

*Kuki Shūzō's Temporal Aesthetics: Finding Japanese Identity in Art and Literature*

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In this paper we will deal with Kuki's *Propor sur le temps* and *Metaphysics of Literature* aiming to define the notion of Aesthetics in Kuki's thought. The structure of the present paper will be: firstly, we will analyze Kuki's text *Propor sur le temps*, focusing mainly in the oriental time that he characterizes as transmigration and how such a temporality is expressed by Japanese art; following, we will deal with his *Metaphysics of Literature* where his constant concern is to support a conception of literature as a pure intuition of the present.

### **A time of transmigration; an art of the infinite**

Before talking about time, Kuki has to come all the way back to the origin of time, just then start to talk about the oriental time. His presupposition is that time is will, thus consciousness. The discussion that posits will as the origin of time is quite recent inside Western Philosophy, since from Aristotle's definition of time as the measure of movement, Philosophy seeks for a transpersonal and objective concept of time, a time to which all nature is subjected to. For instance, when was said that the time/duration of one day is the Sun's trajectory in the sky.

I believe that the will that Kuki talks about as the origin of time is this individual subject that lives and encounter others in the present temporality of contingency.

In this way, the oriental time is the time of transmigration. "Transmigration is the indefinite reborn, the everlasting repetition of the will, the endless return of time. Or, the most remarkable and impressive that we can conceive about transmigration is that the man become the same man in everlasting repetition." (KSZ:I, pp.294) Such a notion of time, necessarily, raises the question of identity. We know that the well-know idea of Karma works by causality: good deeds lead to a good Karma that will make this same person to reborn as a human, evil deeds lead to a rebirth in the form of an animal or even an insect. How it is possible to sustain the same identity if someone reborn as an animal or insect? Kuki's answer is that if someone reborn as an insect, in her previous life she already lived an inner life of an insect. In this way, nothing is more consequent that this same person reborn as an insect that was already her inner life. The identity is sustained, since the continuity of the same identity is the general case, the contrary is just the exception. This is the case because the maintenance of identity as the touchstone of the temporality of transmigration goes all the way beyond the individuals to the world. In other words, one will reborn as the same in a world that is the same, because this world is ruled by a periodic time.

We can conceive imagetically the temporality that Kuki describes as a standing spring of which the ends are connected. Each circle of this spring is identical to the other ones and since they are all connected, including the one in the bottom and the other on the top, we cannot tell apart neither the first one nor the last one in the succession. Here, Kuki distinguishes in a very compelling way to the discussion the occidental and the oriental notions of time. In the occident we have three kinds of temporality: past, present and future, they succeed horizontally progressing from the past through the present in direction to the future. According to Kuki this is the phenomenological temporality. Whereas, the oriental time of transmigration, here called mystic, is vertical meaning that each present, even in the past or future, has an infinite deepness. Once again using the image of the spring, we can just imagine a vertical line passing through all the circles at the same point, these points are identical in every circle and

designate the same present that repeats itself indefinitely. Bearing these characteristics in mind, we can trace the differences between the mystical and the phenomenological time. The last one is continuous, whereas the first one is discontinuous. Moreover, the phenomenological time is a pure heterogeneously, thus irreversible, while the mystic time is a pure homogeneity and reversible. "Assuming these essential differences, we can say: the horizontal plane represents the ontological-phenomenological ecstasy, the vertical plane the metaphysical-mystic ecstasy." (KSZ:I, pp.291)

Both notions of time have direct consequences to the understanding of identity. Kuki claims that the will is the origin of time. A will that produces the occidental horizontal temporality resolves the temporal question of identity by means of continuity. There is no doubt that the person who desire, i.e., the willing person is the "I", in a similar way this "I" that produces time insofar he desires, he desires along time. Thus, we are led to conclude that if the will of this I changes through the time, the I also change, however we have the clear conscience that we are the same, our identity is hold together even in the ever-changing streams of time. In a heterogeneous temporality, the beginning (past) and the end (future) are clearly delimited, since time is irreversible, as far its continuity maintain a successive chain. By this, an identity is a question of the chain that initiates in past, works in present and ends in future.

On the other hand, in a metaphysical-mystic temporality the identity is sustained in another way. Given the periodicity of time, it is impossible to distinguish a before and an after, i.e., a past and a future, the instant is all that exist and, beyond that the instant is the same instant that repeats itself once more, eternally. Therefore, the will that produces time is condemn to desire always the same, it is an "instant that possess a deep and infinite thickness"<sup>1</sup>. The world identity that constructs itself through endless repetition of the Great Year, get mixed up with the identity of the individual subjected to transmigration. "A continuity of the self exists here only in an imaginary way it is a continuity which reveals itself only in mystical moments, the profound moments of a 'profound enlightenment,' moments in which the self takes recognition of itself with an astonishing shudder. 'The self exists' at the same time that the 'self does not exist'." (LIGHT, pp.48/KSZ:I, pp.288). That is the reason why together with the metaphysical-mystic we have the question of the liberation from time that Kuki identifies in two forms: the transcendental, intellectual liberation and the immanent voluntarist liberation.

The transcendental, intellectual is about a negation of the will by intellectual means, through knowledge. Kuki identifies such way of liberation in Buddhism, in which the nirvana is the abolition of any will and any desire. Recognizing the self, the source of will, as an illusion, this self is abolished with the will that is produced by it, time is also negated, since is the will that produces time.

The immanent voluntarist liberation is born from the *Bushidō* as an affirmation of the will, i.e., the negation of the negation. Even so this will is fated to always been disillusioned, always failing, the eternal repetition of the same is taken as a good. *Bushidō* pursues the ideal of the will, and even that this ideal is impossible to reach; the eternal and repeated attempt to reach it has an absolute value. "Pursue perfection while maintaining a clear consciousness as to its 'deception.'" Live in perpetual time,

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<sup>1</sup> See Dōgen's formulation of "existential instant".

in *Endlosigkeit*, to use Hegel's terms. Find *Unendlichkeit* in *Endlosigkeit*, *infinity* in the *indefinite*, *eternity* in *succession without end*. " (LIGHT, pp.49/KSZ:I, pp.286)

Japanese art also would have its ground on this temporal experience marked by the attempt of liberation from both time and space. The Japanese *Bushidō*, Kuki claims, received a double influence and was configured by Indian Buddhism as a religion, what Kuki calls mysticism, and the Chinese philosophy of Daoism which is defined as pantheism. Kuki doesn't go beyond in explaining the mysticism in Buddhism as the search for the ideal of Nirvana, in the same way, the pantheism inherent to Daoism is explained through the understanding of Dao as the essence and beginning of all things.

The *Bushidō* would harmonize with these two traditions, deepening them regarding art. As we've saw above, *Bushidō* seeks the affirmation of the will until its absolutization, hence in art instance, Kuki will interpret this as a search to express the infinity in the finite. In the same way that a purely Buddhist art would search for liberation from time, and a Daoist art would seek for an expression of the Dao, Japanese art's claim is to express the ideal of infinity in the individual and finite artworks.

We see here Kuki conceiving art as a form of expression of a spiritual reality. This is the point we should stress if our aim is to grasp Kuki's concept of aesthetics. Then, art is pervaded with meaning without which it is hard to understand it in a correct way<sup>2</sup>, such meaning, however, is not inputted on the artwork by its creator like we should expect from a Romantic Aesthetics of the genius. Quite the opposite, it is given from culture. We can clearly notice a certain Hegelian influence for whom art is an already overcome expression of the Spirit. Spirit seems like to be understood by Kuki as culture or, if we wish a closest designation, as a world-view. It is not a coincidence that Kuki claims, following closely Okakura Tenshin, that it is the Japanese art that deepen the Oriental ideal of art. "Its [*Bushidō*'s] ideal consists only in living and dying as the 'cherry blossom, exhaling its perfume in the morning light.' It is from this triple source that the 'inward art' of Yamato is born. It is in this spiritual atmosphere that it attains its full flowering." (LIGHT, pp.52 / KSZ:I, pp.282).

If our interpretation is correct, inasmuch we grasp *Bushidō* as a world-view, it becomes the very essence of the culture in which it was born, in other words, *Bushidō* becomes the essence of Japanese culture. Kuki's philosophy, then incur in two problems: 1) the correctness of the concept of *Bushidō* we find in Kuki's thought; and 2) if it is possible to attribute to just one trait all the essence of the art of a specific culture.

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<sup>2</sup> Kuki stresses very strongly this point as we can notice in the following statement. "It is from this triple source that the "inward art" of Yamato is born. It is in this spiritual atmosphere that it attains its full flowering. Consequently, without knowing something of these conceptions of life and world it becomes almost impossible to understand Japanese art. Its meaning, the idealist expression of the infinite in the finite, will go unexplained. Therefore, there are in Europe very few people who truly understand Japanese art. Does not Japanese art for most Europeans consist in woodblock prints of women and landscapes, or in the tea ceremony with its multicolored porcelain. Yet for the most part these things are rather insignificant. The truly great works of art habitually remain unknown". (KSZ:I, pp.287 / LIGHT, pp.52)

## Kuki Shuzo's Aesthetics

As we saw above Kuki's aesthetics is based on the expression of a cultural essence through art. Japanese art expresses the temporality of transmigration that, through *Bushidō*, earns the character of the infinity expressed in a finite artwork. The reason being is the affirmation of the will, this one is a continuous effort toward the ideal which in turn would ever be archived. In a temporality which its features are reversibility and verticality it is impossible to put apart past from future, leaving just a present in an everlasting repetition, which means that this present has an infinite deep. It is in the creation technique we observe in Japanese art where Kuki finds the expression of this infinite present.

In painting, Kuki will first of all analyze the perspective. While in Occidental art we find a geometric perspective, in Oriental art we encounter a perspective that destroys a spatial perspective, replacing it with a spiritual perspective in which it's measures are left for the one before the painting to decide. This perspective is called Metaphysical. The second aspect is an arbitrary composition. The represented in the paint is left incomplete and, hence, according to Kuki, alive, a kind of "form for the form's sake." Such a kind of arbitrary composition, again leave to the spirit of the gazer the task of exercising her spirit to follow the suggestive values there represented, suggestive value that come to replace the aesthetical value. The next point is the line. We are aware that calligraphy became a form of art in the Orient, this because the line, per se, can express movement. According to Kuki, the absolute is dynamic, because what moves do this movement in the present, in a present that doesn't fade away inasmuch there is movement. The forth feature is color. In Oriental art, especially in the ink painting (*Sumie*) tradition we find the black and white, here what Kuki emphasizes is the simplicity and fluidity came "from the nostalgia of the infinity and from the effort to exclude the differences in time" (KSZ:I, pp.279). Hisamatsu Shin'ichi in his study on *Zen and Fine arts* also stresses the dynamics between color and simplicity (this last one he calls No Complexity): "While No Form is thus the simplest form, no color is, likewise, the simplest color; and what is simple in the sense of having no color cannot be anything else but the Formless Self" (HISAMATSU, pp.55). Kuki concludes with considerations about the subject in painting. Beauty is painting's main motif, whereas the infinity pervades all that exists, without any exception, and it is the beauty. It is art that expresses and teaches us to see such beauty in that of most "aesthetical" and even in what is morally reprehensible<sup>3</sup>.

Kuki classifies Japanese poetry as a temporal art, thus, distinguishing itself from spatial arts like painting and architecture. Temporal arts have the aim to release not from space, instead to release from time. To argue in favor of this interpretation, Kuki lists seven characteristics of Japanese poetry that provides liberation from time. The

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<sup>3</sup> It is noteworthy to point out here that Kuki borrows from Aristotle's philosophy his claim that regarding painting mimesis cannot be condemn, by the contrary, it is admirable, since we humans are beings that take pleasure from knowledge we can learn something from an art that mimics something abominable that normally we cannot look at. However, through the mimesis performed by painting this same thing became somewhat pleasant and by looking at it we can learn something about the theme represented. In a similar line of argumentation, the "art for the art's sake" theory claims that art should not be morally or legally condemned, because what is there represented should be aesthetically judge, a sphere apart from moral and law. Following this, Kuki will affirm, in a very enigmatic fashion that "the art for the art's sake theory is a theory of the absolute idealism in art." (KSZ:I, pp.278)



smallest thing as well the biggest one contains the infinity. This is the first trace described by Kuki concerning Japanese poetry, here referring to the traditional forms of the Tanka and Haiku. The second one is said from the asymmetric character we find in these poetic forms, since, according to Kuki, the absolute would be impossible to be contained in a rigid form, only in "a form for the form's sake." Turning again to Tanka and Haiku, Kuki emphasizes the first one five-seven-five-seven-seven's and the last one five-seven-five, syllabic structure. Suggestion is the third trace. Japanese poetry leave something of vague about its whereabouts, just suggesting its meaning, "keeping in silence, a silence more eloquent than eloquence itself." We could also add to Japanese poetry suggestive feature its poetical techniques as *makura-kotoba* (pillow word) and *kire* (cut). The forth one is "the pantheist thought (Daoism), the idea that the essence of Totality is identical." Kuki identifies this in Basho's Haiku. What is said here is that two distinct poetical images reflect each other, one is identified with the small and daily, the other one with the immensurable and transcendent, however both of it ends up mixing themselves in one and same image<sup>4</sup>. The fifth feature reflects the simplicity of color and theme, which is the same case we have saw before when dealing with painting. Such simplicity intermingles with the infinity overcoming multiplicity. The sixth one talks about the negative aspect that is transformed into a positive one, since, like the case of painting, Daoism's pantheism see Dao in everything that exists. Finally, the last one deals with the repetition of time. Clearly, Kuki alludes to the representation of the instant, with which we are used to face when we read a Haiku. Kuki interprets the instant as the temporality of contingency, of the chance or failure, an encounter that constitutes the only real time: the present time.

### **Literature; an art of the present**

The temporality of art as the present that repeats itself eternally and vertically reappears in the moment Kuki deals exclusively with Literature from a metaphysical point of view. Kuki understand metaphysics by a mere contraposition to aesthetics, which means, a search for Literature's philosophical meaning beyond its aesthetical value. It behooves us to ask if he really accomplished his intention.

Following the same line of argumentation that we have saw in the previous section, Kuki attributes to art in general the temporality of present, whereas "When we ask what kind of temporal quality art possess, we can say that so long as it takes intuition as its specific character, art holds a temporal place in the present" (ML, pp. 175). We find here a clear reference to the intuition described by Bergson. In spite of in his philosophy the privileged temporality be the past, Kuki uses Bergson's intuition concept focusing in the idea of inner continuity. Basing his aesthetic in the notion of expression, Kuki cannot avoid giving a place in his thought to the one to whom expression is directed to: the receiver. Art expresses a world-view, the artist seeks to express the infinite in its purest form, insofar the receiver internalizes such expression and elevates her spirit until the point of a liberation of time and/or space<sup>5</sup>. Such

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<sup>4</sup> The most paradigmatic of Basho's Haiku is an example of this:

An octopus pot –  
inside, a short-lived dream  
under the summer moon  
(Trans. Ueda)

<sup>5</sup> "Doubtless it is his divine hand which unveils eternal beauty and, thereby, gives the spectators vertigo, but the task of the spectators remains intact: it is incumbent upon them to make the great leap, to enter into depthless

spiritualization of art expression in the form of a liberation from time or space it is only possible if art has the temporal quality of intuition as Bergson describes it: "The intuition we are talking about bears, before all, the inner duration [...] Intuition means firstly consciousness, but immediate consciousness, vision that scarcely distinguishes itself from the object saw, knowledge which is contact and even coincidence. [...] The intuition is that that reaches the spirit, the duration and the pure changing" (PM, pp.1272-1274/27-29).

Using Bergson's quotation as a basis, we can claim that the present Kuki affirms we find in Literature is not the present of a dot, rather the present understood as duration and extension. In other words, the present of qualitative time. Kuki proves his point taking as an example the syllabic cut in poetry, unit of metrical verse and rhyme, all of them, rather than implying homogeneity similar to that of the quantitative time of the clock, implies a particular fluidity hold by each poem. The poetical accent and rhyme create in the verse a changing and unpredictable temporal impression, howsoever we can count the cuts, poetic syllables and identifies the rhymes, this always happens at a particular duration imposed by the poem's own structure.

To admit that Literature possesses a qualitative temporality implies distinguishes it from music, another art in which the qualitative time is evident. Kuki distinguishes them through a classification that places literature as a linguistic art and music as an acoustic art. Which means that the realm of music is the sound: a musical piece is represented in a given duration, which is, by turn, filled entirely by its own temporality. However, in the case of literature, because its realm is imagination and representation, besides filling the duration of the reading of a poem or a romance, for example, it also creates another conceptual temporality. We could read a poem about the entire spring just in thirty seconds, in the same way, take us three days to read a romance about an entire life. The conceptual and meaningful character of language adds to literature's perceptive temporality (i.e., the duration of reading) another temporal layer that Kuki calls conceptual temporality. Thus, literature as a linguistic art's temporality is found in the fact that it possesses a multilayered temporality. Music holds a one-layered qualitative temporality, while literature holds a multilayered qualitative temporality; this is the main distinction between these two forms of art.

We need to make a last observation concerning the division of styles in literature: prose, drama and poetry<sup>6</sup>. Here we will deal only with poetry because it is paradigmatic inside Kuki's aesthetics. Poetry's temporal nature is the present. Thus, by being a form of art its temporality belongs to present, as a linguistic art it also possesses a multilayered temporality and, finally, for being poetry it also has a tendency to present. This happens, because it concentrates in itself the same feature in

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metaphysical abysses and to be overwhelmed there. Thus, twice is art liberated from time: once in the artist who creates infinity, once in the spectators who participate, as it were, in this creation by their contemplation of works of art" (LIGHT, pp. 62-63).

<sup>6</sup> Kuki classifies the literary forms of prose, drama and poetry regarding the temporal tendency that each one of them possesses. Prose would have a tendency towards past, because Kuki conceives it based in the Japanese term *Monogatari*. *Kataru*, to talk, evokes *noboru*, to tell, that in turn is homophonic with another verb, *noboru*, to stretch. Therefore, to tell a story is to stretch it from its beginning, from the past. In the case of drama, the fact that it is played puts in play human actions. These actions are directed by will, will that is always directed to a future purpose. The most appropriate examples are comedy and tragedy, these classified due the ending that each plot incurs; comedy an unusual ending and tragedy a regrettable ending. In this way, Kuki comes to the conclusion that drama possesses an orientation toward future.

two ways: as expression of feelings and intuitions of the present<sup>7</sup> and using its poetical techniques. In short, both the meaningful content as well as the form conducts poetry toward the present. The intensity of feelings with which we are used before the reading of a poem and its short form, almost momentary, like the repetition of the form in rhymes and the alliteration are emphasized by Kuki to prove his argumentation that poetry is an "eternal now." This strengthens Kuki's definition of the temporality of Japanese art and enlarges it to all poetic forms<sup>8</sup>.

In this way, Kuki's aesthetics consists of the presupposition that the temporality of art is the present; it acquires the form of an eternal present or a deep present through the repetitions we find in poetical techniques. "For this he [Don Juan, the paradigmatic esthete] has no time; for him everything is merely an affair of the moment. In a certain sense it can be said of psychical love that to see her and to love her are the same, but this only suggests a beginning. [...] To see her and to love her are the same; this is in the moment. In the same moment everything is over, and the same thing repeats itself indefinitely". (KIERKEGAARD, *Either/Or*, I, pp. 94-95)

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<sup>7</sup> Here, Kuki evokes Motoori Norinaga's *mono no aware* theory. (ML, pp.203)

<sup>8</sup> We have to make a remark, albeit Kuki talks about poetry in general, all of his examples that he uses to base his theory came from Japanese literature, with one exception; to illustrate alliteration in thyme Kuki uses a poem from the Wei dynasty's Emperor Wen.



