

**FOLLOWING THE FOOTSTEPS OF WIND:
SOME REMARKS ON KUKI SHŪZŌ'S
PHILOSOPHY OF AESTHETICS**

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A Traveling Philosopher

Kuki Shūzō 九鬼周造 (1888–1941) is one of the best-known modern Japanese philosophers both in and outside of Japan. In the translation of his essay, “A Reflection on Poetic Spirit,”¹ that follows this article, I contribute to the understanding of his thought by presenting for the first time in English one of his shorter but important later works. Here is a brief introduction to his life and thought.

Kuki's fame is largely based on several factors from his biography. Kuki was born right after a scandal in the highest echelons of the Meiji cultural elite. The affair between his mother Hatsu (a former geisha who had married the baron and diplomat Kuki Ryūichi) and Okakura Tenshin (one of the early protagonists of modern Japanese aesthetics) occurred when Okakura was charged to accompany a pregnant Hatsu from the United States to Japan. This episode casts a particular light on Kuki's intellectual biography. He received the level of education expected from his aristocratic background, but also internalized the ideal of poetic freedom and anti-conformism represented by his second father figure, Okakura. His own life was marked by a long stay in Europe in his thirties (1920–1928), where he went on a quest for intellectual discovery that oscillated from the dry academic world of Neo-Kantianism and early phenomenology to a Paris still full of Baudelairean and Proustian suggestions. During this time, he met some of the protagonists of the German and French philosophical milieu (a remarkable list including Rickert, Husserl, Heidegger, Becker, Bergson and Sartre). Kuki's thought can be summarized through this split between the sensual and the contingent on one side, and the world of theory on the other: a tension that unavoidably brought him towards aesthetics.

Another contribution to Kuki's fame outside of Japan is Heidegger's fond mention of “Count Kuki,” when in reality he was a baron, at the beginning of his conversation with a Japanese in *A Dialogue on Language*: an enviable showcase for the work of a non-European philosopher, despite

¹ *Fūryū ni kansuru ikkōsatsu* 風流に関する一考察 (1937), from KSZ 4:60–82.

the fact that Heidegger ostensibly understood very little of Kuki's philosophy and of his interest in *iki* (いき)². It is true, however, that Kuki's best-known work is his short and fascinating analysis of this "uniquely Japanese" style of erotic play in *The Structure of Iki*, which he began drafting during his stay in Paris and published in 1930, right after his return to Japan.³ In his analysis of *iki*, Kuki goes back to the pleasure quarters of the Edo period (1603–1868) and tries to draw *more geometrico* a figure for the living atmosphere of sensuality, pluck and disillusion permeating the exchanges between libertines and courtesans of the Floating World. It is not hard, however, to notice the preoccupations of a modern, cosmopolitan man in this analysis: it is after diving into difference that Kuki turns back to Japanese culture, describing it with the unavoidably hybrid language of an intellectual and physical traveler.

The Structure of Iki is a work both charming and perplexing: even before its two translations into English, most of the scholarly attention on Kuki focuses on this work.⁴ Michael Marra's engagement with Kuki's poetic activity and his later philosophy of poetics is unique in this effort to broaden the scope.⁵ Kuki's other major theoretical work, his 1936 *The Problem of Contingency* has only been translated into French.⁶ Kuki's own early death in 1941 effectively leaves us to guess the common concerns and the progressively converging direction of the three main strands of his work:

- a) the aesthetic analysis of "ethnic being" begun with *The Structure of Iki*, right after his European stay;
- b) the theoretical work on contingency and existence, occupying him in the mid-1930s;
- c) the works on poetics of the late '30s, collected in the volume *About Literature* a few months after his death.⁷

² Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: HarperCollins, 2006). 1–56.

³ *Iki no kōzō* いきの構造, KSZ 1:86.

⁴ H. Nara, trans., Kuki 2004; and Clark, trans., Kuki 1997.

⁵ Micheal Marra, *Kuki Shūzō a Philosopher's Poetry and Poetics* (Honolulu, University of Hawai'i, 2004).

⁶ *Gūzensei no Mondai* 偶然性の問題, KSZ 2; H. Omodaka, trans., Kuki 1966; see however Maraldo 2008 and Botz-Bornstein 2000 on this topic.

⁷ *Bungeiron*, KSZ 4.

By all evidence, these apparently separated lines of research all belong to a unitary philosophical puzzle: Kuki's philosophy needs to be addressed as a whole. More of a few hints in this sense can also be found in the essay on *fūryū*. While much less studied than his other works, even in Japan, Kuki's 1937 essay on "poetic spirit" (*fūryū* 風流) is a necessary tile to understand the evolution of his thought after the masterpiece on contingency and the increasing synthesis of the literary and philosophical in his later work. It also shows his great ability in blending premodern Japanese sources and his cosmopolitan philosophical formation into a powerful and deceptively simple synthesis.

The Aesthetic Category of *Fūryū*

That of *fūryū* 風流 (Ch. *fengliu*) is one of the most ancient aesthetic categories in East Asia. Originally Chinese, it is composed of two characters literally referring to "wind" (風) and "flow" (流). However, the sense of this "poetic spirit," perhaps fittingly and just as wind would, seems to refer to something ungraspable and constantly shifting. Richard J. Lynn offered a list of no less than 12 different meanings of the word *fengliu* in Chinese sources:

- (1) literal meaning, "wind flowing (blowing)";
- (2) a metaphor on the unpredictability of human existence;
- (3) a term for popular customs and mores;
- (4) a term for popular literary/aesthetic traditions;
- (5) an individual literary style;
- (6) a term for "noble," high culture behaviour;
- (7) a term for libertine behaviour associated with *xuanxue* (mysterious learning) and *qingtan* (pure talk) movements;
- (8) combining (6) and (7), referring to elegant, asocial behaviour inspired by the Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Buddhist thought;
- (9) a term for unconventional, "elegant" lifestyles;
- (10) an amalgam of (5), (6), and (9), term for the lifestyle and literary expression of eccentric and elegant aesthetes;
- (11) an amalgamation of (10) with (7) (without *xuanxue* and *qingtan* associations), a term for the heightened appreciation and expression of sensual-aesthetic experience and sensibilities (as in Bai Juyi's poems that celebrate wine, women, and song).

The first five categories of meaning seem to have dropped out by the fifth century, but (7), shed of philosophical connotations, was transformed during the Song dynasty into a term for (12) dissolute, libertine behaviour in general, and it, along with (8), (9), (10), and (11), remain in common use up to the present.⁸

As the two characters 風流 reached Japan, they already brought along with them more than one thousand years of disparate aesthetic connotations. Moreover, while in China these differences were mostly results of a chronological drift, the Japanese *fūryū* seemed to immediately embrace opposite meanings. Two early alternative readings for the characters 風流 are in fact *misao* and *miyabi*, with the first referring to simplicity and moral purity, and the second to the formal elegance and sensuality of the court.⁹ Later senses of *fūryū*, too, ostensibly keep playing this dialectic tension between opposite ideals. Already in the Heian age, *fūryū* was used to refer to the refinement of Chinese-style poetry and to the spiritual charm permeating an actual landscape: in other words, it expressed both natural and artificial beauty, connecting to classical terms of Chinese aesthetics like *yūgen* (幽玄), or to Japanese notions like *okashimi* (可笑しみ) and *omoshiroshi* (面白し). Later cases of *fūryū* are the extravagant luxurious aesthetics of *basara* (馬佐良) and *kasa* (過差) and the threadbare simplicity of *wabi* (侘び) and *sabi* (寂) emerging from tea culture, which repurposed in an aesthetic context the spiritual aloofness of Daoist and Buddhist eccentrics.

This sense of tension between contradictory aesthetic stances is perfectly incarnated in the biography of the two paradigmatic examples of *fūryū* in Japanese history: the Zen monk and poet Ikkyū Sōjun 一休宗純 (1394–1481) and the *haikai* master Matsuo Bashō 松尾芭蕉 (1644–1694). Ikkyū's *fūryū* is the irresistible flow of sexual desire and “mad poetry” that lets him break free from monastic rules and realize his original form of

⁸ John R. Lynn, “The Range of Meanings of Fengliu in Early Chinese Texts” abstract for the Association for Asian Studies conference, panel *Defining Refinement: The Aesthetic of Fūryū in Japanese Intellectual and Popular Culture*, 2000 (accessed March 2, 2019, <http://aas2.asian-studies.org/absts/2000abst/Japan/J-91.htm>).

⁹ Okazaki Yoshie, *Fūryū no shisō* 風流の思想, 2 vol. (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1947), 48–65.

transcendence in the world: as Qiu observes, Ikkyū's *fūryū* is an "aesthetic of unconventionality...which to the orthodox point of view, is crazy and eccentric."¹⁰ Bashō's case is different. While the sexual sense of *fūryū* becomes gradually preeminent in the erotically charged world of *ukiyo*, often with parodic references to the refined sensuality of ancient courts, it would be hard to find this sense of *fūryū* in Bashō's work.¹¹ *Fūryū* in the case of Bashō is rather a more-than-personal spirit that, like literal wind, is what pushes him onwards on the lonely path of poetry. While Ikkyū was a monk who still inhabited the world of desire, opposing to society his *fūryū* in its aspect of "wind-madness" (風狂 *fūkyō*), to Bashō, *fūryū* is lived as an all-encompassing "wind-grace" (風雅 *fūga*), permeating nature, culture, and personhood. The lonely refinement of Chinese poetry and medieval authors, such as Saigyō and the popular world of peasants and bourgeois that he met during his travels; the weathered simplicity praised by *sabi* aesthetics and the endlessly creative face of nature (造化 *zōka*); a total immersion into a path of poetry and the sudden distance of irony and self-deprecation: all these contradictory elements are rediscovered by Bashō as elements of *fūryū*.

Despite the lack of a univocal and clear definition, what *fūkyō*, *fūryū* and *fūga* share is their being something "spiritual" in the original sense of wind. "Wind" 風 is, in other words, a signifier for aesthetics. In Imamichi Tomonobu's words:

The way in which through its action consciousness (心 *kokoro*), all while keeping itself invisible, tries to reach a far ideal through the mediation of visible figures (姿 *sugata*) is exactly like the way in which with its action a gust of wind blowing on the leaves keeps revealing its moving image all while keeping itself invisible, breathing from tree to tree in the distant light. Consciousness, due to its depth, has a sort of "aesthetic overtone" that is similar to the essence (本情 *honjō*) of wind, which can only be glimpsed by the trembling of trees.¹²

¹⁰ Qiu Peipei, "Aesthetic of Unconventionality: *Fūryū* in Ikkyū's Poetry," *Japanese Language and Literature* 35/2 (2001), 135.

¹¹ Alfred Haft, *Aesthetic Strategies of the Floating World: Mitate, Yatsushi and Fūryū in early Modern Japanese popular Culture* (Leiden: Brill 2013).

¹² Imamichi Tomonobu, *Tōyō no bigaku 東洋の美学* (Tokyo: Tibiēsuburitanika, 1980): 277–278.

Imamichi was not alone in this realization: the affinity between the field of aesthetics and the dynamic, invisible, formless animation of air is a theme discussed by several Japanese authors.¹³ Kuki's reflection on *fūryū* is uniquely relevant in this perspective because it is one of the earliest attempts to discuss and draw a shape for this formless flow in a deeply transformative moment for the tradition of Japanese aesthetics.

Bashō and Japanese Philosophy in the Early 20th Century

Published in 1937, Kuki's study of *fūryū* was far from an isolated attempt: it must be read within the sudden increase of interest for Bashō and *haikai* (俳諧) poetics that began in the 1920s and lasted until after the war. This "Bashō boom," to borrow Suzuki Sadami's expression, is even more relevant if we observe how intense this spike of interest towards Bashō was perceived among philosophers.¹⁴ Beginning in 1920, a group of Kyoto-based intellectuals including Ōta Mizuho, Kōda Rohan, Abe Jirō, Abe Yoshishige and Watsuji Tetsurō gathered regularly to discuss Bashō's poetry. This long series of meetings was later collected into the three volumes of *Research on Bashō's Haiku*.¹⁵ Ōta published his own book about Bashō a few years later, *The Fundamental Problems of Bashō's Haiku*, while Watsuji, who left shortly after for Europe, returned to the atmospheric attunement of *haikai* (気合 *kiai*), both in *Fūdo* and in his *Studies in the History of Japanese Spirit - Continuation*.¹⁶ Watsuji also tried to directly address the hermeneutics of

¹³ Karak Junzō, *Shi to dekadansu* 詩とデカダンス (Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1951); Ōhashi Ryōsuke, "Der 'Wind' als Kulturbegriff in Japan," in Wolfgang Bauer and Sigrid Paul, eds., "Kultur": *Begriff und Wort in China und Japan: Symposion des Forschungskreises für Symbolik, Salzburg vom 25-27. Juni 1982* (Berlin: D. Reimer, 1984); Ōhashi Ryōsuke, "Inwieweit ist der 'Wind' ein Morphom?" in Blamberger, Günter, et al., *Morphomata. Kulturelle Figurationen: Genese, Dynamik und Medialität* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2011); Ogawa Tadashi, *Kaze no genshōgaku to fun'iki* 風の現象学と雰囲気 (Kyoto: Kōyō Shobō, 2000).

¹⁴ Sadami Suzuki, *The Concept of "Literature" in Japan* (Kyoto: International Research Center for Japanese Studies, 2006).

¹⁵ Abe et al., *Bashō haiku kenkyū* 芭蕉俳句研究, 1924–1926.

¹⁶ Ōta Mizuh, *Bashō haikai no konpon mondai* 芭蕉俳諧の根本問題 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1926); and Watsuji Tetsurō, *Zoku Nihon seishinshi kenkyū* 続日本精神史研究, from WTZ, vols. 4 and 8.

haikai in the incomplete essay *Explaining the Poetry of Bashō*.¹⁷ Another influential interpretation of Bashō in the 1920s was offered by Akutagawa in his *Bashō Zakki*, a series of prose fragments mixing literary interpretation and autobiographical projections to which Akutagawa returned in the last weeks of his life.¹⁸

Fūryū too became an increasingly discussed topic in the 1920s: it was a recurring theme in the work and literary stance of Kōda Rohan and Satō Haruo's 1924 discussion of *fūryū* in the magazine *Chūōkōron*, sparking a further debate with Kume Masao and Akutagawa.¹⁹ In the 1930s and during the war this trend did not stop: a few years after Kuki's essay Ōnishi Yoshinori, chair of aesthetics at Tōkyō University, added to his earlier study of *yūgen* and *aware* the massive study *On Fūga: A Study of "Sabi,"* a philological and phenomenological observation of *sabi* and *fūryū* aesthetics in Bashō.²⁰ In the same years Okazaki Yoshie, another major aesthetician of the period, began working at a massive history of *fūryū* throughout Japanese literary history: a first draft of the book was destroyed in a fire during the war years, but Okazaki still managed to publish two massive volumes after the war. To this day, his *The Thought of Fūryū* is still the most comprehensive study of *fūryū*.²¹

Two more notable works on Bashō, of considerably different tone, also appear during the war. In 1943 the controversial literary critic Yasuda Yōjūrō (1910–1981) published a short volume simply titled *Bashō* in which he harshly criticized how the “new interpretations” of Bashō kept projecting on this Asian giant concerns and problems slavishly imported from the West.²² A distinct tone is exemplified in a second cycle of meetings in Kyoto published in 1945 by the magazine *Gakkai*. The participants included *haikai*

¹⁷ WTZ 2:322–325.

¹⁸ ARZ 11:1240–1250 and ARZ 15:237–240.

¹⁹ Nicolas Mollard, “Construction d’une identité littéraire moderne à travers la relecture d’une esthétique traditionnelle – *fūryū* dans les écrits de Kōda Rohan autour de 1890” (PhD diss., University of Geneva, 2007); and SHZ-19:213–238, from collected work *Satō Haruo zenshū* 佐藤春夫全集 (SHZ), 12 vols. (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1966–1970).

²⁰ Ōnishi Yoshinori, *Fūgaron: Sabi no kenkyū* 風雅論・「さび」の研究 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1939).

²¹ Okazaki Yoshie, *Fūryū no shisō* 風流の思想, 2 vols. (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1947).

²² Yasuda Yōjūrō, *Bashō* 芭蕉 (Tōkyō: Kōdansha, 1989).

specialists such as Endō Yoshimoto and Ebara Taizō and philosophers like Doi Torakazu and Nishitani Keiji.²³ The influence of Bashō was long-lasting especially in the case of Nishitani, who wrote about his “philosophy” several times during the 1940s and kept unfolding the insights gained from *haikai* until the 1980s.

As evident from this cursory list, the relation between 20th century Japanese philosophy and Bashō is a complex one, still largely to be written. Kuki’s work ought to be understood in this general context, from which it stands out as one of the boldest attempts to formalize these materials in a philosophical sense.

Kuki and the Structure of *Fūryū*

At first glance, the 1937 essay about *fūryū* would seem a return to the method of *The Structure of Iki*. In both essays, an ambiguous, hard-to-grasp Japanese aesthetic concept is transformed into a geometric shape organized by pairs of opposite terms. Both *fūryū* and *iki*, moreover, are directly connected by their sensual connotation. Also, the sense of creative contradiction, a “Goethian” feature of Kuki’s thought, is evident in both essays.²⁴ These analogies, however, should not overshadow some distinct differences and the evolution of Kuki’s thought between the two essays. While *Iki* was a uniquely Japanese notion, greatly limited in its temporal and spatial frame, Kuki immediately introduces *fūryū* through an anecdote from Confucius’ *Analects*, acknowledging its trans-national character and stratified history.

Three moments:	Opposite terms:	
離俗 rizoku:	華やか hanayaka,	vs. 寂 <i>sabi</i> , “solitary,”
detachment	“colourful,” “flourishing”	“desolate”
耽美 <i>tanbi</i> :	細み <i>hosomi</i> , “subtle,”	vs. 太い <i>futoi</i> , “bold,”
aestheticism	“fine”	“broad”
自然 <i>shizen</i> :	可笑しみ <i>okashimi</i> ,	vs. 厳か <i>ogosoka</i> ,
nature	“funny,” “laughter”	“stern,” “sublime”

²³ Nishitani Keiji, et. al., 芭蕉研究 *Bashō kenkyū* in *Gakkai–Daitōa gakujutsu kyōkai*, vols. 3–1 to 3–4 (1945).

²⁴ Tanaka Kyūbun, *Gūzen to shizen* 偶然と自然 (Tokyo: Perikansha, 1992): 181–198.

While the phenomenological distinction between “intensional” and “extensional” structure explicitly drawn in *The Structure of Iki* is not repeated, we see how Kuki follows the same method, establishing *fūryū*'s sense through three different “moments” (契機 *keiki*), and its field through six different aesthetic modes, organized in oppositional pairs as above. It would be hard, however, to pattern the dialectic between detachment, aestheticism and nature on the categories of sensuality (媚態 *bitai*), will (意氣地 *ikiji*) and resignation (諦め *akirame*) described in *The Structure of Iki*.²⁵

The difference in the geometrical organization is even greater: the oppositional couples of *iki* included anti-aesthetic terms like boorish (野暮 *yabo*) and vulgar (下品 *gehin*), effectively limiting *iki* to a subsection of that formalized space. In the case of *fūryū*, the contradictions between these couples of different aesthetic modes are presented as something essential: the space of *fūryū* is the totality of aesthetic possibilities shaped by these contradictions, with none of the six aesthetic values superior or inferior to its opposite. Moreover, if the terms around which *iki* was organized were selected arbitrarily, in the case of *fūryū*, Kuki offers poetic examples and theoretical discussions showing how each of these aesthetic values was effectively central to *haikai* aesthetics. The quantitative-spatial contradiction between subtlety (*hosomi*) and boldness (*futoi*), the qualitative-temporal progression that goes from the fresh and colorful (*hanayaka*) to the withered and subdued (*sabi*), the sudden switch between quasi-aesthetic laughter (*okashimi*) and sublimity (*ogosoka*) offer a hermeneutic grid that applies surprisingly well not just to the different styles of *haikai*, but to what is effectively a totality of artistic expression. Kuki begins his analysis of *fūryū*

²⁵ Kuki had already highlighted the opposition between will (most evident in Bushidō) and resignation (exemplified by Buddhism) in the two 1928 French essays on art and time later published as *Propos sur le temps* (KSZ 1:53-86), while in his longer essay *The Japanese Character (Nihontekina seikaku)*, KSZ 3) will and detachment are considered on a common spiritual love of nature rooted in Shintō. In the case of *fūryū*, however, it would be hard to define the “opposition to the world” (離俗 *rizoku*) of Bashō or Ikkyū uniquely as an example of “detachment” or “will.” The 1937 description of an alternation between disruptive (*rizoku*) and creative (耽美 *tanbi*) following a spontaneous flow (自然 *shizen*) is probably a better description of actual creative patterns that does not rely on a crystallized “essence” of religious tradition or on an unchanging Japanese character.

from the paradigmatic example of Bashō, but, as the quote of *Analects*, other extraliterary examples and the inclusion of other key categories like *mono no aware* and *yūgen* within the octahedron of *fūryū* show he is effectively proposing *fūryū* as an all-encompassing notion to understand Japanese (as well as non-Japanese) aesthetic production. The same paradoxical status that forbade a positive determination of *fūryū* in other authors is turned by Kuki into a key to explain how throughout the Japanese aesthetic history, diametrically opposite genres kept flourishing:

Historically the most relevant forms assumed by *fūryū* have shown a tendency to be inclined towards *sabi* on the line between *sabi* and *hosomi*, to be closer to *hosomi* than *futoi* in the segment between the two, and to choose *okashimi* over *ogosoka* [...] But if we think that this interpretation would forbid us to consider as examples of *fūryū* Hōtaikō (Hideyoshi) celebrating his huge cherry-viewing banquet at the Daigo temple or Ogata Kōrin throwing his painted scrolls in the river Ōi, such objections lose all their credibility.²⁶

Kuki's analysis of *fūryū* might be lacking an actual history of the term, collapsing Chinese sources, Edo period *haikai*, and older examples from *waka* (和歌) in the same pattern of oppositions. On the other hand, this quasi-structuralist approach does account for the constant dialectic of personal innovation and established styles that is warp and weft of art. As Kuki observes, the philological puzzle of *fūryū*, a term so all-encompassing to suggest ever so often something and its contrary, actually touches an essential paradox of aesthetics:

The experiential value that we call “beauty” is unavoidably thought as something absolute: and yet in it there is also a necessary movement towards the relative, towards single individuals and ages. It is here that has its roots the duality of “constancy” (不易 *fueki*) and “change” (流行 *ryūkō*).²⁷

²⁶ KSZ 4: 80.

²⁷ KSZ 4: 61.

The constant change of wind, manifesting itself through and with other things as a contingent, unique movement, rather than as an unchanging substance, is the living image of *fūryū*: Kuki is the first modern thinker to recognize how this premodern “wind aesthetic” is not a mere metaphor, but rather touches something essential to artistic manifestations in general. Bashō discussed this duality of art, representing within the structure of its expression the same coexistence of momentary and eternal of nature through the twin concepts of “unchanging” (不易) and “flowing” (流行 *ryūkō*), both emerging from the “truth of windgrace” (風雅の誠 *fūga no makoto*). This is a very likely reason for Kuki’s choice of Bashō as the starting point for a phenomenological reading of *fūryū*; in his 1928 essay on the expression of the infinite in Japanese art, he quoted a *hokku* by Bashō revealing this meta-temporal quality of poetic language:

橘や	<i>Tachibana ya</i>	Oh, wild tangerines
いつの野中の	<i>Itsu no no naka no</i>	In some past field
ほととぎす	<i>Hototogisu</i>	A singing cuckoo

Returning in his essay *Metaphysics of Literature* (trans. in Marra 2004) and in the essay on *fūryū*, this Proustian description of a sudden olfactive memory shows how, through a poetic shift, the fleeting instant of an atmospheric moment can turn into something eternal, transcending time and space. If contingency and temporality are the two great themes of Kuki’s philosophy, it is worth noting how already in this 1928 essay, that is, during his European years, he considered Bashō’s work a worthy philosophical contribution to a reflection on these themes.

Such a paradoxical coincidence of opposites is one of the general figures of modern Japanese philosophy, with Nishida’s “absolutely contradictory self-identity” (絶対矛盾的自己同一 *zettai mujunteki jikodōitsu*) and Watsuji’s irreducibly singular-plural “human existence” (人間存在 *ningen sonzai*) being other prime examples of this structure. Nor could this pattern be found only in Bashō or *haikai*: an acceptance, even a certain gusto for unescapable contradictions, is a recurring feature of Buddhism and Daoism, in general. The tension between theoretical necessity and the radical contingency of existence and cultural belonging is, however, something that insistently led Kuki towards poetry (a poetry that, as in Nishitani’s case, is part of philosophy, not other from it). The essay on *fūryū* is probably the part of his production in which he faced Japanese poetic tradition at his best, using his philosophical formation to reveal its deeper problem, rather than force on

it a logical structure from the outside. Kuki was well aware of this temptation in himself, ironically confessing:

I do not know if in my observations I am being too impertinent, turning my back on the purport of Bashō's teachings: maybe my own attempt rests on the misguided assumption that such *esprit de finesse* (*hosomi*) can be translated as *esprit de geometrie*. And yet to me also this latter one is holding the “one thin thread” that connects all life, so that it is hard not to do so.²⁸

“A Reflection on Poetic Spirit” does walk on this thread, trying to reconcile these two opposite necessities. As it does so by approaching an aesthetic ideal that names these contradictions themselves, however, it might succeed where a one-sided attempt (philosophical or philological) would be bound to fail.

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