

Poetry and Place: *basho*, Emptiness, and *kireji*

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So first of all, I would like to thank James Heisig and Enrico Fongaro for welcoming me here at the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, it is a pleasure and an honor to be able to present my work here in such a prestigious context. I had a chance last Spring to take part in Professor Fongaro's reading groups on Nishida here at Nanzan, although remotely, and I believe much of the work I am presenting today would have not been possible without them. But my special thanks goes to Gianluca Pulsoni, who was kind enough to invite me to give this talk today, as part of his JSPS project and his cycle of talks on the concept of place in the most various contexts, and he asked me to come give a talk on a topic I have been thinking about for a long time and that perhaps flows as a hidden vein underneath most of my research work, already from my undergraduate studies in Philosophy and Literature at the University of Warwick to my graduate research at Harvard and then in Slovenia and finally in Kobe: namely, the question of the place of poetry.

Indeed, while my dissertation and later philosophical research verted more and more on the European history of the concept of intention and its relationship to breath, air, voice, and even atmosphere, and thus seems to have little to do with poetry; and while my research on poetry seems to be interested instead simply in the question of how breath, wind, spirit, and atmosphere appear in poetry, especially in modern European poetry, where I have argued they go to re-found the conception of the self. It is precisely to the question Gianluca asked me to deal with today, and which I have hardly ever had a chance to tackle seriously, that my projects once and again return. Indeed, even my research on the concept of intention had actually began from asking what an intention in poetry might be: whether what we read in a poem comes from the intention of a subject – the poet or the author, the famous intentional fallacy – or whether poetry might prove the very impossibility of an intention, and even of a subject.

I know that this problem does not seem to coincide in any way with the title of my lecture, and with the problem of the place of poetry, but let's reformulate it this way: in the European tradition, poetry was slowly transformed from an external, inspired event into, with Romanticism, an extreme spiritual subjective one. If we take Romanticism and Hegel's conception of lyric poetry as paradigmatic for modern European poetry what we find is that, if poetry opens a place, that place is the place either of subjective "internal" feelings ("the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" according to Wordsworth) or the place of an absolute spirit, which poetry can reach by transforming the subjective feelings of the human spirit into something absolute through the objectivity of language (this is Hegel's theory). In other words, for the modern European tradition, the place poetry opens is another place, either internal to the human being, its soul or spirit, or one further away, another realm altogether, but in both cases a place detached from reality, from our world,

from nature. Nature can appear in poetry but it is always filtered through a subjective lens and an objective lens, which are able to push it somewhere else, in the spiritual realm.

Now, what most of my work on intention, breath, voice, atmosphere tried to do – and unfortunately I cannot go into that today – is to prove that the very opposite is true: namely, that poetry does not open onto a different realm altogether, the realm of the immaterial spirit, but the very opposite, that poetry is actually the form of language that by preserving its links to breath and voice through vocal tensions, cuts, and rhythms, is most able to open to the place of reality itself, it is able to bring us back there where everything takes place, to our very life.

Although I believe there will be ways to show that this happens also in European poetry, today I would like to take another way. What I would like to do instead is to turn to the Japanese tradition, and especially to the tradition of haikai and the hokku, what today is usually called haiku, and to a philosopher who, taking seriously this tradition from a philosophical perspective, reached precisely the conclusion I mentioned above. This philosopher is Keiji Nishitani, who in a well-known late essay from 1982, titled “Kū to soku,” and translated by Michael Marra as “Emptiness and Sameness,” proposed a new understanding of poetry, according to which poetry opens up the place of reality itself, and does so by using, among other things, a specific poetic device of the Japanese tradition, namely the *kireji*, the “cutting word” or “character,” which is said to do two things at the same time, which we will study in this order: first, it cuts, and secondly, it cuts through breath and voice.

Let me begin, then, from what is often considered, rightly or wrongly, one of the most important elements of what used to be called the 発句 (*hokku*) and is now known, not only in Japan but worldwide, as the haiku form. I am talking about the 切れ字 (*kireji*), the “cutting character or word” that often appears within a haiku or at the end, introducing a pause in both rhythm and meaning. As I will soon show, although this device is taken to be central to the haiku, literary scholars and poets have long struggled to clarify exactly what its “content” or function might be, beyond the mere act of cutting. It is as if, as soon as one tries to understand exactly what the *kireji* does, the problem suddenly opened up onto a different plane, one that requires us to look beyond the limits of what we usually take poetry to be — somewhere else, in another direction.

To shed new light on the *kireji*, I would like today to make a bet, and to approach the problem philosophically — not, however, by building a theory of my own, but by reading, slowly, a single text: the late essay by Nishitani I have just mentioned, “Emptiness and

Sameness” (「空と即」, Kū to soku), from 1982. This essay — once described by Ryōsuke Ōhashi as nothing less than “one of the high points of Nishitani’s thinking,”¹ and well known also to English-speaking readers thanks to Michael Marra’s translation — has, I believe, much more to offer on the questions of philosophy and literature than has been noticed until today.

For in these pages the pivotal concepts of the Kyoto School — from Nishida’s pure experience, place (*basho*), and discontinuous continuity, through Nishitani’s own absolute emptiness, down to what Ōhashi would later call *kire-tsuzuki*, the “cut-continuance” — are gathered together, rather unexpectedly, around poetry: around a single *hokku*, and around the question of what a poem does to language and to the world. My wager is that, if we retrace the way Nishitani weaves these concepts together — often subtly, often tacitly — the *kireji*, this tiny, untranslatable, logically meaningless word, will appear, in the end, almost as the culmination of a whole philosophical tradition: the point at which immediate experience, place, emptiness, cut-continuance, and breath reveal themselves perhaps as a constellation pointing in a single direction: to the place of poetry.

To do so, I will begin by briefly introducing the *kireji* itself — its history, and the impasse at which literary scholarship, left to itself, seems to have arrived. I will then ask whether perhaps philosophy can help us, by turning to the most interesting attempt at building a Japanese philosophy of the cut, namely in Ryosuke Ōhashi’s, which will send us back to Nishitani’s essay. Then, before reading “Emptiness and Sameness,” however, we will need to retrace some concepts from Nishida — pure experience, *basho*, discontinuous continuity — and Nishitani’s own reworking of them into absolute emptiness. Only then will we return to the *hokku*, to its cuts, and to the final exclamation, where breath enters language, and a place appears.

1. Kireji: what are they?

In what scholars and practitioners worldwide now call the “Global Haiku” scene, the *kireji* is consistently listed as one of the three defining features of the haiku form. According to the accepted understanding of haiku in the West, a haiku must have three elements: the *teikei* 定形 (its fixed 5–7–5 form), a *kigo* 季語 (a seasonal word, a word that traditionally refers to a specific season), and finally a 切れ字, *kireji*—a cutting word or character. Classic examples of *kireji* include exclamations and verb endings such as や (*ya*), かな (*kana*), and けり (*keri*), which have remained in use since at least the Muromachi period. In this context, discussion often turns to how the *kireji* might be translated into English in the first place, or even how it should be reproduced in English haiku, since English—and most European languages—seem to lack a direct equivalent. The attempt to use exclamations or interjections such as “Ah!” or “Oh!” is often rejected as alien to European poetry (although one day it will be worth asking whether that is really the case).

¹ M. Fujiwara, “Haiku no kanshō shidō to ‘kireji’: Kireji no kinō kōzōron kara no kentō,” *Waseda Daigaku Kokugo Kyoiku Kenkyu* vol. 31 (2009): 1–15.

In the Japanese context, the situation is more complicated. The haiku scene—especially in its avant-garde forms—has often gone beyond the traditional limitations just described. Yet the *kireji* remains, if sometimes only in a negative sense, a central feature of haiku, and serious literary studies have been devoted to it even in recent years.² Following Asano’s 1962 study, the most recent book on the topic is Reona Takayama’s *Kireji to kire* (2019), which shows how deeply this device has shaped the theory of *waka*, then *hokku*, and finally haiku—even and especially in contemporary times, in the past thirty years, during the Heisei era.³

As Asano and Takayama have shown, the first references to something like a “cut” in Japanese poetry already appear in *waka* theories from the Kamakura period. But the first explicit mention of the *kireji*, along with an initial list of eighteen of them, comes only in the Muromachi period, in direct connection with the *hokku*—the opening three lines of a *renga*. According to the standard history, the *kireji* was first used in the *hokku* to mark a separation (or to cut it from?!) the *tsukeku* that followed. With the gradual independence of the *hokku* from the rest of the *renga* sequence, especially in *haikai*, both the *kireji* and the act of *kire* grew in importance, since they were supposed to be precisely the devices marking a difference from the *tsukeku*. By the 16th and 17th century, the list of *kireji* also expanded enormously, to around forty or fifty items, before Bashō could claim, in his characteristically esoteric fashion: “When used as cutting words, all of the forty-eight syllabary characters are *kireji*; when not used so, not a single one is a *kireji*.”⁴

Yet, as Bashō’s exaggeration perhaps already suggests, Takayama’s study has also shown how unstable, ambiguous, and inconclusive this history and this theorization have been. The historical commentaries, as much as the modern reflections, on *kire* and *kireji* seem unable to explain either its necessity in haiku or its actual meaning. Instead, these questions remain shrouded in ambiguity and, at times, even in secrecy. For centuries, *kireji* and *kire* were treated as fundamental to the *hokku*, but at the same time as too complex to be openly discussed. Bashō himself warned against speaking of them, as his disciple Kyorai recalls:

As for the matter of the *kireji*, in linked verse as in *haikai*, it is something to be deeply kept secret; it should not be spoken of carelessly to others. In general, I heard many things from my late master, but since this alone he said must be kept secret, for now I refrain from speaking further of it.⁵

² S. Asano, *Kireji no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Ōfūsha, 1962); R. Takayama, *Kireji to kire* (Tokyo: Yōshorin, 2019).

³ 切字に用ふる時は、四十八字皆切字也。用ひざる時は一字も切字なし。[去来抄 (Kyoraiishō)]

⁴ 切字のことは連俳ともに深く秘す、猥りに人にかたるべからず。惣て先師に承る事多しといへども、秘すべしと有しは是のみなれば、その事はしばらく遠慮し侍る。去来抄 (Kyoraiishō).

⁵ R. H. Blyth, *Haiku, Vol. 1: Eastern Culture* (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1949), 377.

Suddenly, the scholar of European philosophy is reminded of Plato's ban on writing about his most important teaching, the theory of Ideas—as if the *kireji* could not be theorized, but only learnt by poetizing and talking about it together.

But to begin to understand what a *kireji* is and what it does, let us see one in action:

この道や行く人なしに秋の暮れ

Kono michi ya / yuku hito nashini / aki no kure

this road here —

no one travels it this

autumn's evening

(Matsuo Bashō)

In this poem the *kireji*, the cutting word, is the や concluding the first 5 mora line. What it achieves, on a mere formal level, is the cut, the interruption, both on the level of meaning and on the level of rhythm between the two rhythmic series of 5 and 7. Through the character *ya*, which has no grammatical meaning but is rather an exclamation or interjection, “this road” of the first line becomes oddly continuous but also cut from the “yuku hito nashini”—from the “no one travels it.” Thus, you might be starting to see, a *kireji* is a cut in meaning as well as in rhythm, a point of imbalance between the semiotic and the semantic series in language. Yet this does not explain what the *kireji* is supposed to “do” or achieve, what Asano called “its content.”

However, there is a hint in what seems to be the contemporary popular understanding of haiku, which is worth considering. In the Western, English-speaking world of the Global Haiku scene a long-standing commonplace has taken hold, which nowadays can however be found also in Japan: namely, that the *kireji* signals the mood of the poet, or of the haiku itself. This belief—which should catch our attention, since it gives our question the most familiar of answers: the poem would take place in the feelings of the poet—can be traced back to the great systematizer of the haiku in the West, R. H. Blyth. In the first volume of his *Haiku* study, he wrote:

Kireji are a kind of poetical punctuation, or the marks *piano*, *forte*, *cresc.*, *con sordino* in music, by which the composer of the haiku expresses, or hints at, or emphasizes his mood and soul-state.⁶

⁶ 又座の景気もけにと覚めるやらにすべし。Nijō Yoshimoto, *Renri Hishō* (1349), “Secret Notes on the Principles of Linked Verse,” cited in Asano, *Kireji no kenkyū*.

According to this striking formulation, the *kireji* would not be even a “word,” but rather a sign that directly expresses—or at least points toward—the mood, *Stimmung*, or *stato d’animo* of the poet.

Such a modern, Westernized view—to notice the stress Blyth puts on the subjectivity of the poet, something quite alien to the haiku tradition, as it will be shown again today—may however already have its roots in Japanese theories of the *kireji*. In one of the earliest texts to mention *the cutting word*, from the fourteenth century, the *hokku* is defined by the use of the *kireji*, and we read that the *hokku* “should set the mood or atmosphere (景気, *keiki*) of the [poetic] gathering in truth.”⁷ In the context of the origins of the *hokku* in *renga*—in the collective composition of linked verse—the *kireji* was pivotal in letting the *hokku*, *the first verse*, set the mood of the specific poetic gathering.

But even if this suggestion might point in the right direction, what still escapes us is what this “mood” actually is, where it takes place, and how the *kireji* makes it appear. It is as if the literary discussion of this device had reached an impasse. Within the tradition itself, we cannot say more than this: the *kireji* cuts, and the cuts seem to point towards a mood. But what this really means remains unclear. What if we turned to another discipline—to philosophy—to find out?

2. A philosophy of the cut: From Ōhashi’s *kire* and *kire-tsuzuki* to Nishitani’s “Emptiness and Sameness” (*Kū to soku*)

Indeed, contemporary Japanese philosophy possesses a full-fledged philosophy of the cut: Ryōsuke Ōhashi, a philosopher who we could perhaps ascribe to the third generation of the Kyoto School, began to develop it in his 1986 book “*Kire*” *no kōzō*—“The Structure of the Cut”—and in a series of later essays.⁸ It is not a surprise that Ōhashi too begins his philosophy of the cut with our very device, claiming that the conception of the cut in Japan has poetic origins: “Although the term can be extended to other arts,” he writes, “‘*kire*’ was first applied to a fundamental concept in Japanese poetry, ‘*kire-ji*’ (cut syllable). The cut syllable interrupts a poem’s flow of expression to create space for a new phase of poetic

⁷ R. Ōhashi, “*Kire*” *no kōzō: Nihonbi to gendai sekai* (Tokyo: Chūōkōronsha, 1986); German: *Kire: Das “Schöne” in Japan*, trans. R. Elberfeld (Cologne: DuMont, 1994); Italian: *Kire: Il bello in Giappone* (Milano: Mimesis, 2017).

⁸ R. Ōhashi, “The Hermeneutic Approach to Japanese Modernity: ‘Art-Way,’ ‘Iki,’ and ‘Cut-Continuance,’” in *Japanese Hermeneutics: Current Debates on Aesthetics and Interpretation*, ed. M. Marra (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002), 31. Cf. the German formulation in R. Ōhashi, *Schnittpunkte: Essays zum ost-westlichen Gespräch*, vol. 1 (Nordhausen: Bautz, 2013), 78.

expression.”⁹ In this sense, perhaps we don’t need to go much far to find an answer to our question and discover the philosophical role of the *kireji*.

However, Ōhashi goes on to develop his philosophy of the cut not in the poetic tradition but by finding it at work throughout Japanese aesthetics: for example, in the dry garden of Ryōanji, in the Noh actor’s specific way of walking, in the way of tea. What he finds every time and interests him is that Japanese culture and aesthetics seem to exemplify precisely the concept of “discontinuous continuity” first developed by Nishida: in this tradition a cut is never a mere rupture or severing, a contradiction, but rather “a connection to a new flow” – *kire* is never only *kire* but, merged with つづき (*tsuzuki*), “continuance,” *kire* is always *kire-tsuzuki*, “cut-continuance.”¹⁰ This is what he finds also, for example, in ikebana, the Japanese art of arranging flowers, where the cut flower, severed from natural life, expresses the nature of the flower more purely than any flower in the field—an insight that also goes back to an essay by Nishitani from 1953.¹¹ But this is also what he finds once again in poetry, above all in the figure of Bashō, the poet whose decision to pursue his poetic art by travelling “cut him off” from the everyday world in order to return him to it—a reading Ōhashi might be shown to take from an early essay by Nishitani on “Bashō’s folly,” from 1949.¹²

Yet, perhaps precisely because his interest lies in this general structure, Ōhashi does not delve much further into the poetic meaning of the *kireji* itself. For our question, then, we have to look elsewhere. But, as we have begun to see, his own sources point the way: “*Kire*” *no kōzō* appeared in 1986, only four years after the philosopher who had inspired Ōhashi’s readings of Bashō and of ikebana, Keiji Nishitani, published the late essay we are about to read—an essay in which we can find, hidden away, one of the most fascinating

⁹ R. Ōhashi, “Kire and Iki,” trans. G. Parkes, in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. M. Kelly, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 553. Cf. M. Marra, “A Few Afterthoughts on Places, Cuts, and Promises,” 17: “This discontinuous continuity is at the basis of Ōhashi Ryōsuke’s notion of ‘cut-continuance’ (*kire-tsuzuki* 切れ続き),” with reference to Ōhashi, “*Kire*” *no kōzō*, 294. See also M. Ghilardi, “Cut-Continuance,” *International Lexicon of Aesthetics* (Spring 2019).

¹⁰ Ōhashi, in *Japanese Hermeneutics*, 33 and n. 14, crediting K. Nishitani, “Ikebana” (1953); English translation in *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, ed. J. W. Heisig, T. P. Kasulis, and J. C. Maraldo (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2011), 1197–1200.

¹¹ K. Nishitani, “Die »Verrücktheit« beim Dichter Bashō,” trans. E. Jorißen, in Ōhashi (ed.), *Die Philosophie der Kyōto-Schule* (Freiburg/München: Verlag Karl Alber, 2014), 258–280.

¹² Marra, translator’s note to K. Nishitani, “Emptiness and Sameness,” trans. M. Marra, in *Modern Japanese Aesthetics: A Reader*, ed. M. Marra (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1999), 179 n. 16. Original Japanese: K. Nishitani, “Kū to soku,” in *Nishitani Keiji Chosakushū*, vol. 13 (Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1987), 111–160. The essay is now also reprinted, with an introductory note by the editors, in K. Nishitani, *Essays and Reflections 2*, ed. S. P. K. Cerda and J. W. Heisig (Nagoya: Chisokudō, 2024), 9ff.

readings of the *kireji*, one that links some of the most important concepts of the Kyoto School at once with poetry and with the question of its place.

The essay in question, published in 1982, at the end of Nishitani's long career, is titled "Kū to soku", translated into English as "Emptiness and Sameness" and can almost be seen as the culmination of Nishitani's work. As the title already shows, the essay aims to discuss, and perhaps to clarify, two of the most important concepts—or better, instruments—of Nishitani's philosophy, and perhaps of the philosophy of the whole Kyoto School: two words taken almost directly from Buddhism, as Nishitani himself immediately points out.

The first is 空, *kū*: emptiness, the Buddhist *śūnyatā*, perhaps the fundamental concept of Nishitani's entire philosophy—but also at the same time the kanji for sky, *sora*.¹³ The second is 即, *soku*, which Marra translates as "sameness"—or, as James Heisig and Sova Cerda put it in their recent edition of the essay, "sameness or mutual entailment"¹⁴—but which is really a special Buddhist conjunction, almost untranslatable—"namely," "=", "that is," "qua," "in other words," "is,"¹⁵—: the conjunction that keeps two opposites together in their very contradiction, without dissolving it. Taken together, the two words of the title thus go to the very kernel of Nishitani's philosophy, which could be summarized with the Buddhist teaching: reality-*soku*-emptiness, emptiness-*soku*-reality. Reality is emptiness; emptiness is reality.

What does Nishitani want to do with these concepts in this essay? He begins by pointing out that these words have been studied by Buddhologists so much so that one could say there is nothing new to add about them. And yet he writes that he wishes "to problematize these concepts from a slightly different angle."¹⁶ Interestingly for us, that new angle is poetry: the first section of the essay bears the title "'Emptiness' in Poetry."¹⁷ An essay carrying the most metaphysical title imaginable takes the form of a discussion of poetry—as if Nishitani believed that through poetry, or perhaps only through poetry, something new could still be understood about the deepest concepts of his tradition.

3. But first Nishida: pure experience, place, discontinuous continuity

But before delving into the beautiful, albeit subtly complex, arguments of this essay—which bring together forty years of philosophizing, and many more, if one counts in

¹³S. P. K. Cerda and J. W. Heisig, introductory note to "Emptiness and Sameness," in Nishitani, *Essays and Reflections* 2, 9.

¹⁴Marra, translator's note to Nishitani, "Emptiness and Sameness," 179 n. 14.

¹⁵ Nishitani, "Emptiness and Sameness," 179.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ K. Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good* (1911), in *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, 647–648.

Nishida's explorations—it is necessary to retrace some of the concepts Nishitani will put to use in this essay. It is indeed impossible, I believe, to understand what Nishitani means by place and emptiness here, and the role poetry plays in it, without first understanding a series of concepts from Nishida's philosophy: immediate or pure experience (also *taiken* in Japanese, literally bodily experience); *basho*—place—and absolute nothingness; and discontinuous continuity; as well as their relationship to language and the body. To understand this essay, we first need to understand the connection in Nishida's thought between all these concepts, namely how the place of absolute nothingness turns out to be a discontinuous continuity in which things appear as they are—where the immediate, bodily experience (*taiken*) takes place.

Pure experience. Let's start from where Nishida starts. In his first book, *An Inquiry into the Good* (1911), Nishida attacks Western metaphysics while following, in many ways, the Western philosophy of his own time. Strongly influenced by scientific psychology, he argues that at the basis of everything lies neither the subject, consciousness, or the cogito, nor an object, sensations, etc. Rather, before everything else there is what he calls pure or immediate experience. I know I am citing here very well-known passages but remembering them will be important later. Nishida writes:

To experience means to know facts just as they are, to know in accordance with facts by completely relinquishing one's own fabrications. What we usually refer to as experience is adulterated with some sort of thought, so by pure I am referring to the state of experience just as it is without the least addition of deliberative discrimination. The moment of seeing a color or hearing a sound, for example, is prior not only to the thought that the color or sound is the activity of an external object or that one is sensing it, but also to the judgment of what the color or sound might be. In this regard, pure experience is identical with direct experience. When one directly experiences one's own state of consciousness, there is not yet a subject or an object, and knowing and its object are completely unified.¹⁸

Before the subject who sees and the color that is seen, there is the seeing. Nishida's fundamental idea from the beginning is that when we experience something immediately, there is no subject experiencing an object: there is only an experiencing, without subject—which is why Nishida can reverse the order we take for granted: “it is not that experience exists because there is an individual, but that an individual exists because there is experience.”¹⁹ Everyday perception, scientific reasoning, intellectual thought, even acting (willing) – but that is perhaps more controversial initially – are thus for Nishida all abstractions from this first immediate bodily experience, to which everything should

¹⁸ Ibid., 647.

¹⁹ K. Nishida, “Basho,” in *Place and Dialectic: Two Essays by Nishida Kitarō*, trans. J. W. M. Krummel and S. Nagatomo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 49–50. Cf. also James W. Heisig's translation, “The logic of place,” in *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, 649: “Everything that is, is in something else.”

return. And of course, we don't have the time today to show how such a basis in immediate experience develops into a form of radical voluntarism.

Place and absolute nothingness. In the following years and reaching a culmination in his 1926 essay "Basho," "Place," Nishida developed his philosophy further, turning immediate experience into the endgame of his philosophy rather than the starting point, by turning it into the place of all reality. This time in explicit confrontation with the Western understanding of Being, to which he opposes his own, Buddhist influenced concept of absolute nothingness, Nishida transformed his radical voluntarism into a philosophy of place, 場所 *basho*. Here, he doesn't start from immediate experience anymore, but from our at once commonsensical and philosophical understanding of our experience of the world.

He begins from the fact that in everyday perception as much as in scientific reasoning and intellectual thought, everything we perceive and think has to take place in something but, in line with the Western philosophy of the time, where that takes place is nothing other than our consciousness. Everything can be reduced to a state of our consciousness, most philosophies taught us. But Nishida's provocation is that for this consciousness, this self, namely the I, to exist, this I too needs to be in something else:

That which is must be implaced in something. Otherwise the distinction between *is* and *is not* cannot be made. [...] Even if we attempt to think in regard to acts, taking the I as a pure unity of acts, insofar as the I is conceived in opposition to the not-I, there must be that which envelops the opposition between I and non-I within itself and makes the establishment of the so-called phenomena of consciousness possible within itself. Following the words of Plato's *Timaeus*, I shall call the receptacle of the ideas in this sense, basho [place; χώρα, *chōra*].²⁰

Consciousness itself must take place in something. What is this something, what place are we talking about? At the level where everything is finally seen as taking place in consciousness, the self is no longer a thing among things: it becomes a pure acting, a pure consciousness mirroring everything within itself, a negativity— and Nishida is here not far from Fichte and Hegel.

Yet, while Nishitani will later say, even this negativity remains a "thing," Nishida instead said: even this self as negativity must be implaced in something. Even consciousness must have a place, but if consciousness is but nothingness, a negativity, then the place of consciousness must be an absolute nothingness, which he also calls the *basho* of "true nothing": "that which transcends the opposition of being and nothing in every sense and enables them to be established within."²¹ This nothingness is not a thing, not even a

²⁰ Nishida, "Basho," 57.

²¹ Nishida, letter of 8 June 1926, quoted in J. W. M. Krummel, "Basho, World, and Dialectics: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Nishida Kitarō," in *Place and Dialectic*, 182 n. 16 (= *Nishida Kitarō zenshū* XVIII, 303).

negative one: rather, it coincides with the mere taking place of things as they are. This absolute nothingness is nothing more than the world itself experiencing itself and thus producing itself through the consciousness. Once reached the place of absolute nothingness, we are back at immediate experience—there where there is just the experiencing, without subjects nor objects. Let us keep this in mind, because it already contains a first answer to our question: if everything that is must be implaced in something, then poetry too must take place somewhere.

And here comes another fascinating aspect of this logic of place, which concerns language. On this basis, in “Basho,” Nishida develops a new understanding of logic. The whole of Western philosophy, he claims, rests on Aristotle’s understanding of substance, which is itself founded on a specific understanding of the grammatical structure of judgment. As Krummel once noted in his introduction to the English translation of “Basho,” Nishida stated it with unusual clarity in a letter written in June 1926, the very month in which “Basho” appeared:

Instead of defining substance as “that which becomes the grammatical subject but not the predicate” as Aristotle did, I would like to logically define consciousness as “that which becomes the predicate but not the grammatical subject.”²²

This is, in a nutshell, the whole revolution. For Aristotle, the real is what can always occupy the position of the subject in a sentence—“this table,” “this pine tree,” “I”—and never be said of anything else. Nishida turns the sentence around and looks for the real in the opposite direction: not in the subject, but in the predicate-plane that envelops it; not in what is said, but in that within which it is said. “The I is not a unity qua [grammatical] subject,” he writes. “It must instead be a predicating unity. It would have to be a circle rather than a point, a *basho* rather than a thing. The reason why the I cannot know itself is because a predicate cannot become a [grammatical] subject.”²³ Aristotle’s is a logic of the subject, based on substance; Nishida’s is a logic of place, as a logic of the predicate. As we will see, this breaks through the judgment-based (apophantic) conception of language, pointing perhaps towards a completely different understanding of language.

Discontinuous continuity. In his later philosophy, Nishida came to explain all of this also in dynamic terms, deriving from the logic of place the claim that the world is an “absolutely contradictory self-identity” (絶対矛盾的自己同一, *zettai mujunteki jiko dōitsu*)—a continuity made of contradictions, cuts, which he calls “discontinuous continuity” or “continuity of discontinuity” (非連続の連続, *hirenzoku no renzoku*). The perfect example is what we call time: each moment contains within itself both past and future in their negativity and as a contradiction. Past and future negate each other absolutely, and yet they are one in the present: “the present,” Nishida writes, “is the place where the past and the

²² Nishida, “Basho,” 95–96.

²³ K. Nishida, “Absolute Contradictory Self-Identity” (1939), English translation in *Nishida Kitarō: Zettai mujunteki jikodōitsu*, ed. E. Fongaro et al. (Nagoya: Nanzan Institute, 2025), 97.

future are one in reciprocal negation.”²⁴ “Time is established as a continuity of discontinuity.”²⁵

But this is not only about time; he writes: “Unity through acting-intuition hence does not refer to a unity that is continuous as conceived from the standpoint of logic but rather must be a unity such as wherein the many is the one. This is the reason why I call this the continuity of discontinuity rather than [just] continuity.”²⁶ The place of consciousness we discussed above is already a continuity of discontinuity. At the level of absolute nothingness, the whole world becomes a self-identity characterized by absolute contradiction—by a cut. The world is and is not itself at once, and it is from this contradiction that the very experiencing of the world takes place. The place of absolute nothingness, in other words, is not a static container: it is a discontinuous continuity in which things appear as they are—and it is this cut that once again is nothing other than immediate, bodily experience.

4. Nishitani: from absolute nothingness to absolute emptiness

As many have already argued, Nishitani’s philosophy can be read as a rereading of Nishida’s main concepts—one that transforms the place of absolute nothingness into absolute emptiness (*śūnyatā*), the *kū* of our title.²⁷ But he arrives there from a different starting point. In *Religion and Nothingness* (1961), his masterpiece, Nishitani does not begin from experience but from a diagnosis: Western philosophy, as Heidegger had taught him, culminates from within in nihilism—in the collapse of every ground, in the experience that being itself has become groundless. And what he recognizes in that nihilism is nothing other than the place of consciousness that Nishida had described: that place in which everything is reduced to consciousness, and in which the self, having lost every ground beneath it, comes to see itself as pure negativity—itself empty, like everything else in the world.

But here we must recall the objection I anticipated earlier: even this negativity remains, for Nishitani, a “thing.” On the field of nihility, as Nishitani calls it, emptiness is still seen as something—a nothingness represented, thought, posited: one more ground, even if a dark, abyssal one. And it could not be otherwise, because on that field everything must still take the shape of what stands and subsists: things take the shape of substance and,

²⁴ K. Nishida, “Logic and Life,” in *Place and Dialectic*, 160.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 168.

²⁶ Cf. *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, 643: “Nishitani later shifted it again to its traditional Buddhist roots when he replaced it with the notion of emptiness as distinguished from nihility.”

²⁷ K. Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. J. Van Bragt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 131.

symmetrically, the self takes the shape of the subject—both, as we have just seen with Nishida, products of one and the same operation, judgment, grammatical logical language. The self that has understood that everything is empty is still a self that stands. It is only when the self, too, empties itself—when even this last representation of emptiness is emptied out—that absolute emptiness is reached: what Nishida had called the place of absolute nothingness. And it is precisely there, Nishitani argues, that things as such are finally encountered:

And the field where all things have a hold on themselves is none other than the field of *śūnyatā* that, having passed beyond the standpoints of sensation and reason, and having passed through nihilism, opens up as an absolute near side. On that field of *śūnyatā* each thing becomes manifest in its suchness in its very act of affirming itself, according to its own particular potential and *virtus* and in its own particular shape. For us as human beings, to revert to that field entails at one and the same time an elemental affirmation of the existence of all things (the world) and an elemental affirmation of our own existence. The field of *śūnyatā* is nothing other than the field of the Great Affirmation.²⁸

Emptiness, then, takes nothing away from things: it gives them back. It is Nishida's immediate experience, regained at the far end of nihilism—the place where each thing appears precisely as it is. Reality-*soku*-emptiness, emptiness-*soku*-reality. But this would also imply that such a field requires a different logic, a non-logic, a different understanding of language. We can now return to our essay, we can return to poetry—and to the question of its place.

5. “Emptiness and Sameness”: poetry and the place of things

A different logic, then—a non-logic; a language that does not stand on judgment. Where could such a thing ever be found? Nishitani's answer, in this essay, is: in poetry. It was not the first time he had looked in that direction: his 1949 essay already pointed, as we saw, towards an understanding of poetry itself as a cut, though he left it mostly unexplored; and references to Bashō, precisely in the context of the reality of things in emptiness, are not lacking in *Religion and Nothingness*. But here he finally turns to poetry itself—and he does so by reading a few verses.

He titles section 2 of the essay “An Example from Bashō,” although what he reads for the most part is a *hokku* by a follower of Bashō, which opens a *haikai* sequence from 1690 in which Bashō himself had taken part. The *hokku* is by Naitō Jōsō and it reads:

さびしさの底ぬけてふるみぞれかな
sabishisa no / soko nukete furu / mizore kana

²⁸ Cited in Nishitani, “Emptiness and Sameness,” 186.

The bottom of loneliness

falls off:

Oh, the falling sleet!²⁹

As you will notice, I will use different translations during my discussion, simply because so much is happening here on a textual level; but this one, by Michael Marra, stresses the presence of the *kireji*, *kana*, in the last line. On the surface, what happens in the poem is clear enough: something like the bottom of loneliness has detached itself from its hinges and is now falling—the poet or speaker has accessed a state of bottomless loneliness, we could say—and at the same time something else is falling: sleet, *mizore*, a mixture of rain and snow, a winter seasonal word (*kigo*) in the *hokku* tradition.

Right away, Nishitani turns to the question of moods, since the poem begins explicitly with one: loneliness (*sabishisa*, さびしさ). He cites the poem and immediately repeats the conception of the *hokku* as what sets the mood of the whole poetic gathering, which we already encountered in the first section of this talk. He writes:

The central mood appears in the opening verse, which regulates the entire exchange: “the bottom of loneliness falls off.” We can say that it shows the place where the action of the poem occurs—the falling of sleet that is the subject of this verse—as well as the way in which the falling takes place. In both cases, we are witness to the presentation of the “place” where the phenomenon reveals itself in the world of nature and the “way” in which this revelation takes place, as the same mood of “loneliness.”³⁰

Notice what happens within these few lines. Nishitani begins from the ancient conception according to which the *hokku* should set the mood of the poetic gathering, and yet, in the same breath, his language shifts onto another level entirely—the level of “place” (*ba*, 場). What the poem does, he claims, is to turn the loneliness into the very place in which the natural phenomenon of the falling sleet takes place. This can seem quite a trivial point, but it hides a more sophisticated philosophical argument: what has struck Nishitani here is that what is usually taken to be an “internal state” pertaining to the mind of human beings, the mood of the poet, is actually presented as the place where the natural world takes place, as the place where the sleet is falling.

In everyday discourse, as much as in the history of Western philosophy—for which, Nishitani immediately points out, it became one of its main aporia³¹—it is quite normal to say that natural phenomena arise in connection with moods, through sensory perceptions;

²⁹ Ibid., 186.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 187.

yet the two are still seen as different and separate events, two different realms: one external and the other internal; on the one hand the *mizore*, on the other the loneliness. Poetry takes a completely different approach: it does not join those two realms back together, it simply never took them apart.

Here we have two actions that should become two propositions with separate subjects: the bottom of loneliness has fallen off, and the sleet falls. On the one hand, we have the inner event of the author Jōsō; on the other, we witness an occurrence related to the external world. But in this poem the two facts are collapsed into one pattern. Interiority and exteriority are linked together; they become one single event.³²

It is worth following Nishitani's interpretation to its conclusion. Because what he calls this something that is before and beyond both the internal *kibun* (気分) and the external natural event is—following Nishida's famous study—the “place” (*basho*, 場所) of things, or “emptiness,” or even “direct experience.” What poetry is able to achieve, for Nishitani, is the world as the place of things, before the difference between subject and world:

Inasmuch as it overcomes the judgment of “this sleet is sad” and goes beyond the realm of the cognitive discernment that is found in consciousness, the reality of the falling sleet is a place which is cast as an absolute reality in itself. [...] We could call it a straightforward expression of direct experience. Such a place is in itself neither subjective nor objective. Rather, it is a basic space that is made possible the first time by standing on it and seeing it as both a place of subjective emotion and a place of objective reality or description. This “loneliness” shows such a “place.” [...] The experience of such a reality is a direct experience—a “bodily experience” (*taiken* [体験]) in the word's literal sense. Such an event occurs in the realm of the original “thing.”³³

Every word of this passage, by now, should sound familiar: the place; direct experience; a basic space neither subjective nor objective, which both subject and object presuppose; and even that “bodily experience,” *taiken*, from which Nishida had started. By going beyond grammar and logic, beyond the simple logical claim “the sleet is sad,” linking together two events without making use of any logical connection, the poem opens onto a more original plane—one that is before consciousness, before subjectivity and objectivity, and that yet includes our body.

But how does a poem do this? Through a different use of language—and this is why, at this point, the essay becomes a reflection on language itself. We are back at Nishida's logic of place: for Nishitani argues that philosophy and everyday understanding read the world through substance and the logic of substance—which is to say, through judgments and propositions:

³² Ibid., 188–189.

³³ Ibid., 193.

In the case of this logicization, the cognitive discrimination that divides subject and predicate and unites them with a copula (is)—that is, “judgment” as a mental activity known as “predication”—becomes the center of the entire operation. [...] At that point, the entire language is for the first time atomized as “words” and the whole text is regarded a relationship between word and word. [...] Basing its principles on this logical premise, the law of language is arranged and “grammar” comes into being. At the root of all this movement is the intellect—particularly the mechanism of discriminating intellect—which arranges the logos of language along the path of logic.³⁴

But poetry does not use language like this at all:

Poetry, however, differs completely from the tendency in philosophy of stopping at a cognition that objectifies everyday experience, or at objectifying cognition, searching for it in the realm of “knowledge” as cognition. This poetic approach implies a course of inquiry that never departs from experience but penetrates the source of experience. [...] In the previous instance, however, loneliness is not a simple adjective modifying sleet. It is, rather, the actual place where the actually falling sleet is produced. Inasmuch as it overcomes the judgment of “this sleet is sad” and goes beyond the realm of the cognitive discernment that is found in consciousness, the reality of the falling sleet is a place which is cast as an absolute reality in itself.³⁵

Loneliness is not an adjective: it is a place. It is as if poetry performed, within language, the very reversal Nishida had performed within logic—away from the grammatical subject, towards the predicate, towards the place. Here, then, is the non-logic we were looking for.

But Nishitani does not stop there, he goes even further. He clarifies also what allows poetry to make loneliness not into the subject but into the place of things. And poetry can achieve that thanks to particles and rhythm—and, finally, *kireji*. Nishitani’s answer is poetry is not founded on grammar but on rhythm, and what gives rhythm are its cuts. He turns once more to our *hokku* and notices how the particle *〇*, at the end of the first 5 mora line, cuts the loneliness apart while turning it, at the same time, almost into the subject of the poem; and how a further cut falls in the second line, within the 7 mora structure itself, between “soko nukete” and “furu”—where “furu,” which can also be considered a relative clause of “mizore” on the following line, creates what in European poetics would be called an *enjambement*.

What these cuts do, using a famous expression of Bashō’s, is to make the words and images reverberate, so that what in cognitive terms we take to be different events and different worlds interpenetrate each other, precisely as they do in our direct experience. And here Nishitani names what the cuts open with a term we have been waiting for:

³⁴ Ibid., 186–188.

³⁵ Ibid., 190.

These cuts make links more profound. Poetic profundity depends on the strength of these interruptions. This strength opens up the “place” where the context, which we should call discontinuous continuity, is made possible.³⁶

Discontinuous continuity: Nishida’s *hirenzoku no renzoku*, no longer a metaphysical thesis about time and the world, but the texture of a poem. The cuts of the *hokku* do to language what, in Nishida, negation does to being: they interrupt the continuous flow so that a deeper connection may occur, and the place may open. And we can also see, now, what Ōhashi found in these pages: the cut that is “not a breaking off or severing, but rather a connection to a new flow”—the *kire-tsuzuki*—is described here, four years before “*Kire*” *no kōzō*, as what the cuts of poetry achieve.

6. The *kireji*: exclamation, breath, voice

But it is the *kireji* that is really the culmination of this process:

And then, from this mutual reverberation, comes the spontaneous exclamation: “oh” (*kana*), the sleet! In this poem, the entire reverberation of words is concentrated in this exclamation. At the same time that the source of the author’s excitement appears straightforwardly in a simple form, the place of the original appearance of the reality of sleet—which this poem expresses in its wholeness—is brought into view.³⁷

It is the final *kireji* that brings suddenly into view the *mizore*, the sleet, in its wholeness, in its own place. The whole poem becomes concentrated in this last exclamation (the actual *kireji*!): it is as if, on the one hand, the *kireji* cut the *mizore* out of language, bringing it back to the loneliness to which it belonged; and, on the other, it allowed the *hokku* to return to the world itself, there where people are gathered together making verses under the *mizore*—making it possible, one day, for this *hokku* to be read on its own, and giving rise to the haiku tradition.

But Nishitani does not stop there either; he explains how this double return takes place. And it is here that the most powerful shift in his conception of place and poetry happens, because it is the *kireji*’s exclamatory nature that turns out to bring into language the very materiality of the world and of the place of things—that “bodily experience” he mentioned earlier. And this is because *kireji* are:

words that are the original form of self-expression of living human beings who are endowed not only with intellect but also with emotions (情意). It is as if human breathing (息づかい), inhalations (息込み), exhalations (吐息), and sighs (溜息)

³⁶ Ibid., 191.

³⁷ Nishitani, “Kū to soku,” in Nishitani Keiji Chosakushū, vol. 13; my translation, modified from Marra, “Emptiness and Sameness,” 194–195.

are transmitted together with words. [...] Words such as “kana” in “oh, the falling sleet” or “ya” in the last verse [he refers to another *hokku*], logically speaking, are meaningless. And yet, within the thread of “gram” of living words, they play the most important role, which is the transformation in language of things that are hard to express.³⁸

Everything hangs on this passage. “Loneliness” names a mood, “sleet” names a thing: both belong to the intellect, and grammar can break them into subjects and predicates. The *kireji* names nothing at all—“logically speaking,” it is “meaningless.” And yet it is precisely this non-word that plays “the most important role,” because what it transmits together with words is not a meaning but a breathing, an inhalation, an exhalation, a sigh. Around the *kireji*, one could say, the *hokku* developed a rest of materiality that language usually allows to disappear into mere thought.

And this is why the *kireji* can do what no other word of the poem can do. For this non-word is not the mark of the poet’s mood within the poem, as Blyth thought; it is rather the point of origin of both subject and world. What comes through it is breath: not something the poet has, but that bodily exchange with the world—that *taiken*—which takes place before anything can be called subjective or objective, and in which, therefore, that “basic space” which is “in itself neither subjective nor objective” can for a moment be reached. Ōhashi saw something very close to this when he observed that breathing is itself a *kire-tsuzuki*: inhalation and exhalation are cut from one another and, in that very cut, continued.³⁹ The *kireji* is where the cut-continuance of the poem and the cut-continuance of the breath coincide.

If this reading is correct, we can finally answer—or at least reformulate—the question with which we began: about the “content” of the *kireji*, the question a thousand years of literary theory left shrouded in secrecy. The content of the *kireji* is not a meaning, for it has none; it is not the mood of the poet, as Blyth believed. The *kireji* coincides with the place itself: the emptiness within the sensorial world, into which the poem opens by cutting itself.

Let me go back, then, to the question Gianluca asked me, and with which I began: what kind of place does poetry open? Against the hegemonic understanding of poetry in the West, poetry does not open onto another place, further away, detached from reality, from our world, from nature. Rather, with “mizore kana,” with the *kireji*, namely the exclamation that cuts, the poem is able to make the words reverberate so much that it leaves the place of abstract, logical language, there where sound and sense always have to coincide, to reach

³⁸ Ōhashi, in *Japanese Hermeneutics*, 30: life, “like breathing, inhaling and exhaling, or walking, one foot after the other—is in reality not a simple continuance or ‘flow’ but a moment-by-moment discontinuous continuity.” Cf. *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, vol. 2, 554.

³⁹ R. Ōhashi, “Keiji Nishitani,” in *Die Philosophie der Kyôto-Schule*, ed. R. Ōhashi (Freiburg/München: Karl Alber, 2014), 238: »Leere und ›soku‹« „gilt ... als einer der Höhepunkte von Nishitanis Denken“ (my translation).

back onto the reality from which everything started: from the place of absolute nothingness, from that absolute emptiness, which is actually the world in its own taking place.

Thank you!