COPYRIGHT NOTICE
Snyder/Fictions of Desire

is published by University of Hawai‘i Press and copyrighted, © 2000, by University of Hawai‘i Press. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher, except for reading and browsing via the World Wide Web. Users are not permitted to mount this file on any network servers.
NB: Illustrations may have been deleted to decrease file size.
INTRODUCTION

*The delight of the urban poet is love—not at first sight, but at last sight.*
—WALTER BENJAMIN

Nagai Kafū was a *flâneur*, that urban “prowler” immortalized by the “first modernist,” Baudelaire, in *Le Spleen de Paris.* Kafū’s fiction, diaries, criticism, and occasional pieces document his perambulations in the modern(izing) metropolis that Tokyo had become by the beginning of the twentieth century, as he turns the “mobilized gaze of the *flâneur*” on the spectacle of contemporary life. Over the course of his career, Kafū’s view of that life shifted from approbation to censure, but his commitment to the act of chronicling the cityscape remained a constant through nearly six decades of literary production. Kafū is, however, more than a simple roving eye, more than simply the best observer of his chosen metropolis, though he was that too, as Edward Seidensticker has so eloquently demonstrated. The city in Kafū’s fiction, in particular, becomes a stage for the presentation of a developing aesthetic vision, a vision that serves as a barometer in reverse of Japan’s cultural climate during the first half of the twentieth century.

In reverse because Kafū was, perhaps above all, a contrarian. Throughout his career, he took the cultural pulse of his burgeoning, metamorphosing nation and then did and said precisely the opposite. After writing *Yume no onna* (Woman of the Dream, 1903), arguably the best work to come of the “Zola fever” that swept Japan after the turn of the century and gave rise to Japanese Naturalism, he aligned himself with Mori Ōgai and the Anti-Naturalists, repudiating the origins of the dominant mode of twentieth-century Japanese fiction, the “I novel.” After traveling to the West and returning to write the immensely successful *Amerika monogatari* (American Tales, 1908) and the famously censored *Furansu monogatari* (French Tales, 1909), which established him as a leader in the movement to create a modern, Western literature and situated him squarely in the literary avant-garde, he published a series of attacks on Japanese modernization and Westernization and began his long cultivation of the persona of a latter-day gesaku writer; that is, at the height of the Taishō frenzy of the new he recreated himself as a throwback to the world of premodern Japan. Two decades later, however, after
the rest of the nation had made a seemingly similar “return to Japan” (Nihon kaiki) with the revalorization of native culture in the days leading up to the Pacific War, Kafū was highly critical of Japanese policy and the culture that had produced it.

This study is a reconsideration of Kafū’s major fiction and the vision that shaped it from his first important mature work, Amerika monogatari, through his definitive masterpiece, Bokutō kidan (A Strange Tale from East of the River, 1937). Kafū’s contrarian spirit and his role as flâneur assured that he observed and recorded something of the Japanese experience of the modern, the complex negotiation of and painful coming to terms with the various challenges presented by the projects of defining a nation-state and both national and personal selves. While Kafū’s diaries and critical works provide a great deal of evidence concerning his thoughts on these subjects, it is his fiction that contains the most basic statements of his beliefs and the boldest expressions of his vision—though not always in the most transparent form. Kafū’s diaries, for example, are often cited for their relatively clear dissent from the war effort, while his essays provide a vivid picture of a man who was dismayed by developments in contemporary Japanese culture. But only in his fiction does Kafū confront the issues that concern him most deeply: aesthetic realities that receive his most subtle yet most candid reflection.

The label most frequently given to Kafū’s work is “elegaic.” The heart of his literary production (apart from his immensely significant diary, Danchōtei nichijō [Dyspepsia House Days], which he kept from 1917 to 1959) is from the beginning of the Taishō era through the Pacific War, a period characterized in his literary and personal life by a seemingly endless search for the remnants of Edo culture in the increasingly modernized, and twice razed, neighborhoods of eastern Tokyo. The origins of and impetus for this backward glance are variously traced to Kafū’s disgust with Meiji culture and Tokyo squalor on his return from the West, as expressed in Shinkichōsha nikki (Diary of a Recent Returnee, 1909), or to his horror at the Kōtoku Incident of 1910, which Kafū describes in his 1919 essay “Hanabi” (Fireworks). Whatever the sources, however, with the construction of the Danchōtei (Dyspepsia House) in the garden of his family home in Okubo in 1916, Kafū’s retirement from contemporary life is complete. He formally, if rather transparently and self-consciously, commits himself to playing the role of gesakusha (writer of frivolous works).

I concluded that I could do no better than drag myself down to the level of the Tokugawa writer of frivolous and amatory fiction. Arming

2 Fictions of Desire
myself with the tobacco pouch that was the mark of the old-style dandy, I set out to collect Ukiyoe prints, and I began to learn the samisen. It was a matter of no interest to such inferior persons as the writer of light Edo fiction or the maker of color prints that Perry's Black Ships had arrived at Uraga, or that Ii Kamon no Kami, Great Minister of the Shogunate, was assassinated at the castle gate. They thought it better to know their place and remain silent. Quite as if nothing had happened, they went on writing their indecent books and making their indecent prints.}

In response to an increasingly authoritarian government and a populace and intelligentsia that seemed to ignore its repressive tendencies in favor of Western brands of hedonism, Kafû chose to emulate the Edo literatus, writing his "indecent books" and pursuing what traces he could find of Edo culture in the only place he could find them: the "pleasure quarters." The melancholy and elegaic tone that haunts Kafû's fiction from this period of retirement on—including all the major works: Udekurabe (Geisha in Rivalry, 1917), Okamezasa (Dwarf Bamboo, 1918), Tsuyu no atosaki (During the Rains, 1931), Hikage no hana (Flowers in the Shade, 1934), and Bokutō kidan—is a product of this pointed rejection of contemporary Japanese culture and assumption of the self-imposed, highly mediated persona of the gesakusha.

The utter self-consciousness of the pose, however, becomes for Kafû a touchstone in his literary life, and it can be argued that self-consciousness, of a very Modernist sort, is the theme of his best fiction. This contradiction characterizes Kafû's work as thoroughly as does the elegaic tone that is so often noted: at the same time and in the same texts where he catalogs and celebrates the remnants of traditional Japanese culture, Kafû is actively investigating the possibilities of his narrative medium, following (through his ongoing and extensive reading of Japanese and Western literature) and participating in (through his own fiction writing) a Modernist revolution that challenged existing representational codes.

If there is a simple definition of the twentieth-century Modernist aesthetic in the arts, it may be the consciousness that the medium itself becomes the subject matter. Painters, famously and somewhat before the dawn of the Modern century, abandon representation and transparency for techniques that call attention to the surface of their canvases, the strokes of their brushes, the paint itself. Composers adopt new tonal systems that question the "natural" status of conventional tonality or import “nonmusical” sounds into their compositions to question the very definition of music. And writers, novelists in particular, develop a seem-
ingly endless array of techniques—some subtle, some less so—to challenge the realist conventions of narrative perfected in the nineteenth century and to thematize their own activity, that is, writing itself. Transparency of language gives way to difficulty and opacity; a fixed, well-defined narrative point of view gives way to multiple, problematic ones; and the great realist project that had characterized at least the mainstream novel through the nineteenth century comes unraveled in a flurry of Modernist manifestoes. Kafū is neither innocent of these innovations, in both their European and their Japanese forms, nor satisfied with the (disingenuous) rhetorical transparency of “I fiction,” which became the indigenous norm during these years. His fiction, from the time of Amerika monogatari on, but increasingly from the period of Udokurabe and Okamezasa, becomes an extended investigation of the limits of his medium and the possibilities, suggested by both European and Japanese sources, for a new kind of narrative.

There is, however, another essential feature of Kafū’s work, one that might at first seem unrelated to the focus on narrative experiment but that is, in fact, inextricably bound up with it. The fictions examined in this study are set almost exclusively in the demimonde and peopled by the women who inhabit it, and it is the ways in which prostitution and prostitutes become a metaphor for Kafū’s narrative project that will be a central concern in the chapters that follow. Kafū’s fascination with this milieu and these women stems from his earliest works, and beginning with his 1903 adaptation of Zola’s Nana and the novel of the same year he wrote in imitation, Yume no onna, through late pieces such as “Odoriko” (Dancing Girl, 1944) or “Kunshō” (The Decoration, 1946), his imagination rarely strayed far from the theme of prostitution and its practitioners. This tendency is, by most accounts, an aspect of his pose as a writer of gesaku, since the “frivolous and amatory” fiction produced by his Edo period precursors was largely set in the Yoshiwara and other licensed prostitution quarters. But for Kafū, this aspect of his narrative experiment, too, was an amalgam, and a close examination of his demimonde settings and characters as well as his thematic concerns reveals their hybrid nature. Komayo’s Shimbashi in Udokurabe is as evocative of Zola’s Paris as it is of Saikaku’s yūkaku (prostitution quarter), and the writer’s view of the world “east of the river” in Bokutō kidan is informed as much by his reading of André Gide as of Tamenaga Shunsui. A literary fascination with the figure of the prostitute, moreover, is hardly peculiar to early modern Japan; nineteenth-century French fiction placed in the forefront these women who, as Peter Brooks has pointed out, are not only utterly “narratable” themselves but also provoke the “stuff of story”
in others. For Kafû, Kimie, O-yuki, and the other prostitutes in his demi-
monde fictions become the focus of a Modernist experiment, consistently
and emphatically serving to thematize the act of narration, to mark the
texts as reflections on their own ontological status. The prostitute, as
Kafû figured her, was herself both a fiction and a fabulist; she was
responsible for incarnating herself as an object but also for creating the
narrative of her relationship with the customer, which was, patently, not
“real” but an economically based, theatrically staged fiction of desire. In
both of these activities she was, as Kafû saw it, doubling the activities of
the writer. It is this status and this narrative process that Kafû explores
in his “elegaic” works, fictions that I consider instances of what might be
called Kafû’s “covert Modernism.”

Kafû’s aesthetic vision is a synthesis of the Japanese narrative tra-
dition and the one he discovers in the writings of European Modernists.
His understanding of the latter, particularly in the area of narrative struc-
turing, owes much to his friendship with Mori Ōgai and to his encounter
with Ōgai’s fiction. Ōgai himself was an early and extraordinarily astute
student of European fiction and of the narrative techniques that under-
wrote the realist project in the nineteenth century, and he experiments
extensively with ways of creating equivalents for an emerging modern
Japanese fiction. His mature fiction, however, goes beyond re-creation,
attempting a self-conscious deconstruction of Western realist forms. In
Chapter 1, I examine the relationship between Kafû and Ōgai and the
ways in which the latter’s fiction, particularly his pivotal novel Gan (The
Wild Goose, 1911–1915), prefigures Kafû’s own narrative experiments as
well as his fascination with the demimonde.

Kafû’s experimentation with storytelling forms and with the possi-
bilities for a fiction that moves the act of narration to the foreground
begins in earnest with Amerika monogatari and Furansu monogatari,
works that owe nearly as much of their shape and content to Kafû’s avid
reading of Maupassant during this period as to his actual experiences in
America and France. Chapter 2 focuses on the framed narrative struc-
tures in the stories of American Tales, the tendency of the stories to
thematize the act of storytelling, and the precedents for both in the work
of Maupassant. The connections among narrative, demimonde settings,
and the act of prostitution, which are elaborated in later works, are also
examined here in their nascent forms.

One of Kafû’s most successful longer works, Udekurabe, is a brilliant
evocation of the machinations of desire surrounding the career of a Shim-
bashi geisha, Komayo. Chapter 3 examines this novel in light of Kafû’s
ongoing study of French fiction, particularly the works of Flaubert, Zola,
and Loti, writers whose demimonde themes and narrative inventions have been seen as complicitous with a larger societal effort to marginalize and contain prostitution. I compare social and literary attitudes toward prostitution in nineteenth-century France and Edo Japan, and then suggest ways in which the structure of *Udekurabe* reflects Kafū's understanding of the mediated, fictionalized desire that characterizes both prostituted sex and storytelling in the demimonde. *Udekurabe* is often paired with the novel that follows it, *Okamezasa*, a work examined in Chapter 4 in which Kafū explores the spread of the demimonde beyond the traditional confines of the "pleasure quarters" and the contagion of demimonde values as they infect other social arenas, notably the art world. But this work is most striking for the ways in which these themes are reflected explicitly in the manipulative plot structures and subtle narrative devices designed to enflame and then frustrate reader expectations. In *Okamezasa*, Kafū begins to suggest the full ramifications of the relationship between writer and reader, between writing and reading, offering the highly mediated desire for the prostitute as a metaphor for narrative seduction.

Kafū's greatest achievement, however, is almost certainly the short novel *Bokutō kidan*, and this study concludes with a close look at the ways in which Kafū's important themes and techniques converge in this one work. In response to his reading of Gide's *Counterfeitters* and *Paludes*, Kafū creates a highly self-conscious and self-referential novel-within-a-novel structure, situating the book firmly within a metafictional tradition stretching back to Shunsui on the one hand and Diderot and Sterne on the other. At the same time, however, *Bokutō kidan* is among Kafū's most evocative demimonde fictions and O-yuki perhaps the most memorable of his prostitute characters. Walter Benjamin has commented that "the prostitute is a listener. . . . She has seen every man's desire fail and now the stream of words drains away into her nights."10 It is Kafū's signal insight that the prostitute, despite the bondage of sexual slavery and in contradistinction to traditional male-authored demimonde fiction (both East and West), is not only a "listener" but also one who speaks, filling her nights with a stream of words that take on a life of their own. It is the confluence of these insights—that of the self-referentiality of fiction and the centrality of storytelling in the demimonde—that marks *Bokutō kidan* as one of the great experimental fictions of modern Japanese literature and charges the otherwise mild "elegaic" tone with contemporary meaning.

A flâneur such as Kafū was, in fact, is always in search of both the past and the future. As Hannah Arendt has observed of another great
“urban prowler,” Walter Benjamin, “it is to him, aimlessly strolling through the crowds in the big cities in studied contrast to their hurried, purposeful activity, that things reveal themselves in their secret meaning; The true picture of the past flits by . . . and only the flâneur who idly strolls by receives the message. . . . For just as the flâneur, through the gestus of purposeless strolling, turns his back to the crowd even as he is propelled and swept by it, so the ‘angel of history,’ who looks at nothing but the expanse of ruins of the past, is blown backwards into the future by the storm of progress.”  Kafū’s perpetual backward glance obscures the real object of his desires: the future of fiction. This study is an attempt to stroll idly through Kafū’s longer narratives in search of their “secret meanings.”