Studi di estetica, anno XLVI, IV serie, 1/2018
ISSN 0585-4733, ISSN digitale 1825-8646, DOI 10.7413/18258646046

Lorenzo Marinucci [1]

Sabi and irony. The cross-cultural aesthetics of Ōnishi Yoshinori

Abstract
The category of sabi *is one of the most distinctive forms of Japanese aesthetics. A spiritual love for age, solitude and melancholia, it is central to practices like tea ceremony and* haikai *poetry: however, a formal description of its character is often deemed impossible. The Japanese philosopher Ōnishi Yoshinori (1888-1959) was however convinced that* sabi *was a complex but coherent category, and that a philosophical approach to* sabi *in Japanese poetry could reveal in its structure a mixture of affirmation and negation that brought it close to Romantic irony. Together with* yūgen *and* aware*,* sabi *is one of the three Asian aesthetic categories proposed by Ōnishi's intercultural system as counterparts to the European forms of beautiful, sublime and comic. In this essay we turn to his 1940 volume* Fūgaron*, still mostly ignored by Western bibliography, to discuss the outlines of Ōnishi's analysis of* sabi*, its background, its difficulties and intellectual potential.*

Keywords
Sabi, *Japanese philosophy, Ōnishi*

1. Sabi *as a cross-cultural aesthetic problem*

If we asked someone foreign to Japanese taste to list some Japanese "beautiful things", we'd probably hear of cherry blossoms, colorful kimonos and maple leaves. It would not be unlikely though for moss-grown stones, the raw wood of a tea hut, a certain *haiku* about a pond and a frog to also get into such a list.

This taste for the subdued, the withered, the forlorn, as opposed to things easily and positively seen as beautiful (花鳥 *kachō*, "flowers and birds"), is a relevant aspect of Japanese aesthetic consciousness. Sometimes hastily explained as hallmarks of a "Zen" aesthetics, these qualities are more correctly identified by terms like *kotan* 枯淡,

[1] lorem86@gmail.com.

shibumi 渋み, *wabi* わび, and most importantly *sabi* さび. In aesthetic terms, talking of *sabi* is a gateway to some relevant problems:
- if *sabi* is a uniquely Japanese notion, is it possible to make sense of it in intercultural or universal terms?
- Does *sabi* have an internal logical structure, does it behave as a category?
- In which extent is a specific understanding of it relevant to the general field of aesthetics?
- Does understanding *sabi* offer us something philosophically, in extra-aesthetic terms?

However, posing the question of *sabi* and aesthetics today and in a simply Western perspective is problematic, if it means erasing the essentially philosophical reflection that several Japanese thinkers dedicated to it in a crucial moment of Japanese modernity. Thinking of the possible integration of Japanese concepts and Western thought tradition ought to begin with an acknowledgement of the consistent efforts in this sense made by Japanese thinkers like Watsuji Tetsurō, Kuki Shūzō, Nakai Masakazu, Okazaki Yoshie and Ōnishi Yoshinori. While they all were original philosophers, with very different approaches and intellectual agendas, it is clear in their work that a reflection on aesthetic tradition in 1920s and 1930s Japan already happens within a relationship with Western philosophy and thought. In other words, all these authors are moving (often physically) on a double axis of West and East, present and past. The reception of this *corpus* of thought, with an assessment of its merits and its intellectual shortcomings, is essential to an opening of aesthetic discourse that thinks itself not as a Western-lead discovery of the Other (or the Others), but as a gradual, multidirectional integration of discourses that has already started from a century at least. Far from being an exercise in cultural exceptionalism, as it has been described by some critics (Dale 2012, Pincus 1996), in such Japanese canon the reflection on the cultural particularity given through an aesthetic tradition, with its coexistence of locatedness and trans-temporal, transspatial availability, can be seen as fully consistent with the connection problem at the heart of Western aesthetics, its dealing with "subjective universals".

If *sabi* can be integrated into a Western discourse on beauty, it would be both through an erasure of its origin but rather using the history of its Japanese formulations to discover family resemblances throughout European heritages. As *sabi* apparently deals with scarce-

ly explored elements of beauty – the cold, the old, the passive and broken, the lonely – a structural determination of it allows moreover a conceptualization (not abstract, but living through actual historical expression) of a relatively unthought region of Western aesthetics, "the negative".

By trying to offer a general picture of *sabi* in Japanese culture and of its modern philosophical definition, we will focus on a long monographic study by Ōnishi Yoshinori **大西克礼** (1888-1959), **風雅論** *Fūgaron* (Ōnishi 1940), focused on the notion of *sabi* in the aesthetics of Bashō's school *haikai*. Still untranslated in any Western language, and greatly understudied even in secondary literature, Ōnishi was instead a central intellectual figure of the interwar years. What makes Ōnishi's work particularly relevant is not only his great confidence with Japanese premodern sources but his even more "serious engagement with Western epistemological problems" (Marra 1999: 121).

2. *Ōnishi Yoshinori: global, local and universal*

Ōnishi Yoshinori was undoubtedly a deep and original thinker, and his scholarly work, although very dry, has aged surprisingly well. Born in 1888, he was a fellow student of Kuki Shūzō (1888-1941) and Watsuji Tetsurō (1889-1960) at the Imperial University of Tokyo, the first elite institution of the country. Like Kuki and Watsuji, he was part of the first fully trans-continental generation of Japanese thinkers.

A parallel with his much more known peers is useful to see both the commonalties and the differences in their intellectual trajectories: like Kuki and Watsuji, Ōnishi came to know in depth Western philosophical thought, especially the German Idealism diffused in Japan by Raphael von Köber, their teacher at Tokyo University. Like Kuki and Watsuji, he was sent to Germany for the period of study abroad that was unofficially required to acquire a full professorship (in 1927, actually on the same steamer as Watsuji). Unlike Kuki, whose stay in Europe lasted eight years, evenly divided between Germany and France, with a deep effect on his existential outlook and Watsuji, who stayed for just one year and a half but traveled Europe extensively, gathering the experience that later originated his masterpiece on human spatialities, *Fūdo* (1935), Ōnishi's own two-year stay was

mostly spent in Germany. Moreover, both Kuki and Watsuji immediately engaged themselves with the new turn of German intellectual milieu, Heidegger's existential phenomenology – Kuki was a direct acquaintance of Heidegger in Marburg and Freiburg, and Watsuji (who however never met Heidegger personally) challenged the preeminence of temporality over space in *Time and being* in the very first pages of *Fūdo*. Ōnishi was in contrast a much more conservative scholar of German thought, focusing on the orthodox Neo-Kantian scholarship abandoned by Kuki. Ōnishi will dedicate to Heidegger just the last chapter of another of his major books, *Phenomenological aesthetics* (**現象学派の美学**, 1937), but even in his research on Japanese aesthetic categories the main Western references are still Kant, Schlegel, Hegel, Lipps, Cohen, Vischer. This intellectual proximity with the German canon is influencing Ōnishi up to his style: while Kuki and Watsuji were both masters of philosophical prose, and their texts found a balance between intellectual depth and artistic beauty that makes them challenging but widely read texts even now, Ōnishi's prose is hard and unforgiving, its style much closer to rigorous academic analysis than to hermeneutic brilliance of Kuki and Watsuji (Sasaki 2001: 175). What is however very similar in all three intellectual biographies is the intellectual movement that characterizes Japan by the end of the 1920s: that is an attempt of re-exploring Japanese intellectual tradition through Western categories and intellectual discourses. In the early 1930s Japan – and industrial, colonizing country – is caught in what Micheal Lucken has called "romantic mimetism", in which deeply embedded subjects (individuals and nations) are using this very relation with the other to project on it the phantasm of their own unicity (Lucken 2015: 37-8). Kuki's exploration of *iki* and contingency (Kuki 1930, Kuki 1935), Watsuji's research on climatic forms and on Japanese spirit, leading to his system of ethics (Watsuji 1935, Watsuji 1937), Ōnishi's aesthetics, bringing together Western and Japanese categories into a transcultural system, can all be seen as elements of this thought pattern.

However, what distinguishes Ōnishi's aesthetic thought is its stress on universality: not of Western categories, but of a system built by recognizing both Western and Eastern expressions as particular structures of general forms of aesthetic consciousness, whose contingent historical and "climatic" determination is not in contradiction with their intelligibility in a general, comparative system. A "Japanese character" posited as an *a priori*, before grasping an actual structural

connection between what manifests into local historical forms, is to Ōnishi an intellectual scam. In 1940 Ōnishi opens *Fūgaron*, his study on *sabi*, with words that must have sounded like a cold shower in years in which patriotic fervor was eager to warp any study of Japanese aesthetics into a praise of Japanese soul and of its actual war efforts:

> It is obvious that, especially in an age like this, where in the field of the history of spirituality and thought there is a strong current stressing what is Asian or Japanese against what is Western, […] the explanations of single phenomena and problems are not carried out with the necessary care, and we see a tendency to hastily gather all these elements together by the alleged "Japanese character" that they would all share […]. It is first necessary to differentiate them systematically, and through this to ground theoretically the particular character of each of them. […] To say Japanese aesthetics is just a provisional expression meant for simplicity of use, theoretically it does not make any sense. (Ōnishi 1940: 8)

In a sliding scale going from cultural exceptionalism to universalism, Ōnishi is surely closer to the latter: by claiming the universality of aesthetic categories, however, he does not seem to argue for a superiority of Western thought (as claimed by Inaga 2013), but rather on a reciprocal translatability and integration of such discourses – something already happening in Shōwa Japan, and a (slowly) realized reality in today's Western world.

The stress on translation and interpretation is important, since Ōnishi's research on Japanese aesthetic categories only begins after a first phase in his career purely dedicated to Western thought. Ōnishi's doctorate dissertation is a research on Kant's third *Critique*, published after his return from Germany (*A study of Kant's* Critique of judgement **カント「判断力批判」の研究**, 1931) and leading to the first full translation, in 1932, of the *Critique of judgement,* completing the draft begun by Kyoto scholar Fukada Kōsan, died in 1928 (see Lucken 2015: 73). The apex of this early activity is the comprehensive study *Phenomenological aesthetics* (1937).

Only in the late 1930s Ōnishi turned this considerable knowledge of German thought trends to Japanese culture, and tried to construct a cross-cultural aesthetic system, including Western and Eastern aesthetic manifestations on an equal standing. The first products of this

ambitious endeavor were the two twin studies *Yūgen to aware* (Ōnishi 1939) and *Fūgaron* (Ōnishi 1940), in which Ōnishi analyzes the three fundamental Japanese aesthetic "categories": *aware*, *yūgen* and *sabi*. Underlying these studies there is already and evident systematic project: however, after the war and his retirement (1949), Ōnishi will keep writing but not publish anymore, and the two volumes (for over a thousand pages) of his monumental *Aesthetics* (*Bigaku*, 1959 and 1960) were published shortly before and after his death.

3. *Japanese aesthetic categories: the case of* sabi

Ōnishi's research has hitherto received little to no attention in the small but growing number of texts on Japanese philosophy available in Western languages. Moreover, all these texts are dedicated to the first two categories of *aware* and *yūgen*, barely mentioning *sabi*. Accounts of Ōnishi's theory of *yūgen* and *aware* can be found in Marra (1999), Ueda (1990), Heisig Kasulis and Maraldo (Heisig, Kasulis, Maraldo 2011) and Odin (2016). Ōnishi however immediately structured his research on these three categories as a common effort, and as the dates of publication reveal, *Yūgen to aware* (1939) and *Fūgaron* (1940) can be considered twin volumes. The separation is not a matter of chronological order or hierarchy (even if the three categories of *aware, yūgen* and *sabi* do gain preeminence in different moment of Japan history). What forces Ōnishi to dedicate to the study of *sabi* a full volume is rather a matter of size and complexity: the 1940 study on *sabi* alone is on fact twice the size of the 1939 book on *aware* and *yūgen* combined. It is Ōnishi himself to state that *sabi*, with its contradictory appreciation of negative aspects of reality, is "even harder than *yūgen* and *aware* to grasp as an aesthetic category" (Ōnishi 1940: 180). If we add to that complexity the fact that in Ōnishi's final system (scheme reported from Tanaka 2014: 11) *sabi* is taken as a particular Japanese realization of *humor*, a concept at first sight not only very far from tea huts and quiet solitude, but also out of place next to the classical Kantian ideas of "beautiful" and "sublime", his claim does call for a closer consideration, and makes the lack of scholarship on Ōnishi's interpretation of *sabi* a severe hindrance for a full comprehension of his work.

美 Beauty *Aware Das Schöne*
崇高 Sublime *Yūgen Das Erhabene*
フモール Humor *Sabi Das Komische*

4. *Ōnishi's method and the structure of* sabi

Ōnishi first declared the method of his new approach to Japanese aesthetics at the beginning of *Yugen to aware*, and this declaration is fully valid also for his approach to *sabi*:

> My original scientific concern was to include afresh all Japanese notions related to beauty in the logical network of discourses on aesthetic categories, as well as to further develop these debates from within the system of aesthetics in general. (Ōnishi 1939: 3)

We could compare Ōnishi's operation to a distillation: rather than beginning from a vague, abstract idea of what *sabi* could mean, the first part of his work is a collection of relevant materials, that are independently analyzed in their themes and content. From this content, aesthetic problems independently emerge, and are ultimately grasped in abstract, formal terms. We can distinguish five steps in Ōnishi's approach to the problem.

- Given the vagueness of its object, Ōnishi decides to select one specific set of sources for his inquiry of *sabi*: *haikai* poetics, and especially the practice and theory of *sabi* that characterized Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694) and his school (the Shōmon).
- While being far from systematic, these texts are recognized by Ōnishi as worthy attempts of reflecting on this evasive concept.
- Ōnishi also considers, from the aesthetician's point of view, if the rise of *sabi* as an ideal in Bashō's age *haikai* is somehow related to the

aesthetic character of *haikai* itself. It is in other words not a meaningless historical fact that *sabi* would become so preeminent in a poetic form characterized by extreme shortness, implicit meanings, a stress on objectivity, intuition, parody, and an interpersonal mode of creation.
- It is only as a fourth step that Ōnishi arrives to a linguistic, etymological analysis of *sabi* itself. Philologically the term *sabi* is a mix of two different stems, with three different meanings emerging diachronically ("age", "loneliness", "appearance"). All three meanings can however be recognized in the problems faced by Shōmon authors,
- Through his interpretation of this material, Ōnishi defines *sabi* as a particular form of humor that manifested itself in Japanese art, colored by a strong nature-feeling (*Naturgefühl*) and a metaphysical relation with temporality.

Sabi is thus rediscovered as a contradictory, complex and yet essentially unified aesthetic category, whose versatility lies in its keeping these tensions active as such. Loneliness, age, and appearance share in their modalities a spatial, temporal or phenomenal destruction of the object and its reintegration into an aesthetic image, something that at its core characterizes the ironic movement. What Ōnishi does not explore in depth in this first book is how the notion of *sabi* relate to instances of Western comic, and if such a connection would be relevant in mutual understanding. He suggests however that the notion of romantic irony as found in Schlegel bears some deep, structural analogies with the movement of *sabi*. But to assess Ōnishi's claim, first we have to observe the first steps of his research.

5. *The three meanings of* sabi

Ōnishi's effort to translate the language of *haikai* theory into aesthetic insight is impressive: and yet the core of his work is the three different meanings, or phenomenological "aspects", of *sabi*. Here the approach is not simply philological, as he aims at recognizing a formal, categorical structure within these expressions.
- Following the *Daigenkai* dictionary, a first origin of the term *sabi* is the verb 荒ぶ *sabu* "to be desolate, rough" (Ōnishi 1940: 145). Derived from it are 不楽しき *sabushiki* and 殺風景 *sappukei*, "lacking of charm", "unpleasant". On this level, the word has exactly the sense of *anti*-aesthetic. But contrasting with this subjective meaning of un-

pleasant we also find the adjective 淋し *sabushi*, "desolate" and "quiet" in an objective sense. The sense of this first *sabi*, even in the later, more spiritual expression of words like of *kanjaku* 閑寂, "quiet solitude", is essentially negative: a spatial removal from sociality and its pleasantness.

- However, the words *sabi/sabu* are also associated to characters 老 and 宿, with the sense of "growing old", "have an old color" (古色を帯ぶ). The first meaning of "lonesome" has a spatial connotation, this second one deals with aging and temporality. According to Ōnishi, "Even if they are born of the same etymology, it is undeniable that an essential difference already exists between words like 不楽 *sabushi* and 寂寥 *kanjaku* and the meaning of 老 *rō* 宿 *juku* 古 *kō* [all have the sense of 'old']. Moreover, from the etymology of *sabu* 荒ぶ, also separately, comes the term *sabu* 錆ぶ 'to rust'" (Ōnishi 1940: 147).

- Mixed to these two stems there is the homophonic but etymologically unrelated verb 然帯ぶ *saobu* – "to have the appearance", "to have the *air* of something" (気色 *keshiki*). *Saobu* refers to qualities or resonances of things that exceed their objective form, but rather hint at an "air" or "essence". At the time of *Man'yōshū* (18th century) examples of *sabi/saobi* included *otokosabi* or *otomesabi* ("manly air", "girly air"), but later on the use of *sabi/saobi* was rather employed just for things already close to the first and second meaning – *akisabi*, *okinasabi*, *kamisabi* ("the atmosphere of autumn", "the air of an old man", "a holy aura"). We see an example of the last term in Bashō, to describe the atmosphere of a Shintō sanctuary: "I went off for night worship at Kei Shrine, the site of Emperor Chuai's tomb. The shrine precincts *have great sanctity* [*kamisabi*] with moonlight filtering through pines and white sands spread before the sanctuary like frost (*Oku no Hosomichi*, Barnhill 2005: 75).

Here Bashō with the word *kamisabi* is describing very well how the general sense of atmospheric immersion into an aesthetic space can turn into religious, spiritual attunement: at the same time, we can see how the sense of age and the solitude participate in the background to this impression. But how does this combination of senses relate to the apparently very different atmosphere of humor?

6. *Three layers of* sabi

This blending of different meanings alone would make *sabi* a complex notion. But Ōnishi points out that *sabi* is not simply a quality of objects and situations, nor can be reduced to state of mind or an aesthetic emotion. As a matter of fact, it can be used as a predicate of "real" objects, but also to describe something in the quality of a verse, or as the key to the quasi-religious life ideal of "wind-grace" (*fūga* 風雅) incarnated by Bashō. Here are some examples listed by Ōnishi (1940: 165):

- Twenty years he broke his bones, with the *sabi* of windgrace (風雅の寂).
- The *sabi* of *haikai*.
- *Okashiki* is the name of *haikai*, *sabishiki* is the truth of the windgrace (Shikō).
- *Sabishimi* and *okashimi* are the wind-and-bones of *haikai* (Shikō).
- It is a good thing for a verse to have *sabi*. But for a verse to have too much *sabi* is like to lay bare its bones, it should not lose its irony (皮肉 skin-and-sinews; *Bashō Habune*).
- *Fūga* is at its deepest something *sabi*. If one understands thoroughly that when one stands in what is fun, what is *sabi* is hard to enjoy; but if one stands in *sabi*, what is enjoyable will be enjoyed too (Shikō).
- What is the *sabi* of a poem? Kyorai said: *sabi* is the color of a poem. It is not simply a quiet, lonely poem (Kyoraishō).

In these examples we can distinguish, according to Ōnishi, three – often intertwined – levels of *sabi*:

- *sabi* as a wide-encompassing aesthetic ideal.
- The *sabi* of the verse, discussed in conjunction with *shiori, kurai, hosomi*.
- The *sabi* of things themselves, that *haikai* tries to approach in a purely objective fashion.

Could it be that these three layers of life-ideal, poetic style aesthetic quality, together with the three meanings of loneliness, old age and appearance or "aura" all fit with a certain regular attunement in the notion of *sabi*, making it a viable aesthetic category, rather than an "ineffable" token of Japanese spirituality or a simple concoction of terms? If that is the case, it would be not be exaggerating to consider it not only as a central concept in Japanese thought, but as an integration of aesthetic consciousness that has a validity also for a Western approach to art and experience.

7. Sabi *as an aesthetic category: loneliness and irony*

In the last and major section of the book, Ōnishi tries to integrate these meanings in a distinct whole, an aesthetic category. In order to do so, the refined meanings of the former sections are scrutinized again, this time in a more formal way.

The first one to be examined is that of quiet, lonely poverty. Here Ōnishi refuses to explain its aesthetic value by reducing it to a "Zen-like" spiritual experience, to the Daoist love of isolation, or to something akin to Romantic refusal of societal norms – they all are aspects of the "wind-flowing" (*fūryū*) life-ideal, but they are not aesthetic *per se*[2]. Ōnishi observes: "We cannot think, however, that these moments of 'poverty', 'fragility' and 'unreliability' can turn into an aesthetic category by becoming connected or united with some external positive aesthetic moment" (Ōnishi 1940: 200).

On the contrary, it is in and through their *negativity,* continues Ōnishi, that "Thanks to a particular inclination of consciousness and of the subjective view towards them [...] they are turned in a sort of aesthetic positivity as an experiential content" (Ōnishi 1940: 201).

Turning negative into positive, while keeping it negative implies a paradox, a double movement of negation. Things seen through the filter of *sabi* become in a sense truly themselves just as they are negated, like the withered branch in Bashō's famous *hokku*. But in searching for structural similarities with this paradoxical duality, Ōnishi points out that this oscillation between positive and negative is what already characterized the attitude of *romantic irony*: for Schlegel, "a Blick (gaze) able to float over and negate everything" (Ōnishi 1940: 206). Not only this double movement of negation carries with itself a creative aesthetic value, it is somehow recursive: in laughter

[2] For another contemporary study of *fūryū*, see Kuki 1937. Kuki's approach, while insightful and equally erudite, is based on an original systematization of the *whole* of Japanese aesthetic vocabulary in the notion of *fūryū*, and is very far from the painstaking progression of Ōnishi. Interestingly, what is equally stressed by the two authors in their treatment of *haikai* aesthetics is the creative role of paradox and the integration of negation and contradictions that shapes it internally. Kuki however, with its insistence of "wind" as an overarching metaphor (and experience) in this aesthetic attitude, is recognizing a central point that Ōnishi, who ironically uses the term "wind-grace" (*fūga*) as the very title of his book, fails to consider as another central aesthetic problem.

reality gets negated by ideality, and ideality in turn gets negated by reality.

Haikai is indeed, from its very name, which originally had this sense, a "comic" verse: it includes the parodic, the imaginary, the unreal[3]. This is true for its content, which mixes the classic themes of *waka* with popular language and coarse material, and by negating them discovers them in a new freshness. But irony is closely related to the form of *haikai* too: short, contextual, based on the sudden turns typical of a joke, especially in the unexpected turnings of the collective chained poetry that constituted its core in Bashō's age.

Ōnishi recognizes in Kagami Shikō (各務 支考, 1665-1731), one of Basho's most controversial disciples, a first theorist of this ironic gaze. Shikō's theory of *kyojitsu* 虚実, "real-unreal", is attributed in his *Zokugoron* (1699) and *Haikai jūron* (1719) to Bashō's teachings, but by the late 19th century it was already discovered that while collecting and editing Bashō's posthumous papers Shikō forged other texts in order to attribute some of his ideas to the old master[4]. However, according to Ōnishi, the notion of *kyojitsu* – the "real unreality" and "unreal reality" of worldly things, poetic expression in *haikai* and *haikai* worldview, is not at all inconsistent with *haikai* practice as a whole[5]. Here's one of the *Twenty-five sayings* and the *Uyamuya no seki*, attributed to Bashō, but probably produced by Shikō, since they expose the idea of *kyojitsu*:

> In Buddhism we have Daruma, in Daoism we have Zhuangzi: they step over and destroy the reality of their road. When we consider that in the same way in the way of poetry we have *haikai*, it becomes the path through which, by going against the way, the way itself is fully realized […]. The ten thousand things of this world truly do something when they are in unreality. How could they act on imagination if they were real already! What is in truth stands in its reality, and men become wistful because of it. In *renga*, truth means cherishing true things – being sad for the scattering of cherry blossoms, pitying

[3] The stress on unadulterated reality and a "sketch from life" (*shasei*), prevalent in the reception of modern *haiku* in America and Europe, is actually the much more recent ideal of poetic practice envisioned by Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902). While it is true that Bashō in particular was an excellent observer, to read pre-Meiji *haikai* as a poetry of presence, of the here-and-now, means employing retroactively a modern notion, and effectively misunderstand it.

[4] Cfr. Horikiri 2006.

[5] For a discussion on *kyojitsu*, unfortunately still missing in Western languages, cfr. Iwakura 2003.

the waning moon. But cherishing things unreal – that is the truth of haikai! (Ōnishi 1940: 26)

Unlike *waka*, *haikai* is a mode of poetry that shows funny image (*sugata*) on the outside, and holds a sad-quiet heart in depth. It is golden, to say that *haikai* is skillfully weaving lies […] weaving lies to truth is that, weaving truth in lies: saying truth as truth and lie as a lie, is not *haikai*'s way. The "true style" (正風) plays between truth and falsehood, it does not rest on truth or falsehood: that is a secret saying of my school. (Ōnishi 1940: 23)

Even in Shikō's definition of *okashimi* (comic) and *sabi* as "wind-and-bones" of *haikai*, the barren objectivity of *sabi* is not simply opposed, but related to the ironic "spirit" (wind is also signifier for irony, just as the French *esprit*) in a particular whole. Poverty, withering, solitude, brokenness are states in which the underlying unreality of things is suddenly manifesting itself. As long as the ego posits this negation as an obstacle or a damage, it can assume a dramatic or tragic connotation: but if the self recognizes its own vacuity through withering and loneliness, the result can be an ironic smile or laughter. We could say that more than to the austere, meditative aspect of Zen tradition, *sabi* is an ironic ideal connected to the laugh *kōan* of Chinese and Japanese Zen, or to the Daoist laughter of Zhuangzi, a text that deeply influenced Bashō (Qiu 2005).

8. Sabi *as an aesthetic category: the patina of time*

As the "withered" and "lonely" aspect of *sabi* has been revealed as a form of "humor", Ōnishi has to link to it the other two meanings too. While the ironic potential of this withering is explained by Ōnishi through the concept of *kyojitsu*, *sabi* as "old age" is connected by Ōnishi to the temporal-poetic paradox of "current and eternal" *fueki ryukō*, the other most discussed theoretical point of Bashō's school. In Ōnishi's words:

"Withering" or "solitude" was a sense of fading occurring in a spatial relation – this sort of *sabi* is a visual quality. Instead now in the case of the second sense of *sabi*, that is "old", not only the problem obviously turns into a matter of temporal relation, but contrasting with the dissolution and the fading of before, it is clear that at its root there is a sense of progression and accumulation. (Ōnishi 1940: 218)

This accumulation of life (or *durée*: Ōnishi does not directly refer to Bergson, but an influence is not unlikely) does not make any sense as long as the world is seen mechanically: it is a spiritual element. Even the most inanimate is therefore engulfed, according to Ōnishi, into the "fundamental atmosphere of human life" (Ōnishi 1940: 234). If we think of "the old pond", it is only in its relation to us that it becomes so. And so, while the eternal change of life and spirit appears within and through things of nature, the snapshot of poetic reflection realizes it as a constant flow of consciousness; nature reveals then itself again as a horizon and background to it, as a form of metaphysical stillness. This art faces a huge contradiction between the "intuitive quality of living experience and the objectivity of its expression" (Ōnishi 1940: 245), since both stillness and movement seem to be contradictory and yet essential elements of reality itself. Moreover, as Imamichi Tomonobu has observed in his own aesthetic reflection, "Even when we paint an image imitating nature, as we are trying to make eternal a beautiful instant, are we not attempting something that is actually *against*-nature?" (Imamichi 1984: 14). Art cannot help but let this temporal contradiction emerge, and Bashō was well aware of this contradictory unity of "flowing-eternal" (不易流行, *fueki ryukō*). Probably the most faithful account of this concept is contained in Hattori Dohō's *Red booklet* (1702)[6]:

> The Master remarked: "The evolvement of heaven and earth is the seed of aesthetic creativity". As stillness is the immutable aspect of things, it is motion that represents the aspect of their phenomenal evolvement. The flow of evolvement would never halt, even for a moment, unless we ourselves bring it to a halt. [...] Falling petals, leaves scattered by the wind-even the most vivacious of the things will eventually subside to disappear into nothingness without leaving any trace behind, unless we, in the midst of their actuality, arrest them with our cognitive act of seeing and hearing. (Izutsu 1981: 166)

Left by themselves, constant movement and constant change would disappear in an extra-temporal "nothingness": revealing temporality in a *hokku*, a poem so brief and "passive" that is in several

[6] Here in Izutsu Toshihiko's philosophical but not always fluid translation. A French translation by Sieffert (1983) is less speculative, often gaining something in terms of readability and adherence to the text. It is true however that Dohō's *Three booklets* (White, Red and Black) are dense texts, in which Bashō's words are only reported in a mediated way, and open to multiple interpretations.

ways like a snapshot[7], is only possible on the background of such a huge, metaphysical stillness. Infinite a-temporality has to be expressed through the moment, and vice versa. Ōnishi explains this process with a striking example:

> To use an image, a color cannot be saturated in its hue more than a certain degree. However, if we put it next to its complementary color, its tone becomes much clearer to our own eyes: in the same way it is correct to say that as a result of *haikai* chasing to the highest degree of purity its original artistic ideal, through the unconscious artistic activity of its genius it has put the actuality of our moving experience of nature against its opposite extra-temporal, metaphysical eternity. (Ōnishi 1940: 247)

Haikai is at its core a *contrastive* expression; such continuous discontinuity also exists in the polarity between single *hokku* and the flow of *haikai no renga*: verses are chained and in motion, yet each of them is still in an eternal moment. Is this "metaphysical eternity" of nature also a directly ironic element? As Ōnishi notes, all art is traversed by two contradictory instincts, a *Kunstgefühl* and a *Natuergefühl.* In irony, the opening to the external quality of nature is minimal, the balance is almost solely on the "artificial" elements of *techne*. Simply put, we do not laugh before sunsets. And yet seeing the old or the timeless as the background to the instant, allows to the ironic *Blick* to acquire through emotion, love for nature, a new depth. We can say after Ōnishi that the aesthetics of *sabi* is far from being an unproblematic "Zen" love of subdueness: it represents a strange and complex construct, an *ironic metaphysics of nature*.

9. Sabi *as an aesthetic category: color and air*

In the last step of his work Ōnishi tries to further connect the "ironic metaphysics" of *sabi* (in its spatial negation and temporal, asymptotic affirmation) with the "aesthetic" essence expressed by the verbal fomr *saobiru*. Ōnishi reminds that in aesthetics, from Hegel to Robert

[7] It seems that of all the studies of *haiku*, we owe a realization of his proximity to photography to Roland Barthes: "This brings the Photograph (certain photographs) close to the *Haiku* […] In both cases we might (we must) speak of an *intense immobility:* linked to a detail (to a detonator), an explosion makes a little star on the pane of the text or of the photograph: neither the *Haiku* nor the Photograph makes us 'dream'" (Barthes 1981: 49).

Vischer (a now less known author that has however a strong influence on Ōnishi's work, beginning with its tripartition of general categories), a classical definition of beautiful was a "material manifestation of an idea".

To Vischer the aesthetic idea is in fact realized into single specific objects: it is nothing else than their essence. This beauty or prototypical quality is however not something that can be reduced to objective form. In this respect Ōnishi wonders if old expressions from Man'yōshū like *umabitosabi* (貴人然), "with the air of a noble man" and *otomesabi* (乙女然) "with the appearance of a maiden" are recognizing this essential nature, not as something abstract or common to all members of a class, but as its *honzen* (本然). *Honzen* is hard to translate: the character 本 *hon* means "true" or "fundamental", but the character 然, the *sa* of *saobi* 然帯 has the double meaning of "appearing" and "being just as one is", describing something that is both manifestation and nature (Ōnishi 1940: 260).

Ōnishi recalls in this context how Hegel characterizes an essential difference between Classic and Romantic aesthetics: in the latter the aesthetic value of something does not refer to its formal perfection, but can rather be seen as something between manifestation and idea.

> Even if its sensible fullness and richness are corrupted and withered to a certain degree through relations of time (old age) and space (solitude), [the object] does not necessarily loses its aesthetic sense, and on the contrary since this moment (*keiki*) transfers the weight of its essentiality even more deeply in an internal, spiritual direction, it makes us feel again a certain division between the essential and the sensible. (Ōnishi 1940: 264)

If such an "immaterial" nature of things is not taken as an abstract, ideal one, but something that exists within the phenomenon itself, on the aesthetic plane where it manifests itself and is negated at the same time, this tension (and connection) of essence and appearance is, to quote Ōnishi, "the result of a certain sense of self-destruction and self-reconstruction happening within aesthetic expression itself" (Ōnishi 1940: 268). Ōnishi takes as an example a withered branch of plum suggesting the image of a jagged rock. It contradicts its own nature of plant by *having the appearance* (*saobu*) of something else, and yet in this "romantic" or "ironic" (the two terms were already linked by Schlegel) negation we find expressed the "essence" of its nobility, the freshness of winter. *Haikai*'s shortness and

allusive quality means that the world is given in terms of fragments, "scents" or, to quote Ōnishi, "like rust on the surface of a mirror" (Ōnishi 1940: 276). The aesthetic effect of *sabi*/*saobi* does not rely on things as closed, perfected objects, but rather on their expressing their "aura" also negatively, emanated in the relative, or "empty" fashion of a coloring or an aura.

In this respect (although Ōnishi does not refer to it in this section), another insight in this aspect of *sabi* is a definition given in the *Kyoraishō* (1704) and in *Haikai mondō* (1697): "Yamei dit: 'La patine (*sabi*) d'un verset, quelle sorte de chose est-ce donc?'. Kyorai dit: 'La patine est la coloration (色 *iro*) d'un verset'". (see Sieffert 1983: 91)

The term "color" comes, in its Latin etymology, from *celare*, "to conceal". Just as a coat, or rust on an object exposed to air, covers and reveals it at the same time – the color or appearance of poetic manifestation (the character 色 *iro*/*shiki* has this two meanings) does not belong nor to our eye nor to the object proper, but is the mood and quality of its aesthetic revelation[8]. This relation between external and internal was already recognizable in Shikō's definition of *sabi* as "wind-bones" of poetry: the ironic possibility of revelation and destruction is linked to an image of wind. We can recognize this aesthetic sense of *sabi* in the atmospheric modes of manifestation of color and coat, or "aura": another word meaning "air" and "color" at the same time.

野ざらしを心に風のしむ身かな
nozarashi o / kokoro ni kaze no / shimu mi kana
bleached bones on my mind, the wind pierces my body to the heart
(Bashō)

10. *A conclusion*

This last meaning allows us perhaps to consider *sabi* as a category for atmosphere, a "pathic effusion in the lived-space" (Schmitz 2014) explored by Japanese forms of life. This could explain why its structure can belong to real objects, be the "smell" and "color" of a poem, emanate from a lifestyle of aesthetic freedom (*fūryū*, "windflow") or be

[8] Kuki Shūzō too, in a much shorter 1937 essay on *haikai*, directly links *sabi* to this phenomenological quality of colors. See Kuki 2012: 54.

present in the intersubjective attunement of a *haikai* session[9]. Even if the notion of *fūga*, literally "windgrace", gives the title to Ōnishi's work, in the volume the discussion on *fūryū* and *fūga* themselves is very limited. It seems to me that all these meanings – the spatial withering of bones in a field, the breath-like "floating" of fantasy between real and unreal, the literally atmospheric "rusting" of time, and the auratic quality of objects and poems (their being what they are, and yet more), all belong together in this sense of "air-like" poetry.

This obviously does not to reduce the merit of Ōnishi's work. On the contrary, his approach shows that a rigorous, cross-cultural approach to Japanese aesthetics is viable, and that Western philosophical language and Japanese styles of reflections nor have to collapse into one or to be completely separated from each other. Ōnishi rather tries to recognize isomorphisms and deep analogies, imagining a scholarly progression that does not erase difference and particularity, but can recognize it as a contribution to dialogue. Ōnishi's work does not speak to Japanese only: it affirms that Japanese aesthetic categories have full citizenship into the structure of Western aesthetics, and that its architecture (which is by itself very much of a work in progress) might even need some rearrangement in order to include them. Ōnishi's work is even more relevant if we think that of all Japanese aesthetic categories it is exactly that of *sabi* and *wabi-sabi* to have been more enthusiastically adopted in the West. Interestingly, the main fronts of this integration process have not been aesthetic discourses, but design, applied arts, architecture, the lively scene of Western language *haiku* practice. The number of English *sabi*-inspired publications is consistent, and keeps rising[10]: what is unfortunate about them is however their general acceptation of the rhetoric of ineffability and the reduction to Zen irrationalism of such aesthetic consciousness. In 2009 the British novelist Marcel Theroux produced a BBC documentary, *In search of wabi sabi*, in which he walked through the streets of Tokyo asking people to explain *sabi*. Their incapacity of explaining its meaning was offered as a proof of the impossibility of understanding this category rationally. To understand how shallow and exoticizing this approach is, we just have to imagine someone waling in the streets of London, Paris or Berlin asking for a

[9] For Watsuji another form of **気合** *kiai*, "breathing accord" or "meeting of feeling". See Watsuji 1935: 196.
[10] See Koren 2008, Powell 2004, Gold 2004, Juniper 2003, Crowley J. and S. 2001.

definition of "beauty" or "sublime". In the context of a more and more intense circulation of physical and non-physical cultural artifacts, including those shaped by Japanese *sabi*, it is therefore increasingly important to appreciate the intellectual rigor of Ōnishi's work. Refusing the rhetoric of cultural uniqueness and the alleged a-logical quality of extra-European cultural expressions is a necessary step to the opening of the Western philosophical canon. The field of aesthetics, with its necessary grounding into particular manifestations, might even be a crucial region of such an opening effort: this was probably Ōnishi Yoshinori's own conviction.

Bibliography

Barnhill D.L., *The literary prose of Matsuo Bashō*, New York, SUNY Press, 2005.

Crowley J.S., *Wabi sabi style*, Layton, Gibbs Smith, 2001.

Dale P., *The myth of Japanese uniqueness*, London, Routledge, 2012.

Gold T., *Living wabi-sabi*, Montana, Andrews McMeel, 2004.

Horikiri M., 俳聖芭蕉と俳魔支考 *Haisei Bashō to haima Shikō*, Tokyo, Kadokawa Senshō, 2006.

Imamichi, T., 講座美学 *Kōza bigaku. Aesthetica*, Tokyo, Daigaku Shuppankai, 1984.

Inaga, *Japanese philosophers go West. The effect of maritime trips on philosophy in Japan with special reference to the case of Watsuji Tetsuro*, "Japan Review", 25 (2013), 113-44.

Iwakura, S., 俳諧の心 *Haikai no kokoro*, Tokyo, Perikansha, 2003.

Izutsu, T., *The theory of beauty in the classical aesthetics of Japan* (1981), The Hague, Nijhoff, 2003.

Koren, L., *Wabi-sabi: for artists, designers, poets and philosophers*, California, Imperfect, 2008.

Kuki, S., いきの構造 *Iki no kōzō*, in *Kuki Shūzō Zenshū* (1930), Tokyo, Iwanami Shoten, 1980.

Kuki, S., 偶然性の問題 *Gūzensei no mondai*, Tokyo, Iwanami Shoten 2012.

Kuki, S., 風流に関する一考察 *Fūryū ni kan-suru ikkōsatsu* (1937), It. tr. by L. Marinucci, *Sul vento che scorre*, Genova, Il Melangolo 2012.

Lucken, M., *Nakai Masakazu: naissance de la théorie critique au japon*, Dijon, Presses du Réel, 2015.

Marra, M., *Modern Japanese aesthetics: a reader*, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 1999.

Ōnishi, Y., 現象学派の美学 *Genshōgakuha no bigaku*, Tokyo, Iwanami Shoten, 1937.

Ōnishi, Y., 幽玄とあはれ *Yūgen to aware*, Tokyo, Iwanami Shoten, 1939.

Ōnishi, Y., 風雅論—「さび」の研究 *Fūgaron*: *"sabi" no kenkyū*, Tokyo, Iwanami Shoten, 1940.

Ōnishi, Y., 美学 *Bigaku*, Tokyo, Kōbundō, 1959-60.

Pincus, L., *Authenticating culture in imperial Japan: Kuki Shūzō and the rise of national aesthetics*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996.

Powell, R., *Wabi sabi simple*, Avon, Adams Media, 2006.

Qiu, P., *Bashō and the Dao: the Zhuangzi and the transformation of Haikai*, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2005.

Sasaki, K., *Style in Japanese aesthetics: Ōnishi Yoshinori*, in M. Marra (ed.), *A history of modern Japanese aesthetics*, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2001.

Sieffert, R., *Le Haikai selon Bashō*, Paris, Publications Orientalistes de France, 1983.

Tanaka, K., 日本美を哲学する *Nihonbi o tetsugaku suru*, Tokyo, Seidosha, 2014.

Ueda, M., *Yūgen and Erhabene: Ōnishi Yoshinori's attempt to synthesize Japanese and Western aesthetics*, in T. Rimer (ed.), *Culture and identity: Japanese intellectuals during the interwar years*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990.

Watsuji, T., 風土 *Fūdo*, Tokyo, Iwanami Shoten, 1935.