

# いきと西欧

(*Iki* and the West)

---

## Influencing the Unconscious

Kalynn Smith  
Japanese Literature  
Dr. Nozomi Irei  
May 15, 2013

*Iki* (いき), as described by Kuki Shuzo, exists somewhere “between the lines” of consciousness. It is, in essence, a phenomenon of being which appears naturally, seemingly without intent to exist, as though it has manifested through the human unconscious – this ability of *iki* to blend into the culture can be seen through its multiple meanings in the Japanese language: *iki* (息) as “breath,” and *iki* (行き) as “going (outbound),” are two interpretations of the word; though its most interesting form comes from its place in the Japanese verb “to live,” or “to exist” as *ikiru* (生きる) – and as the stem of such an influential verb, this phenomenon is applicable to a wide variety of areas from art to architecture to music and even, as I intend to prove, to literature (which is an area neglected by Kuki). There remains, however, the question of the universality of *iki* – is it a concept unique to the Japanese people, or can it be found in societies around the world? Kuki himself mentions the structure of *iki* as experienced by an ethnic group, and, through reasoning by linguistics, declared that because there is no word for this “phenomenon of consciousness” in Western culture, it therefore does not exist in Western culture<sup>1</sup>. However, it is certainly possible to dispel the word “hypothetical” from Kuki’s assertion, and by doing so perhaps reveal a greater potential within the West to manifest such a “foreign” point of view. After all, if such formidable minds like that of Jaques Derrida can claim that language is of no “true significance,” then it may be possible to prove that the West doesn’t

---

<sup>1</sup>“But let us say, for the sake of argument, that *iki* is found in certain hypothetical cases in Western culture, and that such cases represent actual personal experience in exceptional circumstances. Even then, the meaning is entirely different. In this case, *iki* is not manifested in the domain of the public as meaning of an ethnic group. For a word to have a consistent meaning and value to a people, a linguistic path must be always open there. The fact that the West has no word corresponding to *iki* is itself evidence that the phenomenon of consciousness that is *iki* has no place in Western culture as a certain meaning in its ethnic being” (59).

---

lack the unconsciousness of mind to reflect *iki*.

By inhabiting the areas of subtlety in reality, *iki* finds a perfect literary outlet in the form of poetry, which inhabits the area of subtlety in literature. No other literary form depends so heavily upon the effect of devices which stimulate the subconscious (devices such as assonance and consonance, for example, can be difficult to identify when one is unaware of what exactly they are). In fact, this is perhaps the greatest reason why poetry is, at least for some writers, more difficult than prose – prose appeals to the reader’s active mind, while poetry requires a “deeper” state of mind to be truly appreciated. Robert Browning’s “Meeting at Night” serves as a fine example of study in the Western sphere as opposed to Kuki’s native Japanese sphere:

“The grey sea and the long black land;  
 And the yellow half-moon large and low;  
 And the startled little waves that leap  
 In fiery ringlets from their sleep,  
 As I gain the cove with pushing prow,  
 And quench its speed i' the slushy sand.

Then a mile of warm sea-scented beach;  
 Three fields to cross till a farm appears;  
 A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch  
 And blue spurt of a lighted match,  
 And a voice less loud, thro' its joys and fears,  
 Than the two hearts beating each to each!”

Browning’s poetry often follows the affairs between people, similar to the way a component of Kuki’s interpretation of *iki* affects the impressions of the opposite sex (the “domain” of *iki* and *shibumi*). While breaking down the extensional structure of *iki*, Kuki makes the assertion that “*iki* expresses a certain supposition about the opposite sex” and that it “came to mean ‘being thoroughly familiar with worldly affairs and human emotions,’ ‘being well-versed in matters

pertaining to the special society of the opposite sex,' and 'being sophisticated'" (28). Browning (and any Western poet worth his/her merit) follows this criteria; "Meeting at Night" demonstrates them specifically in the last four lines, which concentrate on the affair. In regard to this, it seems strange that, despite the many differences in fashion between traditional Japan and the West, Kuki's mention of hairstyles should apply to "Meeting at Night" – yet by virtue of Browning's "sophistication" of language, it does. "A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch / And the blue spurt of a lighted match / And a voice less loud, thro' its joys and fears" describes this "meeting at night" as, more specifically, a meeting at early morning (the "yellow half-moon large and low" also identifies the time). The "spurt of a lighted match" implies that the speaker's loved one has just woken from sleep, still in the dark, which means that her hair would be undone, and in all likelihood reveal "the sentiment expressed by 'stray hair escaping its tie' or 'the straggling hair from the night before on a woman's face'" (38). This coquettish image is complemented by what Kuki refers to as "the expression of *iki* as an expression of natural form" (35) as we are given a description of the lover's voice as softer than a heartbeat which, taken either literally or figuratively, can only be interpreted as a whisper.

The implications of "a voice less loud, thro' its joys and fears" coincide with Kuki's notion of the "sense of hearing." According to Kuki, "the voice exhibits *iki* when it is pitched to convey an element of *sabi* 'quiet elegance'" (35). Not only is the "quiet elegance" exhibited in the voice of the speaker's lover, but it is exhibited in the voice of the reader as well, as such a poem cannot be read any other way than in a gentle tone for several reasons, though the one most prominent of these falls to the rhetorical devices which forcibly slow the reader to yield to the imagery. To demonstrate this, I'll return to the devices I mentioned earlier: assonance and consonance. Consonance, as it repeats the consonant sounds, is often associated with harsh

noises, which “Meeting at Night” lacks in any significant amount. Many of the non-euphonic sounds are few and far between. Conversely, assonance is abundant throughout the poem, and lends its natural euphony to support Kuki’s belief that “[the sense of hearing] is also encountered in pronunciation or inflection at the ends of words. A word said slowly, in a drawl, suddenly cut short with an inflection at the end – that is basic to *iki* in language use” (35). The first two lines of the poem – “The grey sea and the long black land; / And the yellow half-moon large and low” – show those very drawls and abrupt cuts; the drawls are created by the assonance, by the vowels stretching out their words, and the cuts which, if not caused by the ends of the words, are inserted by both the anaphoric use of the word “and” as well as the natural pause which comes with the end of a line of poetry.

While these poetic devices contribute their effects to the unconscious, the very nature of the poem demands the “quiet elegance” which enraptures the mind with *iki*. In fact, Browning’s poem behaves in much the same way as a haiku, thematically speaking (perhaps in relating Browning’s work and the work of other Western writers to a Japanese form, Kuki’s assertion that *iki* is unique to Japanese culture will diminish to some extent). As haiku handle matters of nature, so too does “Meeting at Night”; of the poem’s twelve total lines, only the last four break away from using elements of nature. In Browning’s construction of these natural elements, his use of color is most applicable to Kuki’s *iki*; “the colors expressive of *iki* cannot be *hade* ‘flashy.’ Colors, to be *iki*, must speak to duality in a subdued manner...the colors that embody *iki* are those belonging to grays, browns, and blues” (46-47). Since we have already established that the setting of this poem is in the dark hours of early morning, any color that the speaker could come across would be “subdued” by the reigning darkness, including warm colors which Kuki declares do not express *iki*.

For instance, there is a mention of “waves that leap / in fiery ringlets from their sleep.” It would be conceivable to interpret the “fiery” quality of the waves as a comparison of motion between the floating embers of a crackling fire and the spray of water after a wave breaks on a rock – however, I will instead return to the significance of the time of day. In this early morning setting, it would be possible for there to be some evidence of the sun – which perhaps has not quite risen above the horizon – in the east. Therefore, it is also conceivable to imagine the color of the waves resembling that of a small flame which possesses a blue hue with an obscure red-orange center. This mixture of colors, influenced by the dominance of the *iki* color, blue, is what speaks to Kuki’s “duality.” In other words, it could be said that the subduing effect of the morning darkness reflects the sentiment that “*iki* lives in the future, holding the past in its arms...The soul that has tasted the last drop of sizzling excitement of warm colors draws on the quietude in cool colors that offer complementary afterimages” (48). This idea of “quietude in cool colors” is exactly what Browning’s poem captures, though instead of afterimages, we are given foreshadowing of the coming dawn. Yet there are still concrete examples of the colors that directly express *iki*, such as “The grey sea and the long black land” and later still, when the reader is pulled away from the land and into the affair, with the “blue spurt of a lighted match.” The very palette of the poem contributes to the *iki* effect by virtue of Kuki’s analysis of subdued and cool colors.

But still, the several interpretations of “Meeting at Night”, all contribute to just one example from the West, which makes for quite an incomplete argument – not only does it fail as a representative of the whole of the West, it only covers an *iki*-based *structural* analysis of literature, which is only one small aspect of the broader concept. As mentioned before, *iki* is applicable not just to literature, but to art, music, architecture – to any form of creative

expression. Though most importantly, *iki* is not only applicable to the creations of the human mind, it is applicable to humanity itself. In fact, this is the form of *iki* which Kuki covers in the greatest detail. Humanity, as we know, is the chief topic of literature; therefore, a more thorough exploration of *iki* in Western literature requires a character analysis as well. Also to be more thorough, I'll use another Western society besides the English and shift towards Victor Hugo's Les Misérables. The variety of humanity in this French classic is perfect for searching for *iki*, and within two characters in particular – the much beloved Cosette and the down-trod Éponine. These two most critical female characters remain foils throughout the novel, and consequently represent the duality of Kuki's analysis of *iki*, specifically the aspects of *iki* which imply *amami* (Cosette) and *ikiji* and *shibumi* (Éponine).

Remembering that “*iki* expresses a certain supposition about the opposite sex” (28), it is more appropriate to use feminine examples from the decidedly male-dominated society of Revolutionary France (as well as the West as a whole) – not to mention that it is through the male point of view in which the reader sees these two young women (it is also worth noting that though Kuki is mindful to include both sexes when describing the natural forms of *iki*, he neglects to mention specific masculine examples). Therefore, the first analysis will be of the woman the men of Les Misérables (including the author) favored, Cosette. Cosette undoubtedly represents *amami*, or “sweet.” Of this, Kuki says “here, the *ikiji* ‘pride and honor’ and the *akirame* ‘resignation’ components of *iki* are lost and, as a result, only the sugary sweetness remains, like that in the personality of an ordinary, pleasant person” (31). Given that Cosette is

---

<sup>2</sup>I refer to Cosette as a symbol chiefly because her role in the novel is not so much her own as it is an addition to other characters. We first learn of Cosette as the object of Fantine's devotion and diligence. She then serves the same purpose for Valjean and later for Marius. In contrast to the other characters, Cosette does very little, if nothing, to influence the plot of the story other than simply existing.

more of a symbol than an “active” character, “ordinary” and “pleasant” are perhaps the greatest compliments that could be paid to her, aside from those already given in the text<sup>2</sup>. However, it is clear that the symbol Cosette bears within her character (and what few actions she does perform in the novel, such as caring after her father in his illness and accompanying him to give charity to the impoverished) are indeed “sweet.”

Balancing Cosette’s *amami*, Éponine doubtless embodies the qualities of *ikiji* and *akirame*; this frail, thin waif of a young woman resigned to protecting the man who has written her off for no other reason than the existence of Cosette manages to maintain her pride and honor rather than becoming pathetic or pitiable. Her actions born out of love, diligence, and dedication reflect Kuki’s descriptions as perfectly as a Western example could:

“Say what you like, you aren’t going in. I’m not a dog’s daughter but a wolf’s. There are six of you, six men and I’m one woman, but I’m not afraid of you. You aren’t going to break into this house, because I don’t choose to let you. I’m the watchdog, and if you try it I’ll bark. So you might as well be on your way. Go anywhere if you like but don’t come here. I won’t have it.’

She took a step towards them, and she was awe-inspiring. She laughed again.

‘My God, do you think I’m scared? I’m used to starving in summer and freezing in winter. You poor fools, you think you can frighten any woman because you’ve got soft little sluts of mistresses who cower under the bedclothes when you talk rough. But I’m not scared.’ She looked at her father. ‘Not even of you.’ With fiery eyes she glared round at the other men. What do I care if my body’s picked up in the street tomorrow morning, beaten to death by my own father — or found in a year’s time in the ditches round Saint-Cloud or the Île des Cygnes, along with the garbage and the dead dogs?’

She was interrupted by a fit of coughing, a hollow sound that came from the depths of her narrow, sickly chest.

‘I’ve got only to yell, you know, and people will come running. There are six of you, but I’m the public.’” (857)

The backdrop of this scene is naturally in the dark, which, as I’ve proven before, comes with more implications of *iki*. Yet it is clear that those structural aspects (such as the use of color, rhetorical/poetic devices, etc.) pale in comparison to Éponine, who is in fact much like *iki* itself; Éponine is, perhaps, the closest to Marius and yet the furthest from him as well. She is constantly there with the (literal) helping hand he needs: during their first meeting she provided him with a note which allowed his beloved Cosette’s father to escape the wrath of the Thénardiens (636, 695-696) and at her end she intercepted the bullet that would have taken his life, exchanging his with her own (962-966). And through the whole of her wretched, noble existence, nothing came to reward her actions, not true sign of recognition, for “certainly [Marius] had nothing against her – far from it. It was simply that, with all his warmth bestowed on Cosette he had none for Éponine” (853). By this, we can conclude that Éponine is similar to *iki* in that *iki* is present in all aspects of life, yet is still limited to the unconscious. In relation to this, Kuki recollects Nietzsche and says “the ‘nobility’ and ‘pathos of distance’ that Nietzsche discusses are no doubt each a kind of *ikiji* ‘pride and honor’. Originating in chivalry, these words have similarities that are difficult to distinguish from *ikiji*, which came out of *bushido*” (59). “Nobility” and “pathos of distance” are apt descriptions not only of Éponine’s valiant deflection of her father and his cohorts from Marius’ Cosette, but of every action the young woman performed.

But despite all of these applications of *iki* to Western examples there still remains the condemning dissent toward my argument which would claim that I’ve forced Kuki’s

---

<sup>3</sup> “Whatever the case may be, the objectified expression of *iki* can be understood only if its understanding is based on *iki* as a phenomenon of consciousness. Most scholars who have attempted to clarify the structure of *iki* by taking objective expression as their point of departure have fallen into the same trap. They have not gone beyond the abstract and eidetic understanding of *iki* and hence have not reached a point of grasping concretely and hermeneutically the determinants for the particular being of *iki*” (57)

interpretation onto my own, that I have “fallen into the same trap” as those who conjured “objective expressions” of *iki*<sup>3</sup>. And perhaps I have. Kuki, no doubt, would agree with this statement; he mentions “objective expression is no more than symbolic of *iki*” (56). Yet if we of Western blood can achieve even a symbolic representation of *iki*, then perhaps this is evidence that *iki* is not lost to us – the signifier and the signified are, after all, two different things. Can one not exist without the other? Do the Japanese and the Western symbols not direct toward the same thing in essence?

Yet perhaps this was not the whole argument, the sole contributor to our cultural differences; the Western world is very industrial and materialistic as opposed to the traditional Japanese world of agriculture and the spirituality seen through the deep-seeded relationship with nature. It seems only natural that there should be fewer signifiers for intangible things. In other words, though Westerners may not have a word for Kuki’s “phenomenon of consciousness,” this does not necessarily mean that they lack it. In the Western world the concept of *iki* may just simply remain in the unconscious, manifesting itself accordingly through subtle mediums. What’s more is that Kuki’s constant denial and “proof” that *iki* exists only within its native sphere is losing credibility in today’s internationally involved world; the complete isolation of a nation is incredibly difficult to manage, if not entirely impossible. As a result, cultures have begun to blend, and once-foreign words have started to become naturalized in other languages (modern Japanese is in fact a shining example of this).

However, I must state that it was never my intent to “take away” from the Japanese culture, to prove that *iki* is not unique to the Japanese, for it is – it is simply not *exclusive* to the Japanese, just as breathing and living is not exclusive to one people. My intention was not merely to point out this fact, but to show respect and adoration for the people who were able to

recognize, far earlier than their “progressive” Western foils, aspects of life and appeal which are so inherent to the human yet so easily unrecognized by most.

#### Works Cited

- Browning, Robert. "“*Meeting at Night*”." *Poems and Poets*. The Poetry Foundation. Web. 25 Mar. 2013.
- Hugo, Victor. *Les Misérables*. Trans. Norman Denny. New York, NY: Penguin, 2012. Print.
- Kuki, Shuzo. *The Structure of Detachment: The Aesthetic Vision of Kuki Shuzo*. Trans. Hiroshi Nara. Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 2004. Print.