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Title

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Journal

TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World, 6(1)

ISSN

2154-1353

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Publication Date

2016

DOI

10.5070/T461030924

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Peer reviewed

Contemplating José Watanabe's Poetic Eyethrough Roland Barthes's Photographic Eye

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Abstract

In contemplation, gazing on his surroundings, José Watanabe's eye serves as his principal instrument for finding exact words and executing their use with precision. Watanabe searches for the precision of a word through his gaze, but it is paradoxically his gaze through which the precision of a word becomes imprecise and impossible to be attained. This study, first, attempts to show that paradoxical phenomena emerge as a result of the presentation of the apparition of a precise image and its simultaneous disappearance. Then, it explores how and why the simultaneous disappearance of precision can be understood as a way for Watanabe to reveal the unattainableness of the "reality" that he tries to project through precision. Studying Roland Barthes's concept of photographic temporality, one can see a certain resonance between Barthes's understanding of "reality" projected on a photograph and Watanabe's approach to the representation of "reality" in a poem. Barthes's concept of photographic temporality exposes the simultaneous co-presence of the existence and death of a subject in a photograph. Applying Barthes's observation of the co-presence of existence and death in a photograph to the exploration of the simultaneous apparition of *both* precision *and* imprecision in Watanabe's poetry can be useful for looking closely into how he reveals the impossibility of projecting the precision of the "reality" that he endeavors to capture in his poetry.

Las palabras no nos reflejan como los espejos, así exactamente,
pero quisiera.

Escribo con una pregunta obsesiva en las orejas:
¿Es esta la palabra exacta o es el amague de otra
que viene

no más bella sino más especular?

Por esta inseguridad

tarjo,

toda la noche tarjo, y en el espejo que aún porfío
sólo queda una figura borrosa, mutilada, malograda.

(José Watanabe, "Los versos que tarjo," *El buso de la palabra*)¹

Introduction: José Watanabe's paradoxical gaze

In contemplation, gazing on his surroundings, José Watanabe's eye serves as his principal instrument for finding exact words and executing their use with precision. Colombian writer Darío Jaramillo Agudelo draws attention to Watanabe's gaze in his prologue to Watanabe's *Poesía completa* (2008), a poetry collection published a year after the poet's death:

El ojo de este hombre sabía hablar. Esto es autoevidente, brota de por sí leyendo sus poemas. . . . Hay mirada, sí, pero no necesariamente hay fotografía. Los ojos de este poeta ven cosas que la cámara no capta, la visión no es sólo atributo de la mirada, una visión como de banderas detrás de la niebla, como una rendija que rasga las apariencias.

. . .

Lo que busca el poeta es la fidelidad de la palabra con el ojo, la palabra justa. En *Los versos que tarjo* usa un verbo poco frecuente, tarjar—por tachar—para explayarse sobre la necesidad que tiene el poeta de algo imposible como es la palabra exacta. (9-10)

“The faithfulness of a word” can be interpreted as the precision of a word, and the “precision” generally indicates exactness and accuracy,² as in a reflection of a thing or person in a photograph or mirror. However, Agudelo indicates that Watanabe's “precision” does not exhibit a photographic or mirror-like exactness and accuracy, because the precise image he tries to capture becomes imprecise and blurry through his gaze (9-10). Watanabe searches for the precision of a word through his gaze, but it is paradoxically his gaze through which the precision of a word becomes imprecise and impossible to be attained.

Watanabe's contemplations have been explored as his technique to create the sensibility of *haiku* in his poetry.³ However, an exploration of his poetry *only* through the studies on the techniques of *haiku* tends to be too limited to see more deeply into the paradoxical phenomenon arising in the process of Watanabe's search for precision.⁴ This study, first, attempts to show that paradoxical phenomena emerge as a result of the presentation of the apparition of a precise image and its simultaneous disappearance. Then, it explores how and why the simultaneous disappearance of precision can be understood as a way for Watanabe to reveal the unattainableness of the “reality” that he tries to project through precision. Studying Roland Barthes's concept of photographic temporality, one can see a certain resonance between Barthes's understanding of “reality” projected

on a photograph and Watanabe's approach to the representation of "reality" in a poem. Barthes's concept of photographic temporality exposes the simultaneous co-presence of the existence and death of a subject in a photograph. Applying Barthes's observation of the co-presence of existence and death in a photograph to the exploration of the simultaneous apparition of *both* precision *and* imprecision in Watanabe's poetry can be useful for looking closely into how he reveals the impossibility of projecting the precision of the "reality" that he endeavors to capture in his poetry.

Roland Barthes's concept of photographic temporality

In his last book, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980; trans. 1981), Barthes introduces two Latin terms, *studium* and *punctum*, to show what photographs can project to the viewer and how the viewer reacts to certain photographs.⁵ The *studium* refers to the meanings of photographs arising from "general interest," "an *average* affect," and "emotion [that] requires the rational intermediary of an ethical and political culture" (26) and leads to a "unary" and "coded" interpretation that matches "the photographer's intentions" (27, 40-41, 51). The *punctum*, on the other hand, induces personal and individual emotions or meanings that "rise[s] from the scene, shoot[s] out of it like an arrow, and pierces [the viewer]" (26). Barthes refers to the *punctum* as an unexpected "wound," "prick," or "mark" (punctuation) with "sensitive points" (26-27): "[F]or *punctum* is also: sting, speck, cult, little hole—and a cast of the dice. A photograph's *punctum* is that accident ("the detail") which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)" (27).

Although Barthes, in "Part One" of the book, seems to treat the *punctum* as something distinguished and separated from the *studium*, he, in "Part Two," realizes that every photograph has *both* the *punctum* and the *studium* (94-96):

I thought I could distinguish a field of cultural interest (the *studium*) from that unexpected flash which sometimes crosses this field and which I called the *punctum*.

I now know that there exists another *punctum* (another "stigmatum") than the "detail."

This new *punctum*, which is no longer of form but of intensity, is Time, the lacerating emphasis of the *noeme* ("that-has-been"), its pure representation. (94-96)

The *punctum* arises when what a photograph shows ("what-it-is") evokes simultaneously the sense of time of *both* "that-has-been" (the past) *and* "that-will-be" (the future in the past). Barthes, through the photograph of his mother (the Winter Garden Photograph), which *pricks* him most intensely,

illustrates how the *punctum*, the intensity of time looming out of the *studium*, pierces him: “In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder . . . *over a catastrophe which has already occurred*. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe” (96).

Geoffrey Batchen, in his study “*Camera Lucida: Another Little History of Photography*,” drawing attention to the complexity of this inseparable relationship between the *studium* and the *punctum*, asserts that “every photograph, no matter what its subject matter, speaks both of ‘what-has-been’ and also of the catastrophe of death in the future” (268). Because of the inseparability of the *studium* and the *punctum*, what a photograph shows to the viewer at the present moment (“what-it-is”) always already exists with (is haunted by) the times of “what-has-been” and “what-will-be.” In other words, “what-it-is” (present) does not exist independently separated from “what-has-been” (past) and “what-will-be” (future), but travels between the latter two time tenses.

Barthes’s understanding of this photographic temporality underscores the paradoxical representation that a photograph instigates. On the one hand, what is represented on a photograph gives the viewer the impression that the subject actually exists and is real at the present moment, yet at the same time, the photograph reminds the viewer that the subject *has existed* somewhere and sometime in the past and that it has been dead since then (79, 96). Thus looking at the photograph at the present moment, the viewer is reminded again that the subject will die or disappear in the future (96).

This co-presence of existence and death disturbs the “reality” of the subject that a photographer attempts to project, not because the future death makes the subject completely disappear from the photograph, but because the photographer can no longer hold the existence of the subject in one space and time as he or she has attempted to capture. The subject’s existence is always accompanied by his or her death, while the feeling of death is provoked by the existence of the subject. What a photograph shows, according to Barthes, is the movement of this time passing between the existence and death, and it is this photographic temporality that reveals a conflictive relationship between the coded interpretations of the “reality” of a photographed subject and the “realities” behind the coded interpretations. At the end of *Camera Lucida*, Barthes, bringing this conflictive relationship to light, insinuates the importance of perceiving “realities” beyond the coded interpretations: “[There are] two ways of the Photograph. The choice is mine: to subject its

spectacle to the civilized code of perfect illusions, or to confront in it the wakening of intractable reality” (119). Though Barthes gives the two choices, one can argue that by putting the second choice at the end, with which he closes the book, he emphasizes a need for awakening “intractable reality” in order to see beyond the coded interpretations of “reality” (119).

Watanabe’s poetry creation, which exhibits *both* the apparition of precision *and* its disappearance, as mentioned above, exposes something similar to the apparition of Barthes’s *punctum*—“the lacerating emphasis of the *noeme* (*that-has-been*)” (96)—that makes visible the inseparable and paradoxical relationship between existence and death. Watanabe attempts to find a precise word in order to assert the existence of an image or poem, while recognizing that it is impossible to hold that precise word in the same spatiotemporal location as when the poet has originally created his work. The disappearance or death of the image or poem arrives in the process of creating the image or poem, because that precision turns into something imprecise and impossible to congeal. As shown in Barthes’s notion of photographic temporality, the temporality created in Watanabe’s poetry presents the moment of a shift in which the “reality” of the existence of a subject matter projected in a precise word or image (*studium*) collides with the “reality” of its death (*punctum*), awakening the intractableness of the “reality” and making it unattainable.

In particular, this study examines “Las manos,” published in Watanabe’s first collection of poetry *Album de familia* (1971), “Arte poética,” in *Historia natural* (1994), “Mi ojo tiene sus razones,” in *El buso de la palabra* (1989), and “Flores,” in his last collection *Banderas detrás de la niebla* (2006), poems that evidently manifest this co-presence of the existence (precision) and death (imprecision). For this study, I choose these four poems from the collections published from 1971 to 2006, a year before his death, rather than selecting poems from one particular collection, in order to display Watanabe’s ongoing and indefatigable contemplations on and creations of the symbiotic existence of precision and imprecision in his poetry. Among these selected poems, only one poem, “Las manos,” depicts a subject who has died, as was the case with the photographs that Barthes describes in *Camera Lucida*, yet the other three still echo Barthes’s photographic temporality, revealing the co-presence of the existence and death of the “reality” as projected in the poems.

“Las manos:” Hands between precision and imprecision

“Las manos” is a good example of showing how the Barthesian *punctum* appears and disturbs the concept of reality constructed based on the linear understanding of time. This poem describes the poetic voice’s immigrant father in a coffin waiting to be buried in a little while, and the poetic voice recollects the memories of his father:

Mi padre vino desde tan lejos
cruzó los mares,
 caminó
 y se inventó caminos,
hasta terminar dejándome sólo estas manos
y enterrando las tuyas
 como dos tiernísimas frutas ya apagadas.

Digo que bien pueden ser éstas sus manos
encendidas también con la estampa de Utamaro
 del hombre tenue bajo la lluvia.

Sin embargo, la gente repite que son mías
aunque mi padre
multiplicó sus manos
 sólo por dos o tres circunstancias de la vida
o porque no quiso que otras manos
 pesasen sobre su pecho silenciado.

Pero es bien sencillo comprender
 que con estas manos
también enterrarán un poco a mi padre,
 a su venida desde tan lejos,
 a su ternura que supo modelar sobre mis cabellos
cuando él tenía sus manos para coger cualquier viento,

de cualquier tierra. (43)

What the poetic voice observes is his father's hands, while remembering where his father came from and what he did. His father's hands are the ones that bring the memory of his father's tenderness, which caressed his son's hair and gave him strength to survive.

At first glance, the Barthesian *studium* and *punctum* can be observed in the memory coming from his father's hands. The *studium* in this poem can be the existence of the poetic voice's father's hands bringing the memory of his tenderness and strength before his burial ("what-it-is"). But this existence is disturbed by the arrival of the *punctum* moment in which the poetic voice sees his own hands, which will be soon burying his father. Before the burial, as the last six lines show, the poetic voice remembers how tender and strong his father's hands were. However, his father's tender and strong hands no longer exist, as indicated in the line "como dos tiernísimas frutas ya apagadas" (43). Thus the existence of his father's hands becomes a reminder of not only his tenderness and strength, but also the disappearance of them. In other words, the existence of his father's hands before the burial provokes the past time (the *noeme* or "that-has-been"), when his hands were tender and strong, and at the same time, reminds that they have been dead and that they will be buried ("that-will-be").

This "reality" of the existence of his hands, which is already distorted by this apparition of the *punctum*, is further unsettled and complicated by another *punctum* moment. Although the *punctum* moment examined above appears in relation to the memory of his father's hands, what stands out most in this poem is, not the memory coming from his father's hands, but the ambiguity of the hands that the poetic voice is looking at. His father's hands are confused with the poetic voice's in these lines: "Digo que bien pueden ser éstas sus manos" and ". . . la gente repite que son mías" (43). Looking at his father's hands, questions may come to the poetic voice. Whose hands are they, his or his father's? Whose hands will bury his father? Whose hands will be buried?

If the *studium* is still the existence of the poetic voice's father's hands, the *punctum* can appear when the poetic voice sees his own hands *in* his father's. While his father's hands have been dead and will be buried, the poetic voice's hands are "alive" and "real" at the present moment. However, the confusion of his hands with his father's brings a feeling that the poetic voice's hands also have been dead and will be buried, just like his father's. This ambiguity of the hands, not only muddles the "reality" of the existence of the father's dead hands, but also prompts the Barthesian photographic temporality of the *noeme*, ("that-has-been"), which shifts the reality to the past and the

prophecy of the future catastrophe (Barthes 96). The poetic voice's hands, which are "alive" and "real," are going to bury his father (the present image), but this "reality" shifts into an illusion because the poetic voice's hands may have been already dead, and if so, they will be buried (the past and the future).

At these *punctum* moments, the precision of the existence of the poetic voice's father's hands, which creates a sense of being "alive" and "real," becomes weakened and imprecise due to the emergence of a sense of disappearance or death of the hands. By projecting the image of the hands between precision and imprecision, Watanabe confronts the intractableness of the "reality" of the existence of the hands.

"Arte poética:" Unattainableness of "reality" awakened by vampiric words

In "Arte poética," Watanabe endeavors to fight against the intractableness of "reality" by portraying a particular image of a poet who tires to capture a precise word in order to faithfully describe the "reality" that he observes. It can be read as a meta-poem in which the poetic voice manifests how a poet should perceive and treat words in the process of creating a poem. The poetic voice is perhaps a poet and his alter ego, who advises himself to quit inventing a metaphor:

Deja tu alfiler de entomólogo, poeta:
las palabras no son mariposas con teta.

Sentado en la cima del osario
preguntas: [sí] seré yo el nuevo notario?

Pasan muchas frases de hombro caído,
tú las quieres con un poquito de sonido.

Las palabras, o mejor, las vampiro
ya vienen volando con lujurioso suspiro.

Pronto serás tú, entre gozoso y aterrado,
el mandado. (184)

As an entomologist who pins peculiar insects in his specimen case, the poetic voice wants to invent and display an extraordinary, metaphoric image such as “mariposas con teta.” Searching for perfect words in something buried and immobilized, such as skulls gathered in an ossuary or dead insects pinned in a specimen case, the poetic voice seeks to authorize, like a notary, the words he looks for from the dead to be used in his poetry. He attempts to project a precise image, believing that it will appear as it is captured through his creation of metaphors.

However, the poetic voice subconsciously knows that it is impossible to pin down such a metaphoric image with words. With his subconscious awareness, he lets his alter ego begin the poem by telling him to give up his tool, “tu alfiler de entomólogo,” for gripping and burying the right words to create and hold an image in a list of immobilized metaphors. Then, he explains why it is impossible to capture an image in words. It is impossible, not because many phrases do not come to him, but because words are seductive and too volatile and capricious to be seized, as shown in the last four lines. His alter ego, calling words “vampiros” that come flying to seduce him by giving both pleasure and terror, assures that he will be exhausted and consumed, being seduced by words, while incapable of clasping them.

The notion of words as something volatile and capricious that impedes the poetic voice from representing what he observes in words, questions the existence of “reality” represented and inscribed in fixed words or locked metaphors. The moment in which words come flying like vampires in the fourth stanza, “Las palabras, o mejor, las vampiro / ya vienen volando con lujurioso suspiro,” can be interpreted as the Barthesian *punctum*, which disturbs the “reality” represented through metaphors. The *studium* then can be the poetic voice’s belief that he can project the precision of “reality” through fixed metaphors. With the apparition of the *punctum*, his belief is soon distorted because his alter ego announces that it is impossible to catch and lock words in a box of metaphors and that the poetic voice’s creation of poems through his exhausting and impossible search for metaphors will not survive. The *punctum* moment insinuates that the poetic voice’s belief that he can represent “reality” through metaphors has existed in the past (“that-has-been”), but no longer exists or will disappear soon. In this Barthesian temporality, the existence of the “reality” represented by the poetic voice shifts into the death of this “reality” (96).

“Mi ojo tiene sus razones:” A vulnerability of “obsessive precision”

If “Arte poética” exposes the incredibility and instability of the “reality” that the poetic voice tries to construct, “Mi ojo tiene sus razones” reinforces the doubtfulness of eternalizing one “reality” in a poem. Watanabe links this doubtfulness to the arbitrariness through which a poem is composed. The poetic voice reveals that the scene that he exhibits in his poem is arbitrarily chosen:

Creo que mi ojo tiene un arbitrario criterio de selección.
Obviamente hubo más paisaje alrededor,
imposible que sólo fuéramos ella y yo en el rompeolas. (59)

The poetic voice lays out his thoughts on his arbitrary way of setting a scene for his poem, though he knows that it is impossible to select only one scene among all the surroundings that he saw in the past. In order to decipher the enigma of the arbitrary selection of a particular scene, he first tries to remember the surroundings from his memory:

Soy de repeticiones, como todos. Entonces puedo suponer que
si hubo niebla
le dije: botes en la bruma pueden ser sólo reflejos, espejismos,
y le mencioné el antiguo haiku de Harumi:
“Entre la niebla
toco el esfumado bote.
Luego me embarco”.

Si hubo sol
le tomé fotografías con el hueco de la mano y acaso la azoré
diciéndole: posa con los senos hacia el viento.
Si pasaron gaviotas y ella las admiró, le recordé
que eran aves carniceras y que únicamente su feo canto es ho-
nesto.

Mi ojo todo lo veía, no descartaba nada. (59)

By claiming that he is “a person of repetitions” as anyone else, the poetic voice suggests what he contemplates is shared with the majority of people and considered as “normal.” For instance, if it was a foggy day, he described boats in the mist as an illusion and recited his father’s haiku capturing the moment in which even as he steps upon it, the shape of a boat floating in the mist fades away.

And if it was sunny, he pretended to take a picture of his partner, making a camera lens with his hands, telling her to pose with her breasts toward the wind. Seagulls flew over, and she admired them. The poetic voice reminded her that they were carnivorous birds and that only their singing was sincere. As he displays the details of the scenes, he states that his eye saw all and did not discard anything. He continues to show what his eye observed:

Entramos en el mar por el rompeolas de rocas cortadas.

Sobre una roca saliente ella recogió su falda

y deslizó sus pies hacia el agua.

Sus muslos desnudos hallaron comodidad en la piedra. (59)

He remembers the scene in which his partner lifted up her skirt on a rock in the sea and slipped in her feet into the water. Her naked thighs comfortably suited themselves on the rock. Up to this moment, the poetic voice presents the movements and actions that his eye observed without subjective arbitrariness. But the next stanza shifts into a description of his subjective reaction to the scene of her thigh against the rock:

Era particularmente raro

el contraste de su muslo blanco contra la roca gris:

su muslo era viviente como un animal dormido en el invierno,

la roca era demasiado corpórea y definitiva. (60)

He describes that her white thigh was a living thing like a hibernated animal on the grey rock, which seemed vividly like a body. This image then erases all the other depictions presented before his subjective reaction:

Hubiera querido inscribir mi poema en todo el paisaje,

pero mi ojo, arbitrariamente, lo ha excluido

y sólo vuelve con obsesiva precisión

a aquel bello y extremo problema de texturas:

el muslo

contra la roca. (60)

The poetic voice admits that his eye arbitrarily excludes what he saw and that what remains in the poem is an “obsessive precision,” exposing that particular image of her thigh against the rock.

His eye not only sees and retains all the surroundings, but also does exclude certain surroundings to select a precise image. His eye's contemplation seems contradictory, but as the title of the poem suggests, both what his eye sees and retains and what it excludes have their "truths." As Barthes's *studium* on a photograph, all the surroundings that the poetic voice tries to capture have "unary" and "coded" meanings that are socially and culturally repeated, shared, and communicated with everyone else (Barthes 27, 40-41, 51). On the other hand, the image of the poetic voice's partner's thigh against the rock, presented in the penultimate and last stanzas, recalls Barthes's *punctum*, bringing another "reality" that highlights the strangeness of the contrast between her white thigh and the corporeal grey rock. The "obsessive precision" of this description of her thigh against the rock (the *punctum*) pronounces that the repeatable and communicable "reality" of the entire scenery (the *studium*) has been there, but will disappear from the poetic voice's memory and poem, leaving the only image of "el muslo contra la roca."

To further complicate the discussion of the arbitrary image of the woman's thigh as Barthes's *punctum*, it is indispensable to examine Barthes's following statement: "What I can name cannot really prick me. The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance" (51). This statement suggests that a nameless image can lead to the apparition of the *punctum*, but the ironic consequence is that the image stemming from the *punctum* cannot have a name to communicate what it is, in order to continue to disturb coded and communicable "reality."

Whether or not Watanabe intentionally applies Barthes's *punctum* to his poetry is unknown, yet Watanabe seems aware of the impossibility of perpetuating the last image in the poem as something namable. The image of the woman's thigh does not have a name because, as the line "a aquel bello y extremo problema de texturas" indicates (60), he finds it problematic to describe the touching feeling of her thigh against the rock precisely. He is so obsessed with precision that he cannot find a word or name to communicate and reproduce the image.

From the beginning of the poem, the poetic voice underscores the arbitrary inclusion and exclusion of scenes in creating a poem. Watanabe insinuates that because of the essence of the poetic voice's eye that possesses this arbitrariness, there is no guarantee that the randomly selected image can stay still, without being replaced for other arbitrarily chosen images. His eye can capture other arbitrarily selected images that also temporarily come to exist, but the images can disappear because they are unnamed. If the woman's thigh against the rock can be perceived as Barthes's

punctum, this *punctum* not only questions the coded “reality” of the *studium* (the whole landscape captured by the poetic voice’s eye and shared with anyone else), but also unsettles that of the *punctum* itself, as soon as another nameless image appears and provokes the readiness of disappearing and announcing the time passing. It has existed, but it is ready to disappear.

“Flores:” Wordless poetic creation

Watanabe’s constant quest for a precise word and image and surrender to the impossibility of finding precision through words continues to appear in the last collection of his poems. “Flores” is one such meta-poem that reflects his quest and surrender in the poetic voice’s struggle to capture a precise image in a verse. As in the previous two poems examined above, the poetic voice tries to find a precise word and image to represent what he observes.

Looking at a honeysuckle flower that closed up at dawn, he meditates on his creation of poetry:

La madreSelva se cerró al amanecer
y yo, sin su perfume, seguí creyendo en la poesía.

Es difícil persistir en la poesía, más aún
cuando ella misma nos desorienta:
en la desesperación
yo escribí los poemas más sosegados.
¡Casi enloquezco pidiendo calma!

Ahora, después de la noche en blanco
y ningún verso, estoy en paz.

La madreSelva, ya lo dije, se cerró al amanecer. (412)

The poetic voice has not written any line yet, and the flower is closed and offers no scent that might inspire his artistic creation. But he is calm, believing in poetry and letting it appear naturally when the time comes. He knows that persisting in constructing poetry and trying to control it makes him fabricate the gentlest and peaceful poems that ironically drive him crazy for peace, instead of bringing him any peace.

But now, rather than waiting for the honeysuckle flower to be reopened and to bring him its fragrance of inspiration, he attempts to contemplate his surroundings and accepts the nature of poetry:

Otras flores habrá a lo largo del día.
 Los lirios que pone mi mujer en la sala,
 las rosas que dejan caer los cortejos fúnebres,
 las flores carnívoras que cierran tan violentamente
 que apenas dejan ver a la abeja que matan.
 De estas flores aprenderé, una vez más,
 que la poesía que tanto amo sólo puede ser
 una fugaz y delicada acción del ojo. (412)

The poetic voice contemplates the images of other flowers that exist around him. His contemplations of the flowers further vividly bring the surroundings of the flowers into existence. His eye wanders from one flower to another: from the closed honeysuckle flower, the lilies that his wife put in the living room, the roses that fall in funeral processions, to the carnivorous flowers that trap a bee quickly. His eye does not stay on one particular flower, but moves onto another. The poetic voice calls this moving contemplation “una fugaz y delicada acción del ojo” (412), to which he attributes his poetry creation. A certain image of a flower captured through his contemplation becomes still for a moment, but soon the stillness becomes transitory and mobile through his next eye movement.

“Flores” is about a poem without any lines, as indicated in the line, “y ningún verso, estoy en paz” (412). The poetic voice has not written any lines, but he is peaceful, not only because he is aware that poetry is fleeting and transient like flowers, but also because as the last three lines show, his contemplations through his eye enable him to see and be reassured as to the ephemeral existence of poetry. This reassurance of the ephemerality of poetry captured only through the action of contemplating (“delicada acción del ojo”), not through writing down words, can be recognized as a Barthesian *punctum* moment. The general understanding of poetry is that it is an artistic composition in verse or the imaginative or creative writings of a poet (“poetry, n”). The poetic voice also tries to *write* a line and has *written* excruciating poems in his desperation. But the apparition of the *punctum*, revealing the ephemerality of poetry, evokes the Barthesian photographic temporality, inciting the

time-passing sense that poetry has existed before (“that-has-been”) and will disappear soon (“that-will-be”).

Introducing a provocative concept of wordless poetry in this poem, Watanabe presents a poetic voice who ponders over how to represent, through words, the transitoriness of the “reality” that his eye captures and acknowledges the impossibility of holding the “reality” in words. In short, the poetic voice’s eye captures the ephemeral existence of poetry, but it is the same eye that pronounces the death (quick disappearance) of poetry.

Conclusion: An ongoing gaze that crosses out “reality”

Needless to say, the analyses of these four poems cannot reach a full comprehension of Watanabe’s voluminous poetry with its myriads of themes compiled in *Poesía completa*. However, approaching his poetry through Barthes’s concept of photographic temporality can be one small but insightful way to illuminate his ongoing search for an answer on how to represent “reality” through a precise word. Watanabe attempts to capture the precision of “reality,” but as soon as he finds it, he immediately distorts the presence of that precision. Reading these four poems through Barthes’s photographic eye enables the reader to scrutinize how the “reality” that Watanabe’s poetic eye projects crosses the zone of time-passing between the existence of the “reality” (“what-it-is”) and its death (“that-has-been” and “that-will-be”). By situating a “reality” between existence and death, Watanabe makes it impossible to maintain and reproduce the precision of that “reality” captured by his eye. To borrow Agudelo’s first sentence in his prologue (as quoted in the introduction of this study), “El ojo de este hombre sabía hablar,” it is Watanabe’s eye through which he contemplates and communicates the meaning of “reality,” which both comes to exist and simultaneously disappears in his poetry.

Notes

I would like to thank the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science for the partial financial support of the 2013-2015 grant. Their support allowed me to complete this study. I also would like to thank the anonymous readers who gave me constructive comments.

¹ Quoted in Darío Jaramillo Agudelo (10). For the complete version of the poem, see p. 81 in *Poesía Completa* of Watanabe.

² See the English definition of “precision” in *OED Online*, as well as the Spanish one in *Diccionario de la lengua española*.

³ Many scholars have attributed his poetic creation to his Japanese ethnic and cultural background and the influence of *haiku*. For instance, in his book *José Watanabe: El ojo que nos descubre: La poesía de nikkei peruano*, Randy Muth delineates the importance of the influence of Japanese culture, in particular, the spirit of *haiku* and Buddhism on Watanabe’s poetry (41-82). Muth asserts that Watanabe’s observation and treatment of nature, meditation on what he stumbles upon, and depiction of a moment of enlightenment, parallel the spiritual elements of *haiku* (52-56). Ignacio López-Calvo, while rejecting a reductionist categorization of Watanabe as *haiku* poet with too much emphasis on his racial and ethnic Japanese background, still recognizes the importance of exploring the elements of *haiku* on Watanabe’s poems, such as his contemplation of nature and creation of a subtle sense captured beyond his words (168-70). Also, in his talk “Pintura y literatura de la poesía de José Watanabe,” José Li Ning demonstrated the effect of *haiku*, the sudden, unexpected insight about nature that sprouts through contemplation of silence in Watanabe’s poetry. Rebecca Riger Tsurumi’s “Reflections of the Japanese in the Poetry of José Watanabe” examines Watanabe’s Japanese father’s artistic and cultural influence on his poetry, highlighting the visibility of the world of *haiku* and Japanese *bushido*, the code of honor and morals of *samurai* warriors, in his poetry (151, 153-70).

⁴ In his interview with Maribel De Paz, Watanabe expresses to her, “No me molesta [que me asocien con la serenidad japonesa y el haiku], pero tampoco quiero que exageren. Tengo influencia del haiku, pero no tanto como muchos suponen” (228).

⁵ Prior to the publication of *Camera Lucida*, Barthes had written about photography as a medium, but his last book offers the most extended analysis of the topic. In particular, the terms, *studium* and *punctum*, seem to have evolved from the terms of denotation and connotation that Barthes applies to his analysis on photography, especially on press photography, in his earlier study on the subject, “The Photographic Message.” In this study, Barthes argues that press photograph projects both denoted meaning (“a mechanical analogue of reality, its first-order message”) and connoted one (“second-order message derived from a code,” or interpretations and perceptions based on cultural and historical value system) (18). In his “Rhetoric of the Image,” an article published three years after “The Photographic Message,” Barthes comments on “the myth of photographic ‘naturalness’” that leads one to believe that the literal message (the denoted message) of a photograph is its “reality,” hiding the fact that the denoted message projected through “the plane of connotation” (44). The denoted message or “the message without code” emerges, not as an illusion, but the “reality” of the photograph, according to Barthes, in part because of “a new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority,” which bolsters the “naturalness” of the literal image of the photograph (44).

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