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Michael F. Marra/Kuki Shuzo: A Philosopher's Poetry and Poetics

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Introduction

Kuki Shūzō (1888–1941), one of Japan’s most original thinkers of the twentieth century, has been the object of divided critical evaluations since the time he published a work that was destined to make him a truly popular philosopher, rather than simply an academic one: *Iki no Kōzō* (The structure of *iki*; 1930).¹ As Kuki himself noticed in a short essay titled “Dentō to Shinshu” (Tradition and progressivism; 1936),² as soon as *The Structure of Iki* appeared, first in the pages of the journal *Shisō* (Thought) and then as a monograph eight months later,³ he was immediately attacked by Marxist critics as a “fervent traditionalist.” Kuki accepted the charges, but only after qualifying his position toward tradition. He would hardly have spent eight years in Europe and dedicated most of his life to the study of Western philosophy—he argued—if he wanted simply to promote the maintenance of “the old customs of tradition” in his land. The simple mentioning of the issue was, in his opinion, “obvious, banal, and almost ludicrous.” But if by “traditionalism” one meant the realization of the role played by tradition in the formation of one’s “Being,” then the charge of traditionalism was not only justified but actually welcome. Kuki’s commitment to an understanding of language—a topic that is central to the articulation of *Sein* (Being)—was reduced by Marxist critics to an avowal of nationalism, particularly in light of the changed political circumstances that were silencing all opposition in the name of military expansionism.

This charge has haunted Kuki’s reputation to this day, threatening to obfuscate the originality of a truly cosmopolitan philosopher

whose “guilt” has been established chiefly by association. In Japan no one dared to talk about Kuki after the war because of his association with the “Kyoto school,” which was accused of providing the government with the intellectual justification for nationalistic and expansionistic policies. This argument is based on the premise that Kuki worked in the department of philosophy at Kyoto Imperial University together with Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945), Tanabe Hajime (1885–1962), and other members of the Kyoto school whose thought was deeply affected by Nishida’s system. Not until the 1980s did Kuki become the focus of scholarly attention in Japan and the West, at the same time as a reevaluation of the alleged war responsibilities of members of the Kyoto school.⁴ It is ironic, however, to notice that while Kuki’s association with the Kyoto school hurt him to a considerable degree, he is seldom included in discussions of the school—and appropriately so, since he was intellectually rooted in the philosophy department of Tokyo Imperial University and seldom took a public stand on the issue of imperialism.⁵

Furthermore, Kuki’s association with the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), with whom he studied in the fall of 1927 and the spring of 1928, has led several critics to see a commonality of aims between the two philosophers, who are thus presented as “typical ideologues of nineteenth-century imperialism.” This is the position taken by Karatani Kōjin, who has had a particular influence on historians and literary critics writing on Kuki in the West. Karatani sees Kuki’s and Heidegger’s speculations on Being as developments of nineteenth-century discourses on “spirit,” which led both thinkers to arrive, “respectively, at the ‘Great East Asian Coprosperity Sphere’ and the ‘Third Reich.’”⁶ Karatani’s “hermeneutics of national being” is a rehearsal of the Marxist critiques that Kuki himself talked about in “Tradition and Progressivism.” Karatani follows an argument made by the Marxist critic Tosaka Jun (1900–1945) in *Nihon Ideorogiron* (Essay on Japanese ideology; 1935), in which Tosaka highlighted the parallels between the aesthetic practices of German romanticism and the aesthetic ideology of Japan’s ultranationalism.

Tosaka’s and Karatani’s arguments are fully at work in Leslie Pincus’s *Authenticating Culture in Imperial Japan*, the most extensive work on Kuki in English, published in 1996. In this monograph Kuki is

accused of following a methodology—the hermeneutical method—that, allegedly, “has lent itself to conservative, even reactionary, perspectives on history.”⁷ The reference is to Heidegger,⁸ of course, who provided Kuki with a “cultural hermeneutic,” “a national ontology,”⁹ and a “logic of organicism” that made Kuki intellectually responsible for the government’s expansionistic policies in China.¹⁰ Pincus reads Kuki’s philosophy in light of Marxist interpretations of Heidegger, especially interpretations by one of Heidegger’s most severe French critics, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, who created the term “national aestheticism” to define Heidegger’s views of cultural organicism and from whom Pincus derived the subtitle of her book, *Kuki Shūzō and the Rise of National Aesthetics*.¹¹ Karatani’s and Pincus’s interpretations of Kuki have become quite authoritative among scholars of literature in the West, who tend to rely on their assessments when referring to Kuki’s thought.¹² This does not mean that no effort has been made to point out how difficult it is to substantiate these claims when one looks at Kuki’s actual body of work.¹³ It simply indicates that the voices calling for more attention to the writings of Kuki Shūzō tend to be ignored.

Realizing that inattentively conceived links between the philosophies of Heidegger and Kuki have significantly distorted the latter, some critics have attempted to detach Kuki’s thought from Heidegger’s philosophy of Being, pointing out Kuki’s predominant use of French thought, in which he specialized and lectured extensively at the University of Kyoto.¹⁴ Research in this direction has contributed powerful analyses of the differences between Kuki’s and Heidegger’s hermeneutical phenomenology.¹⁵ The answer to the question of relationships lies ultimately with Kuki himself who, in the essay “Tōkyō to Kyōto” (Tokyo and Kyoto),¹⁶ compares his links with Henri Bergson (1859–1941) and Martin Heidegger to his relationship with the two cities most dear to him, the city where he was born and raised (Tokyo) and the city where he spent the second half of his life (Kyoto). If, as Goethe pointed out, talent is built in quietness while character develops in the midst of activity, then Kuki could argue that his personal experience was a fertile ground for the development of both. Raised in the modernity of Japan’s capital, the city of Bergsonian and Parisian vitalism, he was developing his philosophy in the stillness of the ancient capital Kyoto, which afforded him the quietness of Heidegger’s Black Forest. The

names of the two philosophers can hardly be separated in Kuki's thought. His cosmopolitanism was the result of fortunate circumstances that brought him into the world as a member of one of Japan's most distinguished and influential families, both culturally and politically, and allowed him an unusually lengthy stay in Europe where he could engage in conversation with the major philosophical figures active in France and Germany.¹⁷ As I argue in the following chapter, this cosmopolitanism did not come without a price. But this was a price that most Japanese intellectuals born in the Meiji period had to pay in order to make sense of an intellectual tradition into which they were born and which was profoundly challenged by new configurations of knowledge flooding Japan from the West. Beginning with the Meiji Restoration (1868), Japanese thinkers engaged in tremendous efforts to come to grips with new Western vocabularies and sets of ideas in art, literature, philosophy, aesthetics, and more. This was a history of anxious assimilation, angry rejection, and, eventually, detached speculation that came about as a result of unimaginable efforts made by Japan's intellectual pioneers of modernization.¹⁸ No wonder, therefore, that we find "tensions" in Kuki's system reflected in the competing positions taken by his critics. These positions are interesting to me not so much for the grain of truth they may contain but for exemplifying with their performative acts the complexities of Kuki's thought.

In this book I will not be adding my voice to the debate on the political responsibilities of Kuki's philosophy. My aim is much more modest and very much related to my own interests in literary matters. I agree with the characterization that the editors of *Sourcebook for Modern Japanese Philosophy* give of Kuki in the preface to their book. They state: "Indeed, Kuki Shūzō must be considered not only a philosopher of art but also an artist in his own right, especially in the realm of poetry. As such a philosopher-poet, Kuki emerges as one of the most appealing and sensitive modern Japanese philosophers."¹⁹ In the present book I offer Kuki's poetic production in translation: his collections of free verse, *Parī Shinkei* (Paris mindscapes; 1925-1926), *Haben* (Fragments; 1927), *Parī no Negoto* (Sleep talking in Paris; 1926), and *Parī no Mado* (Windows of Paris; 1925), as well as his 31-syllable poems (*tanka*) written in Paris during the second half of the 1920s. I have also translated additional poems that Kuki appended to

a long essay on rhyme in poetry, “Nihonshi no Ōin” (Rhyme in Japanese poetry; 1931). The poems are followed by translations of two essays on poetry that Kuki wrote in Kyoto in the late 1930s and early 1940s: “Jōcho no Keizu: Uta o Tebiki to Shite” (The genealogy of feelings: A guide to poetry; 1938) and “Bungaku no Keijijōgaku” (The metaphysics of literature; 1940). I have chosen to provide readers with textual samples of Kuki’s poetry and poetics because it seems to me that the slippage between practice and theory—the production and the discussion of poetry—is another example of Kuki’s divided loyalties on which critics have focused. In the introductory essay I discuss what I perceive to be an unresolved tension between, on the one hand, the philosophy espoused in Kuki’s poetry dealing with issues related to Bergsonian thought (contingency, freedom, and pure duration) and, on the other, much more conservative theories that he followed in discussing poetry, especially his notion of temporality—theories not unrelated to German thought.

I have appended a translation of selected essays by Kuki that, hopefully, will give readers additional materials for a better understanding of his poetry. I have chosen to include a few essays related to Kuki’s life (“Negishi,” “Remembering Mr. Okakura Kakuzō,” “Remembering Mr. Iwashita Sōichi,” “A Recollection of Henri Bergson,” “Tokyo and Kyoto,” “A Record of Short Songs,” and “Tradition and Progressivism”), to his discussions of language (“My Family Name” and “My Thoughts on Loanwords”), and to the notion of contingency (“Contingency and Destiny,” “Contingency and Surprise,” “A Joke Born from Contingency,” and “Sound and Smell: The Sound of Contingency and the Smell of Possibility”), a notion which informs Kuki’s philosophy deeply and which he developed in one of his most distinctive poems.