

Y. Kawabata and the Japanese Ceramics

— a Dialogue —

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One day in August, 1997, Elisabeth and I started on a long walk through the old streets in Kamakura. It was late afternoon. The sun began to slope downward, while harshly emitting its last tormenting rays upon the city. The people on the streets were evading Apollo's arrows as the Niobedes and desperately seeking out their way home.

I: Hi, Elisabeth! Welcome to the ancient city of Kamakura. Look at this great ebb of bathers from the shore returning to Tokyo. You were lucky to have traveled in the reverse direction from Tokyo to Kamakura.

Elisabeth: You are right, Tsuji. My train from Tokyo was almost empty, and I enjoyed quiet reading for one hour.

I: Reading is the best way to kill time during a short train trip. In fact, the area between Tokyo and Yokohama is the most industrialized, and the view from the train window is least attractive.

Elisabeth: That is why I felt so relieved when I found the train suddenly buried among the green hills upon arrival at Kita (North) Kamakura Station.

I: The city protects both its rich natural environment and historical sites. Now you can even smell the soft ocean breeze from the shore.

Elisabeth: It's so different from the smothering climate in Tokyo.

I: It was due to this climate, —winters are also mild— that, already in the Meiji period, the Imperial family, aristocrats, and wealthy bourgeois found their resort in this vicinity.

Elisabeth: They say, the building of the Kamakura Museum of Literature originally belonged to the Grand Duke of Maeda.

I: That is just one example. There are many old mansions and villas in this city.

They were once the stages of gorgeous social life, but most of them had to leave the hands of their original owners.

Now, let's follow this shady lane rather than the bustling main street. It's quieter and cooler here. You see, it always pleases my curiosity to stroll through such shadowy paths and quickly poke through untrimmed hedges into an old residence. Some seem to have been abandoned for a long time. Yet, it thrills me when I glimpse old people quietly seated on the verandah, as if appearing from the memory of long past.

You also find houses which were once resided by famous writers, scholars, and such. Even today, the city is considered as the ideal place for intellectuals and artists to live. They can enjoy a kind of reclusive life in the bosom of rich nature, but at the same time be relatively close to Tokyo.

Elisabeth : I learned about Yoritomo and his feudal government in a Japanese history course I took in Germany. Doesn't the history of this city go as far back as the medieval period ?

I : Oh, yes. In fact, the city is full of legends and memories of those fearless warriors. At the end of the twelfth century, Minamoto-no-Yoritomo, the chief-tain of the warrior's clan of Genji, established here the first feudal government and secured its relative independence from the traditional aristocratic reign. The history of the Kamakura period was in fact a great epic of incessant clan-destined wars. It continues the famous epic *Tale of Heike*, which describes the fall of the Heike Clan and the rise of Genji. I won't frighten you, Elisabeth, but many of the pebbles under your feet once absorbed crimson blood.

Elisabeth : I know, but it seems that at the same time the warrior lords built so many temples and shrines here.

I : Yes, they were very enthusiastic patrons of the new Zen sect of Buddhism. Zen leaders, such as Eizai, who had learned the new doctrine in Southern Sung China, tried to propagate it in Kyoto. But they first faced the resistance from the traditional esoteric Buddhists. This was at least a partial reason why they sought for protectors among the warrior's rank. So, you know about the Five Sacred Mountains (=monasteries) in Kamakura ?

Elisabeth : Yes, I remember that they were first introduced by the Hojo clan after the Chinese model.

I : Well, well. You studied a lot about this period in your class. We are just passing

by Jufuku-ji Temple, the third in the hierarchy of the Sacred Mountains. You see the lovely stone pavement that leads you from the gate to the main building? Unfortunately, there is no original architecture remaining from the Kamakura period. The earliest extant architecture in the city is the pavilion of the Holy Relic in Engaku-ji Temple from the early fifteenth century. Shall we hurry up to the temple before the gate is closed at sunset?

Thus, we arrived at Engaku-ji Temple. It was inaugurated by the venerable Mugaku-Sogen —he was invited from Sung China— and was ranked only second to Kencho-ji Temple in the hierarchy of the Five Mountains. Slowly we followed the stone pavement that gradually ascended till the end of the valley. Now the evening dusk began to rise silently from a number of hillside Yagura¹⁾.

I: Listen, Elisabeth, now the song of evening cicadae (*Tanna Japonensis*) is enveloping us all around. The Japanese literary tradition is very sensitive not only to the beauty of every season of the year, but also to the transition of the seasons, from Spring to Summer, Summer to Autumn, and so on. A Japanese poet is always alert to the earliest signs of the change of seasons.

Elisabeth: So, you mean that those cicadae are predicting the arrival of autumn?

I: Exactly, Elisabeth, and I am sure that with this rich nature, changing from day to day, Kamakura attracted many novelists in the modern period. The faster the urbanization and industrialization developed in the capital area, the more Japanese intellectuals found their sanctuary here. Thus, they maintain the Japanese tradition in art and esthetics. Do you know about Yasunari Kawabata?

Elisabeth: Yes, he is the first Japanese novelist who was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 1968. I read his *Izu Dancer*. I was very much impressed by his sensitivity and lyricism.

I: He moved from Tokyo to Kamakura in the middle of the 1930s and ended his life by suicide in a nearby marine resort town, in 1972. Especially, in the last half of his life, he devoted himself to rediscovering the Japanese tradition in art and literature. His celebration lecture, "I who belong to this beautiful Japan" delivered in Stockholm in 1968, was his avowed confession of his loyalty to the indigenous tradition. There he stressed the importance of the subtlety of changing nature, the tradition of tea ceremony and flower arrangement, Zen Buddhism, etc. etc. It

was in Kamakura that these artistic and esthetic traditions were all alive and available for Kawabata. By the way, Elisabeth, do you know that the story of the *Thousand Cranes*, one of the great trilogy of his *œuvres*,²⁾ begins exactly here where we are standing?

Elisabeth: Oh, really? No I haven't read that work yet.

I: Well, its getting a little dark. Let's go and sit in a nearby restaurant, and I will tell you about this famous novel?

Elisabeth: Yes, of course. I would love to.

We were led into a chamber with tatami-mattresses of a Japanese restaurant nearby, which was delicately scented so as to soften the remaining heat of the day. We were first greeted by the waitress, who soon prepared a bowl of pale green tea with a sweet cake for us. The small garden in front of the chamber was covered with green moss and dimly lit by a stone lantern in the corner. The residue of the green fluid in the bottom of the light brown Bizen tea bowl seemed to echo amongst the verdure filling the garden.

I: Now, Elisabeth, before the dinner course begins, let me briefly summarize the story of the *Thousand Cranes*. The principal character of the story is Kikuji Mitani. His father was apparently a typical bourgeois patriarch from the pre-war time. As it was traditional among the bourgeois gentlemen of the old time, Kikuji's father was a devotee of tea ceremony. He built a tea cottage in his garden, and indulged himself in collecting tea ceremony utensils. But, he died shortly after the end of the war, and so did his wife. As the only child of the Mitanis, Kikuji has been left alone. He commutes to his business firm in Tokyo, while an old maid, who once served his parents, still serves their son and maintains the household.

As it was not exceptional among the old-time bourgeois gentlemen in Japan, Kikuji's father kept two mistresses, or, concubines. One of them was called Chikako. It seems that she had never been married before she met Kikuji's father. She had an unusually large birthmark on her breast, which is described in cruel realism at the beginning of the story. Due to this physical blemish, it is said in the story, she had had no chance to get married. It seems that the late Mr. Mitani initiated her into the cult of tea ceremony. Since then, she has been

supporting herself as an established tea master, while helping her patron and his family.

The second mistress is Mrs. Ota. She had been the wife of Mr. Mitani's close friend, but she was approached by (or she approached) Mitani after the death of her husband. Mr. Mitani assisted her in selling the collection of tea ceremony utensils which once had belonged to her husband. She had borne a daughter, Fumiko, by her husband. Kikuji's father favored Mrs. Ota and used to visit her quite frequently even during the worst days of the war under the indiscriminating bombardment of Japanese cities.

The story begins with the scene of Kikuji on his way to join a tea ceremony held at a tea house that belonged to one of the hermitages in Engaku-ji Temple. Since the temple is the oldest, and highly venerated among the Five Mountains in Kamakura, the scene itself already points to the high social status assumed by the personages in this novel. Kikuji was in fact invited by the hostess of the ceremony, Chikako, who tried to introduce the son of her late patron to a lady of a well-to-do family, a family of a raw-silk merchant in Yokohama. Their first meeting, the so-called *omiai*, forms the initial stage of an arranged marriage.

In the tea ceremony, however, Kikuji found to his surprise not only the young lady, Yukiko Inamura, but also Mrs. Ota, the second mistress of his late father. She was accompanied by her daughter, Fumiko. Although much impressed by the beauty of the Lady Inamura, Kikuji willingly yielded himself to Mrs. Ota's seduction on his return from the tea ceremony. Their love scene is actually set in a Japanese inn nearby the gate of the temple in the novel.

In their embrace, Kikuji was enchanted by an exquisite pleasure and comfort he had never experienced before. In turn, she fell in a deep remorse, not only because she seduced the young son of her former patron, but also because she caught him on his return from the very scene of *omiai*. Soon afterwards, her daughter Fumiko found her mother so deeply involved in her unleashed passion to the young man as well as the inevitable moral struggle. So, Fumiko dared to visit Kikuji alone and pled him to keep away from her mother.

Meanwhile, Chikako tried hard to persuade Kikuji to marry the Lady Yukiko Inamura, and arranged an unexpected tea ceremony. She even took liberty in inviting the young Lady Inamura without consulting with Kikuji. She deliberately used the utensils and painting collected by her former patron. On the following

day, Mrs. Ota suddenly appeared before Kikuji during a torrential rain. She was irrecoverably consumed by her own passion and moral conflict. After having a tea ceremony, they made love again, however Kikuji was not able to foresee her imminent suicide. At two o'clock in the morning, the daughter called Kikuji to tell him of the death of her mother.

Kikuji deliberately refrained from attending the funeral service, but sent flowers to Fumiko and visited her for condolence on the seventh mourning day. While praying before the urn with the ashes in it, he found a beautiful water-jar from the Shino-kiln used as a vase. Then, Fumiko served ordinary tea for Kikuji and herself in a pair of Raku bowls. Finally, she asked Kikuji to take the water-jar with him as a memento of her late mother.

Later, when Kikuji invited Fumiko to his place, Chikako appeared unexpectedly, and they held a tea ceremony together, using the Shino water-jar which he had just been given. Fumiko had also brought a small Shino cup with her, but she kept it hidden from Chikako's sight. There was a dark scarlet spot on the rim of the cup, as if it were the trace of the *rouge* of her mother who especially favored the piece.

In the concluding section of the story, Kikuji again invited Fumiko to his place. After dinner, Kikuji asked her to prepare tea, using a Karatsu cup, his late father's favorite piece, and the small Shino cup she had previously brought to him. While preparing tea with the small Shino cup, Fumiko cried to Kikuji, trembling in confusion, that her deceased mother would not let her serve tea for Kikuji using the cup. Kikuji stood up and held her, who yielded herself to Kikuji without resistance.

At dawn, Kikuji woke up alone and remembered that, soon after they made love, Fumiko threw the small Shino cup against the stepping stone in front to the alcove of the cottage and broke it into pieces. Kikuji went out to the garden in the morning dusk and tried to collect the fragments in vain. Then, looking upward, he was startled at the beautiful morning star shining in the summit of the sky. When he called Fumiko in the afternoon, he learned that she had already departed for a trip, without revealing her destination. Kikuji suddenly feared her actions as a suicidal indication. While searching her in vain on streets, he desperately sought for a relief under the shade of the trees in the park.

Elisabeth: Well, well. It's a very complicated love story. What is the central theme of the novel? Is it another version of the Oedipus cycle? The son shared a bed with his father's former mistress, and eventually killed her? Then, there is a passionate but unconscious rivalry between mother and daughter.

I: Of course, it is one plausible approach to the story. As long as we deal with the novel as a variety show of twisted psychology, it presents to us a set for commonplace Freudian interpretation.

Waitress: May we start serving you now?

I: Oh, yes, please. It took me along time just to describe the plot of the *Thousand Cranes*.

Waitress: Were you talking about Mr. Kawabata? I had no chance to see him in his lifetime, but the master of this restaurant told us that the famous novelist often dined here.

I: What a coincidence! We are really in the right spot to talk about him and his work. Thank you, and let's start our meal.

You know, Elisabeth, I am not a critic of literature. Nor have I ever carefully analyzed the literary construction of the novel. I am an art historian, you know that, Elisabeth? Nevertheless, I have a lot to say about this famous novel. You have already noticed from my brief description that there appear a number of tea vessels and other craft works in it.

Elisabeth: Yes. In fact, I am very much intrigued by that. The other day, I was invited to a tea ceremony in Tokyo, and the tea master showed us a number of ceramic wares from different kilns. They were all different in form and color. But, I don't think that I could correctly follow the right way of appreciating those traditional Japanese tea utensils.

I: Well, incidentally, here is a copy of handout. I used it when I gave a short talk on the novel in Germany last winter.

Elisabeth: Tsuji, you planned all this!

I: Oh, I hope this does not offend you.

Elisabeth: I only mind that you are too deliberate. May I pour *sake* for you first, *Sensei*, since it is the Japanese custom?

I: Well, well, you are too Japanese. Thank you. Oh, this is very good Sake. It's well chilled. Now, let me pour for you, all right?

As an art historian, I am especially intrigued by the novel which constantly refers to the variety of art objects, especially tea utensils. The text not only describes their essential quality but also loads them with various symbolic meanings. In this respect, these passages belong to the old tradition of *ekphrasis*, the description of art works.

Elisabeth: I know the famous description of Roman paintings by Philostratos the Elder. But he intended to interpret the iconographical content —the narrative by images— of the works. However, the ceramics in Kawabata's novel do not narrate any story by figurative images.

I: You are right, Elisabeth. In this regard, I would rather like to compare these *ekphrases* in the *Thousand Cranes* to those which we find in Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*.

Elisabeth: Oh, I will never forget the wonderful description of the belfry of the village church by Proust in the opening chapter.

I: Now, let us look at where and how art objects are referred to in the novel.

	LOCALES	PLOT	ART OBJECTS	*
1	Way to tea ceremony	Kikuji's recollection of the birthmark on the breast of Chikako (Father's Mistress A)		3-9
2	"	Meeting with Yukiko, Inamura	Kerchief with Thousand Cranes	9-10
3	Tea house in Engaku-ji	Ceremony with guests, incl. Mrs. Ota (Mistress B) and her daughter, Fumiko	Black <i>Oribe</i> bowl	10-24
4	Return from ceremony	Kikuji spent a night with Mrs. Ota at an inn near the temple.		24-35
5	Kikuji's parlor room	Fumiko alone called on Kikuji asking him for a breach with her mother.		35-39
6	Kikuji's tea house	Dinner and ceremony with Yukiko and Chikako	Portrait of a poet	51-55

7	Kikuji's tea house	After tea ceremony with Mrs. Ota, Kikuji made love to her. After returning home she killed herself.	(Iron Kettle)	55-66
8	The late Mrs. Ota's sitting room	Kikuji visited Fumiko for condolence. She gave Kikuji the water jar, then offered tea using a pair of cups.	Water jar of Shino. Black and Red Raku cylindrical cups.	66-81
9	Kikuji's tea house	Tea ceremony with Chikako and Fumiko. Fumiko brought a small Shino cup to Kikuji	(Shino jar) Small Shino cup	94-113
10	"	Chikako lied to Kikuji that both Yukiko and Fumiko had been married.		114-126
11	Kikuji's tea house	After dinner and tea ceremony with Fumiko, Kikuji made love to her. She broke the small Shino cup and disappeared.	(Small Shino cup) Karatsu cylindrical bowl	127-147

* indicates the page number of the English translation by E. G. Seidensticker :
Yasunari Kawabata, *Thousand Cranes* (Charles E. Tuttle, Tokyo, 1958)

Waitress : Please try this roasted ayu (sweetfish) with herbal vinegar sauce before it gets cold.

Elisabeth : Isn't it bitter ?

Waitress : No. The sauce is seasoned with vinegar and sugar. It's really good.

Elisabeth : Thank you. Now I can see clearly that each art object respectively symbolizes a character in the story.

I : That's right. By the way, the wrapping kerchief of Lady Inamura is decorated with the motif of, if not one thousand, a great many white cranes patterned on the bright warm dye-color of texture. A crane is the symbol of happy longevity. However, you must notice that this is the only fabric object that appears on my list, while most of the other objects are ceramic. Therefore, it seems to me that, with this particularly soft and mutative material of the kerchief, Kawabata tried to symbolize something more ephemeral and unreal than what the harder material of ceramic could imply.

Elisabeth : So, not only figurative images but also the physical quality of art objects produces their symbolic meaning.

I : Yes, indeed, and this is what is important in appreciating Japanese craft-art. You not only look at it to 'read' and interpret it, but also hold it in your hand and feel it with your finger, occasionally even with your lips ! Then, you understand the implicit meaning of the object. We will see more of it later.

Elisabeth : This sounds very interesting.

I : Next is the black Oribe bowl that is taken out by Chikako in the first tea ceremony at Engaku-ji Temple. It originally belonged to the late husband of Mrs. Ota, then passed on to the widow after his death, and eventually fell in the hands of Kikuji's father. Thus, the provenance shows the vicissitude of human fate. At the same time, the bowl evidently symbolizes the very presence of the late Mr. Mitani, Kikuji's father, at the scene of the tea ceremony. On it, the ornamental pattern of growing sprouts of brackens, one of the typical motifs of spring season in Japanese poetry, obviously represents the resuscitated life of the deceased Mitani, and his latent but dominant role in the novel.

Incidentally, the symbolic function of these tea utensils in the *Thousand Cranes* has been already discussed by scholars. In my opinion, the two short essays by Thomas E. Swan published in Japanese in 1969 are more or less thorough analyses of the symbolism unique of Kawabata.³⁾ Swan even invented the new term 'transformational symbolism' to define Kawabata's symbolism.

Elisabeth : The term does not sound very familiar to me.

I : No. Neither does it, in my opinion, correctly convey Swan's own idea. He explains it by the example of the black and red Raku cylindrical bowls in Scene no. 8 on my list. According to Swan, the two bowls are first associated with the relationship between Mr. Mitani and Mrs. Ota of the past. Nevertheless, the same utensils are later used by the young couple, Kikuji and Fumiko, now corresponding to the new relationship. While "the bowls once implied love, the sense of guilt, and death in the past, they now symbolize youth, love, and the sense of guilt." The objects are transferred from the past into the present. Accordingly, while they maintain their original meaning, they also obtain a new emotional quality and subtly different significance. Swan notes the parallel 'transformation' of symbolism in the case of the Karatsu bowl and the small Shino cup that appear in Scene no. 11.

Elisabeth : It may be.

I : Well, we must further examine Swan's theory to define the symbolism precisely.

Elisabeth : What is the problem ?

I : First, we must examine how such 'transformational symbolism' is possible in Kawabata's novel. In this respect, we must consider the symbols chronologically. Such 'transformation' is in fact the relocation of the symbolic objects in different times and situations. This is quite important. Namely, while the situation of the story changes, the symbolic objects maintain their form and color.

Elisabeth : Do you mean that the objects last longer in their physical state, while the circumstances surrounding them, including human fates, change constantly ?

I : Yes, indeed. In this respect Swan has noted the symbols of eternity in Kawabata's works. Let me quote him : "In each of the three masterpieces, there is a background, which is figurative and symbolic at the same time, and implies eternity even within the passage of time."⁴⁾

According to Swan, the symbol of eternity in the *Snow Country* is the small spa-village buried in snow. In the *Thousand Cranes*, it is the tea ceremonies, and in the *Sound of Mountain*, the mountain itself.

But, I should note that in the *Thousand Cranes* the art-objects are openly referred to, in contrast to the human vicissitudes, as quasi-eternal beings. For example, when the black Oribe was taken out and Chikako began to remind Kikuji of the association of the bowl with his late father, the son bluntly denied it and stressed the timeless nature of the object, saying : "But what difference does it make that my father owned it for a little while ? It's four hundred years old, after all. Its history goes back to Momoyama and Rikyu himself. Tea masters have looked after it and passed it down through the centuries. . . . So Kikuji tried to forget the associations the bowl called upon it." (pp. 19-21)

Or, in Scene no. 11 on my list, a Karatsu cylindrical bowl was placed side by side with a small Shino cup. The former was a favorite piece of Kikuji's late father and the latter was that of Fumiko's late mother. Therefore, their juxtaposition automatically caused the association of the immoral relationship of the pair in the past. But, after contemplating the two cups, Kikuji thought in his mind as following : "Kikuji could not bring himself to say that the Shino bowl was like her (Fumiko's) mother. But the two bowls before them were like the souls of his father and her mother. / The tea bowls, three or four hundred years old, were

sound and healthy, and they called up no morbid thoughts. Life seemed to stretch taut over them, however, in a way that was almost sensual. Seeing his father and Fumiko's mother in the bowls, Kikuji felt that they had raised two beautiful ghosts and placed them side by side. / The tea bowls were here, present, and the present reality of Kikuji and Fumiko, facing across the bowls, seemed immaculate too.” (p. 140)

Elisabeth : I'm very much interested in two points, Tsuji. First, Kikuji now goes so far as to mention the purifying power of those tea vessels. They can thus cleanse the moral stains in our souls. Secondly, despite unchanging their form, the utensils are considered as something alive, being endowed with life.

I : You are quite right, Elisabeth. Due to their timeless nature, they assume a power to transcend the sphere of an conscientiousness, such as moral conflicts and struggles. Of the large Shino jar, Kawabata writes in Scene no. 9 : “The very face of the Shino (jar), glowing warmly cool, made him think of Mrs. Ota. Possibly because the piece was so fine, the memory was without the darkness and ugliness of guilt.” (p. 137) Nevertheless, in the preceding Scene no. 8, the same author even writes :

“He saw his escape in the Shino water jar. He knelt before it and looked at it appraisingly, as one looks at tea vessels. / A faint red floated up from the white glaze. Kikuji reached to touch the voluptuous and warmly cool surface. / ‘Soft, like dream. Even when you know as little as I do you can appreciate good Shino.’ / ‘Like a dream of a woman,’ he had thought, but he had suppressed the last words.” (p. 72) On the next day, while the recollections of the day before were still lingering in his mind, it is said : “His heart would rise even at the touch of the jar, and he had put no more flowers in it. / Sometimes he would be drawn to a middle-aged woman in the street. . . . / He would look again and see that the woman did not resemble Mrs. Ota after all. / There was only that swelling at the hips. / The longing at such moments would almost make him tremble ; and yet intoxication and fear would meet, as at the moment of awakening from a crime.” (p. 90)

Elisabeth : So, here is a direct analogy between the form of the jar and the physical form of a middle-aged woman. I think, it's something more than a symbol.

I : Right. Therefore, the water jar presents two different, even opposing aspects to the viewer. On the one hand, it appears, as a lasting material object, quasi-

eternal, and thus transcending human fate and moral conflicts. On the other hand, it resembles so obviously the body of a mature woman that is fully generating power, and for this very reason, causing moral degeneration.

By the way, Elisabeth, here is our small Sake carafe. It's empty. Try to hold it and feel it as you touch and rotate it in your hands. This is a pretty good Shigaraki piece. It is better that you close your eyes while holding it. You can feel the form within your hand. Don't you sense anything from the delicate texture of the surface?

Elisabeth: Well, in this way? Oh, are you testing me? You make me feel very strange. No, I cannot do it any longer.

I: Of course you can open your eyes and stop feeling it.

Elisabeth: Tsuji, I am disturbed. The bottle was so alive. It responded to my skin like, like a part of the human body.

I: May I tell you why? First, one particular type of traditional Japanese vessel, that often belongs to the indigenous kilns such as Bizen, Shigaraki, or Tokoname, has a unique form and composition, especially when compared with Chinese vessels, for instance, from the Sung period. While the Chinese ware is made in perfect artistic form, that is, well-balanced and symmetrical, that kind of Japanese ware is deliberately deformed in very irregular shapes. This peculiar form faithfully preserves the movement of the shaping hands and fingers of the potter. Therefore, you feel, through your touching hands, fingers, and skin, not only the physical form of the potters hands, but also their live motion.

Further, Chinese wares are normally glazed, evenly and elaborately, all over the surface, so that you can neither look at nor feel the basic earthen material underneath. In sharp contrast, this particular type of Japanese vessel has a very coarse surface. The glaze is irregularly splashed over the surface. In the case of Shigaraki, you can even feel the subtle roughness caused by the tiny sand grains in the earth and clay to your finger tips. Thus, you feel as if touching the materials, which are still moistened and exposed to the pressure of the shaping hands and fingers of the potter. The material directly derived from nature is still alive here, and conveys its primordial energy to your sensation.

The founders of tea ceremony in the sixteenth-seventeenth century first used imported Chinese and Korean vessels, then adapted the domestic everyday vessels, and finally invented a very ambitious style and technique to produce a completely

new type of vessels.

Waitress : Did you enjoy the meal we served ?

Elisabeth : Oh, it was perfect. Everything was fresh with seasonal flavors.

Waitress : Thank you very much. May I now serve you the last bowls of rice and Miso soup ?

Elisabeth and I : Yes, please.

Waitress : Desert fruits are fig and water melon. Is that all right ?

I : Yes, of course.

Any way, I'd like to make it explicit to you, Elisabeth, that a Japanese tea vessel is a lifeless material object on the one hand, and yet a quasi-biotic being on the other. You can now realize, Elisabeth, that this is not a mere rhetorical metaphor. In your hands a bowl, a carafe, appealed to you with its biomorphic form.

In this regard, I make a special remark that a ceramic object can be easily distinguished from a sculptured object, either in its tangibility or in its visual form. Actually, a ceramic work reaches its final form through the baking process. There, the material of earth and clay is flared and blown by the strong flame and heat. There, you feel as if it becomes animated from inside by a vital energy. This may sound a little disturbing to you, but when I look at a powerful ceramic work, especially a large piece, it reminds me of the large abdomen of an expecting woman. Yet, please forgive me for repeating this point, it is a lifeless, material being.

Now very likely, through Kawabata's esthetic experience, a tea vessel presents an extremely interesting ontological feature. In the course of its appreciation, it traverses the ontological boarder between the live and the lifeless back and forth. (I often wonder if it is merely by chance that, even in the Western tradition, a ceramic ware is an important motif of *Still Life* paintings.⁵⁾)

Elisabeth : I agree with you in recognizing a sort of ontological ambiguity in the esthetics of Kawabata. But, as a woman, I feel myself a little uneasy, if he applies the same ontological notion upon a real human body. Do you understand what I'm trying to say ? I wonder if Kawabata also would look at a live female body as a lifeless material being.

I : Elisabeth, I am really afraid of that point, too, but I should admit that you are right. Namely, the same ontological ambiguity was applied in his observation

and attitude toward human beings. Or, perhaps I should even say that, especially after the end of the Second World War, his artistic notion was carefully constructed on the basis of such a philosophy.⁶⁾ I may prove this point only by quoting a few passages from the two other works of his trilogy.

In the well-known concluding part of the *Snow Country*, a fire scene is described in detail. At the very beginning of the story, on his way to revisit his geisha-lover Komako, the protagonist Shimamura met an extremely beautiful girl, Yoko. It was she who became the victim of the fire. She fell from the burning balcony, fainted or already dead, onto the ground. Kawabata writes: "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. . . . He saw the figure as a phantasm from an unreal world. The stiff figure, flung out into the air, became soft and pliant. With a doll-like passiveness, and the freedom of the lifeless, it seemed to hold both life and death in abeyance. . . ." He continues further: "Yoko's leg moved very slightly, hardly enough to catch the eye. / Even before the spasm passed, Shimamura was looking at the face and the kimono, an arrow figure against a red ground. . . . There was but that slight movement in her leg after she struck the earth. She lay unconscious. For some reason Shimamura did not see death in the still form. He felt rather that Yoko had undergone some shift, some metamorphosis. . . . 'Keep back. Keep back, please.' 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. As he caught his footing, his head fell back, and the Milky Way flowed down inside him with a roar."⁷⁾

In an extremely interesting way, the scene finds its mirror image at the end of the *Thousand Cranes*, where Fumiko, after her first embrace with Kikuji, broke a Shino cup onto the stepping stone and disappeared. Kikuji, while collecting the broken pieces of the pot, became suddenly struck by the light of a large morning star. In the first instance, a human being turned into a lifeless being, and at the very transitory moment between life and death, the astral being appears, as if the sign of purification. In the second case, Fumiko tries to free herself from the chain of ominous fate by breaking the cup, the symbol of the symbiosis of mother and daughter.⁸⁾ The morning star plays the purificatory role.

Further, in the *Sound of the Mountain*, the main character, Shingo Ogata, is described as secretly being in love with his daughter-in-law Kikuko, and she, too, hardly able to conceal her tidal flow of emotion toward her father-in-law. However, since their relation was strictly forbidden, they had never confessed their affection to each other. One day the widow of his deceased friend brought a Noh-theatre mask to him, which he kept for a while “As he brought his face toward it (the mask) from above, the skin, smooth and lustrous as that of a girl, softened in his aging eyes, and the mask came to life, warm and smiling. / He caught his breath. Three or four inches before his eyes, a live girl was smiling at him, cleanly, beautifully. / The eyes and the mouth were truly alive. In the empty sockets were black pupils. The red lips were sensuously moist. . . .” Several days later, he thought of having his daughter-in-law wear the mask. : “No doubt, deep behind the eyes of the mask, Kikuko’s eyes were fixed on him. ‘It has no expression unless you move it.’ The day he had brought it home, Shingo had been on the point of kissing the scarlet lips. He had felt a flash like heaven’s own wayward love. . . . Shingo could not look at Kikuko as she moved the glowing young mask this way and that. / She had a small face, and the tip of her chin was almost hidden behind the mask. Tears were flowing from the scarcely visible chin down over her throat. They flowed on, drawing two lines, then three. / ‘Kikuko,’ said Shingo. ‘Kikuko. You thought if you were to leave Shuichi (her infidel husband) you might give tea lessons, and that was why you went to your friend?’ / The jido (Lovely boy. The character of the mask) nodded. / ‘I think I’d like to stay on with you here and give lessons (of tea-ceremony).’ The words were distinct even from behind the mask. / A piercing wail came from Satoko (Shingo’s young grand-daughter). / Teru (his pet dog) barked noisily in the garden. / Shingo felt something ominous in it all. Kikuko seemed to be listening for a sign at the gate that Shuichi, who evidently went to visit the woman even on Sunday, had come home.”⁹⁾

Elisabeth: What a love scene! They can confess their love to each other only through the mask, the material being.

I: But, it may be that there is a kind of love that is possible only *sub species rerum* (*Mono* in Japanese).

Elisabeth: No. You are completely wrong! Love is a matter of our emotions, desire of our living body. All you have been telling me about is a distorted form of love

for an art-object. Only those who have ceased to believe in true love, whatever the reason may be, have to escape into the world of inanimate things. I am not a doll. I have my own will and decide on what I want. Do you want me to be just a doll?

I: Elisabeth, my generation has seen all our beloved people turned into ashes in a moment, or burnt in a long agony.

Elisabeth: Then, what? However deep your despair was during the war, you have no right to replace a human being for a *Mono* to recognize its *raison d'être*. It's nonsense!

Waitress: Excuse me, the taxi has come and is waiting for you at the gate.

I: Thank you. It's late, Elisabeth. The night deepens with the faint song of the crickets. Perhaps we are a bit drunk. Let's go home, and resume our discussion in the bright sunlight tomorrow morning.

notes

- 1) A burial ground found in man-made caves that is unique of Kamakura.
- 2) The trilogy consists of: *Snow Country*, *Thousand Cranes*, and *the Sound of Mountain*.
- 3) Thomas E. Swan, 「千羽鶴」論 (その一及その二) 『川端文学——海外の評価——』 (長谷川・武田編) (東京, 1969), pp. 166-200..
- 4) *Ibid.*, pp. 190-191.
- 5) Regarding this issue, cf. Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1990).
- 6) This theme becomes more explicit in Kawabata's latest works such as the *House of the Sleeping Beauties* (Tokyo, 1969) or *One Arm* (Tokyo, 1969). I will discuss the issue more thoroughly in the second part of the present paper.
- 7) Y. Kawabata (Trns. by E. G. Seidensticker), *Snow Country* (46th print, Charles E. Tuttle Co., Tokyo, 1996) 173-175.
- 8) Basically I follow Swan's interpretation of this scene (Swan, op. cit., 171-172), though interpretation of Fumiko's act of breaking the small Shino cup as the loss of virginity brings forth a few problems. Cf. the subsequent comment on Swan's paper by Izumi Hasegawa. *Ibid.*, 179-181.
- 9) Y. Kawabata (Trns. by E. G. Seidensticker), *The Sound of the Mountain* (11th print. Ch. E. Tuttle Co. Tokyo, 1995) 87-88 and 160.