

Yasunari Kawabata and the Nostalgia of the Timeless Time

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Abstract: Seeking to express the inexpressible, combining linguistic simplicity with literary ambiguity, Yasunari Kawabata (1899–1972) explored an area of modern Japanese prose in an original and apparently unequalled manner. His novels are constituted from a flow of images; temporal continuity and causal objectivity are replaced by an inner unity which goes beyond space and time. Suggesting that between people and things there is a coordination and synchronization of feelings, a mutual influence named by Japanese aesthetics *mono no aware*, the novel *Snow Country*, using the *haiku* technique, which concentrates the image in the details, fragments, succeeds in suspending the antinomy between real and eternal. The text suggests that, after all, the duality of this world, the hiatus between the world of reality and of intuition, between nature and mind, between civilization and basic human instincts, between present and the timeless time is passed beyond. Man is continuously searching for the eternity from which he was detached through the existence he received, seeking for the primordial entity from which the human being was tragically separated by the pleasures of the world which have been given to him together with the pain of being. The present study tries to examine a possible answer offered by Kawabata's novel to the eternal dilemma of Japanese spirituality of choosing between sensuality (or living) and the attraction of nothingness, as it is proposed by Zen Buddhism.

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“You paint the branch well,
and you hear the sound of the wind...”

Yasunari Kawabata, *Japan, the Beautiful and Myself*

Seeking to express the inexpressible, combining linguistic simplicity with literary ambiguity, Yasunari Kawabata (1899–1972) explored an area of modern Japanese prose in an original and apparently unequalled manner.

Yasunari Kawabata was preoccupied not only by the avant-garde techniques promoted by the literary experiments of his time, but also by the aesthetic awareness inherited from the literary tradition.¹ His literary career started in 1926 with the novel *Izu no odoriko* (*The Dancing Girl of Izu*), but he gained fame with *Yukiguni* (*Snow Country*) (1935–1937, 1948), the idea of the “beauty” concept remaining the Japanese writer's main preoccupation after the end of World War II as well: *Senbazuru*

¹ Donald Keene, *Literatura japoneză*, translated in Romanian by Doina and Mircea Oprea, Preface and Japanese Literary Compendium by Sumiya Haruya (Bucureşti: Univers, 1991), 132.

(*Thousand Cranes*) (1949), *Yama no oto* (*The Sound of the Mountain*) (1949), *Nemureru bijo* (*The House of the Sleeping Beauties*) (1960), *Koto* (*The Old Capital*) (1961).

He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1968; on this occasion Yasunari Kawabata delivered a lecture entitled *Utsukushii Nihon no Watashi* (*Japan, the Beautiful and Myself*). The particle (postposition) *no* in the original title of the lecture can be interpreted as having the role (usual in the Japanese language as a matter of fact) of suggesting possession, and therefore, from the perspective of this interpretation, the adequate translation would be: *I Who Belong to a Beautiful Japan* or *My Beautiful Japan*. Another possible function of the particle *no* would be to connect “beautiful Japan” and “myself” and it should be rendered into English by juxtaposition: *Japan, the Beautiful and Myself*.

The title of Yasunari Kawabata’s discourse *Japan, the Beautiful and Myself* (*Utsukushii Nihon no Watashi*) hides, in fact, a lecture on a mysticism which can be found not only in Japan but in all eastern philosophy founded on the doctrine of Zen Buddhism. Though a 20th century writer, Yasunari Kawabata acknowledged “bravely” with the occasion of the Nobel Prize awarding ceremony that his works can be identified with the letter and the spirit of medieval poems written by Zen monks. These poems conceive words, pointed out Kawabata, in their inability to express the truth as closed shells and only abandoning himself and entering freely in these shells can the reader truly understand them. His works, Yasunari Kawabata admitted in the conclusion of his lecture, had been described by literary critics as an attempt to approach *nothingness*, but this interpretation, warned the Japanese author, must not be associated with western *nihilism*, since the spiritual foundation of his creations is quite different. Dogen (1200–1253), exemplified Yasunari Kawabata in what followed, entitled his poem celebrating the four seasons *Innate Reality* (“In the spring, cherry blossoms, in the summer the cuckoo. / In autumn the moon, and in winter the snow, clear, cold.”), and, though he sang of the beauty of nature, he was, in fact, deeply immersed in Zen.¹ Yasunari Kawabata’s lecture delivered at the Nobel Prize awarding ceremony became, in the end, an open confession about the life he led and the literature he created.

20th century Japanese prose is undoubtedly closely connected with Yasunari Kawabata’s name. His writings appeared, according to the custom of the age, in instalments of limited length in literary magazines, as some kind of “slow-motion”² novels which can be seen as texts constituted from several short narrative sequences. When the author, however, gathered these units in order to publish them in an independent book, he offered by this new reading a new text as in the case of the novel *Yukiguni* (*Snow Country*), which brought to Kawabata the Nobel Prize for Literature. This text was published at first in different publications in the course of thirteen years under the form of some separate parts considered autonomous. The chapters of the novel are therefore conceived as relatively independent units, and the fact that one unit succeeds or is followed by another becomes clear only when all is melted in a single

¹ See Yasunari Kawabata, *Japan, the Beautiful and Myself*, in *From Nobel Lectures, Literature 1968-1980*, editor-in-charge Tore Frängsmyr, ed. Sture Allén, (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co., 1993).

² Cf. Irmela Hijiya-Kirschnereit, “L’inspiration autobiographique. Le *shishōsetsu* dans la littérature japonaise contemporaine. La vivacité d’un genre prétendu mort”, in *Littérature Japonaise Contemporaine. Essais*, ed. Patrick De Voss, (Bruxelles: Editions Labor, 1989), 46.

unit, a unified whole.¹ Consequently, these episodes are not organized around a plot; the richly detailed descriptions have the precedence in such narrative texts, real *engravings* from words giving way to the impression that these are rather essays in prose.

Yasunari Kawabata whose novels dwell on the confines of dream, declared in 1947, at the moment when the capitalist industrialization of the Japanese archipelago began, that, in such a time he can neither be in tune with, nor feel solidarity with, he can do nothing else than to return to “the immemorial sadness of Japan”: “Depuis la défaite, il ne me reste qu’à m’en retourner dans la tristesse immémoriale du Japon.”² He explored thus in his books hallucinatory experiences, he tried to penetrate the “demons’ world”,³ the very intimate perimeter of dangerous nocturnal zones, but, at the same time he also watched the simplest plays of life in daylight, contemplating them with wonder and delight, as a miracle. Having a romantic disposition, Yasunari Kawabata wished to transcend reality and always found the possibility to shut it out. In *Yukiguni* (*Snow Country*, 1948), for example, bare reality can never be observed, only the eventual images of this detected in a *mirror*.⁴

For Europe, whose confrontation with the Land of the Rising Sun was not direct, but only mediate, this “beautiful mirror” has never been broken. Those who after World War II wrote about Japan, Martin Heidegger, Roland Barthes or Lévi Strauss only projected the western world’s self-consciousness on an ... absence. Through *Snow Country* Japan becomes for the other, for the European reader a beautiful, ephemeral and fragile Japan similar to the geisha in the novel. Kawabata himself, entitling his speech delivered on the Nobel Prize awarding ceremony in Stockholm in 1968 *Japan, the Beautiful and Myself* (*Utsukushii Nihon no Watashi*), paid eulogistic homage to this mysterious beauty of an ephemeral and fragile Japan.⁵ The Land of the Rising Sun consequently became a “snow country” situated on the other side of the mirror, the image of the “beautiful Japan” in danger becoming fixed with no connection at all with the militarist ideology promoted by the Japanese in the period previous to and during World War II. Kawabata preserved his dignity in these turbulent nationalistic times since he did not commit himself to anything. Neither did he change his attitude in the course of years. For the Japanese writer, it seems, there was no room for History, and his oeuvre fixed its own context of manifestation: Japan is the “snow country” in which beauty becomes equivalent with sadness. Undoubtedly, Kawabata’s Japan is a charm, a “mirror”, which never encounters the “other”. And Beauty is nothingness, the void sublimated towards transcendence, revealed in the world for the human being as the *beauty of transitory and ephemeral things* or *mono no aware* as this “movement of the soul” was defined in Japanese language more than two hundred years ago by Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801): “A voir, à entendre quelque chose, on pense que c’est émouvant, triste, etc. Ce mouvement du cœur, c’est précisément éprouver le *mono no aware*.”⁶

¹ See Ibid., 47.

² Apud Jean-Jacques Origas, “Dans la lumière des jours ordinaires. Histoire et roman de l’après guerre”, in *Littérature Japonaise Contemporaine. Essais*, ed. Patrick De Voss (Bruxelles: Editions Labor, 1989), 18.

³ See Ibid., 18–19.

⁴ Cf. Karatani Kōjin, “D’un dehors à l’autre. Kawabata et Takeda Taijun”, in *Littérature Japonaise Contemporaine. Essais*, ed. Patrick De Voss (Bruxelles: Editions Labor, 1989), 33–34.

⁵ See Ibid., 33–35.

⁶ Apud Ibid., 37.

The world, exempt from the chances of History, was limited to feelings, and the Japanese writer chose to “return” to old Japan. Yasunari Kawabata recommenced his quest from before the war, and, in 1947, he added a final chapter to the novel *Snow Country* – published in one volume ten years before –, which he modified and extended without paying attention to the fact that the text became more and more enigmatic. He abandoned himself to the will of time choosing willingly an intermittent and alternating creation,¹ his later serial novels, *Senbazuru* (*Thousand Cranes*), *Yama no oto* (*The Sound of the Mountain*), published in instalments in different publications, presenting the same interruptions, continuations, stops, so that the final variant gathered the fragments seemingly independent in a chain of musical movements.

As a natural consequence of this way of writing the characters of Yasunari Kawabata’s narrative texts cannot be analyzed in the traditional terms of the epic discourse such as a plot or dramatic conflict since their personalities are ephemeral and the inner landscape of their life is relative and not systematically explored.² This inner landscape is however reflected in the outer landscape or through fleeting encounters with other people and the suggested insights offered by these become integral parts of a synchronic perception, not being, however, always particularly emphasized.

The novel *Snow Country* has three main characters: a middle aged dilettante rich man from Tokyo named Shimamura and two young women, Komako and Yōko who live in a small hot spring town in Echigo region in the north of Japan. The narration presents the three visits Shimamura paid to this region. The first, three day long visit began on May 21, when Komako, a geisha in the hot spring station, was nineteen years old. The second visit took place in early winter the same year: Shimamura arrived on December 8 and stayed for a few weeks. The third and last visit happened two years later when Shimamura arrived to the spa at the beginning of autumn and left only after the first snowfall. Shimamura is thus the centre of the novel,³ the character through whom the reader arrives to the snow country and gets to know the other two protagonists of the narration, fragile women, dreams reversed on themselves,⁴ in an emotional nihilism, closed in a mirror.

The novel does not follow the chronological order of the visits, Shimamura’s journeys representing the reiterated nostalgia of the search for the timeless time, a suspended time situated between reality and dream. The opening scene of the novel, establishing the growing distance from Tokyo, the real metropolis, is connected to Shimamura’s second visit, the protagonist being carried by the train towards the hot spring resort in the mountains.

¹ Cf. Origas, *Dans la lumière*, 18.

² Cf. Anthony V. Liman, “Kawabata’s Lyrical Mode in *Snow Country*”, *Monumenta Nipponica*, 3/4 (1971): 267.

³ Cf. Makoto Ueda, “The Virgin, the Wife, and the Nun: Kawabata’s *Snow Country*”, in *Approaches to the Modern Japanese Novel*, ed. Kinya Tsuruta and Thomas E. Swann (Tokyo: Sophia University, 1976), 73.

⁴ Cf. Kōjin, *D’un dehors à l’autre*, 39.



ENSŌ – *The Zen Circle*
(Calligraphy by Rodica Frențiu)

The novel's first sentence translated into English ("The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country."¹) tries to interpret the original "Kunizakai no nagai tonneru o nukeru to yukiguni de atta,"² which literally would translate as "Passing through a long tunnel at the border, there was the snow country." The English translation, introducing the grammatical subject "the train", makes explicit what passes through the tunnel, an element which does not appear in the Japanese sentence, creating thus a quite different impression of perspective on the scene as compared to the original. The first sentence of the Japanese novel suggests a quick change of scenery and images, the train being only the instrument, therefore unmentioned, which makes possible the passage from a dark and narrow space to a wide and luminous one, that of the snow country. The translation, focusing on the "train", interpreted as the grammatical subject, modifies the text by introducing an objective perspective:³ not the change of place is important, but rather the change of status of an entire scene. The narrator and the hero, in this English translation seem clearly separated: the narrator observes the hero sitting in the train which carries him to a snow-covered country. In the Japanese sentence, giving precedence to the subjective perspective, the narrator seems to travel in the same train as the hero of the novel sharing the same events and experiences. The "inexplicitness" characteristic to Japanese language, which does not specify the subject, makes possible for the readers to interpret this sentence as the hero's inner monologue in the train.⁴ Moreover, the readers themselves may have the illusion that they are in the same compartment, sharing with the book's hero this initiation-like passage from darkness to light, from a closed space to an open one. The lack of a clearly marked subject invites the readers to project themselves to the atmosphere created by the lines, making possible for them to become themselves the character of the novel. This results in the narrator's identification with the character and the readers, the impersonal beginning immersing everyone into the text, and the story which starts cannot be attributed to anyone in particular. And the novel can be interpreted, in the end, as the separation of the self from the world, but, at the same time, also as an attempt to reconcile⁵ the exterior with the interior.

Snow Country then continues with a diegetic narrative text in third person, related from the perspective of the main hero, Shimamura, the type of the modern intellectual, who bored by his Tokyo life starts in a quest for something beautiful: a region, a woman, a sensation that could rouse him from his state of indifference. The novel covers a time interval of three years, but the flow of time is not reproduced in totality: only those moments are selected which could tempt Shimamura to meet Beauty/ the Beautiful. By the way, Shimamura once showed a powerful interest in the traditional *kabuki* theatre, but, at the moment when the occasion arrived to enter into real contact

¹ Yasunari Kawabata, *Snow Country*, transl. and introd. by Edward G. Seidensticker, (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1978), 3.

² Kawabata Yasunari, *Yukiguni (Snow Country)* (Tokyo: Bungeishunju, 1988), 5.

³ Cf. Ikegami Yoshihiko, *Gengogaku wa honyaku no yakunitatsu ka*, *Ronza* 9 (2007): 200–205, 203–204.

⁴ See Yoshihiko Ikegami, "Discourse Analyses in Japan. Introduction", in *An Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of Discourse*, ed. Teun A. Van Dijk, (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1989), 267.

⁵ Cf. Liman, *Kawabata's Lyrical Mode*, 268.

with this form of theatre, he abandoned it and found a substitute for it in western ballet though he had never seen a performance directly on the stage.

The story in *Snow Country* is dissolved in a flow of images, while temporal continuity and causal objectivity are replaced by an inner unity transcending space and time. The protagonist Shimamura's only link to reality is through his sense perception (*kankaku*), this being his only source of information about reality. The author's insistence on sensory, especially visual perception and his consequent avoidance of discursive reasoning and intellectual processes¹ result in the indirect interpretation of events and of character's features in a particular moment, recalling the cinematographic technique of commentary through images. In Kawabata's case, however, this commentary is never too explicit or definitive, the visual sensation, the image opening the road towards the interpretation of a complex sense.

One of Kawabata's favourite ways for establishing relationship with nature is the mirror,² the object which in the short story *The Moon on the Water* [*Gessui*, 1953] becomes the link between the other two characters, playing magically with distances, fusing the past with the present, becoming the proof of love for the sick, bedridden husband who, by the aid of the mirror, can follow not only his wife working in the garden but also the moon reflected in the garden pool. Similarly, in the novel *Snow Country* the mirror is a permanent presence which establishes interhuman relationships, appearing already in the first lines of the novel when Shimamura observes the eyes of Yōko, a girl with "a cold beauty" sitting on the opposite seat, reflected in the window of the night train carrying him to the snow country: "...it was only the reflection in the window of the girl opposite. Outside it was growing dark, and the lights had been turned on in the train, transforming the window into a mirror. The mirror had been clouded over with steam until he drew that line across it."³

And the clouded window seems to be the best mirror since it does not only reflect things, but also dilutes reality due to its transparency: "The light inside was not particularly strong, and the reflection was not as clear as it would have been in a mirror. Since there was no glare, Shimamura came to forget that it was a mirror he was looking at. The girl's face seemed to be out in the flow of the evening mountains."⁴

Snow itself is transformed in the novel into an immense mirror, which makes possible to relate the novel's heroes to the natural scenery in the background: man and nature are brought together, beauty becomes tangible from time to time, as, for example, in the moment when the red cheeks of Komako, a geisha Shimamura met in the hot spring resort during his first visit, and her black hair are in contrast with the whiteness of the snow reflected in the mirror. It is the "morning" mirror which reminds Shimamura of the other face seen on the train in the "night" mirror: "The white in the depths of the mirror was the snow, and floating in the middle of it were the woman's bright red cheeks. There was an indescribably fresh beauty in the contrast. Was the sun already up? The brightness of the snow was more intense; it seemed to be burning icily. Against it, the woman's hair became a clearer black, touched by a purple sheen."⁵

¹ Cf. Ibid.

² See Kinya Tsuruta, "The Flow-Dynamics in Kawabata Yasunari's *Snow Country*", *Monumenta Nipponica* 3/4 (1971): 251–265, 252.

³ Kawabata, *Snow Country*, 7.

⁴ Ibid., 10.

⁵ Ibid., 48.

The mirror thus serves as a distance regulator, blurring the spatial dimensions of the real world, combining two objects, as well as elements belonging to the human sphere with those of the natural world in a manner impossible in physical space.¹ The experience is, however, sometimes questioned as illusory by the protagonist's mind, and, consequently, the relationship between the truly outer and inner sensation is often made vague. The perceptual framework is configured by *im*-pression and *ex*-pression,² almost interchangeable, the boundary between objective and subjective being strongly altered. Shimamura's inner world becomes more and more unintelligible and it is difficult to understand why his mind associates the dead insects in the room with his children left in Tokyo: "He spent much of his time watching insects in their death agonies. Each day, as the autumn grew colder, insects died on the floor of his room. Stiff-winged insects fell on their backs and were unable to get to their feet again. A bee walked a little and collapsed. It was a quiet death that came with the change of seasons. Looking closely, however, Shimamura could see that the legs and feelers were trembling in the struggle to live. For such a tiny death, the empty eight-mat room seemed enormous.

As he picked up a dead insect to throw it out, he sometimes thought for an instant of the children he had left in Tokyo."³

An emotional experience and a universal sensibility connect the unconscious (or semi-conscious) emotion with a natural phenomenon. A sensualist who transgressed the limits of visceral sensory experience, Kawabata tried to find tangible expression for the intangible and invisible. The images seem to be illogical, impressionistic, and associative,⁴ serving the perception model as a matrix image on the artistic level, being this way unfavourable to the composition. Otherwise, all Japanese aesthetic theories⁵ refuse the principles of a coherent logical construction and minimize the role of the intellect in the structure of an art work, according to the belief that human life is essentially irrational, and the universe is far from being a logical construction. Even the chapters of the novel, published as independent texts in different magazines between 1935 and 1947, can seemingly be arranged in the manner of a *renga* poem ("linked poem"): *Yūgeshiki no kagami* (*Mirror of the Evening Scene*), *Shiroi asa no kagami* (*Mirror of a White Morning*), *Monogatari* (*Tale*), *Torō* (*Futile Efforts*), *Kaya no hana* (*Miscanthus Flower*), *Hi no makura* (*Pillow of Fire*), *Temari uta* (*The Handball Song*), *Setchū kaji* (*Fire in the Snow*), *Amanogawa* (*The Milky Way*), which proves undeniably that the novel followed the writer's life and that the narrative text, not being mechanistically, inorganically constructed, was conformed to its author's rhythm of life.

And only the mirror can help the imagination draw the surrounding reality under its control, and it can dissolve, connect, filter, absorb, intensify, and emphasize contrasts. The realm of dreams and dreaming is not given *ab ovo*; it must be constructed, the reader being able to participate actively in the creative act. In the second part of the novel the image of the mirror appears only as a brief reminiscence towards the end, summing up Shimamura's entire experience in the snow country, emphasizing the

¹ See Tsuruta, *The Flow-Dynamics*, 253.

² Cf. Liman, *Kawabata's Lyrical Mode*, 270.

³ Kawabata, *Snow Country*, 131–132.

⁴ Cf. Liman, *Kawabata's Lyrical Mode*, 271.

⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, 272.

irreconcilable discrepancy¹ between a moment of “cold” timeless beauty and the profane, “tragic” time of a “warm” human relationship: “He remembered the snowy morning toward the end of the year before, and glanced at the mirror. The cold peonies floated up yet larger, cutting a white outline around Komako. Her kimono was open at the neck, and she was wiping at her throat with a towel.”²

But Shimamura proves to be helpless when trying to “collaborate” with bare reality. Towards the end of the first part Komako’s image is dissolved so that the protagonist meets in the second part of the novel, during his third, last, and longest visit a Komako who has become a concrete presence, much more real, with a plumper body and with a skin, which formerly had the translucency of a silkworm, changed into something different: “Insects smaller than moths gathered on the thick white powder of her neck. Some of them died there as Shimamura watched. The flesh on her neck and shoulders was richer than it had been the year before. She is just twenty, he told himself.”³

Taking place in the autumn, the season which mingles life and death, Komako’s drama, her “sacrifice” or “punishment” is consummated, ending in Shimamura’s real world. The natural whiteness of the snow and the artificial whiteness of the powder on Komako’s shoulders stir up nostalgia in the town dweller’s soul for a time of beauty beyond time, a timeless time, since “White is the cleanest of colors, it contains in itself all the other colors.”⁴ But the more real Komako becomes the more she favours the appearance of a void in Shimamura’s soul, who has misgivings regarding lasting human feelings. He becomes more and more passive, and his movements between the two places, Tokyo and Echigo, between him and the two women (Komako and Yōko), and between himself as a real presence and himself as the incurable dreamer seem to end in the final scene of the fire when he looks at the spasm in Yōko’s leg caused by her fall from the burning building: “That stiff figure, flung out into the air, became soft and plaint. With a doll-like passiveness, and the freedom of the lifeless, it seemed to hold both life and death in abeyance. (...) ...there was a suggestion of a spasm in the calf of Yoko’s leg, stretched out on the ground. (...) At the spasm of Yoko’s leg, a chill passed down his spine to his very feet. His heart was pounding in an indefinable anguish. (...) There was but that slight movement in her leg after she struck the earth. She lay unconscious. For some reason Shimamura did not see death in the still form. He felt rather that Yoko had undergone some shift, some metamorphosis.”⁵

As Komako becomes more and more concrete and real, affirming the status of an almost oppressive reality, Yōko, though very close to reality at the beginning of the novel, becomes detached from it, getting farther and farther from it until entering death. Yōko has however too little physical reality,⁶ her concrete characteristics being limited to a pair of unreal eyes and a voice so beautiful that it seems to be sad: “Kanashii hodo utsukushii koe de atta.”⁷ Otherwise, the kanji combination referring in the text to her voice is *kodama* (echo) translated literally as “the spirit of the trees”, her voice seeming

¹ See Ibid., 276.

² Kawabata, *Snow Country*, 149–150.

³ Ibid., 96.

⁴ Kawabata, *Japan, the Beautiful and Myself*, 6.

⁵ Kawabata, *Snow Country*, 173–174.

⁶ Cf. Tsuruta, *The Flow-Dynamics*, 254.

⁷ Kawabata, *Yukiguni*, 7.

to vibrate in Shimamura as the echo from somewhere else: "That voice, so beautiful it was almost lonely, lingered in Shimamura's ears as if it were echoing back from somewhere in the snowy mountains."¹

Yōko's appearances in the novel are flash like; she seems to resemble a fairy from children's tales. She has no body, only eyes, a voice, and an impersonal face, "with the motionless simplicity of a mask", so that Shimamura is always wondering, even when he hears her singing whether he has not seen her in fact in a dream. Her voice is however the voice of death embracing life, and only the bride of death could initiate Shimamura in the secrets of the eternal world.

The final scene of the fire follows the same movement entering reality, and the fall of Yōko, the girl so closely bound to death, apparently unreal, extracted from time, is torn from the charm of dreaming which connected it to Shimamura by Komako's cry. In the end the two women meet: "Komako screamed and brought her hands to her eyes. Shimamura gazed at the still form."² Maybe the characteristics of the two women can be highlighted by a Shimamura cold as the lens of a camera, the ever moving mirror through which crude reality could be liquefied and through which one could pass beyond the boundary of life and death in a state of dream.

The penultimate chapter entitled *Fire in the Snow*, by means of its oxymoronic image, is the one towards which all the other images of the novel converge as some polyphonic images. The plot unfolds around this unifying image³ and its intensity increases, while the other images are carefully selected, following the logic of dreams and of the subconscious in order to transform the novel *Snow Country* in a coherent text. Shimamura's spatial movement between Echigo and Tokyo seems to be made to affect the temporal dimension as well. Shimamura visits the snow country three times: in early summer, in early winter, and in a late autumn extended in winter. The structure of the novel, however, does not follow the chronological order of the visits, the early winter visit constituting the beginning of the narration when through flash-back technique⁴ the first visit to this mountain resort is related, on which occasion Shimamura makes the acquaintance of Komako, and his late autumn visit prolonged until the beginning of winter will close the narration. Thus not only the temporal linearity is broken by swerving from the seasons' chronological order, but also the oxymoronic reality of life and death can appear by means of the fire projected against the snowy background.

The novel *Snow Country* starts with a scene focusing on the main character Shimamura and the image of the girl (Yōko) sitting opposite him reflected in the window of the train. In the next scene the memory of the girl (Komako) towards whom Shimamura is travelling is awakened by means of his moving forefinger, while the sequence of scenes concludes with superposed images, when with the aid of the mirror created by the misted window of the train the reflected image of the present is superposed on the past of memory: "Shimamura stared at his left hand as the forefinger bent and unbent. Only this hand seemed to have a vital and immediate memory of the woman he has going to see. The more he tried to call up a clear picture of her, the more his memory failed him, the farther she faded away, leaving him nothing to catch and hold. In the midst of the uncertainty only the hand, and in particular the forefinger, even

¹ Kawabata, *Snow Country*, 83.

² Ibid., 173.

³ Cf. Liman, *Kawabata's Lyrical Mode*, 272.

⁴ See Tsuruta, *The Flow-Dynamics*, 255.

now seemed damp from her touch, seemed to be pulling him back to her from afar. Taken with the strangeness of it, he brought the hand to his face, then quickly drew a line across the misted-over window. A woman's eye floated up before him. He almost called out in his astonishment. But he had been dreaming, and when he came to himself, he saw that it was only the reflection in the window of the girl opposite."¹

An apparently objective mirror, distanced from the onlooker, and another one strongly subjective related to the hero's own memories become superposed, as it happens in the last chapter where the past time is connected with the present time and finally abolished. Nevertheless, passing beyond time neither alters the time of the material, real space, nor of the unreal dream world. The two time axes form a continuum in the novel broken only at the end, when in the sequence of the fire in the silk worm storeroom Shimamura contemplates the Milky Way (Amanogawa) and time eludes temporality: "Shimamura too looked up, and he felt himself floating into the Milky Way. Its radiance was so near that it seemed to take him up into it. Was this the bright vastness the poet Bashō saw when he wrote of the Milky Way arched over a stormy sea? The Milky Way came down just over there, to wrap the night earth in its naked embrace. There was a terrible voluptuousness about it. Shimamura fancied that his own small shadow was being cast up against it from the earth. Each individual star stood apart from the rest, and even the particles of silver dust in the luminous clouds could be picked out, so clear was the night. The limitless depth of the Milky Way pulled his gaze up into it."²

As the intertextual reference to Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694) suggests, it seems that writer wrote the last novel's last chapter with the poet's *haiku* lurking in his mind: "Araumi ya / Sado ni yokotau, / Amanogawa".³ Therefore, Yasunari Kawabata's works of a profoundly oriental modesty and quietness maybe are dominated by a mysterious lyricism rooted exactly in the poetic formula of the *haiku*, the Japanese poem of seventeen syllables, which trained the prose writer's eye and taught the master the high science of concentrating the image in the detail, the fragment, remembering that between man and things there is, there must be a coordination, synchronization of feelings, a mutual modelling named by Japanese aesthetics *mono no aware* (literally: 'the movement of the heart towards things'). His surroundings can arouse in man an emotion, agitation, making him aware sometimes of the irreversible passing through the world of all things, be they objects or feelings. What remains is only resignation before the Absolute, which, according to *shinto* belief, works eternally.⁴ The entire universe is overcome by a certain sadness of things, a sentiment of melancholy, a thought of resigned solitude; and art is meant to reveal it vaguely and to dissolve it partially.

The silence of the Milky Way suspends the antinomy between real and eternal, between the present and the timeless time, the eternity from which man was torn away through the existence he received, the One from which the human being was separated by the pleasures of the world given to him together with the pain of being. There is in this encounter between Shimamura, the traveller between Echigo and Tokyo, between Komako and Yōko, between real and unreal, and the heavenly way almost a mystical

¹ Kawabata, *Snow Country*, 7.

² Ibid., 165.

³ Bashō, *Cent onze haiku*, Traduits du japonais par Joan Titus-Carmel, (Paris : Verdier, 1998), 46.

⁴ Cf. Yoshihiko Ikegami, "Sign Conception in Japan", in *Semiotics. A Handbook on the Sign – Theoretic Foundations of Nature and Culture*, ed. by Roland Posner, Klauss Robering, Thomas A. Sebeok, (Berlin–New-York: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), 1904.

experience,¹ which appears situated between delicate sensuality and spirituality that is neither carnal, nor metaphysical, suggesting in the novel a kind of “modern transfer” of a nostalgia for the lost paradise.

Shimamura’s immersion in the Milky Way seems to imply that the duality of this world, the hiatus between the world of reality and the world of intuition, between civilization and basic human instincts, between the snowy region with its hot springs and the fire under the Milky Way from the end are surpassed. The invocation of the eternal dilemma of Japanese spirituality of choosing between sensuality or being in life and the attraction of the void seems to get an answer. The spatial poles are set in motion and their position is made relative:² Yōko meets Komako, the Earth is embraced by the Milky Way, fire springs up in the snow, the conflagration is in contrast with the darkness of the night, and the sparks of the flames with the stars. The fusion of the consciousness/mind, of the ego and the everything in “One” is almost an ecstatic moment when the unseen from beyond the appearances of the world is revealed, a liberation from all bounds, observing things detached as nothingness or transparency, lacking the tragic sense from the surface. But the state of impassivity, detachment from all thoughts and ideas, departing from the self and entering the realm of nothingness, which is not the emptiness of the West, but rather the reverse, a universe of the spirit in which everything communicates freely with everything, transcending bounds limitless,³ is the manifestation of the last truth as it is proposed by Zen Buddhism.

Situated beyond words and the intellect, Zen Buddhism is neither a study of the processes which govern thought and conduct, nor a theory of the principles or laws which govern the human law or the universe. It could rather be considered a kind of antiintellectualism or a form of intuitionism: “Zen is taken to be a form of antiintellectualism or a cheap intuitionism, especially when satori in Zen is explained as a flash like intuition.”⁴ The sinuous road of the individual’s quest for *enlightenment*, during which one’s own truth is revealed, is made by rising above the dual perspective applied by the self to the world of phenomena, dividing the world into subject and object, good and evil, etc. The world conceived by reason is for Zen Buddhism a false world, a world of ignorance and deception, far from the world of true reality. Negating the influence of reductionist reason, the world of discriminations would disappear together with it, and true Reality could replace it in its fullness. Negation, in its turn, is not simply abandon, but the redefinition of the world.

In Zen the Absolute is identified with *mu*, boundless *nothingness* that is entirely unsubstantial, consequently the individual can be, paradoxically, identical with this Absolute. *Nothingness* surrounds the individual, and the latter unmanipulated and ungoverned by any law or order by any kind, can thus establish relationship with its own self: “In Zen’s realization of absolute Nothingness, an individual is determined by absolutely no nothing. To be determined by absolutely no thing means the individual is determined by nothing other than itself in its particularity, it has complete self

¹ Cf. Liman, *Kawabata’s Lyrical Mode*, 284.

² Cf. *Ibid.*, 285.

³ See Kawabata, *Japan, the Beautiful and Myself*, 8.

⁴ Masao Abe, *Zen and Western Thought*, ed. William R. LaFleur, foreword by John Hick, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), 3.

determination without any transcendent determinant. This fact is equally true for every individual.”¹

The tension between *to be* (*u*) and *not to be* (*mu*) which governs the human condition is surpassed by *mu*, *nothingness* being the transcendence of the opposition being/non-being. *Mu* should not be interpreted as the negation of *u*. Being contrary to the concept of *u*, *mu* is a stronger form of negation than the simple *not to be*. Absolutized, it transcends both *u* and *mu* in their relative senses.² In other words, life no longer differs from death, good from evil, etc. It is supposed that in Buddhism life is not superior to death, life and death being two antagonistic processes precluding one another reciprocally, becoming, through this, inseparably connected to one another. What is called in Buddhism *samsara*, *transmigration* or *the wheel of death and life* is nothing other than the cycle of life and death, without a beginning and without an end. Only thus the past and the future become present, the only moment which can be recognized.³ And it seems that this eternal present neither enters, nor leaves behind time: it is the timeless time.

But to live for an ideal, be it beauty or purity, is extremely dangerous. Trying to reach the intangible, man risks his life, and boldness is rewarded by death. Maybe this is why Yōko must die, if not physically, at least spiritually, being the sacrifice for a type of dream like beauty based on the aspiration towards the intangible.⁴ Yōko, the eternal virgin, through death immortalized pure beauty, while Komako, the terrestrial maiden, also dies slowly in the second part of the novel, but in a different manner. In the eyes of Shimamura, attracted to the unreal and dreaming, Yōko, seen in the window of the night train, was transformed in an aesthetic gesture by the power of the window-mirror, and the experience of the fire brings back the novel's protagonist to the same coordinates: time has stopped⁵ and, together with it, the conventional polarity between life and death: “Two or three beams from the collapsing balcony were burning over the head. The beautiful eyes that so pierced their object were closed. (...) The fire flickered over the white face. Shimamura felt a rising in his chest again as the memory came to him of the night he had been on his way to visit Komako, and he had seen that mountain light shine in Yoko's face. The years and the months with Komako seemed to be lighted up in that instant; and there, he knew, was the anguish.”⁶

The fire makes spatial distances relative and loosens the time framework thrusting the future and the past into the present: it becomes imminent for the protagonists to part. By reversing the spatial sequences, the fire has suspended life and death. Distances have been modified, and the human being absorbed in the Milky Way is integrated in a process which liquefies reality⁷ enough to permit the fusion of the elements: the fire melts the snow, Yōko dies, and Komako loses the solidity she acquired. “The long geisha's skirt trailing behind her, she staggered through the pools of water and the charred bits of wood that lay scattered over the ground. She turned and

¹ Ibid.

² Cf. Ibid., 94.

³ See Ibid., 131.

⁴ Cf. Makoto Ueda, *Modern Japanese Writers and the Nature of Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 199.

⁵ See Tsuruta, *The Flow-Dynamics*, 264.

⁶ Kawabata, *Snow Country*, 174.

⁷ See Tsuruta, *The Flow-Dynamics*, 262.

struggled back with Yoko at her breast. Her face was strained and desperate, and beneath it, Yoko's face hung vacantly, as at the moment of the soul's flight. Komako struggled forward as if she bore her sacrifice, or her punishment."¹

The fire has united and separated the three people, but a more impressive union is to be achieved. Through the confusion of spatial and temporal dimensions, Shimamura's oscillatory movements in this world oriented towards life are abolished by the fire. And once inside this state of liquefaction maybe only an aesthetic experience could be possible: "Solid forms and conventional petrified relationships between things become pliant and liquid, almost reaching ideal transparency; things return to the open possibilities and freedom of chaos before time, yet their forms still reflect the material world. Shimamura's visual possession of things on the unreal level not only dematerializes and distills their rawness and tragic, temporal three-dimensionality, but also translates biological decay and death into imaginary death that can bring out life in its purest intensity."²

For the Japanese writer there is no division among things: the animate and the inanimate, man and beast, man and plant. The world is a gigantic river whose flow encompasses everything and only reason can see the existence of the world in isolation out of considerations for survival. Man enters this life empty handed, but, in order to survive, he learns to control his environment, trying not only to improve his temporal and spatial senses, but also the rational capacity to organize these sensations.³ Kawabata, however, takes advantage of dualities in order to eliminate them: Tokyo versus snow country, snow versus fire, sky versus earth, man versus woman, all are in the end immersed into the infinity of the Milky Way.

The western reader may somewhat be confused by this lack of action, conflict, clearly outlined identities and individualities which make one finally aware of the relationship with the external world, with reality. Undoubtedly, in Yasunari Kawabata's work the individual is not separated from the natural surroundings, though he is paradoxically isolated from the environment: "He tried to move toward that half-mad voice, but he was pushed aside by the men who had come up to take Yoko from her. As he caught his footing, his head fell back, and the Milky Way flowed down inside him with roar."⁴

Snow Country seems to be a journey towards the state of non-differentiation. During his visit to the region where *chijimi*, an expensive material for summer kimonos valued for its coolness, is made, Shimamura learns from the locals that the name of the tunnel connecting the two sides of the street is *tainai kuguri*, or literally, 'the passage of the womb'. In western terms the return to the embryo stage is a road of death, and to express it became a quest of several years for the Japanese writer.

Initially, Yasunari Kawabata planned to write a short story ending with the scene in which Shimamura looks at Komako's red cheeks in the mirror, a scene which would have clearly alluded to the beginning of the text. In this first version, in fact a series of seven short stories published in different magazines between 1935 and 1937, Komako's name does not appear at all, as if she were only Yoko's shadow. But Kawabata continued to write the text up to the scene when, leaving the snow country,

¹ Kawabata, *Snow Country*, 175.

² Liman, *Kawabata's Lyrical Mode*, 283.

³ Cf. Tsuruta, *The Flow-Dynamics*, 264.

⁴ Kawabata, *Snow Country*, 175.

Shimamura catches sight of Komako's red cheeks in the train window. When publishing this part in a magazine, wishing to mark the end of the novel, the Japanese writer wrote here: "The End". But later he changed his mind and added a few more scenes; the version published in 1937, which gathered all the already published sequences, bore the name *Yukiguni* (*Snow Country*) for the first time and ended with the famous scene in which Komako repeats Shimamura's words who told her she was "a good woman". The novel having been published, the writer did not seem satisfied with the harmony between its beginning and end. He published the continuation in two parts between 1940 and 1941. Still unsatisfied, he tried to end it between 1946 and 1947. The edition published in 1948, which has become the standard edition, presents a *Snow Country* with the final scene where Komako holds Yōko in her arms near the burning silkworm warehouse. But later the Japanese writer seemed to be unsure whether he had found the most suitable ending for the novel ("Perhaps I should not have made those additions."¹), since a shortened version, found after the writer committed suicide in 1972, ends with the scene of the "morning mirror". In other words, *Snow Country* has four different endings confirming by this the writer's wish that such a text ought to be "the sort of work that can be cut off at any point".²

The novel *Snow Country* suggests in the end the difficulty of the often fruitless quest for purity and beauty encountered during one's life, the quest for artistic beauty: "It is a novel with a religious theme, the theme, however, being expressed in terms more aesthetic, more sensual, and therefore in a more immediately appealing way than can be done by a sermon."³

The stream of consciousness technique, not the literature of associations and of memories in western manner exploring the psychological universe of infirmities, corruptions, and alienations of contemporary world, but in an extremely oriental manner recognizing naturalness and closeness to nature, makes almost useless the idea of an end for a literary text in Japanese mentality, since life nevertheless flows ceaselessly. Anyhow, it seems unquestionable that Shimamura would have been the model reader⁴ of Kawabata's novel: ...it should be there apparent on the surface, hidden behind...⁵

Translated by Ágnes Korondi

¹ Ueda, *Modern Japanese Writers*, 205.

² See Ibid., 205–206.

³ Ueda, *The Virgin, the Wife*, 88.

⁴ Ueda, *Modern Japanese Writers*, 203.

⁵ Kawabata, *Japan, the Beautiful and Myself*, 4.