

**The (Hi)story of the Encounter:  
The Historical and the Personal in Nicolas Bouvier's *The Japanese Chronicles***

**Halia Koo**

**Abstract**

*The Japanese Chronicles* is a travel narrative by Swiss writer Nicolas Bouvier (1929–1998), who uses a narrative strategy blending the historical and the personal. Bouvier's style favours the exploration of the 'Other' through the anecdote of the encounter. The (hi)story of the encounter constitutes the framework of *The Japanese Chronicles*, a book organized in significant historical episodes. It is characterized by the juxtaposition of past and present-day travels: indeed, the stories of Japan's encounters with the Western world are interspersed with personal anecdotes describing the author's experience of today's Japan, and this constant interaction between the two levels of encounter helps initiate a reflection on the intercultural contacts between East and West. In his narrative, Bouvier refers to several "chronicles" relating to Japan, e.g. the *Kojiki* (Records of Ancient Matters) and the *Nihongi* (Chronicles of Japan), historical records of the first Westerners in Japan, a courtier's diary, memoirs of missionaries, annals of the Meiji era, and contemporary imperial edicts. Bouvier's personal chronicle incorporates all these diverse historical accounts and intertwines them with his recollections, in order to tell the story of his own personal encounter with Japan, therefore marking the transition from history to the personal story. This unusual perspective also restores the individual voices of ordinary Japanese people—including a Hiroshima survivor whose spoken account is "chronicled" by Bouvier—effectively converting historical facts and dusty archives into living anecdotes that highlight the status of the personal story or narrative within the larger frame of events.

*Keywords:* Nicolas Bouvier, travel literature, Japan, history, personal narrative

## Introduction

In a book review written in *The Guardian* in 2007, journalist Rory MacLean hailed the publication of the English translation of Nicolas Bouvier's travelogue *L'Usage du monde* (*The Way of the World*) as "the most important event in travel literature this year", calling Bouvier "Switzerland's answer to Jack Kerouac".<sup>1</sup> *The Japanese Chronicles* is another travel narrative by Bouvier (1929–1998), a French-speaking Swiss traveller, writer and photographer, who at the age of 24 journeyed through Europe and Central Asia to Afghanistan with his childhood friend and painter Thierry Vernet, driving a small, slow second-hand vehicle, reaching Afghanistan after a year and a half. This transcontinental adventure inspired him to write *L'Usage du monde*, which has been described as a remarkable voyage of self-discovery, and has now become a classic in twentieth-century Francophone travel literature. *L'Usage du monde* ends with the traveller reaching the Khyber Pass, but Bouvier continued his journey on his own to India, Ceylon and Japan, the last being the inspiration for *The Japanese Chronicles*. In this narrative, Bouvier shares his impressions and observations of a country he has visited several times, first as a young man in 1956, then with his wife and child in 1964, and on his own again in 1970. The distinctive feature of this book is a narrative strategy that blends the historical and the personal, a technique that allows Bouvier to perfect a style which favours the exploration of the 'Other' through the anecdote of the encounter, or what I call in my book "l'anecdote de la rencontre" (Koo, 2015).

## Narrating Japan: From Official Document to Personal Testimony

The (hi)story of the encounter constitutes the framework of *The Japanese Chronicles*, a book that is not written in a chronological manner, but is rather arranged as a patchwork of instalments, structured in several sections and organized in significant historical episodes. Its main feature is the juxtaposition of past and present-day travels. The table of contents indicates this approach, which weaves together the threads of both histories and stories about Japan:<sup>2</sup> chapters dealing with historical or mythical benchmarks, with relevant dates ("Year Zero", "Genoa, the Year 1298", "Le Temps retrouvé, 1854–1944", "Washington, 1944–1945")

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<sup>1</sup> Rory MacLean, "On the Road Again", *The Guardian* (Thursday 31 May 2007), <https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2007/may/31/rorymaclean.travelbooks> (consulted on 20 June 2017).

<sup>2</sup> All quotations in English are taken from *The Japanese Chronicles* (Bouvier, 2008). Unattributed page numbers cite this text.

mingle, in no particular chronological order, with chapters describing the author's personal milestones ("The Year of the Monkey, 1956", "The Pavilion of the Auspicious Cloud, 1964", "The Village of the Moon, 1965", "The Island without Memory, 1965–1970"). In addition, personal notes taken from the author's "Grey Notebook" punctuate the text on six occasions.

In this narrative, Bouvier refers to several 'chronicles' relating to Japan, starting with those dealing with the founding myth of the Land of the Rising Sun, as they are documented in the *Kojiki* (Records of Ancient Matters) and the *Nihongi* (Chronicles of Japan), and including the Chinese Han Dynasty's annals, which give a detailed account of China's first diplomatic relations with "the Island of the Wa" (the first recorded name of Japan), then with the "Kingdom of Yamato"; the *Book of the Marvels of the World* by Marco Polo, who knows about the "island of Zipangu" only from hearsay, but who makes his European readers aware of this faraway country; the diary of Sei Shōnagon,<sup>3</sup> lady-in-waiting at the Imperial Court, which gives an idea of the poetic and affected atmosphere that prevailed in the year 1000 A.D.; the 1543 official report written on the order of the governor of the island of Tanegashima (in southern Kyushu); historical records of the first Westerners in Japan; memoirs of Saint Francis Xavier that give an account of the Jesuits' first missionary efforts; annals of the Meiji era, and contemporary imperial edicts that provide an insight into the spectacular rise and decline of a militarist empire; then concluding with *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946) by Ruth Benedict, an ethnological study that attempts to define the Japanese culture and mentality from an American perspective. These stories of Japan's encounters with the Western world are interspersed with personal anecdotes describing Bouvier's intimate experience of Japan. His personal chronicle incorporates all these diverse historical accounts and intertwines them with his own recollections, in order to tell the story of his own personal encounter with Japan, thereby marking the transition from history to the personal story.

This constant interaction between the two levels of encounter helps initiate a reflection on the intercultural contacts between East and West. Indeed, these intertwined chronicles allow Bouvier to travel back in time and to develop variations on the theme of the encounter and also of the missed encounter, in order to analyze the meetings between Japan and the West—unsuccessful encounters that ended in a bloodshed or a misunderstanding.

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<sup>3</sup> Lady-in-waiting to Empress Teishi during the 990s and early 1000s. She is the author of *The Pillow Book* (*Makura no sōshi*), a collection of personal thoughts, poetry, memorable events and anecdotes gathered during her time at the Imperial Court.

The diplomatic mission of eight Japanese scholars sent to China in the 7th century is a model of its kind, because those envoys were chosen with the utmost care for their character, their commitment to study and their virtue: “You can imagine the contacts Europe would have established with the ancient and the new world if the navigators of the sixteenth century had been chosen in this manner. It is true that they were not sent to study but to plunder” (p. 15). Very soon, with the growing arrogance, greed, and expansionism on both sides, the earlier ideal of humility and respect for one another gave way to competition and conflict. The Papal Bull of 1493 divided up, between Spain and Portugal, the new lands of the Planet already discovered or to be discovered, turning their inhabitants into potential subjects of the Kings of Portugal and of Spain. For their part, Japan and China were both convinced of the divine origin of their power, and considered that it was their responsibility to ensure that the whole universe benefit from their benevolent protection: “It is intoxicating to dream of this tight-woven fabric of ignorance and pretensions to hegemony that intertwine, superimpose on one another, and cancel each other out. On the whole, little has changed” (p. 37), Bouvier writes, putting things into a temporal or historical perspective in order to demonstrate that then as now, in the 15th century as in the 20th century, it is just as difficult to step outside one’s self and reach out to the Other.

Indeed, most of these first contacts with the Other sometimes have appalling consequences. After describing (with supporting historical evidence) the scene where Portuguese traders land for the first time on the shores of Kyushu Island, Bouvier continues with a decisive episode that has huge implications for the future relationships between Japan and the West: the sale of the first harquebus (a long-barrelled gun) to the natives. What is remarkable in this sequence is the highly visual quality of the text, and the narrator’s personal involvement in the description.

Personally, I see this transaction in the little port of a little, lost island as a curtain rising on a drama in which the protagonists don’t realise the importance of their roles and play them carelessly. On one hand, there is the governor, full of maxims, so courteous, so determined to be ‘correct’ and of course to keep anything useful from escaping his grasp. On the other hand, the three voluble Portuguese, astounded at the great deal they have made, and most likely very dirty under their lace collars. I feel like yelling at them: “Stand up straight, a little dignity, less bragging”—they declared that Portugal was bigger than China—“and fewer grimaces. And don’t blow your garlic breath into the nose of your interlocutor, choose your words well, and make a good impression...”[.] (pp. 41–42)

By inserting himself in this historical scene like a stage director, the narrator establishes, through his (imagined) personal intervention, an intimate connection with the past. But also, using his visual and episodic perspective, the narrator takes a historical fact from some dusty archives and transforms it into a living anecdote recorded down to the smallest detail, as if he had been an eyewitness. This is a process that Bouvier considers as the cornerstone of his book: “Tonight, I saw all of the events of Japanese history in a dream, lined up like a series of images from popular culture,<sup>4</sup> in acid colours, here and there a close-up of a bit player, of a sorrowful or stupefied face. A little like a child looking at a magic lantern” (p. 52). Using a vocabulary borrowed from theatre, the narrator adopts the perspective of a spectator and of a stage director. In fact, Bouvier writes as if he were putting himself in the frame of this historical encounter, translating it into a theatrical scene, trying to supervise the characters’ acting and bearing onstage, even though there is little one can do to rectify the situation. “But in the end it doesn’t matter; they are no more than puppets, their role is modest. It is the gun that holds centre stage, and it is perfection” (p. 42): because what comes out of this event, Bouvier concludes, is neither the fascination caused by the first intercultural contact nor the negotiation of an agreement, but the purchase of an instrument of destruction.

Indeed, no later than the following year, the Japanese managed to take possession of the secret of the weapons’ manufacture, and they were soon mass-produced throughout the country. Barely twelve years later, at the Battle of Kawanakajima, “the air is already totally black with gunpowder” (p. 41). Bouvier concludes in a deliberately casual tone: “So! Now they have been introduced” (loc cit). He gently makes fun of this memorable encounter, which, instead of bringing friendship and mutual enrichment, started inauspiciously with the exchange of a firearm. Further in the narrative, Bouvier explores the psychological outcomes of another deadly encounter between Japan and the Western world, namely, the attack on Pearl Harbor and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, as if to remind the reader that, today as in the past, the relationship to the Other poses a challenge: “we can hardly progress further today in the art of destruction, but there are still roads to build in the art of understanding” (p. 79).

Mutual understanding is indeed an elusive art, as exemplified by another historical encounter, the rapid spread of Christianity in Japan in the 16th century. This episode starts with

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<sup>4</sup> In the original French text: “une suite d’images d’Épinal” (Bouvier, 1989/1991, p. 84), or Épinal prints, a series of naïve depictions of everyday life or traditional subjects, rendered in bright sharp colours, that were sold in France in the nineteenth century.

the arrival of Saint Francis Xavier, who saw in this country “some undefinable quality, born of a tradition of which the West is ignorant and which his Western vocabulary cannot define” (p. 45). This strict and passionate priest was captivated by the Japanese people’s stoicism and high moral standards, but he was lost in a society whose strengths and weaknesses he knew little of. Moreover, in his missionary zeal, he had not yet mastered “the art of compromise, that flexibility so often attributed to his order; for the most part, compromise is a lesson of the Orient, and the Jesuits bravely struggle to learn it” (p. 44). However, his ground-breaking efforts opened the way to the golden age of the Portuguese Jesuits, a period which saw mass conversions of the Japanese people—to the point of threatening the nation’s political integrity. “It is the beginning of a strange adventure founded on enthusiasm, opportunism, good faith, and misunderstandings. To use a term dear to the Japanese today, you can call it the *Kiristan Boom*” (p.45). This phase was followed by drastic measures put in place to reduce the foreign influence and interference in internal affairs, such as persecutions and massacres that led to the eradication of Christianity in Japan. “Things are not going well. Things couldn’t have gone well. The Jesuits and the Japanese were in love without understanding each other” (p. 49). Once the crisis was over, Japan decided to entrench itself behind protectionist decrees, “meditates on the failure of a business that had begun so well, and transforms the foreigner into a scapegoat or a scarecrow” (p. 51), pledging that never again would it have anything to do with the West.

### **The Chronicling of a Living Anecdote**

Japan kept its word and maintained an isolationist and protectionist policy during the Edo period, until the advent of the Meiji Restoration and the opening up of the country to foreign influences. In 1853, when Commodore Perry’s American warships forced a country that had been isolated for more than two centuries to open up to external trade, the West and Japan had little memory of their previous encounters: “For now, the West’s trajectories don’t match Japan’s: with a few slight exceptions, they know nothing about each other” (p. 59). In a matter of a few decades, Japan entered the Meiji period (enlightened government) in 1868, embarked on an aggressive industrialization agenda, and prepared its revenge. In the 20th century, Japan emerged as an increasingly militarist and expansionist country, and in 1941 became embroiled in a fight to the death with the attack on Pearl Harbor. As the war progressed, Japan was cornered in a dead-end situation: although it refused to admit it, the end was near, and the eleventh chapter of *The Japanese Chronicles* closes on a question mark: “Surrender or a fight

to the death? ... How is the country coping with the bombings? What will the Japanese do?” (p. 70).

Everyone knows what happened next—at least from an official, historical perspective. But what Bouvier strives to do is to stage this confrontation between Japan and the Allied forces from an intimate viewpoint. This is where chapter XII comes in: titled “Yuji Speaks, or a Lesson in ‘Nothing’” (p. 71), it marks the transition from the historical anecdote to the personal anecdote. The time and place of the historical event, as well as that of the personal expression in the present tense, are put together at the beginning of the chapter: “Hiroshima, August 1945 / Tokyo, October 1955” (loc cit). The narration is taken over by Yuji, a journalist and translator who becomes Bouvier’s friend and colleague during the latter’s first stay in Japan, and who tells him his story. Yuji’s father, a respected academic, died during a bombing, and his elder brother was killed during the Pacific War. His younger teenage brother, who was still in full growth and constantly irritated by the wartime scarcity of food, persuaded their already weakened mother to travel on foot to a nearby city to obtain some sugar for him. The point of intersection between the historical anecdote and the personal anecdote occurs soon after Yuji’s mother’s fateful departure for a city located sixty kilometres away, which happens to be Hiroshima.

Two days later, around noon, there was a strange glow in the sky to the north. We learned that a disaster had hit Hiroshima. There were all sorts of rumours about it. We arrived in the city on foot, my brother and I. Before we even reached the outskirts, the sky was grey with suspended soot. The earth was still warm. ... In the heart of the ruins, you could hear the humming of crickets and cicadas that, much more resistant than we, died singing. (p. 72)

The hospital where their mother was supposed to meet their physician uncle to barter for food is razed to the ground, and not a single body can be found. A few days later, the grieving families are given a portion of the bones and ashes collected on site, and the two brothers head home, too overwhelmed to cry, devastated by this sinister tragedy of fate that conspired to send their mother into the midst of a burning inferno for the price of three kilograms of sugar. Yuji’s brother is overcome by guilt and disappears shortly after, leaving a note saying that he has decided to follow their mother. In the whole episode, Yuji’s narrative is characterized by a remarkable restraint, and the simple and understated tone that is used further emphasizes the

intensity of a family drama created by the unfortunate convergence of history and fate. This perspective restores the individual voices of ordinary Japanese people—including this survivor whose spoken account is ‘chronicled’ by Bouvier—effectively converting historical facts and dusty archives into living anecdotes that highlight the status of the personal story or narrative within the larger frame of events.

The interdependence between the historical anecdote and the personal anecdote is once more demonstrated by this story about remorse, broken lives and a long process of healing: with an understated dignity, Yuji tells of his “rebirth”, and describes himself “as light as a cinder and as hard as bamboo that has passed through a fire—nothing for regrets, hypocrisy, or melancholy to cling to. ... Every day we reinvented a little bit of life” (p. 75). Appropriately enough, the chapter closes on the portrait of this invited narrator, the teacher of this initiation to ‘Nothing’, a lesson in humility that the travel writer receives like an illumination likely to fill in “that central inadequacy of soul” that one drags around like a burden: “Yuji, he is a small man, dry and musical, as transparent as a snowflake. He has the look of an ether addict who enjoys himself and dances, with the pale and troubling lightness of someone who has passed through fire. ... When you meet a truly free person, you suddenly feel so silly, with all your travels and projects...” (p. 77). As someone who has learned to lighten himself of useless regret and the weight of sorrow, Yuji is a mentor who teaches the Western traveller the way to true serenity. He is a character who puts a human face on the horrors of war, an innocent victim of a major global confrontation who brings to life the history of his country. In addition to being a living connection to Japan’s recent past, he is also the link to its present, a native who includes Bouvier in his family life, gives him an insider’s view of Japanese society, and guides him through the trials and tribulations of everyday life in a bustling metropolis. Through him, Bouvier shares the life of “small people, small debts that a person forgets and then finds again: Japanese Dickens with an ineffable sweetness” (p. 77).

Likewise, photography plays a central role in Bouvier’s process of approaching and comprehending the average Japanese. In a post-war Japan where ordinary people still struggle for a living, Bouvier is a foreigner who speaks only a few words of Japanese and relies on odd jobs to survive. In the working-class neighbourhood of Araki-cho where he lives in a rented room, the locals are careful and circumspect, hesitant to form a connection without really knowing what to expect from this shabby and eccentric newcomer. Not that they would be

exactly xenophobic, but their guarded attitude stems from a number of misconceptions about Westerners: as Bouvier explains,

they attribute a number of exotic habits to a foreigner, incongruous appetites and whims, sources of problems and puzzles. Several months passed while they observe me without lowering their guard. Relations here are rarely born of individual whim; they are almost always the result of sponsorship, of adoption, of group consensus in one form or another. (p. 98)

Bouvier happens to be an avid photographer who enjoys taking pictures of his travels, and of everyday Japan in particular.<sup>5</sup> He is the only one in the neighbourhood to “possess a decent camera, and [he is] often asked for a favour” (p. 101): in the closed, impenetrable environment of Araki-cho that is not always inviting to outsiders, Bouvier often uses his device to break the ice and endear himself to his neighbours, and the resulting pictures underline once again the importance of the visual, the theatrical and the imagery in the structure of his narrative.

### **“The Foot of the Wall”, and the Allegory of the Encounter**

Bouvier’s simple and modest black-and-white photographs reveal a less conventional and glamourized image of the country, as his models include shopkeepers of Araki-cho, schoolchildren playing, street entertainers, elderly couples visiting from the countryside, exhausted commuters on a train, members of a rustic travelling troupe, and young Buddhist monks who are as curious about Bouvier as he is interested in them. These pictures are genuine and unpretentious portraits of ordinary people that capture all shades and degrees of human feelings and expressions, from shyness, loneliness or innocence to shrewdness, wisdom and mirth, showing the faces of intensely private people who open up and reveal themselves to the traveller’s gaze. Appropriately, Bouvier’s writing is influenced to a large extent by his interest in photography: his style displays a tendency to imitate the photographic process, and his narratives are often structured like an album of snapshots or a collection of illustrations.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout his versatile career, Bouvier described himself as a photographer, iconographer and picture editor as much as a traveller and writer, and there is indeed a close affiliation

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<sup>5</sup> Bouvier’s photographs have been published in albums such as *L’Œil du voyageur* (Paris, Éditions Hoëbeke, 2001), and *Le Japon de Nicolas Bouvier* (Paris, Éditions Hoëbeke, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> See Koo, 2015, chapter II.

between his travel photographs and his travel narratives. His pictures are an exhibit of world images, of colourful environments teeming with life and crowded with average people going about their daily business. The photographs Bouvier brought back from his first travel across Eastern Europe and Central Asia form a diverse picture gallery of farmers, mountain-dwellers, tradesmen, artists, barbers, camel drivers, porters, and beggars. In a series of interviews, he argues that while he may lack some technical skills as an amateur photographer, his genuine and earnest approach give his pictures an undeniable emotional and human value.

Despite my lack of experience, these were very beautiful images because real life was beautiful. They were taken in the Bazaar of Tabriz, and I took a long time to get to know the people before photographing them: they would never have accepted it from a stranger. (1992, p. 101)<sup>7</sup>

Photography creates a trusting relationship in which the Other agrees to open up to the observer's gaze. In that sense, photography, according to Bouvier, is "a very interesting door opener" (ibid, 104)<sup>8</sup> which provides the traveller with an opportunity to engage and connect with people, to dispel their suspicions, and to tame them. Photography is also an art that requires humility and self-denial: in order to let the native's face speak for itself, "the photographer must step aside completely" (ibid, p. 102).<sup>9</sup> These brief encounters captured by the camera lens produced portraits of anonymous faces, smiling and merry, wistful and contemplative, tormented or disillusioned, some of them marked by the vicissitudes of life, and others holding on to the hope of a better future.

Bouvier's narratives bear the mark of these typically photographic features. *The Way of the World* stands out with its montage of sharp, vivid and moving portraits and quick sketches that are enhanced by the acuteness of Bouvier's perception. Despite the massive scale of his journey, his writing is surprisingly light, airy and luminous. As the traveller and poet Jacques Meunier (1987) points out, Bouvier "is to exotic literature what the *haikai*, the limerick or the *fatrasie*

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<sup>7</sup> "Malgré mon inexpérience, c'étaient de très belles images parce que la réalité était très belle. Je les ai prises dans le bazar de Tabriz, avec des gens dont j'ai dû longuement faire connaissance avant de les photographier: de la part d'un inconnu, ils ne l'auraient jamais accepté". This and all subsequent quotations taken from Bouvier's work (other than *The Japanese Chronicles*) and critical studies are my own translations from the original French.

<sup>8</sup> "[U]n sésame très intéressant[.]"

<sup>9</sup> "[I]l faut que le photographe s'efface complètement[.]"

are to the heaviest symbolist poetry” (p. 243).<sup>10</sup> In a straightforward style that is episodic rather than epic, Bouvier writes about his remarkable transcontinental odyssey, all the while managing to remain understated. “Bouvier’s journey is never majestic. It is the sum of countless small journeys” (ibid, p. 244).<sup>11</sup> Rather than striving to be a monumental masterpiece, Bouvier’s text is arranged in a series of scenes, episodes and portraits: his narrative is presented as “slivers of travel” (Laporte, 2002, p. 8)<sup>12</sup> and “fragments of a world puzzle” (ibid, p. 9),<sup>13</sup> and reveals a style of writing that copies the photographic process. Accordingly, this is how Meunier (1987) describes *The Way of the World*: “This travel diary is made of scenes and tableaux, and looks like a photo album that has been saved from a disaster” (p. 244).<sup>14</sup>

Bouvier’s anecdotal form of writing is built around these portraits: this approach is already outlined in his first travelogue *The Way of the World* and further asserts itself in *The Japanese Chronicles*. The episodic vision of the world, which is dependent on the author’s photographic vision, allows the exploration of Otherness by singularizing and amplifying the individual through the anecdote of the encounter. His episodic style, which is a product of this fragmented visual perspective, reinforces the association of past and present, favouring the singular over the generic, the individual over the universal, the story over history.

With a compassionate perspective and a warm, gentle touch, Bouvier practises the art of the individual portrait and of the personal anecdote and establishes them as the foundations of a better understanding of the Other. Intimate photography as a window into the soul of a country is a recurrent theme in *The Japanese Chronicles*, for example when the narrator is invited to Japanese homes and flips through family albums:

These albums (I have seen a good hundred at least) have taught me more about this country than the works of the greatest photographers. ... Turning the pages, I see life stretching the skin of these faces, which get thin and taut, charged with a look that suggests a Japan that is frugal, introverted, and pathetic, certainly not the Japan of the brochures. (p. 100)

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<sup>10</sup> “[E]st à la littérature exotique ce que le haïkaï, le limerick ou la fatrasie sont à la plus lourde des poésies symbolistes[.]”

<sup>11</sup> “Le voyage chez Bouvier n’est jamais majestueux. C’est la somme de mille et un petits voyages[.]”

<sup>12</sup> “[D]es éclats de voyage[.]”

<sup>13</sup> “[F]ragments du puzzle du monde[.]”

<sup>14</sup> “Fait de scènes et de tableaux, ce journal ressemble à un album de photos qui aurait réchappé d’un désastre[.]”

This frugality, or the essence of Yuji's lesson in 'Nothing', points to the process of self-denial that the traveller must go through to gain awareness of the Other: the denial of one's own self is an essential motif in Bouvier's work, and it means that a meaningful meeting with the Other can only take place after one has surrendered one's ego and forsaken his comfort and well-being.

This is where the chapter "The Foot of the Wall" (pp. 103–09) comes in. The title is an appropriate one: this section is indeed about a wall, but it is also the translation of the original French "au pied du mur", an expression meaning "to be forced into a corner". And it is indeed an episode about Bouvier's particularly difficult position at the time: alone and penniless in a foreign country, he is working odd jobs to support himself, struggling to make ends meet, and is about to learn what hunger really means. "I had begun to understand how to eat Japanese-style; all that was left was to learn how to not eat at all" (p. 104). Bouvier discovers what he calls "the wall theatre" at this point when he has given up hope of establishing a positive contact with Japan. He is walking in a back alley in the scorching heat, hungry and confused, when he comes across a wall, which turns out to be the ideal set for a street theatre, or a theatre of life.

I sat on a garbage can to rest, and raising my eyes, I saw: a long, stone wall festooned like a theatre curtain by the summer mould and saltpeter fungus. For the length of this 'set', the pavement is raised, providentially forming a kind of stage, and all who passed by it were transformed into 'characters', amplified by an echo, projected on the comic or the imaginary. I said to myself: it is my fatigue. I closed my eyes a moment. When I reopened them, it continued to happen, like a story told in a foreign language. (p. 105)

Fascinated by this real-life stage, Bouvier ends up spending several days hidden behind a trash bin, waiting in ambush with his camera lens pointed at this wall theatre, hoping to capture unexpected 'encounters' of characters from all walks of life, to see them meet or even bump into each other within the frame of his lens. The result is a series of candid snapshots which represent everyone from the young and the elderly, all of them unsuspecting actors in an intimate, domestic drama, but who, in their own way, illustrate and enhance the theme of the encounter.

Just as Bouvier had inserted himself in his description of the Portuguese traders' arrival in Japan to create a connection with the past, he is now putting himself in the ordinary situation of a Tokyo street to forge a connection with the present. In the same way as he had acted as a

stage director in the previous historical episode, he is now a photographer-observer looking out for passing protagonists, and hoping to see them come together within the frame of his lens. “This evening I have finished my last roll of film. Fortunately. In four days, I was becoming a mythomaniac. The simple passersby weren’t good enough anymore. Before my wall, I wanted some action, a quarrel, an assassination ... the emperor” (p. 107).

This propitious wall theatre—which is a powerful allegory of the encounter—is the turning point in the book. This symbolic episode allows Bouvier to sell his pictures to a Tokyo magazine and to earn the equivalent of half a return ticket to Europe, resolving a desperate financial situation. It also leads to a moving connection with a sick Japanese student who sends him some unexpected fan mail from his hospital bed: in his simple yet heartfelt letter, the young man expresses his admiration, and his regret at not being able to travel and explore faraway lands like Bouvier, and sends him his hard-saved money to encourage the budding author.

### **Restoring a Broken Continuity**

This kind of authentic encounter is a privilege that is not granted to just anyone, and Bouvier makes it clear in his narrative that such an awareness and enlightenment may take place only after a learning process during which the traveller’s resistance and humility are put to the test. Bouvier notes that his personal experience of Japan is itself the outcome of an age-old historical quest, and is the result of an evolution of attitudes and behaviours, and also the product of a series of successes and blunders. This long maturation of intercultural relationships is marked by highs and lows, and goes through several stages of mistrust and lack of understanding, uninformed fascination, and armed conflict and *détente*, leading eventually to an easing of tension and the initiation of a dialogue that offers hope for a fresh start. This is why the photographic and episodic style that underlies the narrative structure of *The Japanese Chronicles* can be distinguished on several levels: legendary and historical, political and religious, ethnological and economic, official and emotional.

The visual and anecdotal approach that underlies the structure of *The Japanese Chronicles* allows Bouvier to elevate the mundane and the prosaic to something memorable and extraordinary, whether it is in a striking scene expressed in a single sentence like a sketch, or a portrait outlined in a few words like a haiku. His anecdotes are constructed and assembled like freeze frames of moments and memories, or what he calls the “crumbs” of his trip (“les

miettes”).<sup>15</sup> His travel narrative is a historical and personal journey that collects the pieces of a larger human mosaic, and restores a broken continuity between past and present, between the fragment and the whole, in order to reconcile the notions of diversity and unity. His tale brings together segments of real-life encounters, moments of intimacy etched in his memory, and nuggets of wisdom collected along the way to arrange them in a portrait gallery or a series of anecdotes: by capturing these fleeting moments of empathy or insight, he makes the humour, the pathos and the humanity shine through.

Accordingly, the personal stories in the book are enacted in a figurative style: instead of being presented in a logical fashion, they are arranged in an analogical manner. Their value cannot be defined in an argumentative mode: rather, Bouvier explains that meeting the Other has little to do with theoretical knowledge, but must be achieved empirically, through hands-on learning. As he explains: “Even when you look through a kinoscope or magic lantern, you should not kid yourself: the most essential connections are formed beyond the rational mind and are only rarely expressed in books” (p. 79). While stressing again in this quotation the visual nature of his narrative strategy in *The Japanese Chronicles*, Bouvier concludes that such “essential connections” are built through the hardships of day-to-day life, chance encounters, and the warmth of human relationships.

More than anything, Bouvier’s purpose in *The Japanese Chronicles* is to go beyond stereotypes and a certain image of Japan shaped by various cultural references, whether fanciful or fabricated. Recounting how his earliest perceptions of Japan were inevitably rooted in childhood memories of Christmas toys, his reading of adventure novels, and his appreciation of Italian opera and Impressionist art, he seeks to learn how to discard those preconceived ideas and misconceptions about Japan, and to start afresh. He accomplishes this by shifting from the historical to the personal, from the public to the private, from the general to the intimate, in order to turn what could have been an average, conventional journey into a unique experience.

To that end, Bouvier reminds the reader that in human history, not only do intercultural contacts have a tendency to degenerate into conflicts, they may sometimes be the result of a huge misunderstanding, as when Christopher Columbus left on his first voyage across the Atlantic, searching for a western trade route to the Orient and looking for Zipangu (as Japan

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<sup>15</sup> From Nicolas Bouvier’s introduction to the original French version of *The Japanese Chronicles*: “Le voyageur est une source continue de perplexités. Sa place est partout et nulle part. Il vit d’instant volés, de reflets, de menus présents, d’aubaines et de miettes. Voici ces miettes” (back cover of *Chronique japonaise*, Éditions Payot, 1989).

was known then), described by Marco Polo as an ‘Island of Gold’. Bouvier describes the moment Columbus and his crew landed on the Caribbean islands while believing they had reached Asia, an episode that is a perfect example of how the West’s first encounter with Japan was based on a mistake and a miscalculation.

The next day, real land, which they take for Japan ... and which is only America, or actually the Bahamas.

There, and later on the coast of Mexico, all the Spanish had to do to gather gold was reach down. So history doesn’t say that they were disappointed to find America while searching for Japan.

Today, a good many tourists, having just arrived the day before in the Tokyo of department stores, all-aluminium elevators, neon signs, taxis with televisions, the cleanest and most modern subway in the world, have the vague feeling that someone has played the same trick on them. (p. 34)

Bouvier humorously concludes that even today, modern visitors to the Land of the Rising Sun are not immune from the confusion and perplexity that must have filled the minds of the first explorers. Through the combination of rapid westernization, vigorous capitalism, rampant consumerism and the growth of the tourism industry, the traditional representation of Japan nurtured by the Western imagination has been distorted: Bouvier’s experience of an unrecognizable, modern-day Japan goes against all conventional expectations and challenges his assumptions, forcing him to adjust his plan of approach.

Such a plan, naturally, excludes the touristic path, which is a superficial way of looking for a convenient shortcut in a country that will only open up after the traveller has gone through a lengthy, patient, and attentive learning process. Observing a group of Western ladies visiting Kyoto’s temple of Ryōan-ji, a garden which is one of the most perfect examples of Zen aesthetic, Bouvier laments their lack of awareness and their cultural self-centredness, which make them totally insensitive to the significance of what they are seeing: “I truly fear, like Kipling, that this West and this East will never meet” (p. 26). Later, he encounters another group of dissatisfied tourists who complain about everything on the trip and yet “demand that before they leave, someone should wrap up the ‘soul of Japan’ for them”, and who feel that “suddenly through a simple mental process, their ignorance should be transformed into knowledge, clear-cut and precise please, so that they can discuss it when they get home” (p. 28). While criticizing the cultural short-sightedness that renders the Western traveller blind to the complexity and depth of Japan, Bouvier does not delude himself: he admits he is

occasionally guilty of the same offense, that of wanting to reach an exhaustive understanding of the Other instantly and effortlessly.

I judge them, but I, too, would sometimes like to find my meal set in front of me, and fast. We come to this thin and frugal country with our greedy metabolisms: the whole West is that way. The golden dishes, the maharajahs, the rubies as big as duck eggs—that is what struck our first explorers, that’s what they wanted to see, not the frugality that is truly one of the marks of Asia. ... Here, anyone who doesn’t serve an apprenticeship to frugality is definitely wasting his time. (pp. 28–29)

Going against the greedy and conquering attitude towards the Other inherited from colonialist expectations of times gone by, Bouvier advocates in his encounter with Japan a philosophy of the less and a wisdom of nothingness borrowed from Zen Buddhism, as well as an aesthetic of asceticism and restraint that take centre stage in his travel narratives, with a special attention to that ‘moment’ of wonder and the amazement which translates into a subtle, profound detail of everyday life pointing to a larger, deeper truth.

Such unexpected, suspended moments of grace and harmony are therefore presented by Bouvier as flashes of revelation guiding him to a more truthful, if still incomplete, understanding of Japan. “Japan and especially the Japanese summer blunts the attention you bring to things. ... But small moments of brotherhood break through occasionally. And you have to start with the small moments before thinking of the big ones” (p. 198). More eloquent than any commentary or analysis, a quiet, humble scene is observed by an exhausted traveller in an isolated bus station: in the morning half-light, an ice cream vendor and a lemonade man are leaning on the counter and listening, enraptured, to the recording of a traditional Japanese drama that has the “power to transport you to a different world” (*loc cit*). Ultimately, “the Japanese culture that we try to wrap up in discussions and explanations is only as impressive as it is spontaneous and ‘of the moment’. This morning we were far from the erudite swooning that would ruin it” (*loc cit*).

Bouvier’s travels to Japan leave him with a complex mix of euphoria and humility, a sense of serenity and fulfilment tempered by a feeling of inadequacy and lack of knowledge. Towards the end of his stay, he is captivated by the exquisite marvels of Kyoto, the heart and soul of Japanese culture, and expresses his fascination for its delicate, hushed intellectual atmosphere: “a subtle and aphoristic humour, ... a crystalline liberty, a lesson of all and nothing that I have

learned very poorly. It is time for me to pick up my knapsack and go live somewhere else” (p. 201). Still, the general underlying message of *The Japanese Chronicles* is an encouraging one, for it conveys the hope of a restored connection with the Other, across the centuries and across the divides: “Courage. We are much closer than we think, but we don’t always remember it” (p. 80).

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**Author email:** hkoo@mun.ca