The Flow Dynamics in Kawabata Yasunari's Snow Country

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THE FLOW-DYNAMICS
IN KAWABATA YASUNARI’S
Snow Country

by Kinya Tsuruta

In his major works, like Snow Country (1935–47), Thousand Cranes (1949–51), The Sound of the Mountain (1949–54) and House of the Sleeping Beauties (1960–1),1 Kawabata Yasunari has consistently used literary devices which mute the intensity of everyday reality; Nature in the snow-bound Echigo region of Snow Country gently frustrates the reflexes of a Tokyo aesthete, a tea-room separated from the outside world by tortuous stepping stones in Thousand Cranes is able to create its own peculiar atmosphere, the recurring dreams of Shingo in The Sound of the Mountain expand reality by blurring its boundaries, and finally the inn in House of the Sleeping Beauties functions as the meeting-place of life and death, when it provides Eguchi with sleeping pills and sleeping girls.

The purpose of this study is to describe the various techniques Kawabata uses in Snow Country for dealing with reality, to show how he reveals a beauty peculiarly his own, and then to arrive at a statement of Kawabata’s concept of ultimate reality.

The celebrated first sentence, abrupt and terse, establishes an important distance from Tokyo reality: ‘The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country.’ Immediately Kawabata reinforces the impact of the plunge, both visually and tactilely: ‘The earth lay white under the night sky’ and, when a girl opens the window, the ‘snowy cold poured in’. After the author has the hero arrive at the inn, he stresses the change by noting that ‘Shimamura’s nose had been stopped up by a stubborn cold, but it cleared to the middle of his head.’ The mere fact that Kawabata has transported his hero from Tokyo to a hot spring in the snow country does not mean that the author liberates himself from naturalist restrictions. Echigo Yuzawa is not to be equated with Shinshū of Izumi Kyōka’s Köyabijiri (1900) or with the Kappa-land of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke’s Kappa (1927).2 Kawabata refuses to take a trip into a never-never land. The shift to the snow-bound spa is a dimming of lights in a theater, not a replacement of actors with puppets. In Kawabata’s locations, the basic laws of nature remain in operation, but to set the stage

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1 「雪国」「千羽鶴」「山の音」「眠れる美女」
2 越後湯沢、信州、長野鬼「高野聖」「河童」
he reduces the glare and rawness of the real world by carefully selecting either a remote place like this snow district or a ‘detached’ space within reality like the tea-room.

One of Kawabata’s favorite ways to deal with reality is to use a mirror. Mirrors appear in many of his works. The mirror in ‘The Moon on the Water’ (1953) plays as vital a part as any character in the story. It carries out the functions of purifying nature, playing magically with distance, fusing past and present, and finally providing ‘the eye of their love’ for the bed-ridden husband and his wife, who gaze through the mirror at the moon reflected in the garden pool.

In Snow Country, too, a mirror plays a significant role in that it occasions some of the most striking scenes in the novel. Early one morning Shimamura inadvertently catches in the mirror a glimpse of Komako, the heroine of the story:

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 with a purple sheen. (48/43)4

Several things happen in the mirror: man and nature are suddenly brought together, and Kawabata most carefully selects those features of each that form a forceful contrast, such as the red cheeks and black hair of Komako, and the snow. One also notes that the mirror reveals hitherto unnoticed aspects of things, such as the snow’s ‘burning icily’ and the hair’s ‘becoming a clearer black, touched with a purple sheen’. Lastly, because the mirror presents things in a purer form, they seem to be in a state of flux: a face ‘floating’ and snow ‘burning’.

These qualities of Kawabata’s mirror are brought out more dramatically in an earlier scene where Shimamura, in the night train, sees the eye of a girl, also inside the train, reflected on the window-glass and merging with the light upon the mountains outside:

It was then that a light shone in the face. The reflection in the mirror was not strong enough to blot out the light outside, nor was the light strong enough to dim the reflection. The light moved across the face, though not to light it up. It was a distant, cold light. As it sent its small ray through the pupil of the girl’s eye, as the

3 Mirrors play a major role in a considerable number of Kawabata’s works, such as Okuyū no kingyo (Goldfish on the Roof, 1926), Mōmonu to shōjo (Blindness and a Girl, 1929), Kemikyō kaidan (A Curious Tale of the Microscope, 1930), Suibōgenō (The Crystal Vision, 1931). Add to this that when the first two chapters of Snow Country appeared in Bungeishunjū and Kaizō in January 1935, they were entitled ‘Yūgeshiki no kagami’ (Mirror of an Evening Scene) and ‘Shiroi asa no kagami’ (Mirror of a White Morning).

eye and the light were superimposed one on the other, the eye became a weirdly beautiful bit of phosphorescence on the sea of evening mountains. (10/16)

Again Kawabata selects two things, one from man and one from nature, and lets them collide in a most extraordinary fashion. What emerges from this contact is a weirdly beautiful scene. Clear emphasis is placed upon the flow of scenery outside. After it becomes dark and Shimamura can see nothing but darkness outside, he loses his enthusiasm for the reflected image of Yōko:

The window was dark by the time they came to the signal stop. The charm of the mirror faded with the fading landscape. Yoko's face was still there, but for all the warmth of her ministrations, Shimamura had found in her a transparent coldness. He did not clear the window as it clouded over again. (11/17)

One can see the importance of flow in Kawabata’s mirror in order to create beauty. At the same time the mirror in the second instance takes on a new attribute: it is semitransparent, and so allows things behind itself to be visible enough so as to blend with what it is reflecting. For Kawabata’s purpose this is the best kind of mirror, because it not only reflects while it allows things to be seen through itself, it also dilutes reality. That is why Kawabata comments:

It was all completely natural, as if the two of them, quite insensitive to space, meant to go on forever, farther and farther into the distance. For Shimamura there was none of the pain that the sight of something truly sad can bring. Rather it was as if he were watching a tableau in a dream—and that was no doubt the working of his strange mirror. (9/15)

In Kawabata a mirror also serves as a distance regulator with which he can blur the spatial dimensions of the real world and then proceed to combine two objects, often some elements from man and nature, in a manner impossible in physical space.

I am of the opinion that Komako, the heroine of this novel, is intended to function as a mirror.5 Shimamura admits that the predominant impression of Komako at his initial encounter is her cleanliness: ‘... she must be clean to the hollows under her toes.' This essential feature of a mirror is repeated and reinforced time and again throughout the work. When he visits Komako in her room, Shimamura feels that her room, clean and

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5 Kawabata's mirror is a peculiar one, having such complex functions as reflecting, selecting, fusing, purifying, and diluting. It is often more than a mere mirror. Thomas E. Swann, who has read my manuscript, suggests that Komako is more of a 'lens' than a mirror. Like the window-glass of the train, Komako not only reflects things inside the snow country but through her translucent body also allows Shimamura a glimpse of a fairy-like maiden who does not belong to this world. Komako is the merger-point of the two worlds. The fusion is possible since the essential feature of a mirror or a lens, unlike a lamp, lies in its self-denial. Komako might be described as a 'translucent mirror'.
orderly, was suspended in space; he is taken with the fancy that the ‘light must pass through Komako, living in the silkworms’ room, as it passed through the translucent silkworms.’ Even the reflective quality of her skin is stressed in descriptions such as ‘white porcelain’, ‘the luster of a sea shell’, ‘a freshly peeled onion’. In fact, Komako physically reflects like an actual mirror in the final fire scene, when Shimamura sees ‘the pulse of the fire beating on her intent, slightly flushed face’. And like other mirrors in Kawabata, the Komako mirror is a merging point with nature; for instance, Shimamura notices how ‘The dusky green of the cedar seemed to reflect from her neck.’

The special position Komako occupies between Shimamura and Yōko suggests something akin to Kawabata’s mirror. One of the unique features of the Shimamura-Komako relationship is that Shimamura keeps finding it difficult to remember Komako despite her sensual attraction. At the outset Shimamura tries to remember the woman he is going to see, but his memories elude him. ‘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.’ After Shimamura ends a visit to Komako’s room, he is surprised at his own reaction: he feels that the room he has just left is a distant world. On his way home, the monotonous sound of the wheels turns into Komako’s voice; this prompts him to muse:

Her words, though short and broken, were a sign that she was alive in all her vital intensity, and he knew he had not forgotten her from the fact that listening was a trial. But to the Shimamura of that moment, moving away from the woman, the voice was already a distant one that could do no more than sharpen the poignancy of travel. (86/74)

It is this lack of solidity of Komako that makes the other woman visible to Shimamura. Through Komako’s translucent body we catch fleeting glimpses of Yōko glowing with the pulse of a firefly. We receive only two dominant impressions of Yōko: her piercing eyes, and her voice—the latter so beautiful it is almost sad, and it seems to re-echo through the snowy night. The Komako mirror selects only these two as it filters out the rest of stark reality. When reality does appear, it is for an effect: a glass chamber-pot and the Jizō serve to enhance Yōko’s fairy-like quality through the shock of a calculated contrast. The peculiar suddenness with which Yōko makes her appearances also suggests something of the fairy. In fact, the 木魂 combination the author employs to express kodama (‘echo’) in his repeated reference to her voice means ‘spirit of the trees’.

If Yōko is a mirage of the pure woman whom Shimamura desires so much and can never touch, it is Komako who ensures through her enigmatic translucency and sensuality that Yōko remains a mirage. As long as Shimamura is after a pure woman, he must approach her through a mirror which filters and purifies, as he sees Yōko through the window-glass of the night train or through Komako. In Shimamura’s effort to approach Yōko, Komako’s
seemingly contradictory attributes, cleanness and sexuality, work together for one purpose: they cleanse Shimamura so that he can see Yōko, much as obijimi\(^7\) is brought to the snow country for bleaching its summer dirt. As the mirror is a device for looking at a purer reality that one cannot touch, so Komako is a bridge to the pure woman Shimamura is only allowed a glimpse of.

Since Komako bears the dual role of woman and mirror, we can discover in Snow Country a most intriguing feature—that of the fluctuating distance between Shimamura and Komako. However, as this to-and-fro movement is but a part of the overall movement working toward the same aesthetic goal as the mirror device, we must next analyze the pattern of movement in Snow Country.

Mishima Yukio once very aptly called Kawabata an ‘eternal traveller’. Shimamura is also a traveller shuttling back and forth between Tokyo and Echigo, Komako and Yōko, reality and unreality. We have already noted the function of Kawabata’s mirror to filter and liquefy raw reality. That Shimamura is a traveller, whose eyes are not fixed but in a state of constant motion, is a significant factor in interpreting the novel, because its focus is upon Shimamura. Kawabata makes efficient use of a moving train for the same effect. We have already observed how the night train has liquefied the scenery outside and turned it into a continuously flowing landscape, and how the charm of the mirror faded when the flow effect disappeared. Another example of a colorless situation suddenly enlivened by movement occurs in a scene of parting at the train station. Shimamura is looking at Komako from inside the train and she reminds him of a strange piece of fruit left behind in the grimy glass case of a shabby mountain grocery, but ‘The window of the waiting-room was clear for an instant as the train started to move. Komako’s face glowed forth, and as quickly disappeared.’ (85/73)

This spatial movement of Shimamura between Tokyo and the snow country seems designed to affect even our temporal sense. Altogether Shimamura visits the mountain spa three times: early summer, early winter, and from fall to winter. The author structures this time sequence so as to thrust the reader into the cold air of the snow country first, then, as the hero meets Komako, gradually to unfold the memories of the hero’s summer affair with Komako by means of a flash-back technique. The structure has the effect not only of breaking up the linear sequence of seasons, but also, by having summer ‘glow’ again in the middle of snow-country winter, of creating an intriguing affinity with the heroine, who also hides a consuming fire within her cool, clean exterior.

The fluctuating distance between Shimamura and Komako seems to have an overall pattern. In the first half of the novel there is a recognizable parallel between Shimamura’s relationship with Komako and his shuttling between Tokyo and Echigo. Here greater stress is laid upon her cleanness and translucency and her being an instrument of merging

\(^7\) 様
with nature. In other words, Kawabata emphasizes Komako’s mirror quality in the first half of the work.

The Komako in the second half is noticeably different. The season is late fall and life is ripe for death. The color of a moth’s green wings strikes Shimamura like the color of death amidst the autumn red. A White-Russian woman peddling cosmetics, he notices, has a face wrinkled and dirty, yet her skin is pure white. The inn-keeper gives him a cake whose hard crust tastes sour and smells musty. Outside the window he sees the bright red of ripe persimmons bathed in the evening sun. He discovers what he took to be susuki were in reality kaya, and is surprised at their unexpected size and vigor. He returns to his hotel room and watches a ‘large-bodied moth laying eggs along the black lacquer of the clothes-frames’. Autumn has a way of mixing life and death. Shimamura learns from Komako that Yukio and the music teacher died; he himself observes insects die in his hotel room. Then, too, he notices some change in his woman as he discovers that ‘the fat on her abdomen was heavier’, and ‘the flesh on her neck and shoulders was thicker than it had been the year before’.

During this third visit of Shimamura, which is the longest and takes up the entire second half of the work, Komako acquires an alarming amount of physicality and workaday reality. Her body, once translucent like a silkworm, is now changed into something entirely different. Shimamura observes: ‘There was something sad about the full flesh under the white powder. It suggested a woolen cloth, and again it suggested the pelt of some animal.’

Earlier, Shimamura is denied knowledge of the human relationships surrounding Komako, but now he receives an avalanche of such information; he is told how her geisha friend destroyed her chance of going straight, how Komako has been under the patronage of a man who paid her debts, and how much she has to earn each month as a geisha. She makes known to him her love of sewing. She even assails him with such daily details as how she once returned home very late and ate rice with cold soup and pickled plum.

Along with this increasing physical realness, Komako begins to emerge more clearly as an individual person aware of human contracts and morals. She berates Shimamura for having broken his promise to come to a winter festival when he returned for his third trip. What a sharp contrast to the earlier Komako, who, ‘far from blaming him, had room in her heart only for the pleasure of regaining what had been lost’, when Shimamura came back to her after all sorts of broken promises. She accuses him of insincerity when he mentions their visit to Yukio’s grave. She instinctively senses his inability to fulfil her wish but is also aware that this inability does not stem from egotism in the usual sense. In fact, her female sensitivity detects something straight and good in him. As her attachment to him increases she begins to lose her function of a mirror and to grow in stature as a woman.

8 薄, 薄
As her affection for him increases, Shimamura begins to waver, then gradually feels a greater closeness to Yōko, who is much less real. Shimamura’s previous vacillation was between Tokyo reality and snow-country unreality, but now that Komako begins to take on reality as a woman, he must have a new pole of unreality and finds it in Yōko. Now his to-and-fro movement is contained within the snow country, becoming shorter and more rapid.

While Shimamura’s distance from the two women is more psychological, his trip to the land of chijimi cloth is purely a physical one. Chijimi, an expensive material for summer kimonos prized for its coolness, used to be produced in this part of Echigo. It is the wonder product of a place which can provide the proper humidity for weaving its thread of very fine grass-linen. The ancients maintained that the way this product of the cold has of feeling cool to the skin in the hottest weather is a play of the principle of light and darkness.

Now, the Komako of the first half of the novel is a perfect example of snow-country Yin and Yang dynamics, coolness controlling a fire. It is highly suggestive that Yōko’s singing voice triggers in Shimamura’s fancy an association with an ancient chijimi weaver, while he thinks that Komako ‘hardly seemed the person to ask about the fate of an old folk art’ (153/125). As a matter of fact, Shimamura undertakes this excursion so that it ‘might set him on his way toward breaking away from his hot spring’ (155/127). Chijimi is conceived of as the opposite pole to what Komako has gradually become. Every year Shimamura sends his chijimi kimono to the snow country to have the dirt of summer bleached out. Komako, with her mirror-like quality of cleanliness and translucency, had this same effect on Shimamura earlier—she removed the dirt of Tokyo from him, and breathed new life into him. Referring to Komako’s frequent visits, Shimamura thinks to himself: ‘The more continuous the assault became, the more he began to wonder what was lacking in him, what kept him from living as completely.’ (155/126) The more solid Komako becomes, the more emptiness she brings out in Shimamura. While there is no denying that Shimamura is attracted to Komako as a person, he nurses a fundamental distrust of the durability of human relationship and this is why he contrasts Komako’s love with chijimi:

But this love would leave behind it nothing so definite as a piece of Chijimi. Though cloth to be worn is among the most short-lived of craftworks, a good piece of Chijimi, if it has been taken care of, can be worn quite unfaded a half-century and more after weaving. (154/126)

On the way back to his hotel from the country of chijimi, Shimamura is joined by Komako. This leads both of them to the final and most important scene of the novel, the fire of the cocoon warehouse; they run toward the fire as if some invisible force had magnetized them. During the brief time span from the hotel to the fire scene, Shimamura goes through a to-and-fro movement as many as seventeen times. This time it is not between Tokyo and snow country, nor between Komako and Yōko, but between Komako and
himself. It fits in well with the overall pattern of his vacillation that the distance Shimamura traverses decreases as the two approach the cocoon warehouse.

Chart I. Horizontal movement in the fire scene in Snow Country.

(Page numbers refer to the translation by Edward Seidensticker, Berkley Medallion Edition, 1964.)

134 'Careful. It's frozen, and you might slip.' She stopped as she turned to look back at him. 'But it's all right. You don't need to go any farther. I ought to go on myself to see if anyone has been hurt.'

134 'Wait, wait,' Shimamura called. 'Come on.' Komako ran toward the dark mountain on which the Milky Way was falling.

135 He ran after her as fast as he could. She slowed down and took his hand.

135 'But people will laugh. Please go back.' 'Just a little farther.' 'But it's wrong. People won't like it if I take you to a fire.'

135 He nodded and stopped. Her hand still rested lightly on his sleeve, however, as she walked on.

135 'Wait for me somewhere. I'll be right back. Where will you wait? 'Wherever you say.'

135 'No. I don't want you to.' She threw herself against him. He reeled back a step or two.

137 'If you leave, I'll lead an honest life,' Komako said, walking on again. She put her hand to her disordered hair. When she had gone five or six steps she turned to look back at him. 'What's the matter? You don't have to stand there do you?' But Shimamura stood looking at her.

137 'Oh? You'll wait, then? And afterwards you'll take me to your room with you.'

137 Komako turned into the main street and disappeared. Shimamura started after her.

137 Komako too had stopped to let it pass. She spotted Shimamura and ran along beside him.

137 'Come sometime when we have a real blizzard, and the snow drives along the ground all night long. But you won't, of course.'

139 Afraid people would be watching, Shimamura slipped away from Komako and stood behind a group of children.

139 Komako had come up to him, he did not know when. She took his hand. He looked around at her, but said nothing.

139 She gazed at the fire, the pulse of the fire beating on her intent, slightly flushed face. Shimamura felt a violent rising in his chest. Komako's hair was coming undone, and her throat was bare and arched. His fingers trembled from the urge to touch it.

140 His hand was warm, but Komako's was still warmer. He did not know why he should feel that a separation was forcing itself upon them.

142 He heard Komako's cry. 'This girl is insane. She's insane.' 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.

At the outset his vacillation spanned the great distance between Tokyo and Echigo, then it became a see-saw motion inside the snow country, and now it is a much more rapid, fitful movement between the hero and the heroine. This movement rises to a climax when Shimamura's gaze fixes on the spasm in Yoko's calf after she falls from the burning building.

Shimamura is very anxious to close this last gap despite Komako's plea against it; however, he gradually becomes more passive, until at the very end he is pushed away.
from Komako by the crowd. Conversely, Komako first tries to maintain the distance but assumes an active role in shrinking it later. Characteristically, when the distance contracts, Shimamura feels that a separation is imminent. Again, this fits the general pattern of the Shimamura-Komako relationship in the novel.

The final tableau of the novel has Komako, with Yoko in her arms, desperately struggling to get away from the fire and reach Shimamura, who is meanwhile being pushed farther away. What does this action signify? When the final gap between Shimamura and Komako refuses to be closed, do we see, with many critics, the futility of human relationships? If this scene is viewed merely in the perspective of horizontal-distance dimension which we have been analyzing thus far, that seems to be the meaning. However, it is only half the story, and so we next consider the novel's vertical movement.

Chart II. Vertical movement in Snow Country

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>The earth lay white under the night sky.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>It's that cold, is it, thought Shimamura. Low, barrack-like buildings that might have been railway dormitories were scattered here and there up the frozen slope of the mountain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Occasionally the bottom of the overcoat in which the man's feet were wrapped would slip open and fall to the floor, and the girl would quickly pull it back together.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>The white of the snow made the deep eaves look deeper still, as if everything had sunk quietly into the earth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>corridor. At the end, where it turned past the office, he saw the tall figure of the woman, her skirts trailing coldly off across the dark floor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>He had come down to the hot-spring village after seven days in the Border Range.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30†</td>
<td>But at the door of the inn he was seduced by the mountain, strong with the smell of new leaves. He started climbing roughly up it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31†</td>
<td>When he was pleasantly tired, he turned sharply around and, tucking the skirts of his kimono into his obi, ran headlong back down the slope.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31†</td>
<td>Two yellow butterflies flew up at his feet. The butterflies, weaving in and out, climbed higher than the line of the Border Range, their yellow turning to white in the distance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31†</td>
<td>From behind the rock, the cedars threw up their trunks in perfectly straight lines, so high that he could see the tops only by arching his back.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42†</td>
<td>The sound of the freezing of snow over the land seemed to roar deep into the earth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42†</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46†</td>
<td>The houses were of a kind with the dark stones on their roofs. The low eaves hugging the ground seemed to have in them the very essence of the north country.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63†</td>
<td>The notes went out crystalline into the clean winter morning, to sound on the far, snowy peaks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67†</td>
<td>The village lay quiet under the cold sky. Komako hitched up the skirt of her kimono and tucked it into her obi. The moon shone like a blade frozen in blue ice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70†</td>
<td>They say that in the next town up the line the schoolchildren jump naked from the second floor of the dormitory. They sink out of sight in the snow, and they move around under it as though they were swimming.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
† The train climbed the north slope of the Border Range into the long tunnel.
73  † The color of evening was descending from chasms between the peaks.
77  † The moth did not move. He struck at it with his fist, and it fell like a leaf from a tree, floating
lightly up midway to the ground.
85  † You know the shop up at the ski grounds? An avalanche went through the second floor of it.
101 † A farm girl threw up a sheaf of rice with a twist of her trousered hips. . . .
115 † Six trees in all.
† Crows' nests below, Sparrows' nests above.
   And what is it they're singing?
123 † 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.
123 † The cedars, under a thin coating of snow, rose sheer from the white ground to the sky, each
cut off sharply from the rest.
132 † A column of sparks was rising in the village below.
132 † A tongue of flames shot up intermittently in the spiral of smoke, dipping down to lick at the
roofs about it.
132 † The tongue of flame sprang high over the roofs.
132 † The fire blazed higher. From the mountain, however, it was as quiet under the starry sky as
a little make-believe fire.
133 † They hurried up toward the inn.
133 † The porter and two or three others came bounding down the steps.
133 † "Throwing children over one after another from the balcony, they say."
133 † Komako started off down the stairs after the porter.
134 † He looked down at his feet and saw that they had come to the crossing.
134 † "The Milky Way. Beautiful, isn't it," Komako murmured. She looked up at the sky as she
ran off ahead of him.
134 † The Milky Way. 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.
134 † The Milky Way came down just over there, to wrap the night earth in its naked embrace.
134 † Shimamura fancied that his own small shadow was being cast up against it from the earth.
134 † The limitless depth of the Milky Way pulled his gaze up into it.
135 † She seemed to have her long skirts in her hands, and as her arms waved the skirts rose and
fell a little.
135 † She slowed down and took his hand, and the long skirts fell to the ground.
135 † She clutched at her skirts, now trailing over the snow.
136 † and a new burst of flame sent up its column of sparks.
136 † He blinked, and the Milky Way came to fill them. He tried to keep the tears from spilling
over.
136 † The Milky Way flowed over them in the direction they were running, and seemed to bathe
Komako's head in its light.
136 † He looked up, and again the Milky Way came down to wrap itself around the earth.
137 † And the Milky Way, like a great aurora, flowed through his body to stand at the edges of the
earth.
137 † She raised her left hand a little and ran off. Her retreating figure was drawn up into the
mountain.
137 † The Milky Way spread its skirts to be broken by the waves of the mountain, and, fanning out
† again in all its brilliant vastness higher in the sky, it left the mountain in a deeper darkness.

138 † They could hear the sound of the flames now, and tongues of flame leaped up before them.
139 † A tongue would shoot up from a quite unexpected spot, the three pumps would turn hastily towards it, and a shower of sparks would fly up in a cloud of black smoke.
139 † The sparks spread off into the Milky Way, and Shimamura was pulled up with them.
139 † As the smoke drifted away, the Milky Way seemed to dip and flow in the opposite direction.
140 † Flames shot up again from the pillars and beams at the entrance. A line of water was turned on them. Hissing clouds of steam arose as the framework began to give way.
140 † The crowd gasped as one person. A woman’s body had fallen through the flames.
142 † As he caught his footing, his head fell back, and the Milky Way flowed down inside him with a roar.

To go back to the first two sentences of the novel: ‘The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country, the earth lay white under the night sky.’ The second sentence contains in the original an important key word: soko,9 or ‘bottom’. The literal and less attractive translation would be, ‘The bottom of the night turned white.’ This word soko appears about ten times in the novel, but its appearances are heavily concentrated at both the beginning and the end. Another key word occurs in one of the opening lines: ‘Low, barrack-like buildings that might have been railway dormitories were scattered here and there up the frozen slope of the mountain’; ‘slope of the mountain’ in the original is yama-suwa,10 literally meaning ‘the hem of the mountain’. This suwa, or ‘hem’ (as of a kimono), appears about twenty times in the novel, again with heavy concentration at both the beginning and the end. I will discuss the full implication of these words below; let it suffice to point out here that at the outset of the novel emphasis is on lowness and downward motion. The location of Echigo Yuzawa hot springs low in a valley thus allows the author to make advantageous use of an up-down motion later.

The vertical motions from the beginning to just before the fire scene are slow in tempo and generally diminutive in scale. They deal with such small things as butterflies, cedar trees, moths, and samisen sounds; however, also included are references to the moon and stars, which are exploited later. But once the fire scene begins, suddenly these motions quicken, become more frantic, and take place on a grand scale, like the climactic dance of a noh play.

As the novel draws near the closing scene, Komako is completely left out of the up-and-down movements. The Milky Way seems to absorb her: ‘The shape of her slightly aquiline nose was not clear, and the color was gone from her small lips’, and ‘Her retreating figure was drawn up into the mountain. The Milky Way spread its skirts to be broken by the waves of the mountain, and, fanning out again in all its brilliant vastness higher in the sky, it left the mountain in a deeper darkness.’ What is more, the Milky Way takes
on a human quality: ‘The Milky Way came down just over there, to wrap the night earth in its naked embrace. There was a terrible voluptuousness about it.’

As the Milky Way repeats its see-saw motion of coming down to engulf Shimamura and then scooping him up into itself, something significant happens. The last sentence of the novel reads, ‘and the Milky Way flowed down inside him with a roar.’ What is striking in the sentence is that an inversion of distance, perspective, and size has taken place: now Shimamura is larger than the Milky Way. He has become the Milky Way. Whereas the horizontal movement begins with a very slow tempo and on a large scale, and ends with a faster rhythm on a smaller scale, the vertical movement begins with a sure, unhurried tempo and on a somewhat small scale, then terminates with a greatly accelerated speed but with a scope that encompasses heaven and earth. The effect of these two movements on the reader is to draw him into an extended pattern of a slow and easy tempo at first, and then, when their scales suddenly change and their tempos quicken, the reader’s grip on temporal and spatial perspectives is broken. In other words, these movements are designed to break down our normal, firmly structured image of reality. They condition our reality reflexes so that we may accept a world where Shimamura is free to vacillate between heaven and earth and where he can absorb the Milky Way, which itself has already absorbed Komako and Yōko.

Although the mirror and the movement patterns liquefy reality enough to permit the fusion of distinct elements, the fire in the final scene probably plays the most vital part in this process. The most obvious effect of the fire is to liquefy the snow: ‘The snow at their feet was melting, while farther on it had already turned to slush from the fire and water, a muddy confusion of footprints.’ The word ‘melting’ in the quotation is yuruma, or ‘loosen’, in the original. It is interesting to note that the author twice during this scene uses the same word in reference to Komako’s hairdo. Note that some of her features, such as the shape of her nose and the color of her lips, have already been absorbed by the Milky Way. Now in the fire scene Shimamura sees that her ‘face floated up like an old mask’ and finds it strange that ‘even in the mask there should be the scent of the woman’. Then, as the fire destroys the solidity of the woman that Komako has gradually built up in the second half of the novel, she once more begins to exert an attraction over him. ‘Komako’s hair was coming undone, and her throat was bare and arched. His fingers trembled from the urge to touch it.’ (172/139)

The fire brings about vivid sensations, too. Into this predominantly visual world built up by Kawabata we find olfactory sensations such as ‘the scent of the woman’ and a ‘smell like boiling cocoons’. The fire occasions a considerable amount of auditory perceptions,

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11 We may also note that, though by her fall from the burning warehouse Yōko is abruptly thrust into the up-and-down movement, seemingly in place of Komako, the female lead role in the fire scene is undeniably neither Komako nor Yōko, but the Milky Way, which seems to combine Komako’s nearness and Yōko’s remoteness.

12 yuruma.
beginning with the recurring sound of a fire-alarm, and including the shouts of people, the roar of the flames, the rhythmical chant of the firemen, and the working of the wooden pumps; one of the sounds, the firemen's voices, in turn produces an effect on Komako and Shimamura: 'Komako's voice was bright and eager. She seemed to take her beat from the chanting voices and the trampling feet around her. Shimamura too was buoyed up by the crowd.' Finally, the fire inspires inanimate objects with life, for Shimamura sees that 'the low, dark houses along the street seemed to be breathing as they floated up in the light of the fire and faded again.'

We will recall that the word *suwa*, 'hem', was used at the beginning of the novel to reinforce a sense of a solid base. The fire, however, seems to change the world's association with a stationary bottom ('the slope of the mountain', *yama suwa*); thus, for example: 'The Milky Way spreads its skirts [*suwa*] to be broken by the waves of the mountains'; 'Yōko had fallen face up. The skirt [*suwa*] of her kimono was pulled up just over one knee,' and 'The long geisha's skirts [*suwa*] trailing behind her, she staggered through the pools of water and charred bits of wood. . . .' Again, the word *soko*, 'bottom', also loses a bit of its literal sense and is used for an opposite phenomenon, as in 'the limitless [*soko-nashi,* literally 'bottomless'] depth of the Milky Way pulled his gaze up into it.' In many ways, then, the fire relaxes our usual spatial perspective.

The fire scene likewise loosens the time framework by thrusting the future and the past into the present. Komako, for instance, tells Shimamura, 'After you leave, I will lead an honest life,' and later she dares Shimamura to come back again during the season of real blizzards. Shimamura in turn senses that their separation is imminent. In regard to the past, Komako brings up something Shimamura had said about her a long time before: 'You said I was a good woman, didn't you? You are going away. Why did you have to say that to me?'; and when Shimamura sees the flames flicker on the face of the fallen Yōko, the sight takes him back to the celebrated night-train scene at the very beginning of the novel.

Besides reversing time sequences, the fire also has the effect of suspending life and death:

A line of water from one of the pumps arched down on the smoldering fire, and a woman's body suddenly floated up before it: such had been the fall. The body was quite horizontal as it passed through the air. Shimamura started back—not from fear, however. He saw the figure as a phantasm from an unreal world. . . . With a doll-like passiveness, and the freedom of the lifeless, it seemed to hold both life and death in abeyance. (173/140)

Just as earlier it did not occur to Shimamura that it was impolite to stare at the girl reflected in the train window, because he was charmed by the unreal, other-worldly power

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13 底なし
of the window-mirror, which so shaped everyday reality that he could enjoy it as a purely aesthetic experience, so now the fire produces the same effect on Shimamura: it has stopped the passage of time, and with it the conventional polarity between life and death. This explains why Shimamura is free from fear as he watches Yōko fall; the only thing that concerns him is its aesthetics: ‘If Shimamura felt even a flicker of uneasiness, it was lest the head drop, or a knee or a hip bend to disturb that perfectly horizontal line.’ Thus, by confusing our sense of space and time, such devices of Kawabata as the mirror, the oscillating movements, and the fire liquefy our survival-oriented world. Once inside this fluid state a pure aesthetic experience becomes possible.

Naturally, the fire is the focus of all the movements scattered throughout the novel, and Yōko’s fall from the burning building is the point at which the fire and the movements meet. The instant at which intense and complete union of the three characters takes place comes when the vertical-horizontal movements reach a sudden climax in the twitch in Yōko’s leg. Komako’s scream and Yōko’s spasm produce in Shimamura an unusual pair of simultaneous ‘motions’: ‘The scream stabbed him through. At the spasm in Yoko’s leg a chill passed down his spine to his very feet. His heart was pounding in an indefinable anguish.’ Only after this union does Shimamura become ready for a union of a much greater dimension, union with the Milky Way. It is a kind of union made possible only when Shimamura demands the purest of experiences, through mirror, not through raw reality.

Kawabata’s ‘Lyric Poem’ has ‘watakushi’ say, ‘I wonder if the word “soul” is but an adjective for a force flowing through things of heaven and earth.’ We can relate this statement to our present analysis. In the process of growing up we learn how to survive in the real world by acquiring control over our surroundings and improving not only our temporal and spatial senses but also our rational capacity to organize these sensations. This inevitably encourages division of our reality, for by dividing we can control. We soon begin to accept as the only reality this rationally controlled world-picture in which things exist in isolation. Kawabata, however, rejects this artificial separation of things instituted by us for the sake of survival. He sees all things as organically related. He refuses to recognize any division among things—the animate and the inanimate, man and beast, man and plant. He sees the world as one gigantic flow of a river. Thus he uses various devices to enable his reader to see things in this state of flux, so that the reader may gain experience of the basic life-force pervading the universe. One can almost say that Kawabata is anxious to reduce the rational world to its primeval stage so that his reader may be allowed a glimpse of the beauty of life no longer marred by rational compartments. This is why Kawabata takes advantage of dualities in order to eliminate them, since they are the fundamental division of things. Tokyo versus snow country, snow versus fire, sky versus earth, the past versus the future, man versus woman—these op-

14 Jojōka 計情歌
posites are exploited until in the end they all merge into the single experience of the Milky Way roaring into Shimamura. On a smaller scale, Komako has her own polarities which are fused together: hot and cool, white and red, purity and sexuality. Most of the memorable expressions in Snow Country operate on the same principle: ‘quiet like the voice of the rain’, ‘snow burning icily’, ‘a beggar who has lost desire’, ‘a sound of freezing snow’, Yōko with a chamber pot, Komako’s ‘lips like a beautiful little circle of leeches’.

The simile of the leech understandably invited some criticism in the West when the novel was translated into English. Some doubted the fidelity of the translation. The comparison of Komako’s lips with leeches is based primarily on their texture and movement, as an infant who has not yet learned to differentiate a blood-sucking leech from other creatures would link them. Perhaps the chief source of the pleasure in this simile is that the comparison carries the reader back to a pre-rational and pre-differentiated world and then makes him view a phenomenon in a surprisingly fresh dimension.

One possible reason for the fact that some Western readers (and some Japanese readers for that matter) are not totally satisfied with Kawabata’s works is that the action of Kawabata’s protagonists is the exact opposite of many heroes in the West. Western heroes undergo a series of human conflicts, gradually consolidate their identity and individuality, and finally achieve varying intensities of awareness of their relationship with reality. It is a process of differentiating the self from its environment. In the end they stand in isolation from their surroundings but also know how to relate themselves to reality in order to survive it. I think that Snow Country is about a thoroughly differentiated man taking a trip back to a state of non-differentiation. It recounts the process of undoing his alienation. This explains why Shimamura is reluctant to accept human commitments and conflicts, and also why he persists in dissolving both man and nature to fuse them more easily. In this respect it is probably more than coincidental that there are frequent references to Yōko’s motherly quality and that the reader is made conscious of the tunnel at the very outset of the novel. Note, too, that during his visit to the land of chijimi Shimamura discovers that the locals call the snow tunnel between both sides of a street, tainai kuguri,15 literally, ‘womb passage’. The process of returning to the womb is often a death process in the Western humanist’s terminology. It is a stroke of irony that only in this kind of ‘death’ process is Komako allowed to radiate a life-force and a beauty seldom paralleled in modern Japanese literature.

15 胎内くぐり