

Travel Literature, Contemplation of the Living World, and Self-Discovery.

A Critical Analysis of the Work of Robert Weis

By François Lantz

In four years and seven books, Robert Weis has put into words original experiences in which literature and geography meet. From the riches of the Luxembourg Minett to the mountains of Japan, these texts form a body of work that, through the act of writing, expresses an ever more refined relationship with the living world. From a formal standpoint, Robert Weis's books can be divided into three categories: travel narratives (Rocklines, 2022; Retour à Kyôto, 2023; Yamabushi, 2024), poetry collections (Rêves d'un mangeur de kakis, 2023; Les Chemins de Buachaille Etive Mòr, 2025), and immersive enquiries (Anthology for the Exhibition "Spirit of Shizen", 2022; The Nature of Kyoto, 2023). While most were written in French, two of these books are in English: Spirit of Shizen, which is an exhibition catalogue, and The Nature of Kyoto, which emerged from an international project bringing together contributors of various nationalities. Beyond this formal variety, it is worth noting that as early as Rocklines and Spirit of Shizen, the two central axes of Robert Weis's work are already apparent: the world considered as a possibility for self-opening, and the contemplation of the living world. We will first clarify what these two axes encompass; then show how Japanese culture has influenced Robert Weis's writing; and finally, explore how the experience of travel — in its capacity to unsettle one's certainties through encounter with the other — is fundamental to Robert Weis's work.

1. The World as Opening and the Contemplation of the Living World

In the form of a travel narrative, Rocklines proposes, as its subtitle indicates, a "geopoetic journey across the Minett Biosphere." Written in collaboration with Italian journalist, translator and poet Davide S. Sapienza, the book recounts a multi-day walk through Luxembourg's first UNESCO-recognised biosphere. Robert Weis knows this landscape well, as both a palaeontologist and an enthusiastic hiker. His wish was to help a group of walkers discover it over several days, so as to kindle in them a sensitivity to the land — to its geological wonders as much as to the slow rhythm of its transformations. Rocklines is the account of this shared adventure. Through the experience, the authors show that walking allows one to establish a more refined relationship with the living world, characterised by a heightened sensitivity to nature. They also show how profoundly the earth can instruct those who frequent it and hold it in regard. For such people, the world becomes larger: flora, fauna, minerals, geological strata are no longer the separate components of a tableau but elements

with which to enter into relationship, and which illuminate the environment in which the walker finds themselves. The world is no longer merely a backdrop but, for those who immerse themselves in it, an opening.

In *Rocklines*, a few poems already appear, foreshadowing the collections to come (*Rêves d'un mangeur de kakis*, 2023; *Les Chemins de Buachaille Etive Mòr*, 2025). But above all, *Rocklines* reveals a sensitivity to the living world that Robert Weis will strive to express — as geologist, poet, or walker — in all his books.

This sensitivity to the living world is also the subject of the *Spirit of Shizen* ("spirit of nature") exhibition, dedicated to nature in Japan, of which Robert Weis was the curator, held at the Musée national d'histoire naturelle Luxembourg in July and August 2022. The catalogue (*Anthology for the Exhibition "Spirit of Shizen"*) produced from this exhibition was coordinated by Robert Weis. It combines photographs — most by John Einarsen, some provided by Robert Weis himself — with texts. The contributions, in English, are signed by writers, artists, poets, and travellers with an intimate knowledge of Japan. Robert Weis wrote the introduction and the account of an autumn walk in Nara. This latter text deepens the relationship with the living world sketched in *Rocklines*. The concept of nature is placed in perspective within a Japan that did not know the word before its reopening to the West at the end of the nineteenth century. By considering the traditional Japanese division of the seasons into 72 periods corresponding to fleeting variations in the order of the living world, Robert Weis returns to the idea that it is through contemplating nature that one becomes fully oneself. A year later, *The Nature of Kyoto* would pursue this reflection by focusing on the spiritual capital of ancient Japan.

Across these three publications, the fundamental themes of Robert Weis's work come together: the world as opening, and the contemplation of the living world. For Robert Weis, the world can only be conceived as an opening if the observer immerses themselves in an environment — an immersion that, patient and contemplative, offers an aesthetic experience of the living world and leads to a transformation of the self.

2. The Art of Brevity and the Instant: A Geopoetic Aesthetic

Japan is the country Robert Weis has travelled to most. Six of his books relate to it more or less directly: *Spirit of Shizen* (2022), *The Nature of Kyoto* (2023), *Retour à Kyôto* (2023), *Rêves d'un mangeur de kakis* (2023), *Yamabushi* (2024), and *Les Chemins de Buachaille Etive Mòr* (2025). This makes sense when one considers the concern for contemplation explored in *Rocklines* and *Spirit of Shizen*, which resonates with the attention Japanese culture pays to the transformations of nature. Japan can thus be regarded as a primary source of inspiration and a land of learning for Robert Weis.

Two travel narratives bear witness to this profound connection: *Retour à Kyôto* and *Yamabushi*, both written in French, which recount several weeks of travel through the

archipelago in 2017 and 2023 respectively. We will return to them in the final section. For now, let us note that these books give Robert Weis the opportunity to speak more intimately — and in the very country that inspires him — of the influence Japan has had on him. This influence is twofold. In terms of content, as we have seen, it maintains a close relationship with the major themes running through his work. In terms of form, this immersion in Japan gives Robert Weis the occasion to practise a new genre: poetry.

Written Japanese poetry, particularly haiku, corresponds to what Robert Weis experiments with during his travels: a sensitive observation of the living world. Having inserted a few poems into *Rocklines*, Robert Weis went on to compose two collections of short poems inspired by walks, places, and landscapes: *Rêves d'un mangeur de kakis* and *Les Chemins de Buachaille Etive Mòr*. Both seek to capture, in an unversified form, the essence of an encounter between a sensibility — that of the walker attentive to the nature around him — and a geography. This work is, in a sense, the culmination of a search that finds here its most aesthetic expression.

Informed by Zen Buddhism, each poem renders a fleeting emotion arising from an interrelation between the author and his environment. In this respect, Robert Weis follows in the tradition of Scottish poet Kenneth White and the geopoetics school, whose project was, in order to make the earth habitable once more, to lead people to rediscover it deeply, through nomadic narratives or poetry.

3. Travel as a Journey into the Self

One final movement remains — one last journey to undertake in order to grasp the richness of a body of work in perpetual forward motion. Through his writing, Robert Weis shows that there is no nature intrinsically beautiful, waiting to be contemplated for renewal, but rather a state of being which, attuned to its environment, finds its equilibrium. Each of his books marks a step toward this union between the outer and the inner. Travel is what makes such an opening possible.

In 2023 and 2024, Robert Weis published two travel narratives, *Retour à Kyôto* and *Yamabushi*, which lead readers to Japan. The first is a meditation along the paths of the Kumano Kodo, towards the spiritual epicentre of the archipelago, Kyoto. The second is an enquiry into a particular branch of Buddhism — Shugendo — and its practitioners, the yamabushi. In both narratives, nature occupies a central place: in *Retour à Kyôto*, it tests and transforms the pilgrim at each stage of the journey; in *Yamabushi* (literally "those who sleep in the mountain"), it lies at the heart of a practice that gives rise to spectacular forms of asceticism. These journeys in contact with nature are also, each time, a plunge into the self.

This gesture follows in the tradition of Nicolas Bouvier who, in the mid-1960s, made travel the place and time of a cracking-open and a rebirth. Likewise, Robert Weis's approach in his travel narratives consists in being transformed by what surrounds him: by the red earth of the

Minett as much as by the Japan of ancient paths and sacred mountains. Interiority and exteriority become one at the end of the journeys to which Robert Weis invites his readers. *Rocklines*, *Retour à Kyôto*, *Yamabushi*: three travel narratives, each a form of fracturing — whether geological, drawing the reader into the palimpsest of the earth's strata, or spiritual, inviting us to enter into harmony with our daimon, the inner spirit that guides our steps.

Nature and walking, attentiveness to the beauty of the world, the return to oneself, the awareness of being a singular soul belonging to the breath of all living things — these are the great subjects Robert Weis teaches us, drawing us, book by book, ever closer to ourselves along the paths of elsewhere.

François Lantz, Paris, September 2026