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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,” 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). 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. 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. Michael Marra’s engagement with Kuki’s poetic activity and his later philosophy of poetics is unique in this effort to broaden the scope. Kuki’s other major theoretical work, his 1936 *The Problem of Contingency* has only been translated into French. 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.

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3 *Iki no kōzō* いきの構造, KSZ 1:86.
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 deceivingly 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: it 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 (笑しまし) and omoshiroshi (面白し). Later cases of fūryū are the extravagant luxurious aesthetics of basara (馬佐良) and kasa (達) 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

transcendence in the world: as Qiu observes, Ikkyū’s ふゆ is an “aesthetic of unconventionality…which to the orthodox point of view, is crazy and eccentric.” Bashō’s case is different. While the sexual sense of ふゆ becomes gradually preeminent in the erotically charged world of にわ, often with parodic references to the refined sensuality of ancient courts, it would be hard to find this sense of ふゆ in Bashō’s work. 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 ふゆ in its aspect of “wind-madness” (風狂 fūkyō), to Bashō, ふゆ 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 さび 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 ふゆ.

Despite the lack of a univocal and clear definition, what ふゆ, ふゆ and ふが 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.

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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. 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. 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*. 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*. Watsuji also tried to directly address the hermeneutics of

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

haikai in the incomplete essay *Explaining the Poetry of Bashō.* 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.

_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. 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. 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_.

Two more notable works on Bashō, of considerably different tone, also appear during the war. In 1943 the controversial literary critic Yasuda Yojurō (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. A distinct tone is exemplified in a second cycle of meetings in Kyoto published in 1945 by the magazine *Gakkai*. The participants included haikai

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17 WTZ 2:322–325.
22 Yasuda Yojūrō, Bashō 芭蕉 (Tōkyō: Kodansha, 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 sabi, “solitary,”
detachment “colourful,” “flourishing” “desolate”
耽美 tanbi: 細み hosomi, “subtle,” vs. 太い futoi, “bold,”
aestheticism “fine” “broad”
自然 shizen: 可笑しみ okashimi, vs. 厳か ogosoka,
nature “funny,” “laughter” “stern,” “sublime”

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 (意気地 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 ふりゆ: 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 ふりゆ: 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:

Japanese: Tachibana ya  |
           Itsu no no naka no |
          Hototogisu |

Translation: Oh, wild tangerines  |
In some past field  |
A singing cuckoo

Returning in his essay *Metaphysics of Literature* (trans. in Marra 2004) and in the essay on ふりゆ, 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 contingence 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 ふりゆ 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.

References

Collected Works

Books and Articles

28 KSZ 4: 69.


