

The Japanese Literary Tradition as Evidenced in *Snow Country*: a Study Concerning the Identity of Yasunari Kawabata with the Haiku

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In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1968, Yasunari Kawabata refers to his essay, "Eyes in Their Last Extremity." The title of this essay comes from the words written in the suicide note of the famous short story writer, Ryunosuke Akutagawa. Kawabata pondered the question of suicide and rejected it as an unenlightened act. But the phrase, "eyes in their extremity," and his rejection of suicide were incarnated ironically in Kawabata's own death in 1972. Perhaps his suicide is symbolic of the core of his aesthetic idea: "the mystery of all art is found in the eyes in their extremity" in which "the beauty of nature is reflected."¹ However, to some, this idea was betrayed and contradicted by the violence, disorder and disruption in modern society. Kawabata could not tolerate this violent destruction by which the beauties of nature and tradition had been lost. This statement can be partially proven by the fact that most of his later works were isolated from the modern stream of Japanese literature. This is true even though he once led the modern literary movement known as "Neo-perceptionalism" after the end of the First World War. His works, including *Snow Country*, *Thousand Cranes*, and *The Sound of the Mountain*, typically represent his isolation from other westernized works in modern Japanese literature. Yet, on the other hand, these same works are representative of the Japanese literary tradition. In this essay, we will explore the relation of Kawabata's *Snow Country* to the literary tradition of Japanese poetry.

To achieve this purpose, we will primarily discuss the significance of the natural imagery used by Kawabata. Secondly, we will see that the natural images of Kawabata's are identical to those of the haiku based on seasonal elements. Thirdly, we will investigate more specifically a certain image of Kawabata's as it is related to a selected haiku by Basho, the greatest haiku poet. Finally we will explore the identity of Kawabata's ideas and attitudes toward nature by using excerpts from his essays.

As a prelude to the main subject, we will briefly discuss the world of *Snow Country*. On the surface, this novel is set in a small local region where, from late autumn to early spring, there is often heavy snow. Because of the snow, the people of this area are isolated from the other people and occurrences of everyday Japan. This particular situation is devised by Kawabata to construct an unreal and imagined world in which the sparkling love between a man and a geisha is depicted. The dramatic events and characters do not belong to the actual world. At least the story is not defined within the concept of reality as used by the schools of Realism and Naturalism. On the contrary, the place "Snow Country" is used as an imaginative but sensuous world in order to describe the ambiguous love (passionate and unpassionate, sensual and unsensual) of the two main characters and to appeal to the emotions of readers through perceptual imagery.

In the beginning of the story, Kawabata writes these sentences to lead readers into the unreal world he has constructed:

The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country. The earth lay white under the night sky. The train pulled up at a signal stop.²⁹

This famous passage, according to Itaru Kawashima, is "a technical device to introduce readers to the fictionalized 'Snow Country'."³⁰ To make the readers aware of this, the author frequently uses the word "unreal" throughout the story. In addition, intentionally ignoring the characterization and behavior based on the sociological circumstances and conditions, Kawabata presents the idealized and fantastic love between the hero, Shimamura, and the heroine, Komako. Even nature and landscape in this story are not described objectively, but subjectively through Shimamura's eyes and feeling. Since the subjective description

is subtly balanced with the suggestive power of images, the tone of this story is very lyrical. At least the musical quality is rich in the original text. It may be said that *Snow Country* is like a work of fiction constructed from a chain of poems in which the subtle expression of love and the description of nature in the imagined world are presented.

The poetic quality of this novel relies heavily on such characteristics of the Japanese language as suggestion and ambiguity rather than logic and reason. This quality also represents Kawabata's highly evocative understanding of the subtle interplay between nature and human existence. In this respect, *Snow Country* has deep roots in the heritage of Japan's past, both religious and literary, from Buddhist reflection and Shinto mystique as well as the haiku.

It is obvious that Kawabata continuously depends on natural images and landscape which he support with sensory perceptions in order to express his central theme, love. Even the ambiguous images of "snow," pure whiteness and extreme cold are reflected in the devoted love of Komako for Shimamura and the unreciprocal feeling of Shimamura toward her passionate love. It seems that the total mood which dominates *Snow Country* dooms the love-affair. But, because Kawabata writes little about Shimamura's passion for and his emotional reaction to love, the dramatic tension produced by the conflict between the characters lacks force except for the ambivalence in Komako's mind. Instead of dramatic conflict, Kawabata uses rich, sensuous and subtle natural objects and landscape in order to reinforce Komako's ambivalent mind. Let us take an example.

"The midnight for Tokyo." The woman (i.e. Komako) seemed to sense his (i.e. Shimamura) hesitation, and she spoke as if to push it away. At the sound of the train whistle she stood up. Roughly throwing open a paper-paneled door and the window behind it, she sat down on the sill with her body thrown back against the railing. The train moved off into the distance, its echo fading into a sound as of the nightwind. Cold air flooded the room.

"Have you lost your mind? It's cold." Shimamura too went over to the window. The air was still, without a suggestion of wind.

It was a stern night landscape. The sound of the freezing of snow over the land seemed to roar deep into the earth. There was no moon. The stars, almost too many of them to be true, came forward so brightly that it was as if they were falling with the swiftness of the void. As the stars came nearer, the sky retreated deeper and deeper into the night color. The layers of the Border Range, indistinguishable one from another, cast their heaviness at the skirt of the starry sky in a blackness grave and somber enough to communicate their mass. The whole of the night scene came together in a clear, tranquil harmony.

As she sensed Shimamura's approach, the woman fell over with her breast against the railing. There was no hint of weakness in the pose. Rather, against the night, it was the strongest and most stubborn she could have taken. So we have to go through that again, thought Shimamura.

Black though the mountains were, they seemed at that moment brilliant with the color of the snow. They seemed to him somehow transparent, somehow lonely. The harmony between sky and mountains was lost.

Shimamura put his hand to the woman's throat. "You'll catch cold. See how cold it is." He tried to pull her back, but she clung to the railing.

"I'm going home." Her voice was choked.

"Go home, then."

"Let me stay like this a little longer."

"I'm going down for a bath."

"No, stay here with me."

"If you close the window."

"Let me stay here like this a little longer."

These passages describe the night when Shimamura visited Komako for the second time. The stern landscape of the snow country is not only described as a mere landscape, but also blended perfectly with Komako's mind and attitude. Here is no analytical psychology of the characters' mind about love. Rather the

roaring silence of a winter night is strained by a few remarks, as well as the exquisite action and gestures of the characters. It seems that we see a static drama such as one finds in a Nō play. Because superfluous explanation is eliminated, Komako's absorption and resistance to her own emotion and Shimamura's desire remarkably balance the coldness of snow, the sound of the freezing of snow, and the countless stars in the night sky. Kawabata presents a subtle interplay between nature and human existence, and through the whole narrative of *Snow Country*, this sort of description is the essential power of the poetic quality in this story.

As a matter of fact, Kawabata intended to establish the natural images in his fiction that had been missing. At that time when he began to write *Snow Country*, he clearly stated this matter :

While staying in Echigo Yuzawa Hot-Spring⁵⁹ for about one month, I was carefully watching the transformation of autumn. It is not difficult to describe it (i.e. the transformation of nature). But, because modern literature, especially the novel is far distant from nature and disregards it, I have felt irresistibly that novelists are reproved by nature. That is to say, we cannot find our modern words (to describe nature) except clichés.....When I read haiku and tanka poems a little, then I understood the poets tried to create the fresh images of nature with great effort, because the poets composed tanka or haiku based on the actual things of nature and because they were restricted by its brief and regular form. In this sense, the poets surpass the writers of prose.⁶⁰

It is clear that, in this statement, Kawabata emphasizes the significance of nature in relation to haiku and tanka. Although Japanese classics were primarily constituted by and based on nature, some of his contemporary writers lost their continuity with that tradition in the rapid industrialization and urbanization of Japan's society. Likewise, they superficially relied on the imitation and influence of western literature without consideration of the fundamental classics which lie in the tradition and history of Japanese literature. As a result, modern literature radically lost its connection with nature as well as with Japanese literary tradition. Kawabata himself once confessed that he "gave up many times" his "writing in

progress” because he “felt the contradiction or gap between the general technique of modern prose and nature.”⁷⁾ In this respect, *Snow Country* is obviously an experimental work to challenge those modern tendencies and to reclaim the power of nature in the modern novel, as it relates to Japanese literary tradition.

Thus, *Snow Country* continues the tradition with Kawabata’s conviction that “the behavior of human beings and the images of nature such as mountains, rivers, grass and trees have changed little for thousands of years.”⁸⁾ The integral relationship of this novel to this continuing literary tradition, as Seidensticker has pointed out in the introduction to the English translation, can be seen in the classic haiku which is composed of 17 syllables with images of nature, especially seasonal elements.

Although some of the Westerners have been struck by the brevity of the haiku as a form, the visual suggestion as imagery and the juxtaposition of its images as structure, the seasonal elements of the haiku have seldom been regarded as important. But many a successful haiku always has a sense of season, adding clarity and fullness of mood to it, and bringing it to bear upon the emotion caught and conceived by the poet. In other words, the presence of the seasonal atmosphere makes it possible for the juxtaposed images to be intergrated, and simultaneously for the objective correlative of a poem to be brought about. Without the seasonal theme, a haiku poem is nothing but a puzzle or a simple expression of “ah-ness” because a haiku poem is limited to an absolute quantity of words and images.

Since Japan is geographically placed where the change of seasons can be clearly experienced, Japanese poets describe nature as viewed through the seasons. Kawabata’s treatment of nature in *Snow Country* is essentially the same. Each trip of Shimamura to the village of the Hot-Spring occurs during one of three seasons: the first is in the early summer, the second in winter, and the third during autumn. The images of nature reported during each trip represent the atmosphere of that season. For instance, the “new greenery,” “butterfly,” and “rice field” noted in the first visit are categorized in the image or mood of early summer by haiku poets. Haiku poets use these images to convey the phenomenon of early summer which is associated with vivid, fresh and active atmosphere. In the same

sense, Kawabata presents those images which consist with Shimamura's fresh impression given in the first encounter with Komako. The similarly perceptual yet associational response of Kawabata to natural objects also is demonstrated in the other two trips. On the second visit, "snow," "ice" and "coldness" are the seasonal images of winter. The cold and stern mood of the winter amplifies the dramatic tension of the emotional relation between Shimamura and Komako. On the third trip, "kaya grass," "crickets," "buckwheat flowers," "maple branches" and "the Milky Way" are used to represent autumn when nature is more colorful and changeable than during the other seasons. The transience of the autumn season is paralleled with the transformation of the emotional relation between Shimamura and Komako. It is no doubt that, like in the haiku poetry, the use of the natural objects in *Snow Country* relies on each season.

However, there is an obvious difference between the use of seasonal elements in prose and in verse. Instead of composing a haiku poem in which one seasonal word or theme is used as an evocative and dominating image, Kawabata, in *Snow Country*, employs the natural and seasonal elements in a decorative and lucid way to construct the background and mood of the story. In other words, while the world of a haiku poem is closed and complete in one sense, the seasonal images in this novel serve to construct the fictive and causal world where a change of the relation between the characters is linked to a change of seasons. Nevertheless, it is similar to the manner of the haiku in that each natural image in this novel is sustained to reveal a mood of a season in each visit of Shimamura to the "Snow Country."

The consistency of Kawabata's attitude to nature and haiku imagery is demonstrated more typically near the end of *Snow Country*. Through his last stay in the village, Shimamura gradually realizes that he can do nothing for Komako. He feels and fears the meaningless emptiness of his own existence. His realization is shared with Komako's awareness that the relation of love between them, after all, is fruitless, although she is afraid of losing him.

To leave Komako, Shimamura has taken by himself the short trip to the town near the Hot-Spring. When Shimamura comes back to the village, Komako finds his car and leaps at it. Then, suddenly the episode of the fire is presented.

It increases the dramatic tension produced with Komako's dangerous action and her suspicion of why he has not taken her along. The cocoon storehouse of the village is on fire. Shimamura and Komako run along the snowy road of the night to the scene of the fire. This episode is dominated by the natural image, the Milky Way.

"The Milky Way. Beautiful, isn't it," Komako murmured. She looked up at the sky as she ran off ahead of him. The Milky Way. Shimamura too looked up and he felt himself floating into it. Was the bright vastness the poet Basho saw when he wrote of the Milky Way arched over a stormy sea?⁹⁾

The image, the Milky Way, is clearly identified with Basho's haiku poem. The poem of the Milky Way written by Basho is shown below:

Ah! A wild sea;
The Milky Way
Is stretching over Sado Isle.¹⁰⁾

It appears that the place of the poem was the province of Echigo which is "snow country" and also is near the setting of Kawabata's novel. Standing on Cape Izumozaki, and looking over the sea toward the Island of Sado¹¹⁾ (fifty odd miles away), Basho drew the inspiration for the poem.

This poem is expressed in cosmic images in which the Milky Way is juxtaposed with the rough, wild and dark sea. The distance between heavens and earth, adding to the vastness of both images, conveys the infinity of the cosmos. Furthermore, by virtue of using the image of "Sado Isle," historically the island to which criminals and political prisoners were exiled and on which gold was produced, there is the contrast of time between the history of nature (the immutability of nature represented by "the Milky Way" and the "wild sea") and the history of human existence (the transience of human life as referred to in the prisoners of Sado). The total imagery, suggestive rather than descriptive, penetrates our mind and evokes associations with cosmic permanence and infinity, as seen in the Milky Way.

Moreover, Basho wrote of his emotion and his experience when he composed the aforementioned poem. He says in his short essay, "Introduction to the Silver

Way" (i.e. the Milky Way):

I thought regretably that, whereas on the one hand this island became a treasure house due to the production of gold, the fearful name of this island was also told in the fact that condemned enemies of Emperors were exiled to the island. Then, I opened the window to consolidate the lonely feeling of my travel. The sun had already sunk into the sea, but the moon still was slightly somber. The Silver River where the stars were flickering bright and clear stretched out over half the heavens. When I heard the sound of the waves was now and then wafted here from the offing, my mind was oppressed with loneliness: a grinding feeling of desolation, a feeling as if my bowels were being torn asunder.....¹²⁾

It seems that the sight of Sado Island and the contemplation about its history made Basho feel very lonely and depressed. The dim outline of the island with the sad stories of exiled prisoners and the production of gold confronts him with the vastness and brightness of the Milky Way over the sky. When he is aware of the sound of waves, he is struck by the great difference between man and nature. He meditates and realizes that the existence of human beings compared with the sea and the cosmos is vacuous. This is essentially the same thing as suggested in the preceding poem.

On the other hand, Kawabata, using the same central image, "the Milky Way," creates a perceptually voluptuous yet subtle impression. The image, "the Milky Way" revolves around the emotion of both the main characters. Unlike the meditative yet objective image of Basho's poem, the Milky Way is presented in a seductive and emotional image evidenced by Shimamura's eyes and feelings. Let's take these examples:

The Milky Way came down just over there, to wrap the night earth in its naked embrace. There was a terrible voluptuousness about it.¹³⁾

The Milky Way flowed over them in the direction they were running and seemed to bathe Komako's head in its light.¹⁴⁾

The light was dimmer even than on the night of the new moon, and

yet the Milky Way was brighter than the brightest full moon. In the faint light that left no shadow on the earth, Komako's face floated up like an old mask. It was strange that even in the mask there should be scent of the woman.¹⁵⁾

In the first example, the Milky Way is described in a sort of lustful manner. The last two examples are also based on the sensual quality of the impression of the Milky Way, referring to the head and face of Komako which embody the past sensual love-affair. This type of characteristic expression of natural imagery consists of the theme "love" which contains sex and sensuality. The motivation and reason of Shimamura to visit Komako stems in part from the attractiveness of Komako's body described in the word "cleanness" like the white snow. In the early part of this story, Shimamura's remark, "this (i.e. the forefinger of his left hand) remembered you best of all,"¹⁶⁾ reveals his sensual capacity for love. Although it is true that Kawabata has never described the sensuality of love in detail throughout the whole story, Kawabata carefully suggests it by means of depicting Komako's body and face viewed through Shimamura's eyes and impressions: "the bud of her lips opened and smoothly, like a beautiful little circle of leeches (its color and motion are similes of seductive lips)"¹⁷⁾ and "the fat on her abdomen was heavier, he noticed."¹⁸⁾ In this sense, the imagery, vastness, brightness and purity of the Milky Way are suggested in a sensual impression which alludes to the past expressions of love.

Furthermore, to resolve the relationship of love between Shimamura and Komako, Kawabata has created the finale, using the image of "the Milky Way." The rapid and abrupt transition from the Milky Way to the motion and action of the characters, and the shift of the images from the Milky Way to the fire are very impressive because of the premonition of the end of love. In this transition, Shimamura's realization and feeling that the moment of parting from Komako is near, are intensified in the confrontation with the vastness and permanence of the Milky Way. It seems that Shimamura acutely recognizes that his sensitive yet cold heart and his loneliness are closer to the Milky Way rather than to Komako's warm and passionate heart. He is painfully aware that Komako has devoted herself to him for many years, and what he has been given by her

passes in a flash through his mind. In that time, the sensual quality of the image "the Milky Way" decreases in its vast space and loses the immediate connection with love and Komako. Shimamura and his lonely mind alone are transformed to the Milky Way: "The Milky Way flowed down inside him with a roar."¹⁹ The Milky Way swallows existence and the emotions of human beings in its vastness and permanence.

As we have seen, there is a certain relationship between the Milky Way of *Snow Country* and that of Basho's poem. In spite of the difference between the meditative and sensual qualities of this image, both writers clearly are absorbed in the bright and vast imagery in the temperament of the night sky of autumn. Needless to say, Kawabata's way of using this image is not the same as Basho's. Even though his poetic novel takes advantage of the immediate signifying power of language in order to bring before us an imaginary life and love, a novel must still describe characters and incidents linked by a more or less adequate suggestion of causality; therefore, the image given by words in the novel can not extend purely and infinitely its meaning. Thus, the image "the Milky Way" in *Snow Country* loses the cosmic power of its meaning and association, while Basho creates the cosmic imagery by virtue of extending its meaning as far as possible. In other words, Kawabata uses it to illuminate and maintain the main theme "love" and relies on the perceptual yet sensual quality of the Milky Way, whereas Basho's imagery of the poem results from the meditative and philosophical. Aside from those differences, we can assert that Kawabata's attitude toward nature is relevant to Basho's poem in the Japanese tradition because of absorption in nature.

In fact, Kawabata increasingly tended to search for Japanese tradition through the ages when he began to write *Snow Country*. First of all, this tendency can be seen in his criticism on modern literature which disregards nature. In this criticism quoted in the early part of our essay, he also emphasizes that the traditional tanka and haiku surpass novels in describing nature. His frequent and abundant images of nature in *Snow Country* reinforce his statement. Furthermore, in his other essay, Kawabata refers to literary creation and individual talent in relation to nature. Doubting how original the individual talent of a writer

in literature is, he states that, "when a writer describes mountains, rivers, grass or trees, whether his description is based on what he has actually seen in a landscape or what he has imaginatively seen, it may be said that his creative power of the description springs from the cosmos and nature themselves."²⁰ According to Kawabata, the individuality of a poet is anonymously dissolved in nature and the universe: "Seeing the moon, he (i.e. a poet) becomes the moon, the moon seen by him becomes him. He sinks into nature, becomes one with nature."²¹ These statements typically reveal his idea on nature, as well as on creative power of a poet.

Since in Japan "there is no word for nature as something apart and distinct from man, something that might be contemplated by man, 'the thinking reed,' man was treated as an integral part of the whole, closely associated and identified with elements and forces of the world about him."²² Nature and the universe are incarnated in every being and phenomenon, not only man but also in life and even death. In these fundamental thoughts and attitudes, Basho said, "Learn about a pine tree from a pine tree, and about a bamboo plant from a bamboo plant."²³ He also stated that the poetic spirit in the great Japanese poets such as Saigyō in tanka and Sōgi in renga is led "to follow the ways of the universe and to become a friend with things of the seasons."²⁴ Following this kind of traditional idea and attitude for nature, Kawabata remarked in his Nobel acceptance speech: "The snow, the moon, the blossoms; words expressive of the seasons as they move one to another, included in the Japanese tradition the beauty of mountains and rivers and grass and trees, of all the myriad manifestations of nature, of human feeling as well."²⁵ Natural objects and the natural images in *Snow Country* spring from traditional Japanese ideas and attitudes toward nature.

In short, *Snow Country* is identified with Japanese classical poetry, haiku, encompassed in the long traditions of Japanese cultural circumstance and history. In particular, nature is the central feature both in Kawabata's work and in the haiku. Whether Kawabata's "eyes in their extremity" have seen the beauty of nature or not, *Snow Country* undoubtedly incarnates it, like Japanese traditional poetry.

1) Yasunari Kawabata, *The Complete Works of Yasunari Kawabata*, XIII (Tokyo:

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- Shinchosha, 1977), p. 58.
- 2) Yasunari Kawabata, *Snow Country*, trans. Edward G. Seidensticker (New York: Berkley Publishing Co., 1970), p. 11.
 - 3) Itaru Kawashima, *The World of Yasunari Kawabata* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1969), p. 204
 - 4) Yasunari Kawabata, *Snow Country*, p. 42-43.
 - 5) This place is the model locale which Kawabata used for *Snow Country*.
 - 6) Yasunari Kawabata, "The Literary Impression in the Travel," *The Complete Works of Yasunari Kawabata*, XVIII (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1977), p. 341. This essay was originally published in *Tokyo Asahi Newspaper* in 1935 when Kawabata began to write a part of *Snow Country*.
 - 7) Yasunari Kawabata, "Description of Nature," *The Complete Works of Yasunari Kawabata*, XVIII (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1977), p. 430. This essay was originally published in *Tokyo Asahi Newspaper* in 1936.
 - 8) Yasunari Kawabata, "Description" in "Miscellaneous Comments," *The Complete Works of Yasunari Kawabata*, XVIII (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1977), p. 392. This comment was originally presented in *Bungeikonwakai* in 1936.
 - 9) Yasunari Kawabata, *Snow Country*, p. 134.
 - 10) Basho Matsuo, A Collection of Basho's Haiku Poems, ed. Atsuzo Otani and Shunjo Nakamura (Tokyo: Iwanamishoten, 1962), p. 131.
 - 11) Sado is an island on the Sea of Japan, about fifty miles off the mainland coast. Historically, this island was the prison where some eminent persons, including Zeami, a famous Nō dramatist and Nichiren, a great evangelist of Buddhism were forced to lead the sorrowful lives.
 - 12) Basho Matsuo, A Collection of Basho's Essays and Letters, ed. Shoichiro Sugiura, et. al. (Tokyo: Iwanamishoten, 1959), p. 168.
 - 13) Yasunari Kawabata, *Snow Country*, p. 134.
 - 14) *Ibid.*, p. 136.
 - 15) *Ibid.*, p. 136.
 - 16) *Ibid.*, p. 20.
 - 17) *Ibid.*, p. 33.
 - 18) *Ibid.*, p. 88.
 - 19) *Ibid.*, p. 142.
 - 20) Yasunari Kawabata, "A Vulgar Opinion," *The Complete Works of Yasunari Kawabata*, XVIII (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1977), p. 183.
 - 21) Yasunari Kawabata, *Japan, the Beautiful and Myself* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1969), pp. 71-70.
 - 22) Shunzo Sakamaki, "Shinto: Japanese Ethnocentrism," in *The Japanese Mind: Essentials of Japanese Philosophy and Culture*, ed. Charles A. Moore (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1967), p. 24.

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- 23) Doho Hattori, "Three Short Books," *Documents of Renga and Haikai Criticism*, ed, Saizo Kido and Noichi Imoto (Tokyo: Iwanamishoten, 1961), p. 399.
- 24) Basho Matsuo, *A Collection of Basho's Essays and Letters*, p. 52.
- 25) Kawabata, *Japan*, op. cit., p. 68.

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