



## Research Article

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# Ordinary Aesthetics and Ethics in the Haiku Poetry of Matsuo Bashō: A Wittgensteinian Perspective

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**Abstract:** This article explores how the notion of *ordinary aesthetics* can stem, as well as the one of *ordinary ethics*, from that *revolution of the ordinary* started by Wittgenstein and further developed by philosophers like Cavell and Diamond. The idea of *ordinary ethics* emphasizes the importance of everyday life and the particular details of our experiences. This concept can be extended to aesthetics, forming the basis of a modality of aesthetic appreciation that recognizes values and importance in the details and nuances of everyday experience. One example of such *ordinary aesthetics* can be found in the *haiku* poetry of Bashō. Bashō's poetry often focuses on the ordinary and mundane aspects of life, such as the changing of seasons, the sound of rain, or the sight of a bird in flight, but also on that lower world made of insects, rotten foliage, and excrements. Bashō conveys in poetry the core of *Zen* philosophy, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all things and the value of living in the present moment. This approach to aesthetics offers an alternative to more traditional modes of aesthetic appreciation, which tend to prioritize grandeur, spectacle, and formal perfection. Ultimately, the concept of ordinary aesthetics invites us to find the intrinsic importance in the simple things that surround us and to cultivate a deeper appreciation for the richness of our everyday lives.

**Keywords:** ordinary, everyday, aesthetics, ethics, Buddhism, Zen, Japan, Haiku, Basho, Wittgenstein

## 1 Introduction: Treating Aesthetics with Wittgensteinian Gloves

When talking about aesthetics, it is crucial to primarily clarify what we are meaning by the word “aesthetics.” Is it something related exclusively to art? Is it something related to the concept of “beauty”? Or, rather, is it something relative to what impresses us based on its value, on its importance? Let's make it clear right away: it is the last of these meanings that interests us here.

Now, since what we are interested in is to understand whether (and how) the recognition of what has been defined as *ordinary ethics* can ground a corresponding *ordinary aesthetics*, we must begin our itinerary by outlining the basic assumptions of the former, in order to understand how – and whether – they can be transposed into the latter. *Ordinary ethics* can be retraced to a form of axiological rearrangement such that “the center of gravity of ethics is thus shifted from what is ‘right’ to what is ‘important’.”<sup>1</sup> That is a shift from what is correct with respect to a rule, to what arouses a feeling and attracts us because of its particular, albeit apparently ordinary, specificity. This vision of ethics hinges on that *revolution of the ordinary* that takes its steps from the Wittgensteinian attempt to resist and dissolve the “craving for generality” that substantiates our

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<sup>1</sup> Laugier, “La cura,” 298.

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yearning for the metaphysics; that is to say, for what is ideal, for what can be assumed as universal. Such conceptualizing desire carries – as its consequence – the constant attempt at establishing ethics as an abstract system of universal ideas: a system capable of guiding the evaluation and judgement of actions according to a fixed and transcendent law.

For Wittgenstein such craving for generality, however, has always been correlated with an inseparable “contemptuous attitude towards the particular case<sup>2</sup>,” and yet what Wittgenstein was most interested in was precisely “the particular case.” The *return to the ordinary* is in fact primarily the recognition of how this quest for general rules, this “striving to understand the foundation, or essence, of everything empirical<sup>3</sup>,” takes us away from what we have under our eyes. Therefore, the error of philosophy (and thus of that canonical philosophical foundation of ethics, which seeks *universal laws* to which application to particular cases can be deduced) is what Cora Diamond precisely recognizes when commenting the paragraph §52<sup>4</sup> of the *Philosophical Investigations*: “philosophers miss the details, the rags, that a philosophical mouse comes out of, because something has led them to think that no mouse *can* come out of that.”<sup>5</sup> Contrary to this view, her proposal, derived from the interpretation of Wittgenstein’s works, is to redeem philosophy from its metaphysic prison and redefine it through a realistic spirit: “the realistic spirit does not then know so well that you cannot get a mouse from rags that it will not *look at* the rags.”<sup>6</sup> What Diamond is saying here is that this “philosophical sickness” brings as its outcome an *a priori* knowledge that prevents us to take a look at what the actual particular case really is about. This preconceived knowledge separates us from the reality of the world: prevents us from getting our hands dirty with the real-thing, namely the world of particular objects. The philosopher knows that no mouse can be born from rags and dust, so he doesn’t even take a look at the rags. But, as Wittgenstein already stated in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, what we take as *a priori* knowledge is not really something that is granted forever. An *a priori* judgement works only in logic, because when we want to transpose its “magic” in the realm of empirical facts it is only a psychological justification that gives it a semblance of reliability:

The procedure of induction consists in accepting as true the simplest law that can be reconciled with our experiences. This procedure however has no logical justification but only a psychological one. It is clear that there are no grounds for believing that the simplest eventuality will in fact be realized. It is an hypothesis that the sun will rise tomorrow: and this means that we do not *know* that it will rise.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, the fact is that there is no *a priori* knowledge outside the self-referential realm of logic.<sup>8</sup> The philosopher can’t *really* know that a mouse can’t come out of a pile of rags unless he doesn’t *really* look in the pile of rags. In this sense, ordinary ethics puts its focus on the pile of rags that is our ordinary everyday life, which cannot be valued and judged by means of a transcendent *a priori* knowledge of what is right and what is

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<sup>2</sup> “Craving for generality is the resultant of a number of tendencies connected with particular philosophical confusions [...]. Instead of “craving for generality” I could also have said “the contemptuous attitude towards the particular case.” Wittgenstein, *Blue Book*, 18.

<sup>3</sup> Cavell, “The Investigations,” 23.

<sup>4</sup> “If I am inclined to suppose that a mouse comes into being by spontaneous generation out of grey rags and dust, it’s a good idea to examine those rags very closely to see how a mouse could have hidden in them, how it could have got there, and so on. But if I am convinced that a mouse cannot come into being from these things, then this investigation will perhaps be superfluous. But what it is in philosophy that resists such an examination of details, we have yet to come to understand.” Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 30.

<sup>5</sup> Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, 47.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 143.

<sup>8</sup> In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein was stark: not even natural sciences can have *a priori* knowledge of anything. What science truly does is only the description of all the facts going on in the world in a given moment (namely in the moment that the description is given). Natural science simply puts together all the true propositions needed to describe the world in the moment it describes it. But such description cannot say anything about what will happen just a moment after those facts have been described. Newtonian mechanics itself is nothing more than a description of the world, but nothing assures us from the fact that this same world could probably be described more simply by another mechanics. (See proposition 6.342, in Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 139.)

wrong, without going to look *really* at what the particular case is. Only through the perspective gained by dropping *into* the particular we can determine what is important and worthy of value. In his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Wittgenstein draws an implicit parallel between this conception of ethics and that of aesthetics. Concerning evaluation and judgement, he states that in some spheres we assess correctness – for example in crafts – but in other spheres the “game” is completely different: of a suit made by a tailor we can say that it is correct, but of a cathedral or a symphony could we ever say that they are “correct”? A dress may be right with respect to a canon, it can be “well made” according to a general rule, but of a cathedral or a symphony we should rather say that they make a certain *impression* on us. This is what he calls an “Aesthetic impression<sup>9</sup>,” something that relies on a whole different kind of judgement. A judgement that is not even properly a judgement, because it stems from a feeling: “the most important thing in connection with aesthetics is what may be called aesthetic reactions, e.g., discontent, disgust, discomfort.”<sup>10</sup> Something that impresses us rarely does so according to universal canons, rather, it does so based on an emotional reaction.

One must always descend into the particular case when talking about impressions and emotions. Impressions are related to experiences: it is the experience of a symphony that makes us react to it. Of a dress one does not need to have experience to see if it is worth anything. You just have to compare it with the canon of what a good dress is. But however human beings, even in this field, seem to be seduced by that promise of simplicity and generality which a universal law seems to be able to provide, through its ability to bind together all particular empirical cases. Consequently, the same generalizing mechanism is at work in this field as well:

The craving for simplicity. [people would like to say:] “What really matters is only the colours”. You say this mostly because you wish it to be the case. If your explanation is complicated, it is disagreeable, especially if you don’t have strong feelings about the thing itself.<sup>11</sup>

Hence the aesthetic is for Wittgenstein linked to the complicate relationship of particulars and details that generate impressions, an impression that is conveyed in something that is more akin to a gesture than an analytical judgement. There are no possible general laws in this process, nor causal connections. What follows from this is that, in order to define “aesthetics,” we must not start from certain “words,” but from certain “occasions” or “activities.” Only the latter are able to provide us with reactions, which is what really matters in aesthetics.

In order to get clear about aesthetic words you have to describe ways of living. We think we have to talk about aesthetic judgements like “This is beautiful”, but we find that if we have to talk about aesthetic judgements, we don’t find these words at all, but a word used something like a gesture, accompanying a complicated activity.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, to find aesthetics we must abandon *concepts* and find *experience*. That is, leaving aside our seduction for generality, and abandon ourselves to the experience of “the inherent validity of the particular.”<sup>13</sup>

In this essay, an attempt will be made to show how the poetics of *haiku* poetry – and in particular that of its most famous exponent, Matsuo Bashō – can be taken as a tangible example of what we have tried, quickly and fleetingly, to outline here as a possible way of conceiving ordinary aesthetics.

*Haiku* is a form of Japanese poetry heavily influenced by Buddhist and Daoist principles. It is the shortest form of poetry that has ever been codified, and in it, as we shall see, we could find a total dissolution of that tension, denounced by Wittgenstein, which arises from the fact that “we want to understand something that is already open to view.”<sup>14</sup> To this extent, *Haiku* poetics embodies the effective realization of the attribution to the ordinary of “its own possibility of perspicuousness.”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Wittgenstein, *Lectures on Aesthetics*, 19.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>13</sup> Laugier, “La cura,” 309–10.

<sup>14</sup> Cavell, “The Investigations,” 23.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

## 2 A Jump into the Ordinary

As said, *haiku* is the shortest poetic form that exists in the world; however, its distinctiveness lies not only in its brevity, but also in the peculiar nature of its main subjects, which are very different from those normally handled by Western poetry. In his extremely measured verses, the *haiku* poem finds a place for all that *world* on which our eye normally does not dwell. Because that *world* is too close, too common, too ordinary for our attention. “*Haiku* covers all the area of life, including the things which have not been treated in the other [kinds of poetry] [...]. A crow digging up mud-snails is an exclusive property of *haiku* poets.”<sup>16</sup>

If Western poetry has always gone in search of conceptualization, *haiku*, conversely, is never argumentative and does not indulge in intellectual abstractions or emotional commentary: “anyone can catch crude emotions such as anger and jealousy, but it requires utmost sensitivity to grasp the thin mist rising over the life of a natural object.”<sup>17</sup> Or, to use the words of Bashō, who is considered the greatest master of this art: “*Haiku* is nothing but poetry. Poetry needs no theory.” The temptation to theorize is what one of the preeminent Bashō’s disciples, Dohō, recalling the master’s words, calls the “disease” peculiar to experienced poets. For this reason, “it is poems composed with the ingenuous mind of a beginner that we could expect much from.”<sup>18</sup> A beginner is not imbued with theory, and his momentum towards things is genuine because it prescind from conceptualization.

In *haiku*, the inherent proper validity of what is particular and mundane shows itself. Fundamental to the composition of a good *haiku* is in fact the successful disappearance of the poet’s point of view. A *haiku* poem should not convey what the poet felt or thought while experiencing a particular situation, but should reflect the situation itself. The experience shown in the *haiku* is the possible reader’s experience of the very object being described. “The ideal of *haiku* making should be object centered, rather than subject centered. When successful, the poet’s effort will ‘grow into a verse’, rather than ‘doing a verse’.”<sup>19</sup> The role of the poet is not to say that something is wonderful or disgusting, but to crystallize the inherent feeling of nature.<sup>20</sup> This feeling has to be something transpersonal, and the poet simply seeks to channel this feeling through transparent description. If we wanted to try to focus more closely on what we are talking about when we talk about this feeling, we notice that this, in *haiku*, is given – according to Makoto Ueda – by the intersection of three different but intertwined feelings: *sabi*, *shiori*, and *hosomi*.<sup>21</sup>

*Sabi* can be rendered as the feeling of nature in its transpersonal loneliness. *Shiori* is a general tone of sadness, but also the ability of the verses to “bend.”<sup>22</sup> *Hosomi* is the name of the delicate sensitivity that the poet must have to concentrate his mind on the smallest stimulus, on the smallest natural phenomenon. And it is properly the latter, *hosomi*, who draws the poet into the heart of the object. Through this interpenetration is the object itself that now expresses its feeling in the verses.<sup>23</sup> If the emergence of these three feelings is properly attuned, the *haiku* as a whole shows an atmospheric harmony rather than a simple logical coherence.

<sup>16</sup> Ueda, “Bashō and the Poetics of Haiku,” 430. Regarding the crow digging for mud snails, this is an example brought by Hattori Dohō – one of the most distinguished disciples of Bashō – in his *Sanzōshi* treatise, to illustrate what kind of subjects pertains to the *haiku* spirit: “a willow tree in a soft spring rain’ is a theme essentially belonging, both in its expression and what is expressed, to the world of *renga* (\*) while ‘a crow pecking at a mud snail in a paddy field’ is purely of *haiku*.” Dohō, “Shirozōshi,” 384. On this matter, see also Izutsu and Izutsu, *The Theory of Beauty*, 65. (\*) *Renga* is the name of one of the standard forms of Japanese poetry that uses linked verses.

<sup>17</sup> Ueda, “Bashō and the Poetics of Haiku,” 426.

<sup>18</sup> Dohō, in Izutsu and Izutsu, *The Theory of Beauty in the Classical Aesthetics of Japan*, 163.

<sup>19</sup> Saito, “The Moral Dimension of Japanese Aesthetics,” 86.

<sup>20</sup> See Ueda, “Bashō and the Poetics of Haiku,” 425.

<sup>21</sup> But it is clear that this feeling cannot always be reduced to the intersection of these three; other typical *haiku* sentiments may be *Wabi* (poverty, desolated sadness, but also a rustic simplicity), *Awake* (a kind of *pathos* for the impermanence of things) and *Yugen* (a subtle grace related to the penumbra, to something mysterious, to something that promises a depth that cannot be explored but only guessed).

<sup>22</sup> The term *Shiori* derives from *Shi* (branch) and *Oru* (to bend or fold), and it alludes to the verse’s flexibility to different interpretations; however, *Shioru* when written with different ideograms but with the exact same pronunciation also means to make something wither and wrinkle, and this is why the term *Shiori* also carries an underlying feeling of sadness.

<sup>23</sup> See Ueda, “Bashō and the Poetics of Haiku,” 427.

In this kind of poetry, the internal relation of one part to another is thus not achieved by means of discursive logic but by a form of atmospheric progression: Bashō calls this particular characteristic “fragrance.”<sup>24</sup> The beauty that blossoms from this harmony, from this correspondence between the parts of the composition, is like the fragrance of a delicate flower: “natural, simple, primitive, and never extravagant or shocking.”<sup>25</sup> This delicateness is also closely linked to the view of things that is characteristic of Buddhism, and particularly of Zen. This is a view of reality that is radically egalitarian, and this characteristic in Bashō’s poetics is reflected in an attitude that – by accepting all things in life as they are – shapes another aesthetic concept: that of lightness (*karumi*). “Lightness is a type of beauty found in common, everyday things. It is not gorgeous but plain, not sophisticated but simple, not greasy but faintly fragrant. It is free of sentimentalism.” We can call this characterization of lightness “the beauty of shallowness<sup>26</sup>”:

Beneath the tree.  
In soup, in fish-salad, and all, —  
Cherry-blossoms!<sup>27</sup>

*Hanami* (which is the pleasant activity of observing in company the – ephemeral – blossoming of flowers) has always been a favourite subject of classical Japanese art and poetry. However, we see that this *haiku* differs radically from traditional art forms related to the watching of cherry blossoms, because it neither praises the beauty of the blossoms nor mourns the fleeting transience of their lives, but instead introduces a much more concrete and ordinary subject: food. What is described here by Bashō is in fact a picnic, perhaps a family one, or maybe one among friends. The lightness comes precisely from this rustic yet graceful everydayness: the pink cherry petals are falling on everything, even on the raw pickled fish soup. It is exactly this light mood that differentiates the *haiku* genre as it was eventually coded by Bashō. Indeed, it should be noted that before him *haiku* was a poetic genre devoted primarily to wordplay, puns, and witticism. It was Bashō who made this form of poetry what it is today and what it is famous for. The revolution – which could as well be called, with good reason, a *revolution of the ordinary* – came with the composition of the following *haiku*, which is also probably the most famous of all:

The old pond:  
A frog jumps in, —  
The sound of water.<sup>28</sup>

The relevance of this composition was felt immediately in Japan. We might say that from this point on *haiku* poetry will be inextricably welded to the Buddhist view of reality. Because *haiku* poetry shows, in a composition like this one, the very fact that things are never more than what they are, and that the whole framework of sense is, in fact, a human framework that is not part of the things themselves.

What meaning could be found in the scene described here? How would it be possible to comment on or explain the meaning of this composition without repeating exactly the same words or some of their simple synonyms?<sup>29</sup> In this movement of emptying and dismantling of the superfluous (superfluous represented by theorizing and speculation; namely by that dualistic mania of looking for a “behind” of things, for a “behind” of the mirror, and hence the obsession to seek for what is secret and hidden), Zen explains the heart of Buddhist

<sup>24</sup> As bizarre as it may sound, that of “fragrance” is one of the oldest ideas in Japanese aesthetics. See Ueda, “Bashō and the Poetics of Haiku,” 427.

<sup>25</sup> See Ueda, “Bashō and the Poetics of Haiku,” 429.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 430.

<sup>27</sup> Bashō, in Blyth, *Haiku*, vol. II, 307.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>29</sup> Roland Barthes had sensitively captured this peculiarity: “to speak of one haiku would be purely and simply to repeat it [...] the Buddhist way is precisely that of the obstructed meaning: the very arcanum of signification, that is, the paradigm, is rendered impossible”; “Neither describing nor defining, the haiku diminishes to the point of pure and sole designation. *It’s that, it’s thus*, says the haiku, *it’s so*. Or better still: *so!*”. Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, 72–3; 83.

teaching with unparalleled gracefulness. Things are what they are, and in this, in their very impermanence and absence of meaning to be revealed, in the lack of their ulterior hidden nature, it is possible to grasp their serene beauty: something we are unable to do as long as we try to find meaning in them. As long as we try to find what we intensely wish there to be in them of eternal, universal, general. In the scenes offered by the *haikus*, we can grasp the *suchness* of things themselves and nothing more. Because there is only *suchness* in the single things, or – that is the same – because in every single thing *suchness* and *whatness* coincide perfectly.<sup>30</sup> Everything, even the smallest and apparently insignificant thing, has its inherent perspicuity. And this is something not too far from what Wittgenstein says when he says that “since everything lies open to view, there is nothing to explain. For whatever may be hidden is of no interest to us<sup>31</sup>.” Since what is hidden – or secret – is of no interest to us, so there is nothing to explain. Sense is in plain sight, and not hidden somewhere, in an unattainable transcendence. Or rather, sense is in the absence of sense (of sense conceived as something “beyond”).

So, if there is nothing hidden to be found, then “all explanation must disappear, and description alone must take its place.”<sup>32</sup> And this is precisely what *haiku* poetry will do from now on, after Bashō has made the frog jump into the old pond.

### 3 Dissolving the Illusions: Samsāra and Nirvāna

Precisely because of this coincidence between the principles underlying Zen and *haiku* poetry, the poet does not even need to become a monk to attain liberation; his attitude towards the things of this world is so all-encompassing that he no longer has selfishness or personal emotions to suppress or destroy as Buddhist practice prescribes. From such an attitude, even life and death no longer have any special importance. Bashō's aesthetic principles are basically the ethical principles of his religion: the aforementioned *sabi*, *shiori*, and *hosomi* are the principles through which it becomes possible to purify oneself from tormenting passions and make the mind calm and serene. It is through these principles that the poet is allowed to live in this world and at the same time to transcend it: “The Buddhist Sage goes through the world like a duck; he no longer gets wet, he has transcended the world by dropping it<sup>33</sup>” says in an efficacious simile Karl Jaspers. But what has been dropped by the Sage is not the world in his *suchness*, but the world in his *whatness*. So, in other words, what has been dropped is the conceptualization of the world: the distinction between this world, and that – transcendent and desirable – other world.

The reality is indeed only one, and if it appears to us to be split, it is only because it is our sight that fell victim to an illusion. The goal we must strive for is, therefore, to return to where we already are, but with new eyes. Said another way, to open our eyes is to realize that we already are where we wanted to be. To realize this, we just have to take off the glasses of metaphysics that distort our vision.<sup>34</sup> This is the same concept that Nāgārjuna (the great Buddhist reformer who triggered that “second turn of the *dharma* wheel” from which later emerged the branch of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, from which Zen itself is descended) proposes to us in the final part of his major work:

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<sup>30</sup> “Wittgenstein speaks of returning to the world of the ordinary (returning from metaphysical intensities desiring to transgress our everyday [...]), a world in which each occupant has its conditions – this chair, this cow, this coin, this hand, this handle, this beetle, this rose, this aroma, this construction of stone or wood, this imaginary rubble, this mythical field of ice, this friction, this man in pain, this god, this ardor, this doubt, this equation, this drawing, this face.” Cavell, Introductory note to “The investigations,” 18. For the definitions of *suchness* and *whatness* within Japanese philosophy, see Kasulis, “Japanese Philosophy?,” 132.

<sup>31</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 55.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>33</sup> Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers*, 132.

<sup>34</sup> See *Philosophical Investigations* §103: “The idea is like a pair of glasses on our nose through which we see whatever we look at. It never occurs to us to take them off.” Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 50.

There is not the slightest difference between cyclic existence and *nirvāna*.  
There is not the slightest difference between *nirvāna* and cyclic existence.

Whatever is the limit of *nirvāna*, that is the limit of cyclic existence.  
There is not even the slightest difference between them, or even the subtlest thing.

Views that after cessation there is a limit, etc., and that it is permanent, etc.,  
Depend upon *nirvāna*, the final limit, and the prior limit.<sup>35</sup>

What does this mean? First of all, it means that the illusion, the *māyā*, is not outside in the world, but within us, in our eyes. If we seek *nirvāna*, if we think that *nirvāna* (or as Wittgenstein would say “the place I really have to get to<sup>36</sup>”) is something outside *this* world (this world which we see as *samsāra*, that is the unsatisfactory realm of cyclic existence and rebirth) we are already entrenched in this illusion. It is the pursuit of *nirvāna* that creates, paradoxically, *samsāra* as the afflicted life in the world of illusion; it is the act of philosophical conceptualization that splits the reality in two (the transcendent world to strive towards, and the world of the *hic et nunc* to be liberated from). This splitting is the real cause of the endless rebirth that continually brings us back here, for living once more another life of unhappiness, in the perpetual cycle that entrenches all living beings. Most of the Indian-derived doctrines are similar in this assumption: the lack of insight that creates dualism, and the recomposition of this dualism that solves the problem. But in the Brahmanical doctrines (such as *Advaita Vedānta*) the solution lies in the discovery of the unity between *Self* and *Absolute* – and thus in the ecstatic discovery that we are the *whole* – in Buddhism a further step is taken, and the solution becomes instead to dissolve entirely the very conception of *Self*, of *Absolute*, and of “division.” All these ideal categories, those kinds of abstractions that end up being essentialized and substantialized, are nothing but the fruit of the mind and language. For *Mahāyāna* Buddhist doctrines, the metaphysical dualism can also be created by the very illusion that we have to be freed from something, in order to achieve an enlightenment that is conceived as something else. So, all the human problems arise from dualism, from the scission between particular and universal, between *this* world and *that* world. This is something really akin to what Wittgenstein says in the *Philosophical Investigations*: conceptualization and reduction to generality (hence transcendence), carried out by philosophy, empties life of its vital character, which is instead graspable only by going down and approaching the very life of the particulars. That is, by going down to investigate whether indeed in the pile of rags and dust a mouse is being born.<sup>37</sup> For Wittgenstein, then, true philosophy consists in putting an end to *this* idea of philosophy (namely, of that generalizing conceptualization that distances us from the world). In the same way that for Nāgārjuna and the Zen true liberation is to end *this* idea of liberation (namely, of that transcendent state that distances us from the world).

Thus, real liberation is not being liberated from the world of the here-and-now, but being liberated from the idea that the world of the here-and-now is something to be liberated from. Nāgārjuna’s work of dissolution (a work of logic that eventually succeeds, through a very tight course of *reductio ad absurdum*, in showing that of nothing can anything be conclusively asserted) ultimately reveals the ultimate reality as “vacuity.” The discussion here could take paths that would lead us too far, but what is interesting is that, based on this conception, the ultimate reality shows that between the world of dissatisfaction and the pacified world there is no difference: they are the same world. True *nirvāna* is the abandonment of the idea of *nirvāna* itself. Metaphysical questions – which for both Wittgenstein and Nāgārjuna have nefarious outcomes – arise when a dualistic conception that disconnects the *world* from the *sense-of-the-world* prevails. Once dualism is eliminated, all the false questions it entails are also eliminated.

As Bashō said on his deathbed to his disciples, the final goal of Zen is nothing more than “attain a high stage of enlightenment, to return to the world of common men.”<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Nāgārjuna, in Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom*, 75.

<sup>36</sup> Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 7.

<sup>37</sup> Again, see *Philosophical Investigations* §52.

<sup>38</sup> Ueda, “Bashō and the Poetics of Haiku,” 431.

## 4 Being and Becoming: The Aesthetics of Impermanence

We have already briefly mentioned that in *haiku* there is a coincidence between Buddhist ethical principles and poetic aesthetic principles. We could say that this is true of most of the manifestations that constitute the Japanese aesthetic universe, and it is not something limited to *haiku*. In any case, to understand what is meant here, it is necessary to make a brief excursus on some Buddhist metaphysical principles (whether it is fair to name in this way the principles of a doctrine that tries in every way to dissolve metaphysics) in order to understand how they reverberate in the aesthetic forms of the Japanese people.

Eastern metaphysics is characterized by the centrality of dynamism, while Western metaphysics has always focused on the search for “stasis” understood as permanence, as stability, as eternity: “in the west, the process thought of such thinkers as Heraclitus, for example, was overshadowed in time by the brilliance and dominance of Plato, who argued cogently for being over becoming, permanence over impermanence, in laying the foundation of epistemology.”<sup>39</sup> Since we cannot, due to space limitations, go into too much depth, it will suffice for us to note that both Daoism and Buddhism place impermanence at the centre of their view of reality. Buddhism, in particular, as a doctrine of strict anti-essentialism, will stress to the extreme limits (as mentioned regarding Nāgārjuna and the concept of the vacuity of ultimate reality) the notion that everything in reality is process, everything is relation, and, as such, everything is temporary and transient. Impermanence is the key word in Buddhism.<sup>40</sup>

What has to be highlighted is the fact that the notion of impermanence is necessarily connected with that of “vulnerability.” To acknowledge the impermanence of all possible existence and experience is to admit that everything in this world has its vulnerability. And it is precisely this vulnerability of the things of the world that the *haiku* poet is able, more than others, to perceive. As we have seen, all the characteristics that make a *haiku* a *haiku* are in some way related to this vulnerability that comes with impermanence. And this is why imbalance, asymmetry, poverty, *sabi*, *wabi*, simplification, aloneness, and other cognate ideas are the pre-eminent features of Japanese art and culture (or, as we prefer to say, of the *form of life* that expresses itself through Japanese art).<sup>41</sup> All of these characteristics are the inescapable result of the fact that, through the assimilation of Buddhist principles, these peoples have shaped their form of life in a defiant attitude against all that can be reconveyed to the illusory metaphysical realm of the *fullness of being*, with all its correlate deceptive characteristics: namely the visible, the measurable, and manipulable nature of things.<sup>42</sup> The fluidity of becomingness will not allow such characteristics, although the human tendency is to manipulate this flow to try to crystallize it. And this is due to our fear of the unpredictability of what is particular; that is, of the untamable multiplicity of which reality is made up. This is what makes us desire generality, this is what deceives us into thinking that in order to walk it would be better to plane all the roughness of the ground making it resemble a slippery ice sheet.<sup>43</sup> And this is what – for both Wittgenstein and Buddhist doctrines – the human mind is naturally inclined to do, but doesn’t have to do. Or else it will lose precisely that experience of the particular – that is nothing but the only “really” possible experience – of which a life truly lived must be substantiated. So, the truth is that there can’t be any real “experience” of universals. There is no experience of *a priori* concepts. The Zen vision that spills over into oriental arts knows well that the only possible experience is that related to things in the realm of *becoming*, and never that of a pure *Being* with a capital B. For this reason, “Zen is emphatically a matter of personal experience [...] life itself must be grasped in the midst of its flow.”<sup>44</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Inada, “A Theory of Oriental Aesthetics,” 118.

<sup>40</sup> But it may be noteworthy to point out that, with today’s general acceptance of such theories as relativity, quantum mechanics, and indeterminacy, the ancient Platonic preference for permanence had to give way to impermanence also in the western scientific world. See Inada, “A Theory of Oriental Aesthetics,” 119.

<sup>41</sup> See Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, 27–8.

<sup>42</sup> See Inada, “A Theory of Oriental Aesthetics,” 127.

<sup>43</sup> See Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 51.

<sup>44</sup> Suzuki, *Introduction to Zen*, 132.



The feelings related to these experiences show the double face of subjectivity and objectivity: while the very notion of *wabi*, so important to various Japanese forms of arts, is a subjective feeling that derives from the feeling of the individual in relation to macrocosmic nature of things,<sup>45</sup> *sabi* is a kind of sadness related to something imperfect and simple, rustic, old. The word means literally solitude, isolation, but it has an objective character, it is related to objects. Those objects which “have beauty in their own imperfection.”<sup>46</sup>

## 5 Impermanence and Vulnerability

If, as mentioned, Western metaphysical conceptions have privileged conceptual knowledge, this knowledge “does not allow us to come in touch with the mystery of being, the significance of life, the beauty of things around us,” because “feelings refuse to be conceptually dealt with, and a *haiku* is not the product of intellection. Hence its brevity and significance.”<sup>47</sup>

Perhaps one of the most egregiously Japanese characteristics is to take notice of the small things of nature and tenderly take care of them. Instead of talking about great ideals or highly abstract thoughts, they cultivate chrysanthemums or morning-glories, and when the season comes, they delight to see them bloom beautifully as they planned. [...] The Western mind has ever come to be moved poetically by such insignificant creatures as the following?

A little frog  
Riding on a banana leaf, —  
Trembling.<sup>48</sup>

The assumption of Daisetz Suzuki is that Easterners live closer to an unadulterated experience of reality than Western peoples, whose mind is constantly “contaminated” by systematic theoretical thinking, conceptualization, and high abstraction. What could perhaps be objected to him is that the Eastern mind is not pure and uncontaminated *per se*. Instead, we might say that, rather, it has been historically early immersed in a whole series of conceptions that are dissolutive towards that very metaphysics and conceptualization which, conversely, Westerners have consciously indulged in. This happened because of the influence and prestige of Greek culture, which has always held abstraction and conceptualization in high regard. While Greek culture shaped the West by erecting its metaphysical castles, in the East the same cultural role was played by the Indian doctrine of Buddhism, whose aim was precisely the opposite: that of demolishing metaphysical superstructures.

But the seduction towards a transcendent metaphysical conceptualization, as was shown by Wittgenstein, is a natural tendency of human beings, since it is rooted in the language itself.<sup>49</sup> We can then assume that the Eastern mind has simply benefited from having been historically equipped earlier with the proper thinking tools that can enable the individual to do this philosophical work of liberation from philosophy. From philosophy intended as a metaphysical theory hinging on ontological dualism.

Then, back to our poetical subject, what *haiku* captures with unparalleled sensibility is that whole range of particulars that are always before our eyes, but which we do not dwell on, which we do not give importance to, because of our being constantly focused on what is general. But what is general subsumes within itself all the particulars, which therefore lose their importance. What is the point of wasting time looking at the particulars when I can have a unified theoretical knowledge that contains them all? What’s the use of actually going to put

<sup>45</sup> Wabi is properly a sense of sadness which is related to impermanence and transience of things, but there is nothing in it of the Western romantic restlessness. It is, rather, something more akin to “an inexpressible quiet joy deeply hidden beneath sheer poverty,” and there is something deeply aesthetic about it. See Inada, “A Theory of Oriental Aesthetics,” 127; and Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, 286.

<sup>46</sup> Inada, “A Theory of Oriental Aesthetics,” 125.

<sup>47</sup> Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, 222.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>49</sup> See Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 55; Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 15; Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 52–3.

my hands into the pile of rags and dust to see if a mouse is being born inside it when I can know *a priori* that there *cannot* be anything like that in that pile? It is here, at this very point, that the philosophical mistake arises. Conversely, the *haiku* poet values the particular aspects of reality because he consciously dwells on them. The sensitivity of the *haiku* poet is precisely that of knowing what to stop on, illuminating its vulnerability and at the same time the serenity of everyday becoming:

Under the water,  
On the rock resting  
The fallen leaves.<sup>50</sup>

Only a *haiku* poem can lay its eye on the leaves in their serene final rest, and not, to say, in their lush green floridity or in the mournful romantic moment when the autumn wind rips them from the branches. The *haiku* poet looks at the leaves at the moment when they quiet down, when they can finally rest, in a place that is both in the world and away from the world. This serenity of gaze is due to the fact that the *haiku* poet limits himself to observation, but his observing, his illuminating glance, his paying attention to something, is also taking care of that something. There, where the poet stops – where it seems that much more can be expressed – the mystery of the *being-in-becoming* opens wide. We talk about that sensation for which things are never anything else than what they are. “Sense,” if this word has really a meaning, expresses itself right in this *suchness* of the things themselves.

Fleas, lice,  
The horse pissing  
Near my pillow.<sup>51</sup>

“Sometimes, not by any means always, the simple, elemental experiences of things, whether of lice or of butterflies, the pissing of horses or the flight of eagles, have a deep significance, not of something beyond themselves, but of their own essential nature.”<sup>52</sup> The nature of life is the life of nature, or, as Wittgenstein once said: “the riddle does not exist” because “the solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of this problem.” And, for that “is not this the reason why men to whom after long doubting the sense of life became clear, could not then say wherein this sense consisted?”<sup>53</sup> The Sense of life cannot be expressed because it is something negative, is the experience of a void, that cannot be put into a positive linguistic statement. The sense of life is the negation of the credence that there is a transcendent sense. We can assume that Wittgenstein was here on the right track, but without yet having taken that step that would lead him to the finding of the meaning of life *in* the ordinary. Or better said: that step that would lead him to dissolve the problem of the meaning of life intended as a transcendent meaning, and to give full meaning to the ordinary, to the particular, to what is glossed over because it is apparently too trivial, too close. But he was really there, really close. Almost ten years after the publishing of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein wrote this note in one of his notebooks:

I might say: if the place I want to get to could only be reached by way of a ladder, I would give up trying to get there. For the place I really have to get to is a place I must already be at now.  
Anything that I might reach by climbing a ladder does not interest me.<sup>54</sup>

What Wittgenstein is saying here is that if I have to climb somewhere with a ladder, it is because I assume the existence of a distinct plane from the one in which I am standing. And it is precisely this assumption that gives rise to the metaphysical questions and the consequent frustration given by the impossibility of answering them. Or from the frustration derived from the fact that their illusory answers separate us from the real world:

<sup>50</sup> Jōsō, in Blyth, *Haiku*, vol. IV, 360. This *haiku* was composed by Jōsō, one of Bashō's main disciples.

<sup>51</sup> Bashō, in Blyth, *Haiku*, vol. III, 195.

<sup>52</sup> Blyth, *Haiku*, vol. III, 196.

<sup>53</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 187.

<sup>54</sup> Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 7.

that world of details, of frogs, of horse urine, and of piles of rags and dust in which perhaps, unbeknownst to us, a mouse is being born at this very moment. Thus, the very possibility of ethics and aesthetics rests on our possible experience of the particular, and not on general laws. And it is indifferent whether these laws are established *a priori* or derived through induction from those same particular cases. What we have to be interested in are the details *in* themselves, and not in the possible conceptualization we can operate *on* them and *with* them.

This experience of the details and particulars of real life is fundamental for both the artist and the recipient of his art, because

To those who have never had such an experience it is difficult, even impossible, to reach the fact itself merely through images, because in this case images are transformed into ideas and concepts, and the mind then attempts to give them an intellectual interpretation, as some critics do with Bashō *haiku* on the old pond. Such an attempt altogether destroys the inner truth and beauty of the *haiku*.<sup>55</sup>

The very moment things are conceived with the intellect they become a concept, which begins to have an existence outside *this* world. In this way, from being sensible objects of experience and imagination, the pond and the frog become intelligible objects.

*Haikus* must never convey intelligible objects, otherwise they would not be *haikus*. Instead, they must be interpreted – or rather perceived – as experiences, as intuitions. Only this kind of relationship between perceived and percipient is indeed capable of producing imaginations. That is, “this intuitive grasp of reality never takes place when a world of emptiness is assumed outside our everyday world of the senses; for those two worlds, sensual and supersensual, are not separate but one.”<sup>56</sup> In a proper *haiku*, there occurs the momentary and illuminating perfect identification between subject and object, between the observer and what is observed: *haiku* in this way places its objects outside of time, in the sense that the scene and the experience of it are crystallized, only for a moment, an eternal moment; its elements are completely unaware of future events, whether propitious or nefarious these may be. And this condition resonates with the human condition: we live in the moment, oblivious to the infinite possibilities of future happenings and oblivious of our place in the ceaseless flow of the causal chain of existence as a whole:

Of an early death,  
Showing no sign,  
The cicada’s voice.<sup>57</sup>

The cicada immediately affirms life, its life, through its song. Why should it care about the transience of its existence? As long as it can sing it is alive, and as long as it is alive its life is lived as eternal. So, what is the point of worrying about impermanence?<sup>58</sup>

It is the human being who, intellectualizing reality, confuses and mixes past, present, and future; with the result of draining what is here-and-now of its own vitality and burdening what is not-yet-here with worries.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, 240–1.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>57</sup> Bashō, tr. by D. Suzuki, in Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, 252.

<sup>58</sup> We can find the same thought in Schopenhauer’s major work: “Whoever is satisfied with life as it is, whoever affirms it in every way, can confidently regard it as endless. [...] the form of all life is the present; and to fear death because it robs us of the present is no wiser than to fear that we can slip down from the round globe on the top of which we are now fortunately standing. [...] Life is certain to the will-to-live; the form of life is the endless present.” Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 280–1.

<sup>59</sup> This liberating mutual exclusivity between death and life, and the consequent identification of the real of death in its anticipation in thought, reminds us of the Epicurean advice to Moeneceus: “Become accustomed to the belief that death is nothing to us. [...] a right understanding that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not because it adds to it an infinite span of time, but because it takes away the craving for immortality. [...] So that the man speaks but idly who says that he fears death not because it will be painful when it comes, but because it is painful in anticipation. For that which gives no troubles when it comes, is but an empty pain in anticipation. So death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us, since so long as we exist, death is not with us.” Epicurus, *Extant Remains*, 85.

This *haiku*, like many others, condenses the heart of Buddhist teaching into an image. The cicada, while living an ephemeral life, far more than ours, never feels fear for tomorrow and its consequences.

One of the basic principles of Buddhism recites that as long as we remain attached to things, as long as we are obsessed with the idea of possession, we can never be free. The greatest attachment that human beings feel is towards their own lives, so to be free – that is, to truly live – we must not be attached even to life itself. Just like the cicada or the butterfly who, to their luck, are completely unaware of the future. The Buddhist take on reality says that there cannot exist something like future as transcendence, because everything is only a continuous flow, so the future, if it is something, it is simply the continuous flow of the present, of the here-and-now. So, the unravelling of Buddhist reality once again brings together what is separate by dissolving the categories: the future and the present are one and the same, or better they are nothing at all.

If we were to narrow down the difference between Western and Eastern metaphysical conceptions, we could therefore say that the West is complacently dualistic, and seeks to create polarizations in everything it touches: unity–multiplicity, subject–object, body–mind, life–death, being–nonbeing.

The Eastern mind, on the other hand, tries to continuously recompose these scissions that human beings naturally produce. So, the right word to define such a conception is *non-dualism* and not mere *monism* which alludes to a form of stasis. *Being–nonbeing* constitutes a dynamic: their relationship is the pulsation of all the interconnected momentary phenomena. *Being–nonbeing* is a dynamic holism, in which the presence of the invisible component of the polarity is always perceivable during the moment of visibility of the other polarity. Eastern aesthetics begins at the very point where being and nonbeing interchange, that is, at the point of balance – brief and momentary – within the becoming of things.<sup>60</sup>

To show how this difference is realized in aesthetic vision, Suzuki exemplifies two poems on the same theme. One is by Tennyson; the other is by Bashō:

Flower in the crannied wall,  
I pluck you out of the crannies,  
I hold you here, root and all, in my hand,  
little flower—but if I could understand  
What you are, root and all, and all in all,  
I should know what God and man is.<sup>61</sup>

Tennyson is philosophically inquisitive, he wants to know what the flower – with roots and all – *really* is. And from this he would also know, as if that wasn't enough, what God and man is.

Let's take a look at a Bashō's *haiku* on a similar subject, a simple humble flower:

Looking carefully, —  
A shepherd's purse is blooming  
Under the fence.<sup>62</sup>

Bashō knowledge of things was deeper: first of all, he knew that the white *nazuna* flower (known in the Western world as “shepherd's purse” due to its shape) was no other than itself. There is no secret nature hidden beneath the surface of the particular things of the world. And due to the fact that in the non-dualistic Buddhist view perceived and perceiver are not separate but one, the white *nazuna* was thus no other than himself. Bashō has no need for personalism or egoism to interact with things in the world.

Second, and for all the reasons stated before, he would never think of plucking the poor flower “with root and all” and use it to ask himself any question.

As Reginald H. Blyth, who pioneeringly immersed himself in Japanese culture, sensibly grasped:

<sup>60</sup> See Inada, “A Theory of Oriental Aesthetics,” 123.

<sup>61</sup> Tennyson, *Tennyson's Selected Works*, 619.

<sup>62</sup> Bashō, in Blyth, *Haiku*, vol. II, 374.

A *haiku* is the expression of a temporary enlightenment, in which we see into the life of things. [...] Each thing is preaching the *law* incessantly, but this law is not something different from the thing itself. *Haiku* is the revealing of this preaching by presenting us with the thing devoid of all our mental twisting and emotional discoloration or rather, it shows the thing as it exists at one and the same time outside and inside the mind, perfectly subjective, our Selves undivided from the object, the object in its original unity with ourselves. [...] It is in this sense that nothing is hidden from us. *Haiku* is the result of the wish, the effort, not to speak, not to write poetry, not to obscure further the truth and suchness of a thing with words, with thoughts and feelings. Of things be it said with Emerson,

What you are speaks so loudly, I cannot hear what you say.

Things must speak to us so loudly that we cannot hear what the poets have said about them. A *haiku* is not a poem, it is not literature; it is a hand beckoning, a door half-opened, a mirror wiped clean.<sup>63</sup>

## 6 Conclusions

The heart of the Japanese aesthetic tradition lies in acute sensitivity, respect, and appreciation for the most minute details, and in the idea that these details deserve consideration in their own right. There is no space for abstract conceptualization or transcendent knowledge. As Bashō said to his disciples: “Of the pine-tree learn from the pine-tree. Of the bamboo learn from the bamboo.”<sup>64</sup> Likewise, we can say that this reflects what Wittgenstein said in §52 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, which could then be put in a way like: “Of the mouse that could be born from the pile of rags, learn from the pile of rags.” Both are expressing the fact that direct experience is the key since it is this experience that may stimulate an aesthetic reaction in us.

In conclusion, the aesthetic tradition that sprang from Zen Buddhism, of which *haiku* poetry is one of the most shining and emblematic examples, shows a moral basis: this aesthetic tradition is rooted in a set of values that include “respect, care, and consideration for others: both humans and nonhumans.”<sup>65</sup> The specific interest in what is not human stems from the Buddhist cosmological vision of the cycle of rebirth (*samsāra*), in which every living form, from the smallest insect to the most resplendent king or divinity, is merely a cog of this profoundly egalitarian cosmic gear. Every living being is rooted in this same situation of dissatisfaction and “karmic retribution.” Every living thing is subject to the same all-encompassing rule. There is no qualitative difference between the beings of the world. “This moral dimension of aesthetic life [...] is deeply entrenched in people’s daily, mundane activities and thoroughly integrated with everyday life, rendering it rather invisible.”<sup>66</sup> Japanese aesthetic tradition shows thus that “concern for the aesthetic in our everyday life is neither frivolous nor trivial. It has a close connection to the moral dimension of our lives. [...] There is a connection between being a person who has aesthetic experience and being a person who has sympathies and insights of a kind required for successful social interactions.”<sup>67</sup>

From the Japanese point of view, a person who rips apart a beautifully wrapped gift or gobbles up a Japanese lunchbox meal without savouring each ingredient is considered not only deficient in aesthetic sense and manner but also lacking in moral sensibility. [...] The distinction between the aesthetic and the moral is blurred, a person’s aesthetic sensibility, whether providing or receiving an aesthetic experience, can be an important measure of his or her moral capacity.<sup>68</sup>

And here lies the profound difference between the Oriental aesthetic-moral dimension, and the Western one: our Western preference for beauty – for a transcendent idea of an *a priori* beauty – has excluded from the realm of aesthetic interest anything that is not immediately appealing for the senses. There is no space in our aesthetic dimension for what is not perfect, for what is not optimal or that falls below sufficiency. We love

<sup>63</sup> Blyth, *Haiku*, Vol. I, 270.

<sup>64</sup> Dohō, in Izutsu and Izutsu, *The Theory of Beauty in the Classical Aesthetics of Japan*, 162.

<sup>65</sup> Saito, “The Moral Dimension of Japanese Aesthetics,” 85.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>67</sup> Eaton, *Aesthetics and the Good Life*, 165.

<sup>68</sup> Saito, “The Moral Dimension of Japanese Aesthetics,” 93.

fullness and we are abhorred by what is simply partial. So, there is no space in the realm of aesthetics for such things as insects, droppings, garbage, debris, rags, swamps, mud, and so on.<sup>69</sup> On the other hand, Japanese aesthetics display the silent and measured “celebration of those qualities commonly regarded as falling short of, or deteriorating from, the optimal condition of the object. Specifically, these qualities are found in objects with defects, an impoverished look, or aging effects,”<sup>70</sup> and so, that is, in all those aspects in which the vulnerability of life (connected in the first instance to its impermanence) manifests itself. The core principle of Buddhist doctrine links our unsatisfactory condition in this existence to the attachment we develop towards things that are, inevitably, transient (because reality is dominated by impermanence is itself impermanence<sup>71</sup>) or unattainable (because the very idea of something to attain poses this something in the realm of transcendence, so that what we really want to attain is not actually the *something*, but the attainability itself, which is as illusory as anything that is transcendent).

We are indeed so naturally inclined towards the ideal – in the sense of a “state of optimal condition” – that we are disappointed by any deviation or lapse from this state of perfection. But we have to overcome this ensnarement of thought; to attain enlightenment we have to liberate ourselves from this illusion that produces, at the same time, the metaphysical craving for attachment and the frustration caused by the real impossibility of this very attachment. The difference between perfect and imperfect, sufficient and insufficient, is based solely on a human perspective (today we would perhaps call it something “psychological”). Zen teaches us that, in the ultimate reality, everything has the nature of Buddha, everything is *nirvāna*; *samsāra* is only a condition of the mind, of the bewitched mind. Therefore, learning to appreciate what is imperfect, or insufficient, or partial, or fallen, is a sign of the fact that we are trying to overcome attachment. And this is a firm and decisive step towards liberation, towards enlightenment: that condition – that immanent and not transcendent condition – in which there is no difference between *samsāra* and *nirvāna*, between the fragrant newly blossomed cherry petal and the rotten and withered same petal lying in a puddle, trampled by horse’s hooves. “When we look at the moon and flowers, it is just the moon and flowers we should see, not some distorted picture created to conform to a preconceived idea. Experience spring as spring and autumn as autumn”<sup>72</sup> wrote Dogen in the *Shobogenzo*, the pinnacle of Zen Buddhist literature. What he wanted to say was that a veiled or halved moon is still the moon, the withered fallen flower is still the flower and not a degraded version of the optimal preconceived idea that we have of these objects, so, in the same sense,

<sup>69</sup> See Saito, “Everyday Aesthetics,” 94.

<sup>70</sup> Saito, “The Japanese Aesthetics of Imperfection,” 377.

<sup>71</sup> The Buddha himself placed the notion of transience at the very centre of what he called the *three marks of existence*, namely *Dukkha* (suffering, dissatisfaction), *Anicca* (transience, impermanence), and *Anatta* (absence of a self, absence of a stable essence). The interrelation among the three is tight, as each leads to the other: we experience dissatisfaction since everything is transitory, and everything is transitory since it is devoid of a stable essence (and *vice versa*, everything is devoid of stable essence since everything is transitory). This doesn’t mean that Buddhism denies the possibility of happiness, but happiness itself is included in the *dukkha* ‘mechanism’, since the genesis of *dukkha* in a living being is intrinsically related to the way phenomena are given in the universe as a whole: everything is impermanent, and anything that is impermanent is *dukkha*. And since everything is impermanent and transient, even “beautiful” things that generate happiness are transient, so they consequently generate dissatisfaction and suffering. This is why the first sentence uttered by the Buddha after his enlightenment was the acknowledgement that “everything is *dukkha*”. This is a result of a causation that binds together the *three marks of existence* in a mutually dependent interconnection. *Anattā*, representing the absence of a stable and permanent essence, is inherently linked to *Anicca*, the pervasive impermanence found in all phenomena within our world. Things are transient (*Anicca*) because of their nature as conditioned relations in constant flux, lacking a stable essence (*Anattā*). Conversely, they lack a stable essence (*Anattā*) precisely because they are transient, they are punctuations with a finite lifespan in a stream characterized by pure relation and process. Every phenomenon arises in dependence upon other phenomena (this cosmic law is named *Paticca-samuppāda*). Our false belief that things might not be so (namely that they may also be eternal and independent) is precisely what generates *dukkha*. So the goal of Buddhism is to bring living beings to dispel this illusion and to accept the truth of the all-encompassing interdependence and transience of all phenomena; an acceptance which means to be cured of that capital disease that is the (frustrated) tendency to foundationalism and essentialism. “All phenomena are impermanent, their nature is to arise and pass away. Having arisen they come to an end. Living in harmony with this truth brings true joy,” goes the dirge that still nowadays accompanies the smoke of funeral pyres in Sri Lanka and other Buddhist countries. It summarizes with extraordinary brevity the heart of the Buddha’s teaching.

<sup>72</sup> Dōgen, *Shōbōgenzō*, 290.

Autumn is just Autumn and not the degraded version of Spring or Summer. “In order to see more clearly, here as in countless similar cases, we must look at what really happens in detail, as it were from close up”<sup>73</sup> suggests Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations*. So, to admire the flower, we must duck down to look at the particular flower in its detail – even if that flower has wilted – and not aim our mind to the skies of metaphysics, where the preconceived transcendent idea of the flower in its optimal condition lies. What this Buddhist take on aesthetics teaches us is that beauty is not in perfection, nor in imperfection, but in a “realm” where such distinctions have ceased to exist. Where the rotten flower is not seen as the decay of the previous freshly bloomed blossom and neither the newly bloomed blossom contains an *omen* of a future rotten flower. Beauty – allow us to use this word in its ordinary sense just one time, by stripping it of its metaphysical bearing – is in the present, in things as they are, and not in their relationship to a preconceived timeless idea. Zen Buddhism introduces an aesthetic positive celebration of transience,<sup>74</sup> an aestheticization of the submission of human beings to transience, which is also an affirmation of life with all its contingencies.

What we want here to say, in the end, is that, as *haiku* poetry perfectly shows, all the vulnerable and transient particularities that we find in ordinary life can have their own possibility of perspicuousness. And that there is something moral in choosing to explore this perspicuousness, because what we choose to explore is nothing more and nothing less than what we find valuable and important in our experience of the world.

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<sup>73</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 30.

<sup>74</sup> See Saito, “The Japanese Aesthetics of Imperfection,” 382.

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