



# The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa

Yasunari Kawabata

the Nobel Prize-winning author of *Snow Country*

## foreword

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**DURING THE FINAL** decades of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, Asakusa was the major entertainment center of Tokyo. From the 1840s to the 1940s, it was to Japan's capital as Montmartre was to Paris, as the Alexanderplatz was to Berlin.

A place of mercantile pleasure, it at the same time retained a neighborhood vitality. It was perhaps this combination of brazen pleasure-mongering and downtown-district virtues that attracted the crowds. Tanizaki Jun'ichirō wrote of the “innumerable classes of visitor and types of entertainment and its constant and peerless richness preserved even as it furiously changes . . . swelling and clashing in confusion and then fusing into harmony.”<sup>1</sup>

It was certainly this blending that was mourned when, after the 1923 earthquake, Akutagawa Ryūnosuke wrote of “the little pleasure stalls, all of them reduced to cinders . . . tiled roofs after a rain, unlighted votive lanterns, pots of morning glories, now withered. This too, all of it, was left a charred waste.”<sup>2</sup>

Yet Asakusa recovered and, to the end, managed to retain something of its earlier charm. The novelist Takami Jun wrote in 1939

that Asakusa still had a “peculiar kind of warmth.” Though it was like “a jazz record blaring forth in an alien tongue,” it was also “all shyness and awkwardness as of a girl with an old-fashioned coiffeur and an advanced bathing suit.”<sup>3</sup>

In a city that saw its pleasures and freedoms curtailed as Japan left behind the liberties of the 1920s and 1930s and marched into the wartime austerities of the 1940s, Asakusa remained to indicate that there was more to life than serving the country. It might be mercantile, but it was also acceptingly human. As observed in a popular song of the day by Soeda Azenbō, “Asakusa is Tokyo’s heart / Asakusa is a human market.”

**ORIGINALLY ASAKUSA** was not a part of Edo, the original name of the city of Tokyo. The district was beyond one of the city’s checkpoints and was initially merely a community serving the needs of Sensō-ji, the big Kannon Temple, which drew hordes of both the pious and profiteers. During most of the Tokugawa period (1600–1868), Asakusa was just a place to go through. After the sumptuary edicts of the 1840s, which banned theaters and bordellos in Edo itself, however, Asakusa and the government-licensed prostitution quarter of Yoshiwara, to its north, were designated places of pleasure—tolerated retreats from the rigors of the samurai sternness of other parts of the city.

It was only during the Meiji period (1868–1912) that Asakusa developed its own identity. The novelist Saitō Ryōkū compared it to Ueno, a neighboring downtown district, and found that “Ueno is for the eyes, a park with a view, but Asakusa is for the mouth, a park for eating and drinking. . . . When you go to Ueno you feel the day’s work isn’t yet finished. When you go to Asakusa you feel that you have shaken off tomorrow’s work.”<sup>4</sup>

The great Asakusa Kannon Temple still brought the crowds to

the district, but it was the great pleasure city, Asakusa itself, that entertained them. Even the foreigners knew about it and went there. The widely read 1891 guidebook by Basil Hall Chamberlain and W. B. Mason finds that “the grounds of Asakusa are the quaintest and liveliest place in Tokyo . . . performing monkeys, cheap photographers, street artists, jugglers, wrestlers, life-sized figures in clay, venders of toys and lollipops of every sort, and, circulating amidst all these cheap attractions, a seething crowd of busy holiday-makers.”<sup>5</sup>

There were other kinds of liveliness as well. An early foreign observer, W. E. Griffis, noted that near the temple were ranged the archery galleries, “presided over by pretty black-eyed Dianas, in paint, powder and shining coiffure. They bring you tea, smile, talk nonsense, and giggle . . . and then ask you leading and very personal questions without blushing. . . . Full-grown able-bodied men . . . can find amusement for hours at such play.”<sup>6</sup> And later, in the back of the stalls, able-bodied men could take further advantage of these black-eyed Dianas.

With its attractions of sensationalism and sexuality, Asakusa prospered. One of Tanizaki’s characters indicated the protean joys of Asakusa in 1911:

Changing my costume every night so as not to be noticed, I plunged into the crowd in Asakusa Park. . . . One night I’d tie a scarf over my head, don a short cotton coat with vertical stripes, apply red polish to the nails of my carefully scrubbed bare feet, and slip on leather-soled sandals. Another night I might go out wearing gold-rimmed dark glasses and an Inverness with the collar turned up. I enjoyed using a false beard, a mole, or a birthmark to alter my features. But one night, at a second-hand clothing shop . . . I saw a woman’s lined kimono with a delicate check pattern against a blue ground, and was seized with a desire to try it on.<sup>7</sup>



Visitors to the Sensō Temple in the 1920s.



The Nakamise and the Nio Gate, 1924.

Later, in an unfinished novel, *The Mermaid (Kōjin)*, Tanizaki tells what Asakusa was like in 1918. Its attractions were “plays of the old style, operettas, plays in the new style, comedies, movies—movies from the West and Japanese productions, Douglas Fairbanks and Onoe Matsunosuke—acrobats balancing on balls, bareback riders, *Naniwa bushi* singers, girl *gidayū* chanters, the merry-go-round, the Hanayashiki Amusement Park, the Twelve Story Tower, shooting galleries, whores, Japanese restaurants, Chinese restaurants, and Western restaurants—the Rairaiken, won ton mein, oysters over rice, horsemeat, snapping turtles, eels, and the Café Paulista.”<sup>8</sup>

There was also the Asakusa Opera, where originally some opera was actually sung. An early attraction was *Rigoletto*, and “*La donna é mobile*” became a local hit, although, no tenor being available, the Duke was sung by a soprano. Shortly, however, the attractions became more varied. Tanizaki’s hero here discovered “caricatures of Charlie Chaplin, [and] living reproductions of such stars as Pearl White, Ruth Roland, Doris Kenyon, Billie Burke, and Dustin Farnum. The reproductions were, of course, crude knock-offs . . . but paradoxically they charmed the audience precisely because they were crude.”<sup>9</sup>

The Asakusa Opera also meant flesh on view, the firm thighs of the chorus line. In a 1942 story, “The Decoration” (“*Kunshō*”), novelist Nagai Kafū remembers what it was like. Backstage

was given over to clutter, such a clutter that you wondered how anything more could possibly be added. An indescribable disorder . . . what first caught the eye, however, was not the violent jumble of colors, or even the faces of the girls as they sprawled about on the floor and then sat up again. It was the powerful flesh of the arms and legs . . . it called to mind the earthen hallway of a florist’s shop, where a litter of torn-off petals and withering leaves is left unswept and trampled into shapelessness.<sup>10</sup>

Crudity became an Asakusa commodity. The hero of Tanizaki's unfinished novel is simultaneously repelled and attracted by it. He confides that he is drawn to Asakusa because, finding Tokyo ugly, he wants to "experience this ugliness in its purest state." He suggests that "since seeking beauty in this city of Tokyo is useless, can it not be said that the most agreeable place to live is Asakusa, where ugliness bares its essential form?"<sup>11</sup>

This crude and ugly but vibrant and sexy Asakusa was soon after destroyed. The 1923 Kanto earthquake demolished it, as it demolished much of Tokyo and Yokohama. Among the more famed calamities was the collapse of the Asakusa Twelve Story Tower (the Ryōunkaku, or Cloud-Surpassing Pavilion), a brick structure that had become synonymous with Asakusa. Also gone was the old neighborhood structure of the place. The sense of community, raffish but real, that had appealed to many (Akutagawa Ryūnosuke among them) was never entirely recovered.

Because it was a pleasure city, an entertainment capital, one of the great night towns of the world, however, reconstruction began at once. And now, symbolizing the new Asakusa, instead of the Twelve Story Tower there was the Subway Tower building, with its observation platform. Kawabata said it was in the Osaka style, all the floors except the top being eating places. This influence of Osaka, known for commerce rather than culture, upon what was left of old Edo was commonly lamented. "Why, it's gotten just like Osaka," complains a character in one Kawabata story.

Actually, it was like no place else on earth. In commenting on *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa*, Kataoka Yoshikaze, writing in 1939, described the new Asakusa as that "human market" where

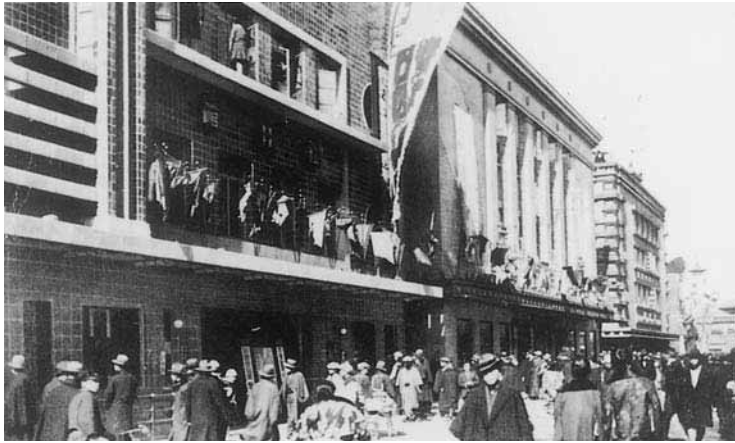
the pleasure resort of the Edo period, the vestiges of the crude, semi-enlightened curiosity of the Meiji era, and the over-ripeness . . . of the present era of capitalist corruption, are thrown together in a



The Rokku, the cinema and theater district of Asakusa Park, in the late 1920s.



The Rokku and its cinemas and revue halls, 1933.



Movie theaters in Asakusa Park around 1930.



Movie theaters in the Rokku in the second half of the 1920s.

forever disordered state. Or organized in a manner peculiarly like the place itself. Eroticism and frivolity and speed and comic-strip humor; the bare legs of dancing girls and jazzy revues; kiss-dances, foreign girls, ground-cherries and popular songs; the movie, the circus, the fake, dilapidated aquarium and insectarium. Here the girls bob their hair and “Bobbed-hair” so-and-so, wearing a red dress, plays the piano, deep in a narrow backstreet lane, with her knees exposed. Her rendezvous notes are scribbled on the back of the Goddess Kannon’s written oracles.<sup>12</sup>

Like Montmartre in the 1890s, like New York’s Times Square in the 1940s, the place was license itself. In *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa*, Kawabata quotes Soeda Azenbō’s heightened description: “In Asakusa, everything is flung out in the raw. Desires dance naked. All races, all classes, all jumbled together forming a bottomless, endless current, flowing day and night, no beginning, no end. Asakusa is alive.”

**AMONG ALL THESE** varied attractions, one of the most popular was the cinema, a form of entertainment early associated with Asakusa because the first Tokyo movie house, the Denkikan, had opened there in 1903. Here one could see the wonders of the West; after 1932, one could even hear them—Marlene Dietrich and Gary Cooper talking to each other in *Morocco*, one of the first films subtitled for Japanese audiences.

Kawabata noted that by 1930, Asakusa had fourteen movie houses. He also stated, however, that it had even more live theaters. (In addition, his survey counted half a dozen vaudeville, or *yose*, halls, one kabuki theater, the largest number of pawnshops in the city, and the most beggars: in the summer of 1930, some eight hundred were living in Asakusa Park, though Kawabata did not trust this official estimate and maintained that there were far more.)

Kawabata himself eschewed the screen in favor of the stage, in particular the Asakusa revue, a dance and comedy show with erotic undertones first performed in 1929 by the Casino Folies (Kashino Fori). He described this performance as composed of “eroticism and nonsense and speed, and humor in the vein of the topical cartoon, the jazz song, legs.”<sup>13</sup> *Ero guro* was the spirit of the age. This combination of the first syllables of “erotic” and “grotesque” typified that combination of the sexy and the absurd and characterized the many entertainments of Asakusa: on the one hand, the firm-thighed chorines, and on the other (since Meiji times, it was said), the man who smoked through his navel.

Kawabata’s novel made the Casino Folies famous, though the revue’s leading comedian, Enoken, said that its popularity was based only on the false rumor that on Fridays the chorus girls dropped their panties. In any case, the novelist also gave us our only real record of what the place was like.

Kawabata shows us Asakusa at its prewar prime. *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa* captures the area at its most Asakusa-like, a hundred million people a year, a human wave, money spilled into shows, eateries, geisha houses, a world frivolous, frenetic, and filled with flesh. “Asakusa is like a specimen in the Bug House,” says the narrator of the novel, “something completely different from today’s world, like a remote island or some African village.”

Soon after that, the place began its decline. Exotic bloom that it was, in increasingly illiberal Japan, Asakusa began to fade. Takami Jun wrote that by 1938, “The famous old places of Asakusa had been abandoned. . . . The birthplace of the Asakusa revues was in a state of advanced neglect, the subject of weird stories. Late at night, it was said, you could hear the sound of tap dancing on the roof. It has since been torn down, and so those who loved the Casino Folies have lost all trace of their dream.”<sup>14</sup>

The military takeovers of the 1940s subdued even more the Asakusa spirit. Nagai Kafū, one cold night in 1944, recorded the closing of the Opera House, his favorite. “As I passed the lane of shops . . . on my way to the subway, I found myself weeping again. . . . I have been witness to it all, Tokyo going to ruin.”<sup>15</sup>

It went completely to ruin in 1945. In the U.S. incendiary raids of March 9 and 10, between 70,000 and 80,000 people were killed, and some two-fifths of the city was destroyed—Asakusa, too. The Kannon Temple was hit at one-thirty in the morning and was consumed by flames in just two hours.

After the conclusion of the Pacific war, the Allied Occupation authorities gave much of the land in Asakusa to the Kannon Temple, which, having no money of its own, sold it. Thus, Asakusa Park, with its famous pond, disappeared. The area behind the temple was turned into a parking lot for tourist buses; another portion went to a motion-picture company, which built a theater and an amusement hall.

That postwar innovation, the strip show, was visible from 1948—more flesh than ever before seen, with variations as well: the bath strip, the tigh trope strip, etc. But all this activity was illusory. Tokyo was moving west; Shinjuku was the new night town, and Asakusa was forgotten. By 1966 one newspaper headlined, “Deserted Place, Thy Name Is Asakusa.”<sup>16</sup>

**ASAKUSA EARLY HELD** a fascination for Kawabata. He once said that for three years during his high school days, he commuted daily, rain or shine, between two popular Asakusa gathering places, the Café Paris and the Café Elban. One day he glimpsed Tanizaki, some thirteen years his senior and already a well-known writer, at the nearby Nihonkan, surrounded by pretty girls, and thought that this would someday be he.

After graduating from high school in 1920, the twenty-one-year-



The Twelve Story Tower. Built in 1890, the tower was Tokyo's tallest building. It was destroyed in the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake. This photo was taken sometime between 1910 and 1923.

old Kawabata, though nominally a Tokyo Imperial University student, rented his own place in Asakusa, on the second floor of a hat repair shop, and started to write.

He was in his room when the 1923 earthquake hit, but the building stood and he escaped unhurt. His first reaction, as soon as the tremors stopped, was to round up fellow writers Kon Tōkō and Akutagawa Ryūnosuke and make a walking tour of the ruins. He continued taking long walks every day, carrying with him a jug of water and something to eat in his knapsack. Later he wrote that there couldn't have been many who saw so plainly what the earthquake had done.

He was also neglecting his Imperial University studies. A contemporary noted that the student Kawabata was “more fond of soaking in the public bath than of attending classes.”<sup>17</sup> He was writing, however, and later he became the editor of a new magazine,

*The Age of Literary Arts (Bungei Jidai)*. In it, he said his ambition was to view every incident of the human condition through new eyes. The critics dutifully labeled his group the New Perception School (Shinkankaku-ha).

Viewing every incident through new eyes was one of the tenets of the new aesthetic movement, modernism. This is a loose label, indeed, but it may be at least provisionally defined. According to Malcolm Bradbury, it is experimental, formally complex, and elliptical. The language is often awry, cultural cohesion is lost, perception is pluralized. It “tends to associate notions of the artist’s freedom from realism, materialism, traditional genre and form, with notions of cultural apocalypse and disaster.”<sup>18</sup>

A body of writers illustrates the concept. Among them are Proust, Mann, Gide, Kafka, and Joyce in fiction; Strindberg, Pirandello, Wedekind, and Brecht in drama; Mallarmé, Eliot, and Rilke in poetry. Their works are often aesthetically radical and technically innovative, often emphasize spatial as opposed to chronological forms, tend toward irony, and involve what Ortega y Gasset (who did not like modernism) called a certain “dehumanization of art.”<sup>19</sup>

Kawabata knew modernist narrative—indeed, he had already created some. In 1926 he wrote the scenario for *A Page Out of Order (Kurutta ichipeji)*, Kinugasa Teisuke’s modernist film (produced by the New Perceptionist School Motion Picture Federation). Like everyone else, Kawabata had seen Robert Wiene’s *Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari*, a modernist landmark and another film set in an insane asylum.

In addition, though he understood English only with difficulty, he had attempted to read *Ulysses*. One wonders if he also knew about the other big-city modernist novels of the period, Bely’s 1916 *Petersburg* and Döblin’s 1929 *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. He certainly knew *Shanghai* (1928–1931), then being written by his best friend and fel-



Poster for the Casino Folies revue, June 9, 1930.

low New Perceptionist, Yokomitsu Riichi. Indeed, Kawabata stated that *Shanghai* was the “grand summation of the methods” of the New Perceptionist School.<sup>20</sup> And he had early had some knowledge of the aims of modernism. Marinetti’s 1909 *Declaration of the Futurists* had been translated by prominent literary figure (and Japan’s surgeon general) Mori Ogai and published in Japan the same year it came out in Italy.

He would also have been familiar with Nagai Kafū's *Geisha in Rivalry* (*Udekurabe*), published in 1916. In it, one of the characters, having visited an Asakusa prostitute, walks back past the Kannon Temple and stops to look at it, then recalls that "he had once read, in some magazine or other, a review of a novel by Blasco Ibáñez called *La Catedral* . . . [which] had used the cathedral of Toledo as a focus for sketching the lives of those who lived in its environs. It had immediately occurred to [him] to write a novel applying this idea to the Kannon Temple of Asakusa."<sup>21</sup> Nothing came of this, but four years later Tanizaki set out to write just this sort of book, *The Mermaid*. Nothing came of this either—the author abandoned it after two hundred pages. It was Kawabata who finally wrote the novel you are about to begin.

The author would also have known that Asakusa had already been singled out as the best place to study the popular culture that formed the basis of the kind of modernism that interested him. In 1921, Gonda Yasunosuke, scholar of Japanese popular culture, told his students, "Go to Asakusa—Asakusa's your text."<sup>22</sup> His advice became famous, and a number of students did their fieldwork there.

Kawabata moved to Asakusa in 1929. He already knew it well from his high school days and its post-earthquake days. Now he began to frequent the Casino Folies, which had just opened, taking notes about the dancers and the lives of the demimonde. It was these notes that were made into the novel *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa*, its sequel, and his other Asakusa writings.

In this way, Kawabata later said, he made use of his three years of research walking around Asakusa. "All I did was walk. I never became acquainted with any of the young delinquents. I never addressed a word to the vagrants either . . . but I took my notes."<sup>23</sup> He was not interested in journalism, or in reportage. He wanted to write down what he saw and to display it in modernist form.

In 1930, when Kawabata was still living in Asakusa, Gonda Yasunosuke completed a study of the area, in which he wrote that in Asakusa, the differences were all visible—that he could show, as though in relief, what restaurants sold what and who ate or drank it, which different classes went to the movies, the vaudeville halls, the stage shows. He included the sizes of the businesses, distinguished the employees by sex and age, and counted the different sorts of enterprise native only to that place.<sup>24</sup>

This is, in a way, what Kawabata was attempting as well, except that he was creating not a work of advanced sociology, but a modernist novel. Gonda contended that the excesses of Asakusa were not intended as escapes from the economic recession then gripping Japan, but as resistance to the social conventions reinforced by monopoly capital. Kawabata had much the same aim, to show the vitality of the place and the people, but his means were artistic.

In this he was somewhat like Virginia Woolf, another writer he had tried to read. His Tokyo is like Mrs. Dalloway's London. It is composed of a collection of seemingly random perceptions unattached to social issues. A difference is that Kawabata's novel is also (another modernist strategy) a commentary on itself. To begin with, it is a pop novel, complete with two-dimensional *manga* or comic-book characters and a gag title—*Asakusa kurenaidan* sounds just as jokey in Japanese as *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa* does in English. It employs a comic deflation of the past, as when Prince Genji and Lord Narihira caper together on the same stage. There is purposely hokey melodrama, as in the boat scenes, which feature Yumiko's panther leaps and her notorious arsenic kiss. There are pop tag lines, such as "Follow those bikes!"

At the same time, there is serious dislocation. The story is often broken into and is at one point abandoned and not rediscovered until the final page. There are "cubist" catalogues, such as the various

views from the Subway Tower, so timed as to disturb any idea of continuity. And there is much questioning of the narrative itself, as in the pretense that events influenced its composition: “By the way, dear reader, as for Yumiko . . . When I’d reached this point in my story, I met Yumiko in a strange way, and so my novel must also suddenly change course.”

Insisting upon artificiality, Kawabata maintains throughout that, as he says at the beginning, “in the end, this is just a novel.” And at the end, he indicates it. Suddenly, Yumiko reappears, this time dressed up as a young peddler from the island of Oshima and is selling its local product, camellia oil for the hair. Kawabata knows that his readers will be aware that “selling oil” (*abura o uru*) is a colloquialism for pulling a fast one and getting away with it. This then, he now indicates, is just what he has done with his novel—getting away with it becomes a metaphor for his book and his method.

Recondite as all this is, the book was intended for a popular audience and was originally serialized in the widely read *Asahi* newspaper. It was as though *Ulysses*, hot from Joyce’s pen, had appeared weekly in the *London Times*. This was possible because in Japan, then as now, the avant-garde is at once incorporated into the taste of the masses, so strong is the lure of the new. Also, in Kawabata’s novel, the brand new came sandwiched between the tried and true.

In it, the reader savors

the curious inebriation induced by a cocktail made, as it were, from [Asakusa’s] tradition and its modernism. Hence, as a story, it is not aimed at a consistently integrated delineation of characters and incidents, the latter having been treated merely as bubbles of all sorts and shapes that give form to the swirling currents of Asakusa, leaving them to rise and vanish at will, and thus creating numerous focal points in the narrative and rendering its sensation both intricate

and many-sided. . . . Cutting, linking, superimposing, unraveling, the story is plotted out on a bewildering scale which is at once variable and involved and which, in short, is very like the cinema.<sup>25</sup>

Certainly, the narrative is very unlike that of the ordinary novel. Seiji M. Lippit, in his masterly exegesis of *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa*, has identified many of the differences. There is a multiplicity of writing styles and genres, along with aggregated language and much slang. The literary mixes with the non-literary, resulting in a fragmentary style, that of reportage and descriptive poetry. The narrative moves from image to image, a progression Kawabata said was like “the succession of images in a newsreel” and that insisted upon a “free and reckless association.”<sup>26</sup>

The conventional novelistic structure is, in the process, dismantled, and there is a willful confusion of tenses and persons. Amid all this Lippit has identified three narrative voices: first, the narrator, the one addressing the “dear reader”; second, this narrator as character in the novel itself; and third, another voice, objective, in the third person, recounting things the first two voices could not know.<sup>27</sup>

All of this accounts for the famous difficulty of the text. Critic Maeda Ai has said that when he first tried to read it, as a college student, he couldn’t make it to the end. The famous opening—one long, many-claused sentence, beginning with confusing particulars and only widening into its subject at the end—all but defies translation.

The structure is equally unexpected. The book stops in the middle while new protagonists take over, and it is not until the final pages that the story we began with suddenly returns. In the meantime, the work turns self-referential, with asides referring to its own popularity, even to the stage and screen versions of it. *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa*, Edward Seidensticker has said, is like Asakusa itself:

“mannered, diffuse, obscure, and inconclusive even as Kawabata novels go . . . but it is interesting.”<sup>28</sup> Certainly, some of this is due to the author’s becoming a modernist. Kawabata was familiar with the foreign models, and his idea of what the new perception and new art ought to consist of precluded much that might have been expected.

Van C. Gessel has written that “the attempt to adopt some of the techniques of European modernism and the struggle to break away from the flat, overly realistic and autobiographical tendencies that dominated the first two decades of the twentieth century in Japan are noteworthy achievements. Much that seems surprising, elliptical and sometimes even odd in Kawabata’s writing can be traced to his days as a New Perceptionist.”<sup>29</sup> It can also be attributed to his membership (and he was one of the founding members) in the New Art School (Shinkōgeijutsu-ha), that short-lived organization formed in opposition both to old-fashioned naturalist literature and newfangled proletarian tracts. The New Art School shared many aims with the New Perceptionists, but there were many differences as well.

The New Art School certainly emphasized an affiliation with that subgenre that Alisa Freedman has identified as the laconic “urban sketch,” which she characterizes thus: “The urban gaze is not a meditative one and instead is a fleeting look at the barrage of spectacles that pass before the eyes of the viewer like the landscape seen from the window of a moving train.”<sup>30</sup>

At the same time, one can also say, as Edward Seidensticker has, that “the influence of Edo literature [on *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa*] is so strong as to make it seem almost imitative. It is not typical Kawabata. The investigation of lonely lives on the edge of the Asakusa demimonde is, however, close to the central preoccupation of Kawabata’s writing.”<sup>31</sup>

The role of observer was one Kawabata felt fit not only the aspi-

rations of the New Perception School but also his own nature. Many critics have noticed how the role of observer seems to define or limit his fiction. The detachment and distancing he showed in all of his work was the dominant theme of his own life—the loss of both parents when he was four, then, one by one, the demise of the rest of the family, and unhappy love affairs, one with a fellow student, later one with a girl. Isolated, he chose to maintain this separation between self and others both in his work and in his life.

The detached, watching narrator communicating elliptical fragments of his vision also has some precedents in Japanese literature. The protagonists of that genre known as the *shishōsetsu* (*watakushi shōsetsu*, the first-person-singular novel) share this regard, though it is more often self-regard.

Kawabata was, however, at least in his Asakusa writings, a special kind of spectator. He was a flâneur, one who strolled about, committing himself to nothing and no one. An often ironic observer, he turned perception itself into a kind of judgment. Like Baudelaire on the boulevard, Kawabata in Asakusa was a literary dandy whose gaze was his only comment.

When Kawabata went to study Asakusa, he was, at the same time turning against the respectable life of a university student with an assured social position. His first popular success, *The Izu Dancer* (*Izu no Odoriko*), is about a student who, rather than studying, wanders the countryside of Izu and encounters an itinerant performing group and the very young dancer who excites his regard. In one of his last books, *The House of the Sleeping Beauties* (*Nemureru Bijo*), the narrator is an old man who pays to sleep with heavily drugged young girls who are unaware of his loving, critical, intrusive, accepting gaze. The young girls of *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa*—Yumiko, Haruko, and all the rest—are members of this crew that so attracted the author all his life.

The elegant stroller is also slumming—the regard of the flâneur is also the open stare of the voyeur. Kawabata in this novel says he is afraid of being like the Edo poet Ōta Nanpo, also known as Shokusanjin and characterized as “a debauched man of letters.” Yet his apparent fears invite our speculations.

“That’s Asakusa,” he proclaims at each new revelation, apparently not noticing his own condescension or that he is reveling in “this world-of-nothingness garbage-can of Asakusa.” The lower classes, as they would be called, seem to invite this regard. And the lower classes at play seem to make it mandatory. Asakusa thus strongly appealed to those with a *nostalgie de la boue* or, as Kawabata phrased it, a “taste for back streets.”<sup>32</sup>

This savoring of the lower classes is often aligned to a taste for control. Not only is the “mud” found more “authentic” than anything upper class, it is also found to be more malleable. Paul Morand in Montmartre, Carl Van Vechten in Harlem, Paul Bowles in Tangier—all are examples of men who found their métier in becoming purposely, if temporarily, *déclassé*. They found a new (sometimes finer, more admirable) authenticity, they found a container for their own feelings, and, though often powerless in their own social spheres, they found something they could control. It was not a question of patronization, however, or of venting simple superiority. This “taste for back streets” contains a sincere admiration coupled with an equally deeply felt need to manipulate. It is this combination that lends such a sense of conviction in this literature.

*The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa* was written swiftly. By December 1929, it was already being serialized in Japan’s most-read newspaper. *The Izu Dancer* had made the writer famous, and here was a new work that promised even more. It proved quite popular, created a kind of Asakusa vogue, and made a sensation of the Casino Folies. Having read the novel, people started to come to see the place,

and for a time it commanded the attention of what Kawabata disdainfully called the “Ginza people.” Perhaps it was in scorn of such success (though he was slumming no less than they) that Kawabata said that in his work he had used only a hundredth of his material and that even so, he was ashamed of the results.

Or perhaps it was that modernism as a technique no longer expressed his needs. A number of writers during this period—Yokomitsu Riichi, Itō Sei, Hori Tatsuo, Satō Haruo—were experimenting with the style. All of them, including Kawabata, abandoned it. Stephen Snyder speaks of “the general consensus that the attempt to find a Japanese idiom in which to render the verbal pyrotechnics of the European brand of modernism was by and large a failure.”<sup>33</sup>

If Kawabata was truly ashamed, he shouldn’t have been. *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa* may have been one-shot modernism, but it effortlessly captures a remarkable era and a fascinating place, both now gone. It also was the theater where Kawabata could create a persona for his first-person singular, for a narrator who was not himself, one who had no authorial validity but without whom he could not express observations, justifications, reflections of the place as he really found it. Both personality and place are joined, face to face, in this evocation of somewhere that never existed and somewhere that did.

## NOTES

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3. Edward Seidensticker, *Tokyo Rising: The City Since the Great Earthquake* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 113.
4. Seidensticker, *Low City, High City*, 119.
5. *Ibid.*, 158.
6. *Ibid.*, 207.

7. Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, "The Secret," trans. Anthony Hood Chambers, in Aileen Gatten and Anthony Hood Chambers, eds., *New Leaves: Studies and Translations of Japanese Literature in Honor of Edward Seidensticker* (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 1993), 161–162.
8. Ken K. Ito, *Visions of Desire: Tanizaki's Fictional Worlds* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 69–70.
9. *Ibid.*, 73.
10. Edward Seidensticker, *Kafū the Scribbler: The Life and Writings of Nagai Kafū* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1965), 331.
11. Ito, *Visions of Desire*, 67.
12. Yoshikazu Kataoka, "Asakusa kurenaidan," in *Introduction to Contemporary Japanese Literature* (Tokyo: Kokusai Bunka Shinkokai, 1939), 339.
13. *Ibid.*, 73.
14. Seidensticker, *Tokyo Rising*, 112.
15. Seidensticker, *Kafū the Scribbler*, 166.
16. Seidensticker, *Tokyo Rising*, 184.
17. Van C. Gessel, *Three Modern Novelists: Sōseki, Tanizaki, Kawabata* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1993), 155.
18. Malcolm Bradbury, "Modernism," in *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms*, ed. Roger Fowler (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 151–152.
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20. Donald Keene, *Dawn to the West: Japanese Literature of the Modern Era*, vol. 3 (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1984), 656.
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22. Miriam Silverberg, "Constructing the Japanese Ethnography of Modernity," *Journal of Asian Studies* 51, no. 1 (February 1992): 30.
23. Keene, *Dawn to the West*, 795.
24. Silverberg, "Constructing the Japanese Ethnography of Modernity," 44–49.
25. Kataoka, "Asakusa kurenaidan," 341.
26. Seiji Mizuta Lippit, *Topographies of Japanese Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 126–127.
27. *Ibid.*, 131.
28. Seidensticker, *Tokyo Rising*, 71.

29. Gessel, *Three Modern Novelists*, 158–159.
30. Alisa Freedman, “Tracking Japanese Modernity: Commuter Trains, Streetcars, and Passengers in Tokyo Literature, 1905–1935” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2002), 172.
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32. Keene, *Dawn to the West*, 796.
33. Stephen Snyder, *Fictions of Desire: Narrative Form in the Novels of Nagai Kafū* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000), 127.