at 5 A.M. in order to swim a few laps before heading to work; of the amateur pianist who spends most of her evenings practicing classical pieces that she would only ever play for herself and perhaps some close family members and friends; of the amateur tennis player who dreams at night of forehands and backhands but not of making it to

³⁴ The main reason for that discursive effect is, of course, historical. While initially associated with the aristocratic privilege to invest resources in the leisurely pursuit of virtuous occupations that serve no external purpose or need, the idea of amateur practice has subsequently, following the Industrial Revolution and especially throughout the nineteenth century, gained a more fraught and controversial meaning. As Derek Attridge notes, “It wasn't long before [the term] was being used to make a distinction between those who carry out an activity as professionals and those who don't—and this distinction led to the possibility of a pejorative sense for the word and thence to the emergence in the second half of the nineteenth century of the distinctly derogatory term ‘amateurish.’ The more obvious the need for professional expertise in a particular activity, the stronger the criticism implied in calling someone an amateur” (Derek Attridge, “In Praise of Amateurism,” in Vadde and Majumdar, *The Critic as Amateur*, 31). See also Stephen Knott's succinct history of these developments in *Amateur Craft: History and Theory* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), especially xiii-xiv, where he describes how, in the nineteenth century, the emergence of higher levels of skill among amateur craftspeople was perceived as a threat to the professional classes and effectively sowed the seeds for “the dichotomization of amateur practice from professional practice as artisans, craftsmen and artists used the word amateur pejoratively to denote lack of commitment, poor skill and ineptitude rather than doing something for its own sake” (*ibid.*, xiv).

³⁵ Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977–1978)*, trans. Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 7, 10, 13.

Wimbledon's Centre Court; or of the amateur chess practitioner who uses his free time to memorize opening sequences yet has no aspirations of ever coming close to the level that this sport officially calls "Master." These amateurs certainly do not lack desire for what they do; what they do lack is precisely a sort of utility-driven, profit-oriented will to mastery. Their brand of amateurism resonates with Barthes's account of the Neutral as a "paradoxical category of discourses with no outcome; or, better, that do not censure effects but [also] do not care about results."³⁶ The amateur swimmers, pianists, or tennis players certainly do not censure effects, in the sense that they are not at all indifferent about their craft or activity. They do care about it, deeply. What they care less about is "results"—in the broad, utilitarian sense of the term; unlike the professional, they are not invested in their amateurish practices for any bottom line. What matters for them is something of a different order: the amateur ventriloquizes Barthes's announcement, "I quit the will-to-possess, I move in the will-to-live."³⁷

Indeed, in a different kind of essay, I could have perhaps made a convincing case for considering the amateur as the thirty-first figure of Barthes's Neutral. Within my purposes here, what this theoretical resonance makes possible is a rethinking of the difference between the amateur and the professional no longer only as a difference in expertise, training, institutional recognition, or socioeconomic positioning but also, as we have seen, as a difference in the very essence of their respective desires. When considered through the conceptual prism of desire, amateurism appears not as an inferior version of professionalism but rather as a freer, more liberated form of living. In the February 1975 interview in which he lays out his most sustained reflections on the amateur, Barthes explicitly associates the amateur's unique disposition with a liberatory horizon. "When I have the time, I paint or play music in the completely assumed role of a simple amateur," he tells his interlocutor, Jean-Jacques Brochier, before switching into a more theoretical idiom:

The enormous benefit of the amateur's situation is that it involves no image-repertoire, no narcissism. When one draws or paints as an amateur, there is no preoccupation with the *imago*, the image one will project of oneself in making the drawing or painting. It's thus a liberation, I would almost say a liberation from civilization. To be included in a utopia à la Fourier. A civilization where people would act without being preoccupied with the image of themselves they will project to others.³⁸

The rhetorical maneuver that Barthes employs in this paragraph, beginning with the personal ("When I have the time, I paint or play") and generalizing it into the theoretical ("The enormous benefit of the amateur's situation"), is in itself not at all uncommon. More intriguing, in this case, is the casualness with which it turns a "situation" that is principally self-contained and uninterested in its own image—and, importantly, uninterested in projecting itself outwards—into the basis of a projected new social order (which is necessarily collective, shared, and relational): a new "civilization." Indeed, as I argue below, the nonchalance with which Barthes formulates theoretically this utopian horizon would need to be critically reassessed. For now, however, it is important to note that a little later in the interview Barthes reiterates this utopian vision in slightly different terms, casting it along a historic arc: "History has its repercussions, its mishaps, that famous bell curve familiar to statisticians. There have been periods of alienation (monarchical or even feudal

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 14, translation modified.

³⁸ Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice*, 216–17.

societies) where there was a real amateurism in the heart of the ruling classes. What we should do is find that amateurism again elsewhere than in the ‘elite’ of society.”³⁹ If there is a politics of the amateur, then, or rather if there is a sense in which the figure of the amateur is inscribed in the political, it would manifest itself in a search through the social fabric for historically determined forms of amateurism.

Yet while Barthes, reflecting on these matters in 1975, sums up his answer by observing that “at present, we’re at a bit of a low point on the curve,” today we may contend that *at our present*, we are simultaneously at a higher and lower point. Precisely at the height of the neoliberal age of the pervasive professionalization of everything, the question of the amateur reintroduces itself in a particularly pressing and paradoxical manner. The social reality of the COVID pandemic, the reality of lockdowns and isolations, which for extended stretches of time radically thwarted the seemingly ever-accelerating, unstoppable rhythms of work on a global scale, introduced a new (or rather, newly perceived) form of “idle time” into the fabric of everyday life (thus calling, as Yoav Ronel convincingly argues, for a renewed inquiry, “more urgent than ever,” into “the relation between idleness, liberation and work”⁴⁰). But at the same time—and in relation to the same emptying up of time—the world under COVID has also seen the emergence of an unprecedented availability—and democratization—of amateurish possibilities. In the tightly entangled, unresolved dialectics of work and idleness, of fullness and emptiness of time, an intimate and familiar mode of amateur desire freshly re-presented itself as a form of activity that resembles yet differentiates itself from both (unlike idleness, it is enthusiastically and fully active; unlike work, it is purposeless and unconcerned with results). One of the effects of the COVID era is, in other words, that it unearthed for many people—in many people—an amateur potential: a potential to be amateur in *something*, to engage with amateurish forms of life that have become more visibly available just as many other forms of living—social, familial, or work-related—were being suspended. For what has been fleshed out during the past couple of years is a sort of tacit social presumption that we all *can* (that is, have the potential to), if we want to, take up such amateurish undertakings as, for example, baking, drawing, knitting, Pilates, calisthenics, juggling, home gardening, making home-made ice cream, playing the guitar. This vastly expandable catalog is intended here not as a tongue-in-cheek parody of what is sometimes perceived as the shallowness of our ideologies of leisure, but rather as a serious critical observation about the changing balance between our principal professional occupations and the many potential amateurisms that are available to us all around. What is becoming clearer from a contemporary perspective is that, at least on the plane of potentiality if not on that of praxis, we are always already amateurs.

On a slightly more abstract level of conceptualization, amateurism may appear as a problem of exercising potential in yet another—and more intrinsic—sense. Indeed, a quick gloss at the theoretical interface between the activity of the amateur and the notion of potentiality would allow for a fuller understanding of the ways in which the idea of amateurism mitigates not only the force of desire but also the question of what it means to possess an ability or a skill. When, in his seminal essay “On Potentiality,” Giorgio Agamben wants to introduce the ontological problem posed by any fulfillment of a potential, he does so by way of a simple example that may have resonated with a subject like Roland Barthes: “The actuality of the potentiality to play

³⁹ Ibid., 217–18.

⁴⁰ Yoav Ronel, “Avodat ha-batala: Hasachat da’at, shvita, potentzialiyut” [Idle work: Diversion, strike, potentiality], *Teoria u-viqoret* [Theory and criticism] 53 (2020): 72, 94.

the piano is the performance of a piece for the piano; but what is the actuality of the potentiality to not-play?⁴¹ This question leads to a theoretically intricate consideration of the moment of transition from potential to the act, an analysis that relies on the famous insight, articulated earlier in the essay, that “all potentiality is impotentiality.”⁴² To put it simply, within Agamben’s Aristotelian philosophy of potentiality, a potential to do this or that thing, that is, having the knowledge or ability necessary to do a particular thing, means first and foremost having a potential to not-do that very thing. With Barthes, however, the potential to play the piano actualizes itself in a rather tentative manner that, theoretically, somewhat displaces the critical gist of the question of fulfillment:

I studied piano when I was a child. My father’s sister, who lived in Bayonne, was a piano teacher. And so I lived in an atmosphere of music. But I haven’t studied since, I have no technique, no speed. I did learn to read music at an early age, and my fingers follow as best they can. So I can sight-read music, but I don’t really know how to play. Which is fine for amateur playing.⁴³

This candid description of the amateur potential as consisting of limited, incomplete ability and knowledge — “I have no technique, no speed. [...] I can sight-read music, but I don’t really know how to play” — unwittingly reproduces the core concepts of the Agambenian theory of potentiality while sidestepping the foundational ontological problem of (im)potentiality in favor of a lower-stakes, more mundane, and less decisive articulation of what it means to be able to do something. If, for Agamben, the underlying motivation of his work is “to understand the meaning of the verb ‘can.’ What do I mean when I say: ‘I can, I cannot?’⁴⁴ — with the amateur, the question is no longer one of a strict difference between “can” and “cannot,” but of allowing for varying positive degrees of “can.” When the amateur says “I can” (I can play the piano, I can play tennis, I can bake homemade bread), they certainly *can* do these things but, perhaps, not so well, not perfectly, not expertly. Thus, another way to account for the conceptual affinities and differences between idleness and amateurism is through their respective relations to the concept of potentiality: while idleness is in its essence an exercise of a potential not to act, of an “I can not,” amateurism, much more actively, involves a problematization and mitigation of what is meant by the claim “I can”: “I can sight-read music,” says the amateur Barthes, “but I don’t really know how to play” (and yet, as he admits elsewhere, “*I play the piano every day*, at about the same time: 2:30 in the afternoon”).⁴⁵ The amateur in this case has just enough knowledge, just enough ability, to be able to play the piano every day even though he doesn’t *really* know how to play. Amateurism, then, implies a measure of enoughness: the amateur exists and acts within the range of the “good enough.” And so, bridging the two senses of potentiality, we may now say that what our contemporary era unveils is the accessibility of a potentiality for amateurism which is in fact *a potentiality for potentiality*, an ability to gain enough ability to do a thing — *some* thing — even and precisely if only amateurishly.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Giorgio Agamben, “On Potentiality,” in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 183.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 182.

⁴³ Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice*, 217.

⁴⁴ Agamben, “On Potentiality,” 177.

⁴⁵ Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice*, 180.

⁴⁶ In stricter theoretical terms, the two senses of potentiality discussed in the previous two paragraphs correspond to the two kinds that Agamben describes, following Aristotle, as *generic potentiality* (“the one that

There is, however, another side to the apparent flourishing of amateurism today. The widespread availability of amateur potentialities is countered in our present-day reality by at least two vectors of containment that threaten to draw the amateurish praxis back into the all-too-familiar, utility-driven, profit-inducing mechanisms of late capitalism. On one level—in which the amateur appears as also a consumer—many fields of amateur activity gradually evolve into something like a specialized “industry” or “market” (involving training programs, specially manufactured gear and equipment, clubs, competitions, merchandise). On another, and perhaps more critically charged level—in which the amateur appears in a role closer to that of a producer or entrepreneur—there have emerged in recent years increasingly growing opportunities for many amateurs to make a living, or at least some profit, out of their amateurish hobbies. With the advent of side-hustle culture, which targets precisely the economically elusive, essentially non-utilitarian and nonproductive realm of amateur activities, the subjects of neoliberalism are consistently encouraged to monetize their hobbies.

Such contradictions around the (un)availability of amateurism are brought into sharp relief in a recent piece published in *The Walrus* magazine under the title “Why Don’t Millennials Have Hobbies?” This offers a firsthand account of what we can now term the contemporary impasses of being amateur. While her main argument concerns the impact of social networks—Instagram in particular—on the ways in which young people today manage their leisure time (and, ultimately, their selves), the author, Alisha Sawhney, a self-described millennial, also documents in the process the trials of becoming an amateur in our times. “In the first several months of the pandemic,” writes Sawhney, she turned to Instagram trends in order to deal with what she experienced as an “identity crisis”: “I started by aggressively completing an adult colouring book while everyone around me made body-shaped candles. [...] While these activities captured the zeitgeist of the pandemic—especially in those early months—I allowed myself to believe that in the midst of those hours between solving puzzles and baking bread, my hobby would miraculously turn up.”⁴⁷ Despite the somewhat parodic, self-deprecating tone, this account does attest to a particularly democratic zeitgeist of amateurish potentiality; and, as we find out toward the end of the article, a serious hobby did eventually turn up for her:

During my identity crisis over the past two years, I’ve become a cyclist—because it’s not enough to enjoy cycling, I must *be* a cyclist. In the fall of 2020, I ordered a lavender beach cruiser on Amazon. My best friend came over and helped me assemble the bike, which became my *raison d’être* in real life and online. I tracked my progress on Strava and photographed my fall rides every day for thirty days—both of which I regularly shared on my Instagram profile.⁴⁸

What this description adds to my previous account of the precarity of amateurism as a practice of love and desire is the ways in which, in the age of social media, amateur activities, prone as they are to becoming thoroughly entangled in a culture of consumerism (“I ordered a lavender beach

is meant when we say, for example, that a child has the potential to know,” i.e., a potentiality that is attained through learning) and, in contrast, as *existing potentiality*, the potentiality that “belongs to someone who, for example, [already] has knowledge or ability” (Agamben, “On Potentiality,” 179). My argument above can thus be rephrased as a suggestion that today’s reality foregrounds a widely accessible *generic* potentiality to attain *existing* (*amateurish*) potentialities, that is, to attain enough knowledge or ability to do things as amateurs.

⁴⁷ Alisha Sawhney, “Why Don’t Millennials Have Hobbies?” *The Walrus*, August 19, 2022, <https://thewalrus.ca/why-dont-millennials-have-hobbies>.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

cruiser on Amazon”), at the same time turn into a means of online self-promotion and identity formation (“which became my *raison d’être* in real life and online”). But if “millennials don’t have hobbies”—a fact that the article’s title seems to take for granted—it is not only because amateur pursuits are mediated through Instagram and other social apps but also because they are, as I pointed out earlier, readily drawn into the actual market:

As a cohort, we’re constantly being told to have side hustles—*masked as hobbies*—in order to have multiple streams of income in today’s gig economy. It can be hard to foster new skills that have nothing to do with a pay cheque when we’re constantly being told we’ll never afford a house. [...] If the purpose of a hobby is to fulfill me outside of my professional life, how can I attain some level of satisfaction—or, better yet, happiness—without the pressure of needing to monetize it looming over me? [...] For proof, look no further than Etsy, where you can find local artisans selling everything from wedding face masks to seed kits.⁴⁹

Thus, in her attempt to understand “Why Don’t Millennials Have Hobbies?” Sawhney chronicles a personal and generational proclivity for finding “my hobby” that inevitably leads, paradoxically, to the dissolution of the very amateurish core of that hobby—a historical state of affairs in which amateurism’s conditions of possibility seem to be expanding and narrowing simultaneously. Against the ever more variegated, sophisticated, and widely distributed forms of making money in today’s capitalist economy, the amateur option keeps slipping away.

When Barthes, speaking in 1975, suggests that “when one draws or paints as an amateur, there is no preoccupation with the *imago*, the image one will project of oneself in making the drawing or painting,” he cannot envision the existence of a platform such as Etsy (or Instagram for that matter) which offers the amateur subject not only the immediate projection outward of his or her image *as a painter* but also the potential materialization and monetization of that image—which, once established, robs the amateur of his or her essence of amateurism. What was possible and even taken for granted for a subject like Barthes (“When I have the time, I paint or play music in the completely assumed role of a simple amateur”) is far less attainable for a subject such as Alisha Sawhney. For the flipside of what appears today as an unprecedented availability of amateur activity is an imminent threat to the vulnerable, nonproductive, amorous core that defines amateurism as a modern form of life. It is in this sense that we are positioned today at both the high and low points of Barthes’s “curve.” Barthes’s utopia, as a civilization of amateurs, is thus, in a sense, both already here and already lost—which, ultimately, preserves it as a horizon of desire and potentiality and renews the stakes of a historical-critical search to “find that amateurism again elsewhere.”



Still, to the extent that it is achievable, how does amateurism feel? And how should we feel about it? As many contemporary accounts of the amateur rightfully warn, any writing “in praise of amateurism,” to cite the title of an insightful recent essay by Derek Attridge, should nowadays proceed with particular caution. Attridge himself singles out the “mistrust of the expert” as one of the alarming byproducts of the prizing of the amateur and asserts that “this mistrust was disastrously evident in the campaign in favor of Brexit [...] and similar rejections of available knowledge have proved politically useful on a number of other occasions around the world, not

⁴⁹ Ibid., my italics.

least in the most recent US presidential campaign [i.e., 2016] as well as in denials of the human responsibility for climate change.⁵⁰ In their introduction to a special issue of *Third Text* on amateurism, Julia Bryan-Wilson and Benjamin Piekut similarly announce that they “want to resist the tempting lure of only celebrating the amateur,” as “amateurism has been recruited for various ideological purposes, put to work for contradictory agendas,” and point out specifically how “Donald Trump’s amateurism in governance betrays a contempt for knowledge, skill, expertise and craft.”⁵¹ Derek R. Ford, too, in his review of Andy Merrifield’s *The Amateur*, remarks that “as I type these words a bigoted real estate mogul and boss—but amateur politician—sits at the head of the US government.”⁵² And Aarthi Vadde and Saikat Majumdar sound a similar alarming note when they open their introduction to the volume *The Critic as Amateur* by acknowledging that “we are living in a great age of anger, mistrust, and vengeance against professional experts and the institutions that shelter them,” while professing that their “collection turns to the critic as amateur not to endorse the backlash against experts but to recover a story of literary study and institutional crossover that might combat it.”⁵³ The age of COVID, with its influx of conspiracy theories and extreme populist ideologies that rely on the “mistrust of the expert,” has of course only heightened the urgency and relevance of these cautionary signposts for any serious account of the amateur.

But while many of these studies grapple with this problem precisely because at the heart of their analyses lies the charged appearance of amateurism in the public or political sphere, my Barthesian inquiry here into the stakes of the amateur is from the outset far less interested in mobilizing this figure as a foil for resisting or challenging the power and authority of professionals. After all, the Neutral (read: the amateur) is the discourse of “the other of conflict, of paradigm”—that is, the other of antagonisms and power struggles.⁵⁴ Rather, I propose to think of amateurism as a personal yet widely distributed lived experience, a post-capitalist mode of action that, as already hinted above, shares with various forms of idleness a liberating sense of release from the purposefulness, competitiveness, and relentlessness of the neoliberal life while it is nonetheless being animated by an intense—“devoted,” “enthusiastic”—operation of desire. As such, it might be experienced as a benign form of the affective agitation associated nowadays with participating in professional work. For being an amateur means not only doing something in the name of pleasure—it also means doing it *like* a professional. To some extent, as any amateur would admit, it involves an imitation of professionalism. And, consequently, it involves *feeling like a professional*: the amateur too may endure the fear of failure, the anxiety of competition, the imposed imperatives of self-improvement, the frustration of stagnation, the triumph of achievement—except that for the amateur these affects are necessarily and benignly checked, dissociated from any material, financial, or social weightiness.

What lends a critical edge to the categorization of amateurism as a post-capitalist mode of living is therefore not only the fact that it positions itself outside of established systems of production and profit, but also—and more interestingly—the way that it re-creates in a mitigated fashion the affective experiences of life and work under late capitalism. Thus, for example, while

⁵⁰ Attridge, “In Praise of Amateurism,” 32.

⁵¹ Julia Bryan-Wilson and Benjamin Piekut, “Amateurism,” 20.

⁵² Derek R. Ford, review of Andy Merrifield’s *The Amateur: The Pleasures of Doing What You Love*, *Antipode Online*, April 24, 2019, <https://antipodeonline.org/2019/04/24/the-amateur-the-pleasures-of-doing-what-you-love/>.

⁵³ Aarthi Vadde and Saikat Majumdar, “Introduction: Criticism for the Whole Person,” in *The Critic as Amateur*, 1.

⁵⁴ Barthes, *The Neutral*, 8.

it is certainly possible to imagine circumstantial scenarios in which an attachment to an amateurish practice constitutes the sort of dynamics that Lauren Berlant famously described as “cruel optimism,”⁵⁵ within amateurism’s internal logic (as a discourse with “no outcome” that “does not care about results”), both the optimism and the cruelty that it may induce would appear in a muted, lightened—and, in a sense, liberated—version. From a materialistic perspective, the consequential horizon of what our amateurish activities can do for us is limited—but so is that of what, negatively, it can do *to us*. Amateurism in its pure form restages the neoliberal oft-tragic affective drama as its own lower-stakes comedic adaptation. All this, finally, allows us to revisit Barthes’s idea of the amateur’s “liberation from civilization,” which can now be understood as operating also along an affective axis—albeit in a mode of operation much more fitting of the Neutral: that is, not necessarily as a promise of total liberation but as a modest alleviation, even bafflement, of normalized ways of feeling. For amateurism charts a uniquely paradoxical affective landscape; as a category of attachment it is experienced simultaneously as both unimportant and the most important thing in the world.

III. WHAT CAN AMATEURISM DO?

By this point it should, I hope, be quite clear that any assessment of Barthes’s supposed unprofessionalism in his treatment of haiku, to which I have drawn attention earlier in this essay, would be remiss if it disregarded the continued provocation of his own affirmative account of amateurism. Indeed, in his thoughtful contribution to the volume *The Critic as Amateur*, Attridge has already suggested that Barthes’s “utopian vision of the supremacy of amateurism is an appealing picture that is worth adapting for reading practices.”⁵⁶ Barthes, as both Attridge and the editors of that collection convincingly assert, can help us locate an “amateur impulse” within the professional practices of modern literary critics and professors. But what is most interesting about Barthes’s amateurish academic performances is not, in my opinion, the general path they open for yet another problematization of the ideology of professionalism. Rather, it is the particularities of his amateurish readings and teachings of haiku—the fact that they are *of haiku*—that allow for a further theorization of the insignificant, far-reaching stakes of the amateur.

My intention in this final section of my essay is therefore to bring together more explicitly the two accusations that may be rightfully leveled against Barthes—the two pejoratives, “Orientalist” and “amateur”—in order to rethink, by qualifying the former with the latter, the political horizons of his turn eastward. The obvious backdrop of this suggestion—that is, of thinking about Barthes’s Orientalism as tainted by amateurism—is the well-known premise that, as Said repeatedly emphasizes, Orientalism is a discourse of professionals, designating “a kind of intellectual *authority* over the Orient within Western culture [...]. Even the name *Orientalism* suggests a serious, perhaps ponderous style of expertise.”⁵⁷ In fact, Said himself, in a lecture titled “Professionals and Amateurs,” delivered as the fourth installment of his 1993 Reith Lectures on “Representation of the Intellectual,” has already lauded the position of the amateur intellectual as a model for a more conscientious, independent, and freewheeling brand of intellectualism,

⁵⁵ A relation of cruel optimism exists, writes Berlant, “when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially.” See Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 1.

⁵⁶ Attridge, “In Praise of Amateurism,” 41.

⁵⁷ Said, *Orientalism*, 19.

against and in spite of the trends of increased professionalization and specialization in academia: “The intellectual today ought to be an amateur, someone who considers that to be a thinking and concerned member of a society one is entitled to raise moral issues at the heart of even the most technical and professionalized activity as it involves one’s country, its power, its mode of interacting with its citizens as well as with other societies.”⁵⁸ As Merrifield declares in his sweeping manifesto for amateurism today, citing Said’s defiant amateur intellectual as a main source of inspiration, “Amateurs uphold ideas that oppose professional authority. [...] An amateur is more likely to be someone who rocks the boat. He or she isn’t on anybody’s payroll and never will be.”⁵⁹ For Barthes, however, who, as we have seen, had been *performing* intellectual amateurism long before Said formulated these ideas in his Reith lectures, what’s at stake in being an amateur is not at all related to the pathos of attaining a higher moral or political ground, stirring audiences “into outright opposition” or mobilizing them “into greater democratic participation in the society.” If anything—apart from love, pleasure, and desire—at stake is an attenuation of politics (i.e., of *la politique*).

Earlier in this essay I suggested that Barthes’s turn to haiku in *The Preparation* can be readily understood as a dramatization of an Orientalist logic at work, a power move of utilizing the Eastern poetic object for the interests of a decidedly Western project. But, in light of the air of unfulfillment that seems to gradually take over Barthes’s writing plan in this course, in light of the Neutral’s denouncement of any *vouloir-saisir*, and, above all, in light of Barthes’s personal, theoretical, and pedagogical appeals to amateurism and his vision of the amateur’s liberation—this Orientalist gesture too can be mitigated and alleviated, indeed liberated. Citing the following paragraph for a third and last time—

Let’s now go back, little by little, to our initial task: how to pass from a fragmented Notation of the present (of which we’ve taken the haiku as the exemplary form) to a plan for a novel? That is: what, of haiku, can pass in(to) our Western thinking, our writing practice?⁶⁰

—we can perhaps read in it now not only the typical arrogance of Orientalist entitlement but also a lingering sense of doubt, an insistence to formulate everything under the aegis of the question mark, a willingness to be satisfied with receiving from haiku no more than what it can give us (note the active tense: “what, of haiku, can pass...” *qu’est-ce qui, du haïku, peut passer...*) rather than insisting on getting from it everything we want or need, and, also, an acknowledgment of haiku’s independence from Barthes’s own project, as well as from the ranges of his knowledge, expertise, or authority. Even in *The Preparation*, then, it seems, Barthes maintains something of the fleetingness that characterized his earlier dealings with haiku, the lightness of reading a poem just twice, no more than twice: a reading, its echo, and that’s it. Barthes’s amateurism as a professor—as a teacher and reader—thus somehow loosens the very core of his Orientalism, tracing, at the very moment in which he exercises his supposed professional distinction by

⁵⁸ Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 82–83. “Every intellectual,” Said adds, “has an audience and a constituency. The issue is whether that audience is there to be satisfied, and hence a client to be kept happy, or whether it is there to be challenged, and hence stirred into outright opposition or mobilized into greater democratic participation in the society. But in either case, there is no getting around authority and power, and no getting around the intellectual’s relationship to them. How does the intellectual address authority: as a professional supplicant or as its unrewarded, amateurish conscience?” *Ibid.*, 83.

⁵⁹ Merrifield, *The Amateur: The Pleasures of Doing What You Love*, 15–16.

⁶⁰ Barthes, *Preparation of the Novel*, 90.

teaching or interpreting haikus, a simultaneous gesture of retreat from any position of control, authority, or possession over the object or its meaning.

Here, then, the celebrated liberation associated with amateurism manifests itself as also a liberation from the claims of knowledge. An amateur Orientalist, Barthes's encounter with the East and its literature relinquishes the will-to-possess in favor of a will to let go and let live. It is characterized by the kind of graciousness toward the other that the amateur reader nonchalantly exhibits (the amateur "establishes himself graciously in the signifier") but with respect to which the professional would always fall short. To regard a haiku just twice is to be content with knowing it precisely to the degree of knowledge that two readings (and two readings only) may allow. In one of the more well-known passages in *Orientalism*, Said writes: "Perhaps the most important task of all would be to undertake studies in contemporary alternatives to Orientalism, to ask how one can study other cultures and peoples from a libertarian, or a nonrepressive and nonmanipulative, perspective. But then one would have to rethink the whole complex problem of knowledge and power." Amateurism—not as a rocking-the-boat kind of rebelliousness but as the gracious contentment of a practice with mitigated claims or outcomes—may emerge not only as a site of release from the pressures of the neoliberal life but also as a potential for a post-Orientalist alternative for encountering alterity, one that perhaps can at least destabilize the seemingly unavoidable Orientalist impasse of the sort that Barthes tries and fails to bypass in the first pages of *Empire of Signs*. For amateurism—*amateur Orientalism*—while not shying away from the encounter and, importantly, not renouncing knowledge, embodies also a liberation from the arrogance of the normative need to know it all, to know as much as possible. Amateurism, as epistemology, wants but does not demand to know. It names, in its uniquely amateurish way, both a form of desire with no possessiveness and a form of knowledge without power.



To strike and maintain the nuanced balance of the amateur Orientalist position—or, to put it more generally, of amateurism as a form of knowledge and thought—is no doubt a difficult, elusive, perhaps impossible task: to assume an amateurish ethical and political disposition in face of otherness might indeed be experienced as an unsustainable effort within a relentless, reiterative, and constantly positioning discourse of *la politique*. In this, it in fact echoes the contemporary instability of the analogous modality of amateurism—amateurism as a praxis and a form of living—which, as we have seen, in our age finds itself in constant danger of being dragged into and implicated in the looming stranglehold of professionalization that epitomizes the neoliberal condition. But such, ultimately, has always been the fate of the Neutral. As Barthes remarks in the very first session of his course apropos of the untenability of the neutral position, "We'll have to hold on to the unsustainable for thirteen weeks: after that, it will fade"; and it is under this premise that he launches his provocatively modest search for "figures" of the Neutral, as fragments "not *on* the Neutral but in which, more vaguely, there is *some* Neutral."⁶¹ The unassuming, non-exhaustive force of the "*there is some . . .*" typifies a final, roundabout lesson that we can perhaps draw from Barthes's late thought for what amateurism can do. Barthes's own vision of "a society to come, completely de-alienated, that would no longer know anything except amateur activity on the level of writing," or of a civilization of amateurs "where people would act without being preoccupied with the image of themselves," imbued as it is with the grand, totalizing

⁶¹ Barthes, *The Neutral*, 13, 10, my italics.

rhetoric of utopianism, could thus be mitigated as well, if not set aside, in favor of a practical and conceptual search, in our own reality and our own times, for sites of action and thought in which *there is some amateurism*. Here, in the humble emancipatory promises of such a search, lies the personal and political pull of the amateur possibility today. If, in other words, there is a contemporary utopian horizon to the idea of amateurism, it manifests itself in a way fitting the very modesty—but also the great appeal and undeniable force—of amateurism itself: in an insistent yet non-appropriative willingness to amateurize some of the ways in which we act, think, read, and relate. A