

The Politics of Modernism in Kawabata Yasunari's 1920s Writing

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Introduction

In this paper, I intend to explore links between *cultural* life, especially in terms of the emergence of modernism, and *political* life in 1920s Japan. My main concern is with the writings of Kawabata Yasunari (1899-1972), but I will also make reference to the work of Kawabata's contemporary, Yokomitsu Riichi (1898-1947). Such a comparison is useful because it emphasizes the fact that, although all writers of the same generation largely share a common cultural and political zeitgeist, they also have the capacity to respond to their age in different, more personal and individualistic ways. It is precisely through attention to the differences between Kawabata and Yokomitsu that I aim to throw into sharper relief the unique manner of Kawabata's literary engagement with the cultural and political life of Japan during the 1920s.

As is well known, Kawabata and Yokomitsu were founding members of the Neo-Sensationalist group (*Shinkankaku-ha*), and critics have connected both writers with literary modernism. As its name implies, the group was particularly keen to concentrate on the concept of *kankaku* (sensation) as a means of fleshing out a modernist world-view. The Kawabata text I will use to explore links between modernism and sensation is his 1924 essay, 'Shinshin sakka no shin keikô kaisetsu.' I will compare this work with a 1925 essay by Yokomitsu Riichi, entitled 'Shinkankaku-ron: kankaku katsudô to kankakuteki sakubutsu ni taisuru hinan e no gyakusetsu.'

Kawabata is generally thought to have had little interest in broader social and political matters, but my argument is that there is indeed a political dimension to his writing. This leads me to conclude that Kawabata made his own contribution to the overall political environment in Japan during the 1920s. Let me begin therefore with some general comments about the political mood of the time so that we can get a sense of the social and historical context that informed Kawabata's literature.

Politics

In terms of politics, 1924 was the year in which two publications emerged that helped shape a new wave of literary developments in Japan. In June, proletarian writers began contributing to *Bungei sensen*, which was a sequel to the first important proletarian journal *Tane maku hito*, disbanded after a run of only two years following the 1923 earthquake. The second publication was *Bungei jidai*, which appeared from October 1924 and served as the main vehicle for writers connected to the Neo-Sensationalist group.

The 1920s was the decade in which Proletarian literature and Neo-Sensationalist writing emerged as two of the major currents of literary thought. Proletarian texts such as Tokunaga Sunao's 1929 *Taiyô no nai machi* exemplified that style of writing. Considering the upheavals emanating from the 1917 Russia revolution, it is hardly surprising that a mood of idealistic socialism inspired some writers such as Tokunaga to produce this sort of writing, which was created with the clear political objective of raising the revolutionary consciousness of the readership.

However, while it is perfectly reasonable to explore links between politics and literature by picking out direct political references from any literary work, this is not always the most productive method. This is especially so if we take into account the argument that politics can be understood not only at the macro level, that is, as a set of competing ideological perspectives and power relations within a society, but more indirectly and perhaps more subtly at the micro level, as the practice and theory of influencing people at the civic or individual level. If this is true, then one way in which that second, less ostentatious but no less pervasive form of political discourse was revealed is through literature.

But let us not overlook the complexity of trying to make sense of the relationship between literature and the wider world. While I believe there are certainly ways of finding connections between literature and politics—this is, after all, the main topic of my paper—it is also important to take into account the links between literature and culture. So let us now turn to this cultural dimension, specifically the relationship between these two authors and modernism.

Modernism

More than one book would be required to survey the huge disparity of views about how modernism should be defined among scholars. What *is* clear is that, even as a category, there is no consensus about the specific nature of modernism, and fundamental questions remain unresolved. Though the term itself was first coined by the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío as the name for a new Spanish-American literary movement in the second half of the nineteenth century, it was soon appropriated to describe a wide set of cultural practices

associated with western society. Indeed, the extent to which modernism is conceptually applicable to cultures beyond the sphere of Europe and North America is a question that has fuelled very productive intellectual debate in recent times, particularly in the field of post-colonial studies.

This is not the place to look further into modernism's so-called 'origins,' except to note some comments by the historian Harry Harootunian since they provide a useful key to imagining a specifically Japanese form of modernism that is rooted partly, at least, in its own native genealogy. Harootunian argues that Japan's modernity should not be seen as a secondary version of what might be called the "real thing" created in the west. Rather, what emerged in Japan was part of a larger global process, or in Harootunian's words, a "co-eval" form of modernity. He proposes that the phenomenon of modernity arose spontaneously in the world around the same time not only in Europe and the United States but also as far afield as Japan.¹ His argument is a compelling one, not least because it offers an alternative to the hierarchical view that the west is the originating source and standard by which non-western cultures must always be judged. However, more directly related to the subject of today's paper, it also raises the possibility that not only Japan's *modernity*, but also its *modernism* should be understood as a phenomenon co-eval with its counterparts elsewhere in the world.

This is not, of course, to claim that Japanese modernism arose in glorious isolation. If Japan's *modernity* was coterminous with similar developments in the west, close ties with the outside world since Meiji meant that Japan also became increasingly integrated into modern global systems of power and domination

¹ Harootunian, *Overcome by Modernity*, p. xvi.

that shaped relations between nations. Likewise, it might be best to think of Japanese *modernism* as emerging from an equivalent mixture of literary and cultural influences, both native and foreign, which helped shape the way some Japanese writers engaged with the modern world.

Now that we have some sense of the political and cultural dynamics at play when Kawabata and Yokomitsu first made their names as writers, let us move on to a comparison of their essays.

Two Sides of the Revolution

Kawabata and Yokomitsu both wrote essays that might be described, in different ways, as *revolutionary* works. However, they present two sides of the revolution.

Now, revolution is a word with a variety of meanings, but two meanings are particularly relevant to this paper. Let me begin with a less obvious understanding of the term. As part of the scientific lexicon, the word carries the metaphorical sense of a procedure or line of travel that follows a circuitous path and returns to the starting point, just as Copernicus once described the revolution of the planets around the sun. I think that this less familiar interpretation of revolution has greater traction in Kawabata's essay.

Kawabata's main purpose in "Shinshin sakka" is to discuss some of the newly emerging writers of his day. However, its most important theoretical significance is to attempt a definition of Neo-Sensationalism through close attention to the function of sensation itself. In some ways, the author appears to advocate revolution in the sense of a complete overthrow of social norms. For instance, he establishes an apocalyptic tone from the very beginning by asserting

that only “newness” (*atarashisa*) will guarantee writers their “entry into the kingdom of the arts for a new age.” He goes on to express doubt that proletarian writers have managed to produce the literary style they aspire to, namely, one that is capable of breaking through false bourgeois consciousness in order to bring about revolutionary change to social and political life. In Kawabata’s view, this is because proletarian writers have failed to address the fundamental question of literary expression, specifically concerning the concept of sensation. As Kawabata puts it, “without new expression there is no new content; without new sensation there is no new expression” (p. 174). It will come as no surprise that he believes it is his own group of Neo-Sensationalists who have exposed the false objectivism of earlier Naturalist fiction, and who have discovered an entirely novel interpretation of reality that makes them really worthy of the title of newly emerging writers.

In Kawabata’s view, the key to his ground breaking literary approach is precisely a heightened attention to sensation. Let me quote the example he himself provides in order to demonstrate how he believes Japanese modernists had broken new ground by re-evaluating the relationship between subjective and objective worlds:

For instance, sugar is sweet. In literature until now, the mind has first picked up this sweet quality from the tongue, and the mind has written, “it is sweet.” Now, however, “it is sweet” is written *with* the tongue. Again, until now people have written, “my eyes saw the red rose,” assuming the eyes and the rose to be separate things, but newly emerging novelists take the eyes and the rose to be one thing and write, “my eyes *are* the red rose” (p. 175).

The problem with this passage, and throughout the essay, is that Kawabata struggles to indicate convincingly how an unmediated relationship between the subject and the object can be attained except through the kind of declarative statements in his examples (in other words, he is saying “it is so because I say it is so.”)

The closest he comes to clarifying the nature of the relationship between subject and object is through what he calls a “new pleasure” that arises by “trusting in the absolute power of subjectivity.” By allowing this subjectivity to flow freely, he claims that “self and other become one, all things become one. The result is a monistic (*ichigen*) world in which the whole of creation loses every boundary and harmonizes into one spirit” (p. 177).

Now, this literary vision is problematic because Kawabata is taking refuge in a myth of undifferentiated harmony unrelated to historical circumstance, which hardly substantiates the iconoclastic new age he claims to be championing. More dangerously, he seems indifferent to an important distinction the literary critic Frank Kermode has made, that “fictions can degenerate into myths whenever they are not consciously held to be fictive.”² By ignoring that distinction, Kawabata is grasping for some semblance of stability through the amorphous spirit of a timeless and unproblematic native culture, rather than celebrating radical change. In this sense, the form of revolution that Kawabata is espousing is not so much the radical overthrow of the old and its replacement by the new, but rather a nostalgic appeal to the comforting fantasy of some original oneness of reality.

² Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, p. 39.

In short, Kawabata articulates a concept of revolution that might be described as a desire to return to the starting point, or to bring about a kind of restoration to an original state of being. In contrast, Yokomitsu's essay, "Shinkankaku-ron," points to the more common and immediately recognizable meaning of revolution; namely, as a force that seeks to produce fundamental change and the violent overthrow of existing social and political structures.

There are similarities in the essays. Yokomitsu parallels Kawabata's work in the way he employs the concept of sensation as a means to provide his own apocalyptic definition of Neo-Sensationalism. Unlike Kawabata, however, he is keener to highlight the destructive potential of the revolutionary moment. In Yokomitsu's interpretation of the relationship between subject and object, he asserts that sensation becomes manifest through what he calls "the subject's intuitive 'contact detonation' (*shokuhatsu butsu*) which strips nature of its external appearance and dances into the thing itself" (p. 76).

As with Kawabata, the language used by Yokomitsu here is not easy to decode. For one thing, the very words he uses do not reflect the usual vocabulary of literary criticism. In part, this points to a modernist-inspired impulse to deliberately break through the easy familiarity of language with the aim of forging greater insights into reality. But the cultural critic Gregory Golley has indicated how expressions like contact detonation reveal Yokomitsu's specific indebtedness to western scientific theories then circulating in Japan. Albert Einstein had attracted much popular interest during his visit to Japan in 1922, and his startling theories on the interdependency between apparently

discrete concepts of time and space were a source of popular debate.³ In this context, Yokomitsu's essay might be seen as a response to this scientific approach, by attempting to challenge the seemingly fixed boundaries between subject and object with an equivalent *literary* language of precision.

However, it is Yokomitsu's association of sensation with total destruction that really distinguishes his work from Kawabata's essay. Yokomitsu found it inconceivable that the bourgeois subject should be perceived as a discrete, fixed entity. Rather, he understood the self more as a kind of fluid function, or what he calls (again using a rather obscure, technical language) "the active faculty that is cognizant of the actual object itself" (p. 76). Moreover, at the moment of the subject's encounter with an object, he suggests that a violent reconfiguration of both subject and object takes place. This is in stark contrast to Kawabata's assertion, mild in comparison, that sensation is the key to overturning the old order. Yokomitsu goes much further by arguing that sensation serves as the trigger for a deadly combustion powerful enough to generate an entirely new world from the shattered fragments of the old. To summarize, Yokomitsu pushes the destructive logic of his own ideas to their furthest end, whereas Kawabata ultimately retreats into the easier comfort of myth.

Neither of these essays is easy to understand. However, I think that it is useful to think of them both as feeding from not only the intellectual and literary currents, but also the political mood of the time.

Conclusion

³ Golley, *When Our Eyes No Longer See*, pp. 60-61.

In conclusion, I am very aware that any attempt to tease out links between politics and modernism in the literary work of any writer is not easy to accomplish without the danger of a crude reductionism. After all, writers of fictional work are not politicians; they see the world differently, and their language aims to produce different effects. Nevertheless, I strongly believe that even the apparently aesthetical and unworldly literature of an outstanding writer like Kawabata is still rooted in the lived experience of the society from which it emerged. Though we should certainly resist facile links between literature and the socio-political environment, we certainly cannot discount the strong possibility that the sort of ideas articulated by Kawabata helped fuel the more inward-looking and conservative debates of the Nihon Roman-ha School that emerged during the early 1930s.

There is always a conundrum about how to discuss links between literature and politics in a sensitive and fruitful manner. Alan Tansman expressed it rather nicely through the metaphor of an airplane seeding the clouds in order to produce rain. He compares the way that major literary figures in Japan during the 1920s and 1930s contributed indirectly but no less effectively to the cultural and political discourse of the times by “aesthetically seed(ing) an atmosphere.”⁴ I hope this paper has given some indication of how, in his characteristically understated manner, Kawabata’s writing likewise seeded the intellectual clouds as it engaged with the wider political questions of the day.

⁴ Tansman, “Repose and Violence,” p. 114.

Works Quoted

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