

KAWABATA'S MIRRORED POETICS

Masaki Mori
University of Georgia

Section One

In the two initial scenes of *Snow Country* (*Yukiguni*) by Kawabata Yasunari, mirrors reflect images of two main female characters. The first case is given far more textual weight, and by comparison the second instance receives only a cursory treatment. The novel's beginning section, including the first mirror scene, was originally published in 1935 as a short story titled "The Mirror of an Evening Landscape" ("Yūgeshiki no kagami"). This underlies the central importance of the mirror scene assumed from the textual conception. Furthermore, Kawabata kept on writing the story for the next thirteen years until 1948 due to his peculiar writing habit.¹ Realizing the still unexhausted potential of lyricism in a short story, he often continued to add one sequence after another intermittently in the form of an independent short story without necessarily having a structurally solid plan in mind, which eventually led to the formation of some of his major novels. Given this manner of composition, it is not too difficult to understand that the initial mirror image significantly affected the rest of *Snow Country* in its making. As Nakayama Masahiko says, the first few pages containing the mirror scene already constitute one climax that occasioned the entire work, and Anthony V. Liman considers the mirror "closest to Kawabata's aesthetic ideal."² Aside from the novel's introductory sentence, this particular mirror scene is arguably the most celebrated spot in Kawabata's entire oeuvre. There has been an intense debate about the passage since its inception seven decades ago; this might seem to preclude the possibility of any new meaningful findings.

¹ Kawabata Yasunari, *Snow Country*, trans. Edward G. Seidensticker (New York: Vintage, 1996), p. 7. Unless otherwise noted, all references to this work are to this edition. (In fact, Kawabata continued to make minor textual modifications until 1971).

² Nakayama Masahiko, "Kyūsai toshite no bungaku: *Yukiguni* to sono futsuyaku ni tsuite," *Gendai bungaku* 29 (1984), pp. 55, 62; and Anthony V. Liman, "Kawabata's Lyrical Mode in *Snow Country*," *Monumenta Nipponica* 26/3-4 (1971), p. 276.

Nevertheless, we can assume that this particular image manifests, unintended by the author and unacknowledged as it might have been so far, his covert statement about his artistic stance on writing fiction.

Section Two

The scene in question takes place when the male protagonist, Shimamura, takes a solitary train ride shortly after the story's onset. In a flashback, hours earlier in the same trip, we find him attempting to remember in vain a young woman, with whom he briefly got involved at a hot springs resort the previous spring. He does not know yet that she has become a full-fledged geisha with a professional name, Komako. With nothing else to do, he plays with his left hand and thinks that the hand alone, especially his index finger, "seemed to have a vital and immediate memory of the woman he was going to see."³ In sharp contrast to this implied, keen sensuality of Komako's body, a girl sits diagonally across the aisle and impresses him as intangibly appealing. This girl, Yoko, whose name Shimamura accidentally comes to know later, initially attracts his attention because of her assiduous care for a sick young man she accompanies. But what arouses his real interest is her beauty, yet this is not necessarily a matter of physicality. In his flashback, when the train is going across a snowless region at dusk, before it reaches the tunnel, she enchants Shimamura with "something coolly piercing about her beauty."⁴ For some time he has been stealthily watching her image mirrored on the window glass with the distant hilly landscape behind.

In the lingering twilight, details of the passing mountains are still visible. But the day has lost enough strength to enable Yoko's image to be reflected on the window glass against the sliding, monochromatic distance. The whole scene is an effect of weak lighting inside and gathering darkness outside. As a result, both Yoko's opaque face and the background scenery are floating on the same transparent plane. The subtle interplay of light and darkness prevents either image from gaining dominance over the other and instead places them in one harmonious perspective. The beauty of the faint mirror resides in this tenuous balance, and culminates when a cold, distant fire in the hills shines through the pupil of Yoko's reflected image.

The scene commands attention beyond its immediate context on

³ Kawabata, *Snow Country*, p. 7.

⁴ Kawabata, *Snow Country*, p. 8.

multiple levels. For example, indicative of Kawabata's strong curiosity with a new art form, Yoko's reflection is perceived as a movie segment that utilizes the technique of superimposition. At the same time, this mirror is related to a second mirror, a part of the story that was originally titled "A White Morning Mirror" ("Shiroi asa no kagami"). On this actual mirror, Shimamura finds Komako's fresh red cheeks and her rich black hair "floating in the middle of" the reflected whiteness of the bright morning snow.⁵ The two mirrors mainly reveal the sharp contrast between Komako's sensuality and Yoko's bodiless charm. One peculiar fact pertains to the initial mirror. The description retentively dwells on itself. In Edward G. Seidensticker's English translation, the entire passage shows Shimamura's furtive observation of Yoko, lasting short of nine pages, and its central passage of four paragraphs about her mirrored image takes up one and a half pages. The content does not justify the length. Within the textual space, Yoko's eye shining with a distant light is mentioned twice. Each time the girl's glistening eye is similarly described as of unearthly beauty.⁶ As Isogai Hideo points out, Kawabata apparently "makes efforts" to offer "a thorough explanation" of the scene with "a spirit of persuasion verging on tenacity," in order to justify her floating eye as a conceivable phenomenon, entailing a sense of redundancy as a consequence.⁷

By nature, *Snow Country* is a kind of "lyrical novel" or "prose poem,"⁸ in step with classical Japanese narratives, such as *The Tale of Genji*

⁵ Kawabata, *Snow Country*, p. 48.

⁶ Concerning Yoko's face overlapping with the distant fire, Nakayama also points out this repetitious treatment, in "Kyūsai toshite no bungaku," p. 136.

⁷ Isogai Hideo, "Yukiguni no shasei," *Kawabata Yasunari: Gendai no biishiki, Kokubungaku kenkyū sōsho*, eds. Takeda Katsuhiko and Takahashi Shintarō (Tokyo: Meiji shoin, 1978), pp. 34-35. Isogai suspects that the author's lack of confidence in this image led to the excessive justification (p. 36). (All translations from Japanese secondary sources are mine.)

⁸ Itō Sei, "Yukiguni," *Itō sei zenshū*, vol. 20 (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1973), p. 163; Hasegawa Izumi, "Kawabata Yasunari ronkō," *Hasegawa Izumi chosaku sen*, vol. 5 (Tokyo: Meiji shoin, 1991), p. 310; and Nakamura Mitsuo, *Ronkō Kawabata Yasunari* (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1978), pp. 91, 167. Liman finds in Kawabata's narratives "some typical, universal aspects

(*Genji monogatari*).⁹ The work lacks a well-defined plot structure. Flashbacks are suddenly mixed in, while relevant information is often left out. The unresolved ending does not give the reader a firm sense of fulfillment or closure. The story is mainly narrated, but not exclusively, from Shimamura's perspective, although he is not the narrator. In this mode of perception, the narrative viewpoint solely focuses on the items that Shimamura finds worth noticing, either for an aesthetic value or for mere interest. As a dilettante, Shimamura directs his attention at beautiful objects around him, including Komako, whose entire way of life he considers a wasted effort and therefore all the more pure and beautiful for her largely unrequited love and devotion. The reader is therefore expected to appreciate not a series of actions, which would keep him/her suspended in eager anticipation of the story's unfolding, but rather beauty observed in human affairs as well as in seasonal changes of the mountain environment. In spite of its form as a novel, *Snow Country* is lyrically poetic rather than linearly progressive in a diachronic structure.

With this overall nature of the text in mind, we can consider the mirror scene as an aesthetic moment when the story's urge to proceed freezes temporarily for a maximum artistic realization of potential lyricism. Therefore, the magic disappears as soon as "it becomes dark and Shimamura can see nothing but darkness outside."¹⁰ Such an aesthetically charged moment is comparable to what *tanka* and *haiku* poems provide in classical Japanese narratives. Compared with the lyrical moments those poems bring about, however, the story's dwelling on Yoko's phenomenal eye still proves too explanatory with redundancy and minute description, unnecessarily stretched beyond what the context demands. Against the authorial efforts to freeze the moment, the composite mirror is constantly shifting and steadily turning dark as Shimamura wonders whether it is "symbolic of the passage of time."¹¹ Apart from the basic doubt of the

of lyrical or lyricized prose," and considers them written in a "poetic, imagistic lyrical mode," in "Kawabata's Lyrical Mode," pp. 267, 285.

⁹ Isogai Hideo, "Yukiguni: Sakuhin bunseki no hōhō," *Nihon bungaku kenkyū shiryō kankōkai*, ed., *Kawabata Yasunari*, *Nihon bungaku kenkyū shiryō sōsho* (Tokyo: Yūseidō, 1973), pp. 208, 212.

¹⁰ Kin'ya Tsuruta, "The Flow-Dynamics in Kawabata Yasunari's *Snow Country*," *Monumenta Nipponica* 26/3-4 (1971), p. 253.

¹¹ Kawabata, *Snow Country*, p. 14.

scene's optical feasibility, a reason for the protracted passage must be sought elsewhere.¹²

Section Three

This scene dually signifies Kawabata's poetics. One aspect concerns a general situation of modern Japanese literature, while Kawabata's personal stance as a writer determines the other. At first glance, the scene exemplifies the importance of darkness that Tanizaki Jun'ichirō ascribes to traditional Japanese sensitivity in the text *In Praise of Shadows* (*In'ei raisan*) composed in 1933-34. Tanizaki argues that the kernel of Japanese culture lies in a deep appreciation of opaque darkness, as well as in literary ambiguity, which produces delicate layers of light in contrast to the West's general fascination with immaculate brightness and stainless transparency.

A classical example is found in Chapter 25, "Fireflies" (*Hotaru*), of *The Tale of Genji*, in which Genji incites a prince into passionate love with his step-daughter, Tamakazura, by showing him only her exquisite silhouette dimly lit with fireflies from behind a paper screen. Such is the case with Shimamura's illusion on the train, which depends on the interplay of weak lighting and gathering dusk. The aestheticism that favors obscurity in physical visibility and literary expression reveals Kawabata's deep indebtedness to classical Japanese literature. It is a well known fact that, during World War II when writers' activities were severely curtailed, Kawabata perused *The Tale of Genji* even between air raids, just as Tanizaki was translating the Heian era text into modern Japanese. He even discussed it as the main theme of his 1968 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, titled "Japan the Beautiful and Myself" (*Utsukushii Nihon no watakushi*). It is precisely this point that Ōe Kenzaburō, awarded the same honor in 1994, criticized in his speech mockingly titled "Japan, the Ambiguous, and Myself" (*Aimai na Nihon no watakushi*) from his humanistic standpoint of political engagement.¹³ At the same time, the relative overlap of two optical phenomena is incessantly shifting, which points to another traditional predilection for beauty inherent in transience.

¹² Terada Tōru, "Yukiguni ron," *Kindai bungaku* 8/4 (1953), p. 65.

¹³ Kenzaburō Ōe, "Japan, the Dubious [Ambiguous] and Myself," *Japan: In Traditional and Postmodern Perspectives*, eds. Charles Wei-hsun Fu and Steven Heine (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 313-325.

The mirror scene in *Snow Country*, however, goes beyond mere traditionalism due to two elements that play a pivotal role: a mirror, and a distant light. The reflective device stands for Aristotelian mimesis, in which neoclassical poetics was based on an emphasis on imitating life and representing it as a meaningful whole. The rise of realism as a reaction to overblown Romanticism can also be traced back to mimesis in its basic tenet of copying life. Japan was then introduced in the late nineteenth century to the Western type of “realism” forming a basis for modern Japanese literature and significantly contributing to the rise of naturalism and the I-novel. Thus, Kawabata’s mirror scene symbolizes the appropriation of a realistic principle into Japan’s fiction-making. But the accidental mirror on the glass window is not a satisfactory metaphor for mimetic representation. It does not shine spotless like a real mirror that reflects back a clear, uncompromising image. Instead, the reflection is ephemeral, half-transparent, and uneven because of moisture that soon clouds its surface. As a result, it allows room for illusion.

If a mirror stands for the Western mimetic tradition, a cold, distant light corresponds to Romantic creativity. Represented by a lamp in M.H. Abrams’ scheme,¹⁴ Romanticism exalts imagination and results in originality.¹⁵ This partly manifests itself as Shimamura’s ingrained fascination with the unreal

¹⁴ M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953). Kawasaki Toshihiko briefly refers to Abrams’ theory in relation to the mirror scene in, Kawasaki, “Yume ka utsutsu ka maboroshi ka: *Yukiguni* to kyōzō no bigaku,” in Hasegawa Izumi and Tsuruta Kin’ya, eds., *Yukiguni no bunseki kenkyū*, Kenkyū sōsho, vol. 4 (Tokyo: Kyōiku shuppan, 1985), pp. 13-14.

¹⁵ Citing Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey,” Michael C. Brownstein calls this mirror “an image of reality mediated by the imagination,” and he compares *Snow Country* to Shelley’s *Alastor* in several respects, in Brownstein, “Kawabata Yasunari’s *Snow Country*,” *Masterworks of Asian Literature in Comparative Perspective: A Guide for Teaching*, ed. Barbara Stoler Miller (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1994), pp. 485-487, 491. Alluding to Abrams’ theory, Tsuruta states that “the essential feature of a mirror or a lens, unlike a lamp, lies in its self-denial,” in “Flow-Dynamics,” p. 253.

beauty that his own perception produces.¹⁶ As a symbol, the distant light in the mountains, albeit essentially oxymoronic as “a cold fire,” resembles a lamp in the sense that each emits its own light, in contrast to a mirror that simply reflects borrowed light. The flame, however, does not emanate from a container that tamely illuminates its immediate surroundings for a definable purpose. Rather, it is a fire of unlimited potential in the wilderness, which if left unchecked, could spontaneously spread out and consume everything in its way. In such spontaneity of inexhaustible furor, this “cold light of idealism” symbolizes Romanticism even better than the lamp.¹⁷ Overlaid with two opposing trends of Western literature, Kawabata's temporary mirror turns out to be more than a mere flat space of illusion.

An auditory variation heightens the same effect toward the end of the novel. Shimamura feels an impending necessity to leave Komako when he unwittingly imagines the tiny sound of her clogs approaching his inn as the tinkling of a bell in the midst of winds passing through pine trees in early winter. To hear a wind blowing through pine is at once a common experience in everyday life as well as a celebrated motif that suggests the pathos of impermanence in classical literature. Like overlapping images on the train window, a bell's faint tinkling as an imaginary focus is superimposed upon two rustling layers of indistinguishable pine needles, and the steps of a woman's clog suddenly dawn upon his consciousness out of this composite indistinctness. The epiphany poignantly reveals that Shimamura has been trammled in Komako's growing passion and this prompts his resolve to leave her shortly. The shock arises from a synesthetic shift. Unlike the mirror scene, this aesthetic experience that should center on the finer, indefinable sense of listening is abruptly replaced by the more obtrusive visual, the image of Komako's approaching feet. The tenuous balance of mimesis, imagination, and traditional aesthetics obviously derives from the same creative principle the initial optical model exhibits.

The half-

¹⁶ In this sense, both Gwenn R. Boardman and Richard C. Buckstead regard Shimamura as a man of romantic temperament, in Boardman, “Kawabata Yasunari: Snow in the Mirror,” *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction* 11/2 (1969), pp. 10, 15; and Buckstead, “The Search for a Symbol in Kawabata's *Snow Country*,” *Asian Profile* 1/1 (1973), pp. 159-160.

¹⁷ Buckstead, “The Search for a Symbol,” p. 161.

transparency on which Yoko's image floats consists of three distinctive poetics: two Western and the third Japanese. As a result, the mirror scene is not so mimetic as to be simply realistic. It does not derive solely from imagination. This has little to do with the fact that the entire story is fictional, although somewhat indebted to the author's actual experience. As a compositional principle, neither realism nor Romanticism is a dominant factor, and yet both are there, shrouded in a traditional mist of dark opaqueness and the beauty of evanescence.¹⁸ Probably, Kawabata himself did not consciously seek for an intercultural blending of creative modes when he was writing *Snow Country*. In addition to the poetics of ambiguity that was an inherent part of his cultural upbringing, there is little doubt that Kawabata understood, intuitively at least, two major tendencies of Western literature in the nineteenth century. After all, he studied English at the Imperial University of Tokyo before he switched his major to Japanese. In "Ryoshū no Nihon," (1936) he even mentions "realistic spirit" and "Romantic spirit" along with traditional Japanese poetic sentiment.¹⁹ Most relevantly, despite certain simplifications, the scene is laden with cultural convergence and attests to the defining nature of modern Japanese literature that lies behind Kawabata's writing. The history of modern Japanese literature reveals a continuous tampering of its heritage with heavy influence absorbed from the West. By writing *Snow Country*, especially the first mirror scene at the core of the text's creative impulse, Kawabata proves himself to be a child of his age.

Section Four

The same mirror also suggests Kawabata's stance as an individual artist. It is an implied statement about his fundamental method for fiction-making. In his novels, social reality is spread over the story with certain particularities while carefully reduced to a mere background, never given a chance to become a focus of interest. Onto this dimmed arrangement, Kawabata places creatures of his imagination. As for the story's principal

¹⁸ Hatori Tetsuya argues that Kawabata's "symbolic use of natural objects" in *Snow Country* points to "sublation of the [naturalistic] Sketch School and the Romantic School," in Hatori, "Yukiguni ni okeru shizen," *Yukiguni no bunseki kenkyū* (Tokyo: Kyōiku shuppan sentaa, 1985), p. 109.

¹⁹ Kawabata Yasunari, "Ryoshū no Nihon," *Kawabata Yasunari zenshū*, vol. 32 (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1982), p. 608.

characters, they are endowed with names and personalities that are tied to their social environment. Because the author seeks to distill a sense of beauty from their presence, upon close examination, the literary figures, especially female ones, turn out to be incongruous with the realm of credibility. Neither the social background nor fictitious characters command undisputed dominance, nor do they appear to merge with each other in blurred co-existence. The story proceeds with the scheme of unrealistic characters overlapping their social landscape, thereby concocting a sense of unreal beauty in seemingly believable circumstances.

The artistic manipulation readily applies to the main characters in *Snow Country*. For instance, we only know a few superficial aspects of Shimamura's life. He has grown up in Tokyo, has a married life there with his children, does not have to earn a living, publishes writings on dance, and likes occasional hiking in high mountains. The basis of his economic stability is totally unclear. The contradiction of his soft, plump, fair-complexioned physique for an experienced mountain hiker is well noted.²⁰ We know him better as a literary type, as Roy Starrs points out: "the very model of what Nietzsche called a 'passive nihilist' or what nineteenth-century Russian novelists called a 'superfluous man.'" ²¹ In comparison, Komako's life story, although sketchy, is more disclosed. Originally from the snowy province, she grew up in a port town until she was "sold" at sixteen and worked as an apprentice geisha in Tokyo. At seventeen she was "bought" to become a wealthy man's household companion. When that patron died after one and a half years she came back to the spa village. She appears before Shimamura at first as an unnamed, half-professional woman who claims to be nineteen years old. Then, to pay for medical expenses for her music teacher's son, her childhood playmate and reportedly her fiancé dying of tuberculosis, she chooses to become a geisha. Even after his death and the death of his palsied mother, she adheres to her professional contract for a term of four years to pay back the debt.

As expected, Shimamura's perception renders this woman a paradoxical entity from their first meeting. She gives him a consistent impression "above all...of cleanness, not quite one of real

²⁰ Terada, "Yukiguni ron," p. 61.

²¹ Roy Starrs, *Soundings in Time: The Fictive Art of Kawabata Yasunari* (Richmond, Surrey: Japan Library, 1998), p. 132.

beauty.”²² He is immediately drawn to her with an “impression” that she is “wonderfully clean and fresh” to “the hollows under her toes.”²³ This observed quality constitutes a significant part of her irresistible attraction for Shimamura.²⁴ The cleanliness of the body metonymically extends to her meticulous tidiness in personality in such forms as a diary, recording all the novels she has read, cleaning a room thoroughly, and interpersonal relationships. At the same time, apart from her regular work as an entertainer at hotel parties, she has several special customers. Not to mention her past patrons in Tokyo, which include a man from Hamamatsu who has sought to marry her and a longstanding patron who she needs financially but cannot physically accept, there is Shimamura who she passionately favors against her reason.

Although she protests at first that sexual catering is not required of a geisha at the hot springs resort, she obviously has physical relations with her select clients. Following a “too self-evident” pattern, traditionally established and institutionally sanctioned as Kawamoto Kōji explains, her rapport with Shimamura is defined in unspoken mutual understanding to her underlying sorrow and mortification.²⁵ In an intimate exchange with Shimamura, she reveals “her full, warm breasts...‘caressed’ into unequal development.”²⁶ Komako’s charm thus originates in an unlikely paradox of a totally clean woman who is physically available to multiple men in partial prostitution.²⁷ Accordingly, Tsuruta Kin’ya regards her as a symbol of

²² Kawabata, *Snow Country*, p. 32.

²³ Kawabata, *Snow Country*, p. 18.

²⁴ Hayashi Takeshi argues that Komako’s cleanliness undergoes change by the time of Shimamura’s third visit, in “Kawabata Yasunari,” *Kanshō Nihon gengai bungaku*, vol. 15, ed. Hayashi (Tokyo: Kadokawa shoten, 1982), pp. 137, 139. For a similar view, see Shin Reishuku, “Yukiguni ron: Shimamura to Komako no kankei o chūshin ni,” *Nihongo to Nihon bungaku* 7 (1987), p. 25.

²⁵ Kawamoto Kōji, “Geisha no koi: Jyaanera shōsetsu toshite no Yukiguni,” *Nihon bungaku no tokushitsu*, eds. Hirakawa Sukehiro and Tsuruta Kin’ya (Tokyo: Meiji shoin, 1991), p. 271.

²⁶ Boardman, “Kawabata Yasunari,” p. 11. Boardman calls Komako “the very essence of ‘a woman of the pleasure quarters,’” p. 11.

²⁷ Kawabata employs the same paradox in a short story titled “The Morning Nail” (*Asa no tsume*). Tachibana Masanori calls this paradox “cleanness

“purified sex” while Terada Tōru calls her “nothing but a paradoxical abstract.”²⁸

An even better instance, and therefore a more problematic case, is Yoko because the author admits that, unlike Komako, she is not modeled after a real-life person and is a product of his pure imagination. When the train comes out of a long tunnel and stops at a snow-covered station at the beginning of the story, Shimamura is entranced to hear her call to a station master with a voice that is repeatedly described later as piercingly clear and beautiful. Yoko's unphysical presence also stems from her visual appearance, or more specifically, her eyes that are often noted with the same qualities. Her beauty consists of these two dissected elements: the voice, which is clear to the point of evoking sadness, and the glistening eyes that dart off a piercing look. The rest of her corporeity is basically left out, as if it were not worth noticing, until the very last scene where a leg, “a truly physical detail about Yoko,” finally “penetrates Shimamura's perception” in a passage that describes her unconscious fall amidst a burning warehouse.²⁹ Simply put, she is “a physically transparent presence.”³⁰ Not encumbered with physical weightiness, her perceptible being essentially consists of voice and a look,³¹ and her paradoxical quality

containing impurity,” in *Iiki kara no tabibito: Kawabata Yasunari ron* (Tokyo: Kawade shobō shinsha, 1981), p. 102. Akamatsu Masayuki thinks that Shimamura renders Komako “a virtual image” by way of the word, “clean,” in Akamatsu, *Genkei to shazō: Kindai Nihon bungaku ronkō*, ed. Shigematsu Yasuo (Fukuoka-shi: Genkei to shazō kankōkai, 1986), pp. 447-448. See also Kondō Hiroko, “Kawabata Yasunari: *Yukiguni*,” *Kokubunbaku kaishaku to kanshō* 58/4 (1993), p. 164.

²⁸ Tsuruta Kin'ya, “*Yukiguni* no Yukio wo kangaeru,” *Yukiguni no bunseki kenkyū*, vol. 4 (Tokyo: Kyōiku shuppan, 1985), p. 86; and Terada, “*Yukiguni* ron,” p. 61.

²⁹ Liman, “Kawabata's Lyrical Mode,” p. 283.

³⁰ Ueda Makoto, “*Yukiguni* no saku hin kōzō,” *Kyojitsu no himaku: Yukiguni, Kōgen, Bokka, Kawabata Yasunari kenkyū sōsho*, vol. 5, ed. Kawabata bungaku kenkyūkai (Tokyo: Kyōiku shuppan, 1979), pp. 77, 82.

³¹ This view of Yoko, in contrast to Komako's physicality, is widely held. See, for example, Liman, “Kawabata's Lyrical Mode,” p. 282; Tatsumi Satoshi, “Kawabata Yasunari *Yukiguni* ni okeru topos: Nichijō kara no dakkyaku,” *Shōwa bungaku kenkyū* 30 (1995), p. 52; and Tsuruta Kin'ya,

is further enhanced through synesthetic expressions, such as “coolly piercing,” that describe her.³² Accordingly, Yamada Yoshirō considers Yoko in Shimamura’s view “an assembly of aesthetic fragments and not even formed as a personality.”³³ She is also ageless, “an eternal virgin” in Tsuruta’s phrase, when Kawasaki finds “Yoko’s age unknown throughout the work,” unlike Komako’s.³⁴

Likewise, her social existence is of a dubious nature. Her biographical information is not provided. She is supposedly a country girl who has grown up in the unnamed, yet easily identifiable, eponymous northern region. Singing folksongs, she often engages in agricultural labor or menial service. Despite her local upbringing, she fluently spoke standard Japanese, to the finesse of grammatically challenging polite expressions without ever reverting to a village dialect. She might have spent a short time as a prospective nurse in Tokyo in pre-WWII compulsory education, which placed great emphasis on learning to speak a standardized language for consolidating the nation. Nevertheless, it is highly unlikely that a girl with a somewhat defective reasoning capability, who probably graduated from a local elementary school, speaks it with native ease. Her speech is even more striking, considering the fact that her accent apparently lacks the slightest provincial inflection even when she talks to villagers. At least Shimamura does not detect it at all from the very first moment he hears her speak on the train. Altogether, she presents another paradox of an urban fairy, clothed in rural mores and costumes, not nature-bound like “a mountain spirit,” “a tree spirit,” or “a spirit of snow.”³⁵ She is essentially

Kawabata Yasunari no geijutsu: Junsui to kyūsai, Kokubungaku kenkyū sōsho (Tokyo: Meiji shoin, 1981), p. 73.

³² Ōshima Maki points out the frequent use of synesthesia throughout this work in Ōshima, “Kawabata Yasunari *Yukiguni* no hiyu hyōgen: Gaikokujin ryūgakusei no shiten yori,” *Hyōgen kenkyū* 57 (1993), pp. 14-16. This suggests the paradoxical nature of not only Yoko, but of the entire story.

³³ Yamada Yoshirō, “*Yukiguni* ni okeru Yoko zō,” *Tōhoku daigaku bungei kenkyū* 97 (1981), p. 48.

³⁴ Tsuruta, *Kawabata Yasunari no geijutsu*, p. 73; and Kawasaki, “Yume ka utsutsu ka,” p. 19.

³⁵ Thomas E. Swann, “Kawabata no *Yukiguni* no kōsei,” *Kawabata Yasunari: Gendai no biishiki*, Kokubungaku kenkyū sōsho, eds. Takeda

“an almost unrealizable, abstract presence,” in Isogai’s terms.³⁶ Although she spent just a few years in the capital city before she returned to the story’s locale, Komako also speaks the “untainted” language artificially modeled after the Tokyo dialect. Generally in Kawabata’s fiction, characters rarely speak a dialect with a regional accent. He apparently regarded such utterance as cacophonous to his aesthetic construct.

In Shimamura’s perspective, readily incorporating the first mirror as “a sort of symbolic world not of this world,” Komako and Yoko are on a par with his aerial Western dance.³⁷ With no need to make a living, he indulges himself in imagining “phantasms” of ballet and writing about it, precisely because he and other Japanese cannot see its actual stage performance.³⁸ He calls it “an art in another world” and “an unrivaled armchair reverie, a lyric from some paradise.”³⁹ He then acknowledges that he unknowingly might have been treating Komako like his Western dance. The author purposefully does the same to his characters, especially the two female figures. Situated in a credible, non-fantastic text, however, they are portrayed realistically enough to blend into their social milieu. Accordingly, they are endowed with certain social attributes only to the extent that those attributes do not mar their unreal quality.⁴⁰ As Isogai asserts, the two women’s “realistic aspects of daily life are not supposed to appear vividly.”⁴¹

The social background is similarly treated in Kawabata’s poetic scheme. Set at a particular historical moment, the novel inevitably shows

Katsuhiko and Takahashi Shintarō (Tokyo: Meiji shoin, 1978), pp. 20-21; Tatsumi, “Kawabata Yasunari *Yukiguni*,” p. 52; and Tsuruta, “Flow-Dynamics,” p. 254.

³⁶ Isogai, “*Yukiguni* no shasei,” pp. 38-39. Isogai further points out the incompatibility between Yoko’s image and the image of the agricultural labor she is engaged in.

³⁷ Kawabata, *Snow Country*, p. 9.

³⁸ Kawabata, *Snow Country*, p. 25.

³⁹ Kawabata, *Snow Country*, p. 25.

⁴⁰ Although Akamatsu mentions a urinal Yoko carries in one brief scene as indicative of the substantiality of her everyday life, a cursory reference to this tool is actually a typical example of Kawabata’s blending technique in, Akamatsu, *Genkei to shazō*, p. 458.

⁴¹ Isogai, “*Yukiguni*: Sakuhin bunseki no hōhō,” pp. 207, 209, 211-212.

people's way of life and changes that affect it.⁴² The train, for example, is an important device. The story begins with Shimamura riding toward the hot springs resort. Without it, he would not come and go so easily as he does. We soon realize that the train line arrived the previous year at the isolated village, which, according to Komako, was a very lonely place. But now, many visitors and seasonal tourists come from Tokyo, including skiers for whom the village made an advertising poster using Komako and a colleague of hers posing as skiing models. All this means is that this place is increasingly tied to the capital city for its economic basis, while – as Komako and Yoko once did – more and more cheap labor relocates to the metropolitan area where it is most needed. With easy passage to the city now available, even those who stay behind begin to think of the city as the center of their imagination, thereby relegating their own home to a further peripheral position than ever before. This is illustrated by Komako's longing for urban culture, which in part prompts her attachment to Shimamura, who is after all, a culturally pampered escapee from the city. The train not only brings about comfortable transportation but also helps to deprive local people of their autonomy and identity, psychologically as well as economically. All these changes that are encroaching on rurality due to the arrival of a train system, can be glimpsed in scattered references, but they are persistently kept inconspicuous as part of the dimmed social background.⁴³ They must not stand out enough to threaten Shimamura's dreamland on the other side of a long tunnel.

The visitors that the train brings are not limited to tourists and skiers who can afford sojourning at a resort for the pursuit of pleasure. Upon returning for what is to become his last visit, Shimamura finds a Russian vendor selling cheap merchandise in the entrance hallway of his

⁴² Richard Torrance discusses “social realism” in *Snow Country* along with naturalism and cinema, which Kawabata appropriated as “popular literary languages ‘in the air’ in the 1930s and 1940s,” in Torrance, “Popular Languages in *Yukiguni*,” *Studies in Modern Japanese Literature: Essays and Translations in Honor of Edwin McClellan*, eds. Alan Tansman and Dennis Washburn (Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 1997), pp. 247-259.

⁴³ In this sense, Terada in “*Yukiguni* ron” calls the lives of all the people in the mountain community, except for Yoko and Komako, “a shadow play,” p. 61.

hotel. He guesses she is in her forties. Because of her many peddling trips, her clothes look dirty. Evidently, she is one of many Russians who fled from their communized homeland after the revolution and came to Japan as refugees. Some of them chose to stay in Japan, hoping that imperial Japan would fight communist Russia and restore czarism.⁴⁴ One might be tempted to interpret this Russian refugee as an unmistakable political reference. Her presence might bespeak Japan's colonial ambition in the 1930s, which led to strife with China that triggered World War II in Asia. This resulted in military conflicts with the Soviet Union on the Manchurian borders.

At the same time, Shimamura's occasional visits to the mountain resort might be taken in a domestic context, not simply as an escape from the tedium of everyday life in Tokyo, but more urgently as flight from political uncertainties veering toward totalitarianism, including two major coups d'état in 1932 and 1936. This finally results in his encounter with the Russian peddler. Such a reading is possible, but an intrusion of external reality is too abrupt and out of joint with the rest of the story. At best, the Russian's presence helps us ascertain the novel's temporal setting, denying any more justification for further historicizing. As Tanaka argues, *Snow Country* stands "beyond reach of the ideology of 'modern imperialism'" and "confronts 'history' as a perspective."⁴⁵ Suggestively, no sooner does Shimamura cast his eyes on the Russian vendor than she packs up her goods and walks away.

Although they are perceptible, the details of social reality are scarcely highlighted and never foregrounded in Kawabata's novels.⁴⁶ Instead, they remain indistinct in the background, deprived of any claim for substantial significance of their own. Against this background hover his

⁴⁴ As representative of such Russian refugees, a character named Kyrilenko in Tanizaki's *Makioka Sisters* [Sasameyuki] (1943-48) expresses this idea. Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, *Tanizaki Jun'ichirō zenshū*, vol. 15 (Tokyo: Chūō kōronsha, 1968), p. 126.

⁴⁵ Tanaka Minoru, "'Sensō' to Kawabata bungaku (ge): 'Shizen' to iū 'tasha': Yukuguni," *Kokugo tsūshin* 322 (1991), p. 14.

⁴⁶ Tsuruta thinks that Kawabata's careful selection of the story's locale, which is not "a never-never land," amounts to "a dimming of lights in a theater" through "reduc[ing] the glare and rawness of the real world," in "Flow-Dynamics," pp. 251-252.

imagined creatures.⁴⁷ They are endowed with certain social trappings so that their contours merge well into their surroundings, but their essence lies in unreality. One might argue that novelists use the same technique all the time in their fictional writings, and that it is by no means Kawabata's monopoly. With other writers, however, characters are supposed to appear fully "realized" with a distinctive identity that is maximally shorn of improbability, while social elements can often stand on their own significance.⁴⁸ As Satake Isamu points out, Kawabata tends to "pursue a delicate world that is not reality although close to it" in mirrors, illusions, and dreams.⁴⁹ In fact, the aesthete Shimamura leaves Komako and his supposed dreamland, and it is difficult for him to take notice of their reality during his third visit. Kawabata's fiction is outstanding for depicting well-disguised imaginary beauty that keeps a tenuous balance with careful, low-profiled reality around it.⁵⁰ Thus, the first mirror scene of *Snow Country* can be considered an artistic manifestation of the author's notion of fiction-making or even an unacknowledged yet tacit statement about his poetics.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Looking back at *Snow Country* much later in his writing career, Kawabata reportedly called all the characters "ghosts"; see Tachibana, *Iki kara no tabibito*, p. 111.

⁴⁸ Tsuruta summarizes the plot of a Western novel as the protagonist's "process of differentiating the self from its environment," in "Flow-Dynamics," p. 265.

⁴⁹ Satake Isamu, "Kawabata Bungaku ni okeru 'kagami' ni tsuite: *Yukuguni to Suigetsu* o chūshin ni," *Kōka joshi daigaku kenkyū kiyō* 19 (1981), p. 67.

⁵⁰ Kawabata sometimes expressed his detachment from reality, as he says in "Bungakuteki jijoden": "I've never aspired to know [truth and reality] or to approach them. Instead, I'll probably live and die in false dreams" (my translation). This implies that he did not completely ignore life's circumstances. Kawabata Yasunari, "Bungakuteki jijoden," *Kawabata Yasunari zenshū*, vol. 33, p. 87. See also his "Dokuei jimei" (1949).

⁵¹ Some critics consider Kawabata's fiction totally lacking in social contours, but such an outlook ignores the essence of Kawabata's fiction. See, for instance, Hasegawa, "Kawabata Yasunari ronkō," p. 341; Akihira Sugiura, "Kawabata Yasunari ron," *Gunzō* 9 (1954), pp. 153-162; Terada Tōru, "Kawabata Yasunari ron," (1948); *Nihon bungaku kenkyū shiryō kankōkai*, ed., *Kawabata Yasunari*, p. 50; and Tsujimoto Chizuru,

Section Five

We have seen the first mirror scene as dually representative of Kawabata's poetics on an individual level as well as in a general literary situation. A third stratum of symbolic reading uncovers the overall complexity of creativity when these two strata correspond, respectively, to Yoko's reflection and to the darkening landscape outside that enables the translucent mirror. Kawabata employs his personal method of fiction-making against the background of general tendencies in contemporary Japanese literature. But his individual technique and the general literary situation are neither contrasted nor to be seen as verging toward fusion. One comes out of the other and Kawabata's originality is based on their interplay. In this viewpoint, a cold fire in the distant landscape acquires great significance as an integrating focus. Metaphorically, the light stands for a new element that emerges from the general background and transfixes the center of Kawabata's philosophical stance as a writer, for the time being at least amid the ceaseless flux of theories and literary modes. Feebly small and hovering as it might be, the flickering light thereby unifies the author's literary world and contextualizes it. All of a sudden, compared to an insect (noctiluca) that emits phosphorescent light in the nocturnal sea,⁵² this image recalls another unusual comparison of Komako's lips to "a beautiful little circle of leeches,"⁵³ and the transient light shimmering through the eye is strongly suggestive of Kawabata's Modernist affiliation.

In his late thirties, Kawabata was no longer blatantly experimenting with new trends of Western literature as in his younger days of Neo-Perceptionism (*Shin-kankaku-ha*). As with his interest in cinema and ballet, however, he remained conscious of new literary methods and techniques imported from the West.⁵⁴ In fact, many elements usually linked to his cultural heritage, such as deliberate ellipsis, associative shifts of

"Kawabata Yasunari no bigaku: *Yukiguni* to no kakawari," *Ritsumeikan bungaku* 508 (1988), p. 953.

⁵² Neither the insect nor its academic name is mentioned in Seidensticker's translation.

⁵³ Kawabata, *Snow Country*, p. 32.

⁵⁴ Hasegawa Izumi, "Kindai bungaku ni okeru *Yukiguni* no ichi," Kawabata bungaku kenkyūkai, ed., *Kyojitsu no himaku: Yukiguni, Kōgen, Bokka*, Kawabata Yasunari kenkyū sōsho, vol. 5 (Tokyo: Kyōiku shuppan sentaa, 1979), pp. 106, 110.

thought,⁵⁵ asymmetrical structure,⁵⁶ and the juxtaposition of incongruous images⁵⁷ are easily ascribable to Modernist influences as well.⁵⁸ A ray at the center of a heavily charged scene implies that in a way closely tied to, but not simply mimicking, contemporary literary techniques, he succeeded in presenting himself as an important Modernist writer. In its multiple levels of symbolism lurking therein, the first mirror scene in *Snow Country* reveals the very nature of Kawabata's art.

⁵⁵ Iwata Mitsuko relates this technique to *renga* and the Joycean stream of consciousness, in Iwata, *Kawabata bungaku no shosō: Kindai no yūen* (Tokyo: Ōfūsha, 1983), p. 184. See also Liman, "Kawabata's Lyrical Mode," pp. 271-72; Naomi Matsuoka, "Japanese-English Translation and the Stream of Consciousness," *Tamkang Review* 19/1-4 (1988-1989), pp. 541-544; and Ozawa Seimei, *Kawabata Yasunari bungei no sekai* (Tokyo: Ōfūsha, 1980), pp. 150-151.

⁵⁶ Citing Kawabata's reference in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech to the traditional Japanese garden that is asymmetrical in contrast to the symmetrical Western garden, Thom Palmer discusses "the suggestive power of" the writer's "asymmetrical text, spreading ever outward," in Palmer, "The Asymmetrical Garden: Discovering Yasunari Kawabata," *Southwest Review* 74/3 (1989), pp. 391-392.

⁵⁷ In the introduction to his translation of *Yukiguni*, Seidensticker talks about "a mating of opposite or incongruous terms," which enables the story "like a series of brief flashes in a void" as "a meeting between haiku and the novel" (pp. vii, viii). See also his "Kawabata Yasunari," *Gendai no esprit* 35 (1969), pp. 58-59, 66-67; and Starrs, *Soundings in Time*, pp. 119-123, 135-136.

⁵⁸ Brownstein infers "a basic affinity between classical Japanese aesthetics and twentieth century modernism" from the fact that "elements of both can be detected in a novelist like Kawabata or a poet like Ezra Pound," in "Kawabata Yasunari's *Snow Country*," p. 483. Starrs also points out inherent affinities and mutual influences between modernist and traditional Japanese techniques, centering especially on juxtaposition, and argues that Kawabata's "traditionalism was a natural outgrowth of his modernism," in *Soundings in Time*, p. 126.