

Images of the Wind

A Japanese Phenomenology of Imagination as Air

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The status of imagination within European philosophy is complex. If philosophy is a quest for truth, it is easy to see how images and imagination could be understood as being closer to mistakes, perceptual errors or even lies than other phenomena. Plato's exile of the poets from his republic is a troubled but clear recognition of this fact; the rational soul holds no space for contradictions, but each image of something is somehow both something (stone, ink, coal on paper) and something else (a body, a landscape, a mythical being). As something "that is like being but is not being,"¹ it is despised as a kind of "witchcraft" (*goeteia*).² Moreover, images summon these unrealities not by grasping what is essential to the nature of things, their "form" or *eidos* (as would be the case in geometry), but by what is inessential and momentary to them: shadows, colors, perspectival and atmospheric alterations (*eidolos*).³ Nonetheless, imagination summons perfect, almost effortless phantoms that are able to enamor and move us without even requiring any real understanding. A poet can write

1. Rep. 597A.

2. Rep. 603A.

3. On Plato and painting, cf. KEULS 1978.

of horses and chariots without knowing how to ride one; even worse, he can do the same with virtue and justice. However, there is a deep ambivalence in Plato's stance: his own philosophical dialogues are works of literary craft, relying on the affective power of *mythos* while proclaiming the superiority of *logos*. It is a stance that is characteristic of European attitudes towards imagination, as Casey explains:

Ever since Plato declared imagining to be mere pseudo- or shadow-knowing—a form of *eikasia*, the lowest species of mental activity—Western philosophers have striven to put imagination in its place: a strictly subordinate place. With the exception of isolated figures such as Vico, Collingwood and Bachelard, philosophers have denounced imagining for its digressiveness and excoriated it for its evasiveness, though sometimes surreptitiously admiring it for these very qualities. At the same time and as part of the same deprecatory tactic, invidious comparisons have been instituted between imagining and supposedly superior psychological activities. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for example, the paradigm was pure thinking, over against which imagining appeared as deceitful and mendacious—as “the mistress of falsehood and error” in Pascal's classic complaint.⁴

THE PROBLEMATIC STATUS OF IMAGINATION

This ambiguity becomes even more acute when modern philosophy begins to rely on the ambiguous status of the imaginary to make it a middle ground between perception and intellect. Close to perceptual mistakes—dreams and ravings, emotions in general—it must belong with the body; with its undeniable role in abstraction, language and creativity, however, this “mistress of falsehood” (Pascal) and its host of ghosts remain very seductive for the theoretician as well. Descartes famously declared imagination a power “not required for the essence of myself” since such essence was the rational mind.⁵ Kant

4. CASEY 1976, 207.

5. DESCARTES, *Med.* 6, AT 7: 73.

was no less dismissive, defining it as a “blind though indispensable function of the soul, without which we would have no cognition at all, but of which we are seldom even conscious.”⁶ However, as Heidegger noted, this downplaying of the imaginary is ultimately a form of panic. In order to bridge the gap between intellect and sensibility, the “passive subject” of imagination, sensual and yet completely free, must lie in the “unknown, common root” of both. The very “horizon of objectivity” emerges from this “transcendental untruth”:⁷

This fundamental constitution of the essence of man, “rooted” in the transcendental imagination, is the “unknown” of which Kant must have had an intimation when he spoke of “the root unknown to us”; for the unknown is not that of which we know absolutely nothing but that of which the knowledge makes us uneasy. However, Kant did not carry out the primordial interpretation of the transcendental imagination; indeed, he did not even make the attempt, despite the clear indications he gave us concerning such an analytic. Kant recoiled from this unknown root.⁸

Despite this stern remark, Heidegger never fully focused on the theme of imagination either. Phenomenology, however, the intellectual context from which his own philosophy originated, is the most relevant discontinuity in a history of imagination in Europe.

IMAGINATION AND PHENOMENOLOGY

It might be surprising to present phenomenology and Husserl’s work as champions of the imaginary, yet Husserl offered a deeply renewed view of the imaginary both in *Ideas* and in the materials collected in 1980 in *Husserliana XXIII: Phantasie, Bildbewusstsein, Erinnerung*.⁹ Sartre later argued that the whole philosophy of imagination

6. KrV §10, cf. KANT 1998, 212.

7. HEIDEGGER 1962, 146f.

8. HEIDEGGER 1962, 166–167.

9. HUSSERL 1980. For an English translation cf. HUSSERL 2005.

in Europe had been the history of a misunderstanding until the publication of *Ideas*. In fact, imagination had been hitherto thought of as *Einbildungskraft*: the production of tiny, imperfect and internal images in the “mind.” Husserl was the first to completely reject this model and understand Phantasie as a noetic mode instead. Imagination is not the reproduction of “something” but a *mode of consciousness* that can point to real or unreal *noemata* in a noetic mode that essentially differs from that of perception and abstract thought. The crucial difference is that in perception, the datum gives itself “in the flesh” (*leibhaftig*) as a “presentation” (*Gegenwärtigung*), while in Phantasie, it is only a “presentification” (*Vergegenwärtigung*), a “nothing,” as in the famous example of a centaur in *Ideas*:

Obviously the centaur itself is nothing psychical; it exists neither in the soul nor in consciousness, nor does it exist somewhere else; the centaur is indeed “nothing,” it is wholly “imagination”; stated more precisely: the mental process of imagining is the imagining of a centaur.¹⁰

Therefore, the whole method of phenomenology rediscovers imagination as a core mode of consciousness, essential to its own field of research. Intentionality describes the way in which consciousness points at something beyond itself as a particular unreality; *epoché* projects into virtuality the whole world of praxis; free variation relies on the open-ended imaginary process that lets a real, solid object dissolve into a field of possibilities. As Husserl writes in *Ideas*:

There are reasons by virtue of which in phenomenology, as in all other eidetic sciences, presentations (*Vergegenwärtigungen*) and, more precisely, *free phantasies* acquire a position of primacy over perceptions and do so even in the phenomenology of perception itself.... One can say in strict truth, that “feigning” (“*Fiktion*”) *makes up the vital element of phenomenology as of every other eidetic science*, that feigning is the source from which the cognition of “eternal truth” is fed.¹¹

10. Ideen I §23, cf. HUSSERL 1980B, 44; see also HUSSERL 2005, 23.

11. Ideen I, §70, cf. HUSSERL 1990B, 131–2

Husserl: hovering fantasies, transparent images

For Husserl, one of the lingering problems in his analysis of imagination is the puzzling continuity and discontinuity between image consciousness and free fantasy. In the first case, he argues that we face a threefold structure of physical image, image-object and image-subject. Unlike almost everything else in the world, an image is both opaque—lines and colors on paper—and a transparent opening. A different kind of spatiality opens up *through* the image as another inexistent “something” becomes a secondary intentional object. In the case of fantasy, the *phantasm* is instead directly “presentified” *somewhere in front of me*, neither in the actual world nor simply in my mind, as in Husserl’s example of the “Berlin palace” that is “hovering before us” without obviously being in Berlin.¹² The verb used by Husserl in his examples is telling: a *phantasm* is not simply a *Vorstellung*, but a *Vorschwebung*; these imaginary objectivities are “hovering things.” These images are not *internal images* (*Ein-*), but rather *something appearing in front of us* (*Vor-*): there is an “irrevocable *frontal* character” in phantasy, which is always “facing me... lacking that depth or three-dimensionality necessary for the exploration of full-bodied objects.”¹³

Schweben is an atmospheric verb: “to float,” “to hover.” *Phantasmata*, as Japanese *yōkai* and European ghosts, or as Husserl’s examples of a centaur or “Berlin’s palace,” are translucent and floating in “air”, an unspecified medium that never reaches presence as such and in turn always reveals itself through similar *Vergegenwärtigungen*. It is in this sense that images and *phantasmata* share an airborne “transparency” (or “non-obstruction”, see 5.2 below) that is the first decisive element differentiating them from perception:

The phantasy image does not appear in the objective context of present reality, the reality that is constituted in actual perception, in the actual

12. HUSSERL 2005, 20.

13. CASEY 1976, 92.

field of vision. The centaur that now *hovers* before me in phantasy *does not seemingly cover a part of my visual field*.¹⁴

The same aerial quality even seems to haunt painted images: A picture does not simply *refer* to something else, pointing to a second presentification “lying next to it”; the image instead “permeates”¹⁵ it as an immanent atmosphere, as an opening that is the “foundation for the possibility of aesthetic feeling in fine art.”¹⁶ Yet Husserl never really wondered why such aerial metaphors kept finding their way into his usually dry prose when discussing the imaginary, nor did he pay particularly close attention to actual artistic expressions or the emotive layering that is connected to imagination.

Sartre: the haziness of the world

Husserl’s work on imagination immediately caught the young Sartre’s attention, resulting in the two volumes *L’imagination* (1936) and *L’imaginaire* (1940). While Sartre does not discuss Husserl much in his later work, it is the problem of imagination that first lead him from phenomenology to existential philosophy through the discovery of “nothingness.”¹⁷ In fact, imagination is described by Sartre as a “diffuse light” of consciousness, similar not to a piece of wood in the sea but conceived “as a wave among the wave” of consciousness.¹⁸ This total permeation of consciousness and imagination is ultimately based on the insubstantial quality of the latter. Imagination is intentionally aimed at external objects, but the image “has wrapped within it a certain nothingness,” distinguishing it from perceiving (partial, in succession, perspectival) and conceiving (all at once, dealing with idealities that do not pose the question of their existence).

Unlike the “nothing” of Husserl’s centaur, this “nothingness”

14. HUSSERL 2005, 53.

15. HUSSERL 2005, 32–33.

16. HUSSERL 2005, 44.

17. Cf. GUSMAN 2018.

18. SARTRE 2004, 16.

becomes a key insight in Sartre's view of consciousness and existence. Imagination means in fact "to constitute an object in the margin of the totality of the real, ...to hold the real at a distance, to be freed from it, in a word, to deny it...."¹⁹ This negativity is nothing less than the fundamental condition of consciousness, since it allows us to exist in relation to the world without being swallowed into its factual reality as a thing would. A consciousness completely "in-the-midst-of-the-world," "bogged down in the real" could not effortlessly annihilate it in fantasy. "For consciousness to be able to imagine, it must be able to escape from the world by its very nature, it must be able to stand back from the world... In a word, it must be free."²⁰

However, this freedom is always *negative*. We cannot read the pages of an imaginary book, and for all its apparent omnipotence, imagination always hides an inherent lack, a sterility. To demonstrate this, Sartre quotes a passage from Alain:

Many have, as they say, in their memory the image of the Panthéon and make it appear easily, or so that it seems to them. I ask them if they would please count the columns that support the pediment; but not only can they not count them but they cannot even try to. But this operation is the most simple in the world, when they have the real Panthéon before their eyes. What do they see, therefore, when they imagine the Panthéon?²¹

Merleau-Ponty also commented on this same passage, observing how imagination is "essentially deceptive" not just because it presents something that is absent, but also because it offers this insubstantial and incomplete phantom as something ostensibly *complete* and *organic*. It calls up an object, but "as one speaks of calling up a spirit."²²

19. SARTRE 2004, 182–183.

20. SARTRE 2004, 184.

21. Quoted in SARTRE 2004, 88.

22. MERLEAU-PONTY 1964, 60.

Once again, the imaginary is something ghostlike, aerial: transparent and hovering in Husserl, here defined by a certain mistlike haziness.

Such “haziness” is another distinctly atmospheric quality: the possibility for something to be given in a way that combines absence and presence in a chaotic way.²³ In the mist, one’s vision is not obstructed by something definite, and yet objects lose their positive, properly given shapes without becoming different or absent. It is not a *partial* revelation, but rather a full revelation in a mode that does not constitute positive and distinct things, conjuring within it as a whole absence, flow, sublimity. The most iconic connection of mist and the sublime in European aesthetic culture is surely Caspar David Friedrich’s *Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* (1818), in which the sea of fog is not the image of something but an essential gate to the imaginary within the perceptual world. In East Asia the praise of the aesthetic quality of this hazy fringe is a classic feature of both Chinese and Japanese art. We can think of ink paintings in the literati style, of the medieval poetics extolling *yūgen* 幽玄, “the dark and indistinct”, and of the many *hokku* by Bashō praising this imaginary element of mist:

霧しぐれ	Rainy mists:
富士をみぬ日ぞ	today the unseen Fuji
面白き	is even more beautiful
雲霧の	Clouds and mist
暫時百景を	for a moment revealing
尽しけり	one hundred landscapes

These aesthetic fogs very clearly show how imagination is not necessarily limited to image-consciousness or to the “free imagining” of a centaur, but is actually already present in certain styles of world percep-

23. I use the word “chaotic” here in the sense of the “relative chaotic manifold” of Hermann Schmitz; a situation in which “the distinction between identity and difference is only partially available and opened up, but which has not fully and definitely dissolved each chaotic relationship between the elements of the manifold.” Cf. SCHMITZ 1964, 312.

tion: not as their “other,” but as a fringe or internal fissure. Imagination is “a latent state, like an electric charge” already present in the world.²⁴ This charge or halo also surrounds images in another sense, which (according to Sartre) Husserl never discussed adequately: as their affectivity, the emotional charge that emerges through and by their negativity, as in the cases of longing or nostalgia.

Sartre eventually concludes that imagination is not simply a faculty, a mediation or an empirical power added to consciousness, but instead “it is the whole of consciousness as it realizes its freedom.”²⁵ Consciousness is in fact consciousness *of* the world in a double sense: it belongs to it both in its original intentional constitution and as something that unfolds “with and in” our relations with it.²⁶ If a “world” needs this negative movement to arise, imagination is the privileged locus to discover this movement, since it is the “one form of consciousness that has the idea of negation written into its intentional structure.”²⁷ This relationship between imagination, nothingness and consciousness explains why phenomenology as a study of consciousness must examine imagination not only as a theme, but include it into its core methodology.

For the context of this investigation, there are three points that remain underdeveloped in Sartre’s account. First, despite his own experience as a writer of fiction, almost all the examples in his work are visual. Secondly, he does not discuss poetry and literary imagination. Thirdly, just as in Husserl, the atmospheric qualities and “metaphors” in the description of imagination do not become an explicit theme in his work. To find a first phenomenologist exploring this homeomorphism between air and imagination, especially as evident in poetry, we must turn to Gaston Bachelard.

24. SARTRE 2004, 33.

25. SARTRE 2004, 185.

26. SARTRE 2004, 187.

27. HOPKINS 2016, 92.

Bachelard and the flow of poetry

Bachelard's intellectual biography was first defined by his involvement with the philosophy of science, with Hegel, Kant, even psychoanalysis: his work is not usually considered as phenomenology. However, beginning from the late 1930s, he progressively approached a "phenomenological turn", recognizing the potential of this approach despite some important flaws of "classical" phenomenology.²⁸ According to Bachelard, Husserlian phenomenology limited itself to a "centripetal" notion of intentionality that never allowed it to go beyond the "visible" and the "static." Bachelard's proposal was to lessen the focus on form and begin a study of "matter," a mobile, almost noumenal *hyle*. According to Bachelard, we are in fact surrounded not by static things such as the tables and cubes favored by Husserl, on which we can fix a "tranquil, passive gaze," but by a matter that is mass, paste, glue and especially "air," incessantly transforming in a dynamic process of permanent shifts.²⁹

Hence, Bachelard's whimsical approach to phenomenology consisted in the study of the different modes of "material imagination" channeled through the four traditional elements. A texture of perception and imagination, these substances are in fact best grasped in poetry. Criticizing the relative stasis of the visual images preferred by Husserl and Sartre, Bachelard argues that no real understanding of imagination can do without a third atmospheric character, its *instability*:

Like many psychological problems, researches on imagination are troubled by the fake light of etymology. It always seems that imagination is the faculty of forming images. But it is rather the faculty of deforming the images formed by perception, it is above all the faculty that frees us from the primary images, the faculty of changing images.... If a present image does not make us think of an absent image, if an occasional image does not determine a host of aberrant images, an explosion of

28. THIBOUTOT et al. 1999, 1.

29. VYDRA 2014, 51.

images, there is no imagination.... The fundamental word corresponding to imagination is not image, is imaginary. The value of an image is measured by the extension of its imaginary halo. Thanks to the imaginary, imagination is essentially open, evasive.³⁰

Husserl and Sartre (following a tradition that had begun with Plato) demeaned this unstable halo by describing it as a *lack* of stability: Bachelard praises it as an elemental disclosure. Moreover, thinking of this “turning into air” as the fundamental quality of the imaginary, as Bachelard does, resolves the problem of the discontinuous continuity of image consciousness and free imagining that riddled Husserl and Sartre. This enlivening dissolution from a single, defined presence to a powerful and open-ended absence is a reciprocal movement of living body (as *Leib*, not the somatic body of Sartre’s *analogon*) and world that we can also define as the disclosure of an “atmosphere.”

In effect, if we stop to think about the givenness of air (and wind in particular), we discover that beside imagination wind too is another element of the lifeworld that has “the idea of negation written into its intentional structure.”³¹ Such phenomenological wind-air is a relative “nothing”: presenting itself never as an object but always through something else that is not-air and not-wind, as it happens with branches and leaves, flags, kites, hair, clothing, sails and clouds, thrown by it into an open, transcendent spatiality. Bachelard clearly addressed the surprising but deep homeomorphism between air and imagination at large in his *Air and Dreams* (1943). According to Valéry, the true poet is “the one who inspires”: this fundamental aesthetic metaphor describes the negative-transcendental movement through which poetical imagination is gathered from and brought back into the world, in a movement resembling breathing. Bachelard adds that while all elemental phenomena teach us “lessons of substantial mobility”, air in particular sheds several fundamental insights into “the flight, the

30. BACHELARD 2007, 5.

31. HOPKINS 2016, 92.

ascension, the sublimation” that constitute the fundamental movement of imagination.³² While reality is given to us in a mostly horizontal plane, unreality is describable as a weightless, spectral verticality (the “hovering”) that is first of all felt in the living body. Bachelard’s survey of poetry however is limited to French and European sources and to a collection of examples that go beyond Husserl and Sartre in insight but not in organization. The “imaginary air” is defined as the “hormone” necessary for a fundamental growth, “the quintessential hominizing faculty”; however, Bachelard never attempts a full study of such phenomenology of air as imaginary.³³

Despite their differences, Husserl, Sartre and Bachelard all discovered something essential in the “nothingness” of imagination. The central categories of European philosophy—being, form, presence—are irretrievably complicated once they are oxidized by this airlike non-being. Despite the difficulty of describing something so subtle and omnipresent, the persistent resurfacing of “aerial qualities” in this primary shift between real and unreal is not a coincidence. We rather ought to ask if the “suspension of the real” that is the core novelty of phenomenology happened somewhere else as well, in a different cultural context. Not strictly “better”, but at least without the hindrance of a metaphysics declaring the primacy of being and reality over nothingness and the unreal.

JAPANESE IMAGINATION

The case of Japan is highly interesting in the context of a phenomenology of imagination. Refraining from positing a world of unchanging truth, a deep exploration of the flowing and illusory (*qua* relational) quality of *all* phenomena, even the ostensibly most stable ones, is a central theme of Japanese art and thought. Daoists like

32. BACHELARD 2007, 16.

33. BACHELARD 2007, 19.

Zhuangzi and proponents of Mahayana Buddhism, Zen in particular, fully employed the transformative power of imagination as an access to the fundamental flow of reality. Japanese poetics was also greatly concerned with the middle-status of the word, in its capability of being both real and unreal.³⁴ The theme of imagination resurfaces often in modern Japanese philosophy as well, with insights gathered both from European philosophy, as in Miki Kiyoshi's ponderous *Logic of Imagination* (1946) or in original syntheses of European and Japanese sources as in Kuki Shūzō's "Metaphysics of Literature", "A Reflection on Fūryū" and his other writings on the topic collected in *On Literature*.³⁵

Moreover, the identification between poetry, imagination and air that was a bold eccentricity in Bachelard and an unconscious paradigm in Husserl, Sartre and many other authors, becomes a central, explicit element in Japanese aesthetics. Before introducing Nishitani Keiji's reflection on "fundamental imagination", however, I would like to discuss a particular *image of wind* in Japanese art.

Hokusai's Wind at Ejiri: a phenomenological analysis

We argued that the particular "negative intentional structure" of wind makes it akin to an *image* and to *imagining*; as we have seen in the sections above, imaginary things also share fundamental traits with air and wind: transparency, haziness, flow. Rather than discussing this revolving relation in an abstract manner, we ought to find a specific context to study its unfolding, just as we do not see wind in general, but only wind in a particular landscape, season and mood. By doing so, we also have a chance to realize why this double passage is not only necessary to our consciousness as we know it, but has a distinct *aesthetic* modality.

We said that wind is the most imaginary perception, or the most

34. As in the relation between *hana* 華 and *mi* 実 in medieval poetics, later further refined by Bashō and his school, especially in Kagami Shikō's theory of real and unreal (虚実). On this topic, see MATSUO 1954.

35. KUKI 1941.

perceptual imagination. How can wind reveal something of the nature of images in general? How would a picture of wind look like, not as the anthropomorphic figure of Aeolus or Fūjin, but as the very paradox of iconicity, that is as *something revealing itself while staying invisible*? Such a work of art would surely have to be a masterpiece. Let us therefore try to see what happens in Katsushika Hokusai’s “Ejiri in Suruga province” (1832), from the series *Thirty-six views of Fuji*, sometimes simply referred to as “Wind.”



Fig. 1: Katsushika Hokusai “Ejiri in Suruga province” (1832)

Where is wind in this picture? Do we see it? There is no specific “point” of the picture that can be identified as wind. However, we can see it *through* and *with* other objects: the paper, the trees, the bodies, the grass. What is the phenomenological sense of this “through and with”? The objects themselves are not transparent, nor their togetherness and relation with wind is the same that might connect them to other positively given, solid objects. We can say that wind is *not* these objects and yet appears contextually through their *figure*—not their *form* in the sense of Plato’s *eidōs*, but something flexible, changing and contextual:

their halo or *air*. If this “air” is everywhere, however, does it not also mean that such almost-pictorial air is coextensive to the space of the picture itself, even where color and forms are present? Wind is therefore *nowhere* and *everywhere*—a dynamic layer creating a negative-relational space where we would have just paper and ink or a collection of shapes. This wind-layer moves (with) the image-objects of the picture, “animating” the whole of it (here the Latin *anima* can be seen in its most literal sense of “breathing”).

In his discussion of pictorial consciousness, Husserl did not reflect on *dynamic images*: while he fully realized the “vertical” shifts of consciousness when confronted with an image, he did not discuss how the shift between image object and imagining subject could also lead us to see movement in static patches of colors and lines or in a marble statue. In Hokusai, this invisible atmospheric layer crosses the image with an almost tangible force. While staying unseen itself, it organizes the fields of lines and colors in a definite, provisionally shaped movement. As a transparent “wave” that does not depict wind iconically, but rather flows with and as our gaze as a diagonal depth, it rises from the lower left corner and dissolves into the indefinite white “air-as-nothing” (空) of sky and white paper in the top right one.

One might ask whether we are still talking of the wind *in* the image or of a more abstract sense of movement and atmosphere *as* image. My suggestion is that Hokusai’s own work is a conscious oscillation between these two meanings. Painting something that is *invisible* by definition, such as wind, he produced a pictorial reflection on how painted images as such constantly deal with this impossibility: Showing what is not there is an essential task of art. Thus, just as a first sort of “wind” can be found in the medial phenomenon within the image and its constellation of objects in the fictional landscape, we also have an ulterior layer of wind-as-image floating between us and the physical patterns on the paper. Just as it is possible to say regarding the presence of wind_I (the presentified wind internal to the image) that wind is directly *imagined*, we could say that this second, moving layer,

wind(2), is also an *imaginary* element, presentifying the image as such. This wind(2) is a dynamism that cannot by any means reduced to its physicality, but also does not automatically belong to the static picture-object or picture-subject that Husserl tried to describe. It is rather the halo that surrounds them and works them into one. The aesthetic force of the image, its ontology, presents itself in the same medial, atmospheric mode in which we recognize wind through a constellation of phenomena, as something that is *between them* and *between them and us* at the same time. In a certain sense, all images are effectively haunted, arising out of the surplus and constant shifts between the layers of their materiality and immateriality.

Hokusai's fondness for ghosts, phantoms and transforming spirits, too, could be seen through this common and surprising continuity between "air" and the matter of Japanese painting. Even landscapes in Japanese art are not collections of objects in a three-dimensional space but rather "wind and shadows" (風景) and "color and air" (気色): not simply optical experiences but evocative atmospheres.³⁶ The same "transfer" between air, landscape and an imaginary transformation into a spirit is also the theme of Hokusai's deathbed poem, a *hokku* written at the age of 91:

人魂で	As a will o' wisp
行くきさんじや	how nice will be to wander
夏野原	over summer fields

Death here is just another kind of passage, a shift from the reality of one's biography to a surreal space in which the actuality of the summer field and the unreality of the *hitodama* (translated as "will o' wisp")—the tiny, flying ball of mist that is the spirit of a deceased—are fused together in a field of joyful freedom, literally a "letting go of one's breath" (気散じ). This auratic transfer into surreality, characteristic of

36. On the topic of the essentially atmospheric quality of the Japanese "landscape", see SASAKI 2006.

poetry and Japanese *haikai* in particular, will be a central theme of Nishitani's study of imagination.

The aesthetics of sugata as a wind-figure

Before discussing Nishitani's poetics, however, I would like to highlight another important aspect of Japanese aesthetics through Hokusai's picture.

We discussed how—in Hokusai's print—we can see trees and people blown by wind. Wind is a contingent, atmospheric event of this imagined scene; it does not belong to their "form." In other words, a gust of wind does not deform the stable and measurable structure of a tree or a human being. They are not dispersed, as a cloud would be. Nonetheless, as we know and can see in the picture, a tree bends and loses its leaves and people crouch with their clothing and hair flapping in the air. There is a sort of soft margin or halo around the stability of a form. In Husserl's terms, these variations are "adumbrations" (*Abschattungen*); they are integral to experience, which must happen within a perspective and a moment, but are surpassed into the eidetic constitution of objects and stable forms.

However, it is at the level of these hazy adumbrations that objects keep appearing to us and their aesthetic, dynamic, emotive or simply qualitative charge discloses. In a later *manga* by Hokusai, inspired by the view of Ejiri, human figures and leaves are blown in a surreal, black and white space of wind. Hokusai here plays the same game of invisibility, this time however concentrating on the finer texture of emotions in the human figures and on their relation to wind. This reaction to wind happens within, or even *is* such a "halo" or "figure": crouched, closed and resisting to the outer force in the case of the woman, joyously embracing it in the case of the old man with the scroll. She radiates discomfort, he "has" or "is" a happy figure. Such happiness or discomfort do not need an internal psyche to exist: Even a stick figure can

look surprised or indignant,³⁷ and a windswept, bare tree looks forlorn without any anthropomorphic projection from our part. Following Schmitz and other philosophers with an externalist view of emotions, we can say that such emotive charge is not a private mental state, but rather exists in the world—even in the imaginary world of the picture—as an atmosphere or “air.”³⁸

This view is well mirrored in Japanese expressions such as *fūtei* (風体 “wind-body”) and *fuzei* (風情 “wind-feelings”), respectively referring to the auratic charge arising like wind from the “figure” of human bodies and that of landscapes.

Fuzei is not something that emerges from the side of our feelings, it belongs to the side of the landscape (*fūkei*); as Ōmori Shōzō explains, *fuzei* is at the same time *atmosphere* and *expression* (*hyōjō*): it belongs to the landscape exactly in the same sense of the expressions on a man’s face.... A sad expression is known together with the eyes, mouth and nose on a man’s face, it is not a secondary emotive reaction produced by our analysis of the face as stage of this emotion. In the same way, the awe-inducing *fuzei* of a snow-covered mountain in a moonlit night is known *indissociably* from the shapes of the mountain and the whiteness of the snow.³⁹

This “air” is given *with* and *as* “figure”: it is not the essential quality of a face or a mountain, but the interactive result of dynamizing lines, shadows, colors, movements. It exists in an intersubjective world, in which things not simply *are* but also *ex-ist* and *ex-press*, without ever being isolated from a horizon and from as constitution of meaning. This expressive air-figure is something temporary and flexible that does not belong to objects as their physical forms do. It implies an intentional act, but it is not an arbitrary projection: As Tanaka stresses, we do not confuse, guess or “evinced” this emotive radiation. This imagi-

37. SARTRE 2004, 30.

38. SCHMITZ 2011.

39. TANAKA 2013, 59.

nary quality is also proved by the fact that it is perspectival (that is it implies a situated spectator) but not open to *multiple* perspectives; we do not need to turn around a face or a landscape to understand if one is happy and the other is gloomy.



Fig. 2: Katsushika Hokusai, *Hokusai Manga*, Volume XII, “Wind” (1834)

While in Europe we have no precise philosophy of such a *figure* (from latin *figo*, “to imagine”), apart perhaps from *Gestaltpsychologie*,⁴⁰ already in premodern times Japanese aesthetics widely employs a term highlighting this element of image phenomenology. Japanese, despite its reputation as a language of mystical indistinction, clearly differentiates *katachi* (形 “form”) and *sugata* (姿 “figure”). The word *kata* derives from the adjective *katai*, “rigid,” with the *-chi* ending corresponding to

40. If we think of Kanizsa’s triangle, for instance, we can see—reduced to the bone of the geometrical configuration—how the second white triangle, composed out of negative space, is actually “hovering” on top of the black one that is now hidden by its “shape”, even if it this triangle is by itself nothing visible.

a deictic particle “there.”⁴¹ As Imamichi Tomonobu notes, however, the word consistently used in Japanese aesthetic discussions is *sugata*, rather than *katachi*. *Sugata* has an essential connection with both “figure” in the sense we tried to describe and a direct connection with the sense of “halo” or “air” like *fuzei* and *fūtei*:

If we do not use what is visible as aesthetic descriptor, how can we human beings see something invisible such as wind-feelings (*fuzei* 風情)? Without something manifesting itself objectively in human perception instead of such stable “forms” (形), probably we would not see *fūzei* at all. I think that this something might be *sugata* (姿), as dialectic unity of “form” and “activity” Medieval discussions of poetry (歌論) avoided from the beginning the word “form” and rather used the more concrete “body” This body however was not the unchanging body in its rigid form (形), but rather as a wind-body (*fūtei* 風体), as a moving *sugata*.⁴²

Imamichi wonders if other European words express this synthesis of “stable body and flowing wind, that is being and not being, quiet and movement.”⁴³ *Hexis*, *habitus*, *Haltung* and *allure* are considered, but none of them has the mobile quality expressed by *sugata*: the *su*-prefix has literally the sense of flowing away, as attested in other verbs like *suberu*, “glide.”⁴⁴ According to Imamichi, the connection between wind and *sugata* is even philologically attested: one of the first Chinese characters employed to write down this word was in fact the character for “wind” (風) close to its other meanings of “personal style” and “habit”:

The fact that the character 風 could also be read “*sugata*” means that the Japanese *sugata* does not refer to a “form,” but that instead, as we described before, it expressed the appearance of a singular movement that never stabilized itself as a form as such; it was a word expressing

41. OGAWA 2000, 28.

42. IMAMICHI 1980, 281f.

43. IMAMICHI 1980, 283.

44. Ibid.

in a single state both movement and quiet. This is because “wind” is a *breathing élan* (勢い) and a *repeating habit* (慣し) Words like wind-image (風姿, “wind-*sugata*”) express both a form and a flowing image. The “appearance” of someone (風采 “wind-colors”) and a “landscape” (風景, “windscape”) shouldn’t at all be taken as rigid, defined “forms,” but rather as “living atmospheres” (佇まい) also in terms like *fūryū* (windflow) and *fuzei* (wind-feelings) we need to recognize this aspect.⁴⁵

This flow lets figures be in their dynamism without defining them as a pure univocal presence, it lets them hover between reality and unreality in a breathlike movement, an *Übergang* or *Übergehen*. *Sugata* refers to this “wind” of things-as-figures, which is utterly necessary for bodies, objects and nature to be able to “move” (both in a concrete and aesthetic sense). The only concept in European thought that might be close to this sensibility is the “strange fold of space and time” of aura.⁴⁶ However, Benjamin never really thought about the question in which sense auras envelop natural phenomena just as artworks;⁴⁷ stressing the historical age and the uniqueness of the original art piece, he did not discuss how such “unbridgeable distance” arises also out of imagination. We can argue that the aerial metaphors surfacing in the phenomenology of imagination tend to be addressed more directly and earnestly by Japanese sources. Nishitani Keiji’s work is probably the most acute modern study of this revolving relationship between air and the imaginary: through it we should be able to clarify some last fundamental points.

NISHITANI: SKY, EMPTINESS AND IMAGINARY

Nishitani Keiji (1900–1990) was a disciple of Nishida Kitarō and a major member of the Kyoto school of philosophy. His philosophy tried to translate the often very abstract formulations of

45. IMAMICHI 1980, 285.

46. BENJAMIN 2008, 23.

47. BÖHME 2017, 15.

Nishida's logic into a direct existential comprehension of the stance of "nothingness" or "emptiness" (空). It is such an attempt to let the concrete and the transcendental interpenetrate each other that led him to bring "Zen poetry, religion, literature and philosophy all together in his work."⁴⁸ This integration is not simply a stylistic concern: To Nishitani poetry cultivates a mode of consciousness that coincides with nothingness itself, in which "nothingness becomes image," and "being becomes transparent."

Nothingness and atmosphere: the place of loneliness

Nishitani's concern for poetry and imagination reaches its peak in what is considered his last major essay, *Kū to soku* from 1982, in which he sketches his notion of "fundamental imagination."⁴⁹

While the notion of "emptiness" has a pivotal doctrinal role in Mahayana Buddhism, in *Kū to soku* Nishitani chooses to approach it in a novel way, discussing its polysemy and its bringing together theory and experience by beginning with a simple and omnipresent atmospheric phenomenon, the sky. *Kū* (空), in fact, is not only the Japanese reading of the Buddhist idea of "emptiness" (Skt. *sunyata*), but also an expression for "sky" (*sora* 空), the signifier for the opening of space (空間) and one of the terms for "fantasy" (空想). Guided by this chain of meanings, Nishitani immediately acknowledges the homeomorphic equivalence between imagination and atmosphere:

The sky is an eternally constant empty space with unlimited depth and endless width. It is the only "eternal thing" we can see with our eyes. The sky of the visible world has been used in scriptures as an image (*Bild*) to indicate eternally unlimited things that cannot be seen

48. HEISIG 2001, 188.

49. NKC 13: 111–160; translated as *Emptiness and Sameness* in MARRA 1999, 179–217. Marra's translation, despite its good quality, is not always able to convey the nuances of Nishitani's Japanese, which heavily relies on word overtones and double meanings. In this context, I translated from *Nishitani Keiji Choshū* (NKC), especially to clearly convey the atmospheric elements used in his argument.

with the eye Even if it is supposed to indicate the limitless eternity that one cannot see with the eye, there is a much more strict relationship than a metaphorical link between the visible phenomenon and the invisible thing indicated by those words. Earlier I used the word “image,” but actually the empty sky visible to the eye has no form and in a strict sense, one cannot say it is a figure or image. Rather, one should say that it is a visible image without form.⁵⁰

“Emptiness,” however, is also a *Stimmung* (“mood,” “atmosphere”), something that *hovers in the air*, charging things with an underlying emotion often found in the most spiritual Chinese and Japanese poetry. Something that flows and connects the emotive and the perceptual, this affective tone is neither an objective thing nor a subjective feeling. Nishitani presents this paradox by referring to a *hokku* by Naitō Jōsō, one of Bashō’s disciples:

寂しさの	The bottom of loneliness
底抜けてふる	falling off—
霙かな	sleet

The inner landscape and the outer landscape, sleet and loneliness, are superimposed through the ambiguity of poetic grammar: *sabi* (寂び, “loneliness”) has an unreal “floor” and the verb *nukeru* (抜ける, “drop”) is constructed ambiguously, so that it could be intransitive (the loneliness’ bottom drops) or transitive (sleet makes the bottom fall). The non-logical (非理) and non-univocal use of language creates an image in which real and unreal, internal and external are overlapped without obstructing each other as they would do in sensation or in classical logic, but rather pivot around each other. The “real place” of falling sleet is at the same time “a state of the heartmind” (心) as the “locus” (場) in which reality and unreality are held together in transparency.⁵¹ Emotion and sleet overlap in a “place” that is *nothing*

50. NKC 13: 112.

51. NKC 13: 120–121.

in three-dimensional space, but rather fully exists in a space that for Nishitani is akin to the atmospheric:

The breadth and depth within the association of what we call image are just like the subtle, unbound movements of atmospheric phenomena (氣象 “ki-images”) that change moment by moment in the open space of the sky. They are a movement that should be called “air-form of consciousness” (心の氣象 “air-forms of the heart-mind”).⁵²

A sound in the stones

To discuss this paradox of nothingness as poetic image, blending real and unreal, of singular, hard fact and universal image, Nishitani recurs to another Buddhist notion, that of “non-obstruction.” Poetry arises out of a language that presents an absolute “event” (事) even when it is a-logical or unreal: There is in other words a kind of “non-obstruction” (無礙) between the single linguistic-imaginary event and the level of ideality as “principle” or “truth.” In this sense, as for Sartre, imagination reveals something essential about the world. Things and facts are characterized by their absolute suchness, their being “stubborn facts” (頑固な事実), which negates their mutual correspondences and permeation when they are taken as individual realities. However, when the thing, never ceasing to be one, “comes to mean a piece of the world” and thus a “place,” it “comes out of itself within itself” by acquiring the nimbus or “transparency” that is characteristic of the *image*. We can here think of a stone: hard, discrete and impenetrable. The Chinese character for “obstruction” (礙) even has the sign for “stone” as a radical. Even a stone, however, *without ceasing to be a stone*, can be transfigured through an emotive permeation that “makes transparent” the whole of being:

The delimiting wall of individuality (and self-sameness) becomes transparent and the thing enters in a reciprocally revolving connection (回互

52. NKC 13: 125.

的連関) with others within the perspective of world-correspondences Hereby “being” begins to become transparent from within itself. Even if we say that “being” and “place” are absolutely the same, between “being” as a stubborn reality and the “place” of that being there is a fundamental shift This shift, fundamentally, is the passage from the actual “reality” to *image*.⁵³

Far from being characteristic of “secondary” reproductions, transparency, flow and haziness are a paradoxical but *primary* quality of all “things-in-the-world” as they become images: In this moment, they “unfold the inner landscape hidden within being.” Let us get back to our example of a stone by looking how this motif is treated in another famous *hokku* by Bashō:

静かさや	Tranquility:
岩にしみいる	seeping into stones
蟬の声	the voice of cicadas

The stone is a stone, through and through. However, in Bashō’s *hokku* the obstructive reality of an actual stone is also negated, transforming it into a translucent, non-obstructing image permeated by the voice of insects: not actual cicadas, but a sound that in turn contains them “as image.”

An atmosphere of “tranquility” (静かさ) is offered as the general field of this revolving network: the verb *shimiuru*, “seeping in” clearly describes this reciprocal permeation of senses and objects. The example of an imaginary stone passing through a window without smashing it was made by Husserl as well, who however considered the sudden annihilation of our “empirical apprehensions” of the stone (its obstructive quality) which occurred in such a scene as a “degradation” which would have reduced it “to fiction, to illusion.”⁵⁴ Can we really say, however, that Jōsō’s “bottom of loneliness” and Bashō’s porous stone are

53. NKC 13: 141.

54. HUSSERL 2005, 340–342.

lesser, degraded beings? John Sallis, discussing Husserl's example of the stone and the window, has criticized his incapacity of recognizing this impossibility not as a conflict, but rather as the most fundamental "spacing" of imagination, the opening of a new, wider world in which this unreal fact holds meaning and emotion in a space of emptiness, not simply *unreal* but *surreal*, related to reality as a more fundamental opening of it.⁵⁵ Here the sense of "space" and "opening" of the character 空 resonates poignantly.

Non-obstruction and perfume

Nishitani stresses the importance of non-obstruction in the access to this "fundamental dimension" relying on the idea of *muge* (無礙). The notion of *muge* originates in Huayan Buddhism (Jp. *Kegon*), which describes this fundamental level of reality as an infinite net of reflecting jewels—so that each one of them, looked at closely, contains the infinite reflection of the other jewels and of the net as a whole. This is fractal or "chaos" corresponds, according to Nishitani, to the fundamental dimension of imagination, in which things are fused in a world-totality and yet totally themselves. However, why is Nishitani, usually interested in Zen, suddenly borrowing a Huayan concept to describe imagination?

Moreover, what is the connection between *haikai* and his thought on imagination, opening and closing the otherwise theoretical text of *Kū to soku*? While perplexing in the isolated context of this last essay, Nishitani's engagement with the idea of *muge* is old. His first use of the word can in fact be found in the earlier essays on Bashō written in the 1940s. In one case, *muge* is quoted to explain the paradoxical juncture of eternal image and ephemeral reality that Bashō recognized both as the structure of nature and of *haikai* poetics (不易流行).⁵⁶ In another essay on "Madness in Bashō" from 1949, *muge* is the floating state of "a

55. SALLIS 2012, 212.

56. NKC 20: 132.

kite whose thread has been cut and is suspended in the wind... without ever breaking the non-obstruction of this floating state.”⁵⁷

The insight that leads Nishitani to connect air and imagination in his later work is therefore grounded on a premodern basis, borrowed specifically from *haikai* poetics. Nishitani’s first engagement with Bashō’s treatment of the imaginary begins even earlier, in fact, in the roundtable *Bashō kenkyū*, published by the magazine *Gakkai* in Kyoto in 1945. In the first panel, the discussion revolves around a *hokku* by Bashō:

菊の香や	Scent of chrysanthemums:
奈良には古き	in Nara many ancient
仏たち	figures of Buddhas

Nishitani develops on this occasion his first interconnected insight into atmosphere, image and non-obstruction:

Within the scent of chrysanthemums, we breathe the perfume of the ancient capital of Nara, of the ancient Buddhas therein. When we say “scent of chrysanthemums”, the scent is obviously the central element, but at the same time within that scent the flowers of chrysanthemum themselves come hovering in imagination (思い浮かんでくる) In other words, something that has the form (形) of a chrysanthemum appears out of something formless that we call the scent of chrysanthemums and is enveloped by it. A kind of atmosphere, something atmospheric becomes the origin of forms prior to forms themselves. Perhaps we can say that the chrysanthemum is something utterly real and yet has within it a certain “air-image” (気配) that appears and disappears, floating in a perfume that goes beyond reality Within this atmosphere hovers the figure (*sugata*) of the many Buddhas in different temples. The same applies to Nara as a city. To put it simply, in every case something that has a form and something formless become one. Chrysanthemums, Nara and the Buddhas are utterly real, but at the same time appear

57. NKC 20: 138.

within an atmosphere that is not real, that is surreal—gone beyond reality.⁵⁸

As they exist in an image, things overlap each other, being both present and absent, in their singular and distinct places and yet all united in an undifferentiated atmosphere. This “atmosphere” is a formless nothing, an unreality; and yet it is also the active emptiness, free spacing or “sky” (the three meanings of 空) in which they are free to manifest and involve us.

CONCLUSION

While we discussed the peculiar connections and transfers between air and imagination first in European sources and then in Japanese ones, I do not wish to suggest a superiority or a radical discontinuity of the latter: The aerial and atmospheric metaphorical register of the imaginary seems to be a universal phenomenon. Despite the resistance of European authors to and the embracing of Japanese ones of the idea of sky and wind as imagination, such elements are never just abstract theory, better grasped here or there, but a constant dynamism occurring in all sorts of places and moments. Imagination is *not* something apart from reality; it crosses it invisibly, it opens up the world and seeps within us just like air would do. *Kū* 空, “air as vacuity,” is both a fundamental principle of reality, the matter of imagination and our constant atmospheric attunement to the world. In this *Stimmung* we discover a sense of disillusion, the troublesome unsubstantiality of our very lives and values: the illusory quality of imagination is one of the masks through which our own impermanence looks at us. Sky as emptiness, noted Nishitani, is characterized by a distinct shade of melancholia. The negativity of fantasy and wind, however, is also the most radical and constant image of freedom, something that “inspires” us

58. NISHITANI 1945, 50–51.

and which we “aspire” to. As Nishitani wrote in his study of Bashō, once the flow of the world is accepted as such and rediscovered as image and atmosphere, there is also a “feeling of compassion, a kind of warmth” redefining our relationship to nothingness and to the phenomena appearing to us.⁵⁹ This atmospheric paradigm has, in a certain sense, both a theoretical and an existential relevance—just as imagination in the life of our consciousness.

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