

Metaphorical Landscapes in Conrad and Kawabata

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Walter Benjamin, in a 1936 essay entitled “The Storyteller,” rather surprisingly announces “that the art of storytelling is coming to an end.” As Benjamin explains, not only do fewer people have “the ability to tell a tale properly,” but also, people more frequently become embarrassed when “the wish to hear a story is expressed.” These symptoms point to a larger loss, he writes, that of “the ability to exchange experiences” by passing them “from mouth to mouth.” Benjamin traces this loss primarily to the notion that “experience has fallen in value,” a process that began in the economic, social, and moral upheavals incident to the First World War (83-84). At first, Benjamin’s diagnosis seems odd in at least one respect, given that at the time, travel and worldwide connectedness in general—key sources of experience, according to Benjamin—had become increasingly accessible to Europeans. However, we ought to note that on the other hand, the same global connections that provided new and enhanced experiences to nourish storytelling could also prompt a troubling literary reassessment of the relation between individuals and the world. One problem at the root of this reassessment is that of simultaneous connectedness and distance, which can be exemplified by patterns of physical and psychological landscapes in Joseph Conrad’s *Victory* (1915) and Yasunari Kawabata’s *Yukiguni* (*Snow Country*, 1935-37). I have not yet seen any published critical juxtapositions of Conrad and Kawabata, let alone comparative studies of the settings of these two novels. However, examining these works on the basis of their landscape

descriptions significantly reveals a shared aesthetic response to defining conditions of modern globalization, demonstrating the usefulness of such cross-cultural comparisons in understanding transnational literary connections in the twentieth century.

I

While the composition of *Yukiguni* coincides with that of Benjamin's essay, one might object that Conrad (1857-1924) and Kawabata (1899-1972) are not true contemporaries—and indeed the authors are nearly two generations apart. Nevertheless, Kawabata published his first story (“*Shōkonsai Ikkei*” [“A View of the Yasukuni Festival”], 1921) within Conrad's lifetime, and the two authors share more similarities than one might at first imagine. Both were orphaned at an early age, for instance, thereby becoming conditioned as writers similarly concerned with themes of human isolation and solidarity. Additionally, both attended to questions of perception, broke with inherited techniques of realism, and demonstrated a modernist interest in the dynamics of surfaces and depths. Specifically, for example, the “neo-perceptionist” group of authors (*Shinkankaku-ha*) of the 1920s, in which Kawabata participated, followed theoretical trends then current in European literature, particularly “emphasizing the subjectivity of ‘reality’—how the world was perceived and ultimately transformed aesthetically by the mind through language” (Brownstein 482-83)—an emphasis that we might go on to describe as notably Conradian. Kawabata helped found *Bungei Jidai* (Literary Age), the formative journal of the *Shinkankaku-ha*, in September 1924, only one month after Conrad's death (Starrs 75).¹

Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, we can find a number of parallels between *Victory* and *Yukiguni*. Both novels incorporate themes of isolation and community, feature tragic love affairs, and employ an elegiac tone. Both feature protagonists on the margins of meaningful work as a marker of conventional masculinity. Shimamura, the

protagonist of *Yukiguni*, suffers from an “inability to love” (Starrs 127), exhibiting a more extreme version of a similar fault in Axel Heyst. Heyst is “disenchanted with life as a whole,” Conrad’s narrator tells us (109), in a characterization that could also apply to the more enigmatically detached Shimamura. Surely just coincidentally, Heyst lives in his own island village, and the name Shimamura means in English “island village.”² As for Komako, like Lena she initially has a truncated sense of self but later develops into a more fully actualized individual. Both novels end in dramatic fires. Furthermore, when Komako alone “[runs] toward the fire” to carry Yōko away after she has fallen from the burning warehouse theater, Komako undertakes a determined act of self-sacrifice and self-definition that resembles Lena’s when the latter character disarms Martin Ricardo by taking his knife (Kawabata 174; Conrad 375-77).³

Conveniently, for a more extended comparison of Conrad and Kawabata that we might undertake, Benjamin denotes “two groups” of storytellers, those who have “come from afar,” and those who have “stayed at home.” One can “picture these two groups through their archaic representatives”: “the trading seaman” represents one group, while the other “is embodied in the resident tiller of the soil.” Both groups comprise storytellers to whom others enjoy listening, because “‘When someone goes on a trip, he has something to tell about,’ goes the German saying,” while someone who stays at home “knows the local tales and traditions” (84-85). Consequently, Benjamin’s categories allow us to draw parallels between Conrad and Kawabata as storytellers, particularly in terms of their respective use of landscapes in their fiction.

The group of storytellers represented by “the trading seaman” of course includes Conrad, whose training and experiences as a merchant marine officer later made him particularly attentive to the details of the physical world in his writing. First, exactitude of observation and description appeared to him a worthy goal. For example, in his essay “Outside

Literature” (1922), Conrad lauds “the honourable ideal—the ideal of perfect accuracy” with regard to the reading of technical bulletins for updating nautical charts (43). In *The Mirror of the Sea* (1906), accordingly, he objects to the inaccurate journalistic practice of referring to a crew as having “cast” an anchor; the proper term, he tells us, is that the ship is “brought up [. . .] to an anchor” (146-47). Such differences amount to more than mere niceties, if we are to believe that Conrad agrees with the narrator of “The Secret Sharer” (1910) when that character announces that “exactitude in small matters is the very soul of discipline” (177). We should not wonder, then, that the landscapes and seascapes of Conrad’s fiction—whether the streets of London or the coastline of Borneo, either minutely detailed or imagistically portrayed—should be so carefully rendered and consequently evocative.

While Kawabata was not a farmer (as we follow Benjamin’s categories), he does resemble a “tiller of the soil” in the extent to which he pays careful attention in his fiction to the seasons; to the life, growth, and death of natural things; and to the weather. In short, Kawabata thoughtfully notes all of the aspects of the visible world that are both crucial to a farmer’s livelihood and the subject of the long-standing Japanese reverence for landscape. Interestingly, while Kawabata later wrote that the characters in his novel are drawn from his imagination, he modeled the landscape of *Yukiguni* on the town and scenery at the *onsen* of Yuzawa because he believed that contemporary authors paid insufficient attention to nature (Keene 816).

II

Specifically, with respect to *Victory* and *Yukiguni*, both authors’ attentiveness to the physical world manifests significantly in the ways that the two novels incorporate heightened metaphorical language into landscape descriptions at key moments. In *Victory*, the first such moment appears in the crucial initial description of Axel Heyst:

[Heyst] was out of everybody's way, as if he were perched on the highest peak of the Himalayas, and in a sense as conspicuous. Every one in that part of the world knew of him, dwelling on his little island. An island is but the top of a mountain. Axel Heyst, perched on it immovably, was surrounded, instead of the imponderable stormy and transparent ocean of air merging into infinity, by a tepid, shallow sea; a passionless offshoot of the great waters which embrace the continents of the globe. (57)

Directly through the use of this vivid metaphorical language, the narrator simultaneously and economically depicts Heyst's notoriety, his emotional character, and his location on the island of Samburan, effectively setting the stage for the narrative conflicts to come.

The notable use of mountains as metaphors continues in *Victory*. Far off, just above the northern horizon, is Heyst's "nearest neighbour [. . .] an indolent volcano which smoked faintly all day [. . .] and at night levelled at him [. . .] a dull red glow [. . .] like the end of a gigantic cigar" (58), and the second major episode of heightened metaphorical language begins at the summit of yet another mountain—the central hill of Samburan. When Heyst and Lena find the way to the other side of the island blocked by the natives, Heyst describes the obstruction as a "barrier" not only against their escape, but also "against the march of civilisation" (330). Then, when the pair returns to the bungalow, an ominous vision awaits them. As the narrator pictures it, "Beyond the headland of Diamond Bay, lying black on a purple sea, great masses of cloud stood piled up and bathed in a mist of blood. A crimson crack like an open wound zigzagged between them, with a piece of dark red sun showing at the bottom" (339). Heyst turns and sees the forest before him, which "stood like a wall." Above him, "the sky at the zenith displayed pellucid clearness, the sheen of a delicate glass bubble which the merest movement of air might shatter." Meanwhile, across the waters, "the volcano, a feather of smoke by day and a cigar-glow at night, took its first fiery expanding breath of the evening. Above it a reddish star came out

like an expelled spark from the fiery bosom of the earth, enchanted into permanency by the mysterious spell of frozen spaces” (341). In each instance, mountains and metaphors appear simultaneously.

One can readily see the narrative usefulness of these descriptions. The “fiery” volcano, the “mist of blood,” and the “open wound” all foreshadow the violent deaths and fatal fire at the end of the novel. More importantly, all of these mountainous landscape descriptions underscore Heyst’s multifaceted “solitude” (77)—his geographical, psychological, and emotional isolation. As the narrator repeatedly informs us, Heyst is “enchanted” (59) by the islands, living within an “unbreakable” “enchanted circle” (60), a “ring of magic stillness” (110) from which he at first makes repeated “attempts to break away” (74), but from which he eventually will not or cannot escape. Finally, Heyst’s nearest neighbor is not even a person but a mountain, as we have noted, seen distantly across a sea.

The mention of a “mysterious spell of frozen spaces” above that distant volcano calls to mind the famous end of *Yukiguni*, where Shimamura’s “head fell back, and the Milky Way flowed down inside him with a roar” (175). Furthermore, as readers of *Yukiguni* know, in that novel—just as in *Victory*—mountainous landscape and landscape description serve an important role, particularly in establishing the isolation of the region and Shimamura’s detachment (like Heyst’s) from the rest of the world. The first of these geographical-figurative moments appears in what are now the novel’s first two sentences: “The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country. [The bottom of the night became white.]”⁴ The passage through the tunnel denotes the division between two distinct worlds, as readers quickly realize. The snow country is purer, cleaner, and more beautiful, and by moving into it, Shimamura severs his ties to his wife and family, and to Tokyo (Keene 817; Orbaugh 143). The later episode in which Shimamura leaves the snow country helps confirm this interpretation. When his train emerges from the tunnel through the Border

Range on the Tokyo side, he finds that “[t]he color of evening was descending from chasms between the peaks. The dim brightness of the winter afternoon seemed to have been sucked into the earth, and the battered old train had shed its bright shell in the tunnel. There was no snow on the south slope” (85). As one recent critic claims, the “border crossing” in *Yukiguni* (like the crossing of the Amagi Pass in “*Izu no Odoriko*” [“The Dancing Girl of Izu,” 1926]) is a “[movement] into another world [that] describe[s] an entry into an ahistorical realm separated from modernity” and manifestly demarcated by the metaphorical purity and whiteness of the snow (Lippit 156).

III

Clearly, in *Yukiguni* as in *Victory*, these episodes perform significant narrative functions. They provide structure through paralleled images of observing and moving through mountains, and they establish the isolation of the settings and characters. Metaphorical language serves to enrich and enhance these functions. However, with regard to the idea of isolation, a yet closer look reveals more at stake than a straightforward binary of purity versus modernity in *Yukiguni*, or of individual versus world in *Victory*. One metaphor, in particular, opens up this field of geographical significance: the metaphor of the mirror, along with the idea of reflection.

The trope of the mirror, especially the sea as a mirror—“one of Conrad’s favourite metaphors” (Knowles and Moore 104)—appears repeatedly throughout Conrad’s works. Perhaps the most obvious instance occurs in the title of *The Mirror of the Sea*. In the Author’s Note to *The Secret Agent* (1907), Conrad calls the sea “the vast expanse of salt waters, the mirror of heaven’s frowns and smiles, the reflector of the world’s light” (250). The epigraph of *The Shadow-Line* (1917) quotes Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal* on the sea as “[le] grand miroir / De mon désespoir” (the great mirror / of my despair”) (3, 113). Later in *The Shadow-Line*, the captain feels a sudden kinship with a nameless

succession of captains before him when he sees himself in the mirror in the ship's saloon for the first time (44). Both in that novel and in "Youth" (1898), tables shine like pools of brown water, reflecting faces and twilight. There in the saloon in *The Shadow-Line*, the "mahogany table" over which the previous captain had presided "shone in the twilight like a dark pool of water" (43). At the end of "Youth," similarly, the speaker and the rest of the audience nod to Marlow "over the polished table that like a still sheet of brown water reflected [their] faces," marked by the "toil[s]," searches, and "success[es]" of their lives (42). In *Victory*, the words "reflect," "reflection," or related words (in the sense of thinking quietly or calmly) appear no fewer than thirty-six times, indicating the importance of this idea to the novel.

As for reflection in *Yukiguni*, the first section of the novel was initially published as a short story under the title "*Yūgeshiki no Kagami*" ("Mirror of Evening Scenery"), thereby announcing the pivotal role that the trope of the mirror plays in the narrative (Keene 817). Furthermore, mirrors are prominent elsewhere in Kawabata's writing as well, a result of what Roy Starrs describes as "Kawabata's life-long fascination with 'mirror images'" (86). Donald Keene likewise asserts that the use of the mirror in *Yukiguni* "to indicate detachment of observation" exemplifies Kawabata's repeated use of this trope in his fiction (817). In Kawabata's later story "*Suigetsu*" ("The Moon on the Water," 1953), for instance, Kyōko gives her dying first husband a mirror with which he can watch her working in the garden from his sickbed in the house. The man uses the mirror to view the moon and the natural world, and she too uses the mirror to gaze upon the world reflected in it. In this story, the mirror brings out the beauty of the world, and of Kyōko, in its reflections. In fact, the mirror serves as the central figurative element and plot device of "*Suigetsu*." The story revolves around Kyōko's memories of the mirror, the images reflected in it, how much time her first husband spent using it, the "inexhaustible joy" that the visions in it gave to him (254), their conversations about it while

peering into it, how she honored “the important role that the mirror had played in their marital life” by placing it on his body in the coffin (248), and how she sought to conceal this private significance under a mass of white chrysanthemums.

Because “*Suigetsu*” is told in a series of flashbacks as Kyōko longingly remembers the beauty and sadness of her first marriage from the perspective of her second, the mirror serves to create a superior world divided from Kyōko’s current one just as the snow country is divided from Shimamura’s Tokyo (Orbaugh 144). Even at the time of Kyōko’s first marriage, the world as reflected in the mirror seems more vivid and full of life than the real one is, as both she and her first husband notice when they contemplate the mirror together. “The trees in the mirror were a fresher green than real trees,” Kyōko realizes, “and the lilies a purer white.” Whereas the real sky is “grayish,” “leaden,” and “heavy,” it appears as “silver” in the mirror, “shining” in a way that calls into question which image is the true one. The husband asks, “‘What we see in the mirror—is that what the mirror eye sees?’ Kyōko wanted to call it the eye of their love” (252), demonstrating the crucial and many-sided importance of this mirror in the story: their love purifies the world through its reflections, and the two of them reflect in their thoughts on the power of its world-creating capacities.

One key moment of figurative, mirror-like reflection in *Victory* occurs just after Ricardo attacks Lena and reveals the sinister plan of the trio of visitors. After Ricardo leaves, Lena, exhausted, clings to a bedpost: “[h]er uncovered flank, damp with the sweat of anguish and fatigue, gleamed coldly with the immobility of polished marble in the hot, diffused light falling through the window above her head—a dim reflection of the consuming, passionate blaze of sunshine outside, all aquiver with the effort to set the earth on fire, to burn it to ashes” (299). This reflection of the world linked to a female character has a parallel instance in *Yukiguni*. I am referring, of course, to the famous passage in *Yukiguni* where

Shimamura sees a reflection of Yōko in the train window, along with a vision of the passing landscape beyond:

In the depths of the mirror the evening landscape moved by, the mirror and the reflected figures like motion pictures superimposed one on the other. The figures and the background were unrelated, and yet the figures, transparent and intangible, and the background, dim in the gathering darkness, melted together into a sort of symbolic world not of this world. (9)

This passage continues with the narrator meditating on the oddly shifting, unsettling way that the window both reflects and transmits light simultaneously, expressed in continuing figurative language:

The reflection in the mirror was not strong enough to blot out the light outside, nor was the light strong enough to dim the reflection. The light moved across the face, though not to light it up. It was a distant, cold light. As it sent its small ray through the pupil of the girl's eye, as the eye and the light were superimposed one on the other, the eye became a weirdly beautiful bit of phosphorescence on the sea of evening mountains. (10)

An echo of this mirroring moment occurs between Shimamura and Komako in his room, when Komako acts “as though a strange, magical wildness had taken her,” and the mirror shows her “bright red cheeks” as if they are “floating” above a reflection of the snow outside (47-48). As in the scene in *Victory* describing Lena reflecting the world outside the bungalow, not only human form and landscape, but also interior and exterior, and light and shadow, interplay and combine metaphorically—and strangely—in ways that highlight juxtaposition and superimposition.

In their unsettling effects, these scenes in *Victory* and *Yukiguni* bring to mind the description of Impressionism offered by Ford Madox Ford: “Impressionism exists to render those queer effects of real life that are like so many views seen through bright glass—through glass so bright

that whilst you perceive through it a landscape or a backyard, you are aware that, on its surface, it reflects a face of a person behind you” (276-77). Ford published this claim in 1914 just after Conrad finished *Victory*, and five years after the period of collaboration between the two authors ended, perhaps indicating the extent to which Ford’s observation may describe Conrad’s insight as well.⁵

IV

Such “queer effects” as Ford describes—the strange results of the reflections in *Victory* and *Yukiguni*—stem, I would argue, from the mirror’s property as something that both connects and distances. Objects seen in mirrors are near but unreachable and intangible. The mirror presents our own world to us, seemingly faithfully, but reversed and therefore unreal. We speak of a mirror’s depths, but of course this effect is part of the illusion. In short, mirrors show us something that both is our world and is not, is immediately close and infinitely distant. In *Yukiguni*, furthermore, the effect is even more dramatic, because the mirror is not even a mirror: it is partially transparent glass, combining the distant and the close in a vertiginous alternation of images, metaphorically related.

In this respect, the first scene in *Yukiguni* serves as a prologue to all of “*Suigetsu*,” the simultaneous closeness and distance as figured by the mirroring glass in the one episode of the novel becoming, in “*Suigetsu*,” a more elaborate motif that dominates the later story and makes the narrative situation even possible. In “*Suigetsu*,” the first husband has not one but two mirrors. In addition to Kyōko’s hand mirror, he also uses a smaller one from a toilet case made for traveling, and “he often traveled” (251), the narrator informs us, in a reminder that the mirror not only brings the distant outside world into the interior of the house for the husband’s viewing, but the mirror also announces by its mere existence the ties to a world of distant places previously experienced directly through travel. When he holds the mirrors as he lies in bed, “It was not

only Kyōko's vegetable garden that her husband had observed through the two mirrors. He had seen the sky, clouds, snow, distant mountains, and nearby woods. He had seen the moon. He had seen wild flowers, and birds of passage had made their way through the mirror. Men walked down the road in the mirror and children played in the garden" (252). Thus, even though he becomes bedridden, the mirrors allow him to continue traveling.

The presence and separateness of the world in the mirrors, the closeness to each other that the couple shares by using them, and "the difference in distance" that accounts in part for "the difference that she had found between that leaden [real] sky and the silver sky in the mirror" together constitute an ongoing meditation on alternating and combining closeness and distance, which continues after her husband's death. Kyōko "thought of, indeed longed for, the image of herself working in the garden, seen through the mirror in her husband's hand, and for the white of the lilies, [. . .] and the morning sun rising above the far-off snowy mountains—for the separate world she had shared with him." She keeps back these feelings, which threaten "to become almost a physical yearning," and for the sake of her second husband, she "tried to take it for something like a distant view of the celestial world." Additionally, Kyōko finds herself "astonished by [the] new discovery [that] [s]he could not see her own face unless she reflected it in the mirror." As she realizes, "One could not see one's own face. One felt one's own face"—a face in other words both intimately near and infinitely far (255). In this story, the paradox of simultaneous closeness and distance operates in ways that enable the portrayal of the rich life and love that Kyōko had with her first husband: life and love that continue beyond the distance imposed by his death.

In both *Yukiguni* and "*Suigetsu*," therefore, the keenly felt simultaneous proximity and separation marked by the mirror (and which takes place both within the mirror and through later memories of the mirror's

paradoxical properties) animates the emotional appeal of the narratives and signals the importance of mirrors in Kawabata's fiction. In numerous instances elsewhere in Conrad's writing as well, mirrors demonstrate this property of creating simultaneous closeness and distance. In *The Shadow-Line*, for example, when the narrator-captain sees himself for the first time in the mirror in the ship's saloon, he remarks, "I stared back at myself with the perfect detachment of distance," watching "this quietly staring man [. . .] both as if he were myself and somebody else" (44). In this passage, the "perfect detachment of distance"—that is to say, the infinite separation—is balanced against a vision of the narrator's self, which is the nearest possible object of contemplation.

In *Chance* (1913-14), similarly, Flora sees her figure in a mirror, "distant, shadowy, as if immersed in water, and was surprised to recognize herself in those surroundings" (199). Later, she goes "to a shabby bit of a mirror on the wall. In the greenish glass her own face looked far off like the livid face of a drowned corpse at the bottom of a pool," the narrator informs us, as Conrad once more employs a nearby mirror to create a metaphor of distance, again linked to an image of water (284). Conrad maintains this relationship of proximity and distance in "A Smile of Fortune" (1911), but he reverses the terms, when Miss Jacobus "seem[s] to be staring at her own lonely image, in some far-off mirror": in this case, the mirror itself is distant although the image it reflects is of the observer's own body (57). Even *The Mirror of the Sea*, otherwise so promisingly titled as a biographically illuminating work, turns out to be, on the whole, strangely both connecting and distancing. The book is "purportedly semi-autobiographical," as Owen Knowles and Gene Moore point out (231), and in his author's note (1919), Conrad even claims that the book "holds back nothing" (135). Yet, as Knowles and Moore note, the volume withholds at inscrutable distance such essential information as why Conrad undertook a sea career in the first place, and why he ended it.

“The End of the Tether” (1902) incorporates a more topographically oriented use of mirrors combining distance and closeness. The narrator informs us that the mirror-like sea, through which the *Sofala* steams, conceals dangers:

Everything remained still, crushed by the overwhelming power of the light; and the whole group, opaque in the sunshine,—the rocks resembling pinnacles, the rocks resembling spires, the rocks resembling ruins; the forms of islets resembling beehives, resembling mole-hills; the islets recalling the shapes of haystacks, the contours of ivy-clad towers—would stand reflected together upside down in the unwrinkled water, like carved toys of ebony disposed on the silvered plate-glass of a mirror. (245)

In this complex instance, the mirror-like sea draws separate geographical points together; it also unites images of foreign islands and objects of home. In this respect, the collapsing of geographical distance enabled by the mirror metaphor on a local scale anticipates a more elaborate treatment of physical and psychological space in *Victory*.

V

Indeed, when we take note of simultaneous connection and distance created through the trope of the mirror, and then when we return to the landscape descriptions in *Victory* and *Yukiguni*, we can recognize just how pronounced is the tension between connection and distance in these novels. In *Victory*, this tension, and not simply Heyst’s isolation, energizes the ironies of the novel, which in fact emerge in some of its best-known lines. For instance, Heyst first tells Lena, “I only know that he who forms a tie is lost” (215), but after her death, he later tells Davidson, “woe to the man whose heart has not learned while young to hope, to love—and to put its trust in life!” (383). The love story is the overt manifestation of the larger question of connection itself. Conrad announces as much in his Author’s Note, where he discusses the problem

of “detachment,” of which Heyst serves as a symbol of the “universal” extreme (48).

Furthermore, we can find related tensions between distance and connection in the metaphorical landscapes of both novels. In *Victory*, we learn that Heyst is splendidly isolated, but that he is also conspicuous. It is the widespread knowledge of Heyst’s distant, isolated existence on Samburan that leads Jones to seek him out. Jones and his henchmen can see Heyst as if both at a great distance and overwhelmingly close: “The figure of a lonely man far from all assistance had loomed up largely,” the narrator explains, “fascinating and defenceless in the middle of the sea, filling the whole field of their vision” (270). At one point, Lena remarks to Heyst on their isolation, exclaiming “Here we are, we two alone, and I can’t even tell where we are,” and Heyst describes their island as “A very well-known spot of the globe [. . .] There must have been at least fifty thousand circulars issued at the time—a hundred and fifty thousand, more likely” (206). After Jones and his men arrive on the island, the narrator observes Heyst concluding that “The outer world had broken upon him; and he did not know what wrong he had done to bring this on himself” (261). Such metaphorical and geographical combinations underscore the ongoing conflicts of detachment and connection.

We have seen how mirroring effects in *Yukiguni* underline simultaneous distance and proximity, and a closer look at Kawabata’s novel reveals the extent to which this conflict forms a crucial part of the narrative throughout. Not long before the end of *Yukiguni*, for instance, Shimamura recalls Yōko “call[ing] to the station master at the snowy signal stop, [in] a voice so beautiful it was almost lonely, calling out as if to someone who could not hear, on a ship far away” (119). In this moment, the distance preventing the connection attempted by the voice is what gives the sound its beauty. Furthermore, Yōko’s cry (reminding Shimamura of her earlier calling to the station master) takes place in an exchange with a boy she knows who waves to her from a passing freight

train; the train announces yet another instance of connections and detachment as it abruptly materializes and then passes into the distance. Significantly, the narrator tells us, Shimamura and Komako “seemed still to hear Yoko’s voice, and not the dying rumble of the freight train. It seemed to come back like an echo of distilled love” (120). The voice—like the train, “like an echo”—both acoustically and metaphorically traverses distances while it invokes the immediacy of memory.

VI

In *Victory*, one particular episode of metaphorical rumination on simultaneous distance and connection turns on the notion of a shrinking globe. Heyst asks Jones “How do you define yourself?” and Jones replies, “I am the world itself, come to pay you a visit” (359). This disastrous visit seems to be the logical resolution of the tensions alluded to in the advertising map prepared by the Tropical Belt Coal Company. On this map, so “greatly admired” by the narrator and his colleagues, “Samburan was represented as the central spot of the Eastern Hemisphere [. . .] Heavy lines radiated from it in all directions through the tropics, figuring a mysterious and effective star—lines of influence or lines of distance, or something of that sort” (73). The map and the prospectus it accompanied originated in Europe and later “found their way out East,” eventually bringing behind them “[E]ngineers [. . .] coolies [. . .] bungalows” and “some coal” production (73). However, the parallel movement of Jones and his men, who also “found their way out East,” terminates when the “mysterious and effective star” of the map is echoed in the phrase “mystery of Samburan”—revealed at the end of the novel as the story of multiple deaths (73, 382).

The narrator’s ambivalence regarding the nature of the lines on the map—whether they create connections or indicate distance—combined with the catastrophic metaphorical intrusion of the world into Samburan in the form of Jones, accords with Conrad’s apparently skeptical attitude

towards the effects of the shrinking world of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For example, Conrad writes of how the opening of the Suez Canal caused the loss of the mystery and romance of the sea. In *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896), the narrator explains:

Like a beautiful and unscrupulous woman, the sea of the past was glorious in its smiles, irresistible in its anger, capricious, enticing, illogical, irresponsible; a thing to love, a thing to fear. It cast a spell, it gave joy, it lulled gently into boundless faith; then with quick and causeless anger it killed. But its cruelty was redeemed by the charm of its inscrutable mystery, by the immensity of its promise, by the supreme witchery of its possible favour.
(20)

However, this state of affairs was ruined in 1869, for “That was the sea before the time when the French mind set the Egyptian muscle in motion and produced a dismal but profitable ditch” (20). The opening of the canal—which could not be transited by sailing ships—consequently accelerated the transition from sail to steam propulsion. As the narrator continues, “Then a great pall of smoke sent out by countless steamboats was spread over the restless mirror of the Infinite. The hand of the engineer tore down the veil of the terrible beauty [. . .] The mystery was destroyed” (20). In “The End of the Tether,” the narrator likewise laments that “the piercing of the Isthmus of Suez, like the breaking of a dam, had let in upon the East a flood of new ships, new men, new methods of trade. It had changed the face of the Eastern seas and the very spirit of their life” (168). The combination of the shorter Suez Canal route (which reduced the distance between London and ports in the East by up to forty percent) and the advent of steam propulsion (which increased the reliability of transit time estimates and thereby enhanced the efficiency of sea transportation) thus resulted in a sense—fictionally expressed—that the world may have become more tightly connected, but at a great cost to the awareness of the enigmas of the world.

Significantly, the shrinking of the globe occasioned by the opening of the Suez Canal is described as the disfiguration of the sea as “the mirror of the Infinite”—as if the mirror-like properties of the sea are themselves called into question by the creation of new international links. “The sea of today,” the narrator of *An Outcast of the Islands* concludes, “is a used-up drudge, wrinkled and defaced by the churned-up wakes of brutal propellers, robbed of the enslaving charm of its vastness, stripped of its beauty, of its mystery and of its promise” (20). To be sure, these anonymous narrators’ positions need not necessarily be read as identical to Conrad’s own. Nevertheless, the loss of “the enslaving charm of [the sea’s] vastness” in addition to “its beauty,” “mystery,” and “promise” constitutes a powerful image of globalization as a process that shrinks the possibilities for exercising the human spirit while shrinking perceived geographical distance.

Conrad indicated an additional negative consequence of globalization through his repeatedly expressed autobiographical or quasi-autobiographical disappointment that the Earth’s last blank spaces had been filled in. In *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Marlow explains his childhood “passion for maps,” noting that “[a]t that time there were many blank spaces on the earth.” By the time of his adulthood, however, “[t]he glamour’s off” in the case of the North Pole, and as for Africa, “by this time it was not a blank space any more. [. . .] It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery” (52). In *A Personal Record*, Conrad writes in 1908-09 that he remembers “putting [his] finger on the blank space then representing the unsolved mystery of that continent,” in 1868 when he was a child (27); by the time he reached Stanley Falls in 1890, of course, the area had already been visited by Europeans. When Conrad wrote “Geography and Some Explorers” in 1924, he recalled his “discovery of the taste of poring over maps” (12), how he had been “addicted” to “map-gazing” in his youth, how his imagination was captivated by “[r]egions unknown,” and how he “enter[ed] laboriously in pencil the

outline of Tanganyika on [his] beloved old atlas” (13-14) after that lake was reached by Richard Francis Burton and John Hanning Speke in 1858. Conrad’s atlas, “published in 1852, knew nothing, of course, of the Great Lakes. The heart of Africa was white and big” (14). Much later, Conrad updated nautical charts while in the merchant service, but he could never “recapture the excitement of that entry of Tanganyika on the blank of [his] old atlas” (15). It appears that the globalizing extension of geographical knowledge progressively weakened the grip on the imagination that the resulting maps could produce.

Through a similarly skeptical attitude, Kawabata, like Conrad, attends to simultaneous connection and distance as a feature of globalization in the modern age. Cultural and political transformations in Japan following the Meiji Restoration, as well as subsequent Japanese policies of expansion in the 1930s, constitute interlocking historical processes through which the shrinking globe had negative consequences for Japan. Dennis C. Washburn interprets Japanese literary responses to the new links between Meiji Era Japan and the rest of the world as a “search for identity that [. . .] was a reaction to the cultural discontinuity created by Japan’s modernization” (246). In Washburn’s assessment, the opening of Japan to the West resulted in a temporal rift, and Kawabata’s use of pre-Meiji literary traditions “was self-conscious and thus an indication of his awareness of the gulf between the past and the present” (248). Thus, the first word of *Yukiguni*, which can be translated as “provincial border,” “hearkens back to pre-Meiji Japan,” and the train in the novel “is a metaphor for the unsettled nature of human existence” (248). The construction of the “imaginary landscape” in the novel, which draws on a shared “cultural memory” of pre-Meiji Japan (248), can thereby be seen as an attempt to overcome the “cultural amnesia” created by the overwhelming transformations brought about by new contact with the West (247).

Furthermore, as Washburn observes, the Pacific War later “severed

Japan from its past just as thoroughly as had the government policies that followed the Meiji Restoration” (246). Of course, the outcome in 1945 was still in the future when Kawabata began writing *Yukiguni* in 1934. Nevertheless, we may productively read *Yukiguni* as set against the backdrop of Japan’s dramatically swift achievement of world power status in the early twentieth century and the subsequent war in Asia during the time of the novel’s protracted composition. Already in the middle and late 1930s, the deepening conflict in China and the resulting confrontations with other powers constituted an increasingly fraught set of relations between Japan and the global order of nations. These relations became ever closer in terms of military and political entanglement, while ever more distant as Japanese and Western nationalism emphasized the differences between Japan and other countries.

Starrs points to this political and historical context of Kawabata’s fiction, writing that “Kawabata’s ‘return to tradition’” in the mid-1930s “was as characteristic of the 1930s as his experimentalism and openness to Western modernism was of the 1920s.” According to Starrs, the demise of “‘Taishō liberalism’ and the rise of militarism and nationalism made Japanese society generally more conservative and traditional, even reactionary, in its tastes in the 1930s” (118). Furthermore, “even Kawabata himself noted with pride that, during the years when the Japanese Imperial Army was deployed all over Asia and the South Pacific, he often received letters from frontline soldiers who told him how much reading *Snow Country* meant to them” (118-19). Starrs interprets the contrasts across Kawabata’s fiction as those of “modernist” versus “traditionalist” works, and he attends to the principle of juxtaposition that makes Kawabata’s fiction resemble haiku (119).

While temporal juxtapositions—traditional and modern styles, themes, and techniques—may account for the characteristics of *Yukiguni* and its place in Kawabata’s *oeuvre*, the nature of geographical juxtapositions in this novel indicate as unsettled a reaction to globalization as that which

appears in *Victory* and Conrad's other works. Seen in this light, some of Shimamura's thoughts can be read as meditations on troubling patterns of distance and proximity writ worldwide, and moreover linked to mirrors in the novel. One extended example of this meditation takes place in the narrator's description of Shimamura's interest in dance. Immediately after we read that Shimamura "saw [Komako] as somehow unreal, like the woman's face in that evening mirror," we receive the statement that "[h]is taste for the occidental dance had much the same air of unreality about it" (24). Shimamura had initially devoted himself to Japanese dance, but then "abruptly switched to the occidental dance" (24). As the narrator's explanation of Shimamura's study of Western ballet notes, "The pleasure he found in his new hobby" derives precisely "from his inability to see with his own eyes occidentals in occidental ballets" (25). There is no question of any desire on Shimamura's part to travel to the West. On the contrary, "He preferred not to savor the ballet in the flesh" (25). Instead, writing about it from the books, posters, and programs that came to Japan from overseas creates "an unrivaled armchair reverie" of "art in another world": "a lyric from some paradise" that is "actually free, uncontrolled fantasy" (25). Shimamura's sudden abandonment of traditional Japanese dance indicates that the fault line enabling his pleasure exists not temporally (between traditional and modern), but spatially: between distance and proximity.

Shimamura's interest in Western ballet highlights the simultaneous closeness and distance between Japan and the West, and we may plausibly read Kawabata's attitude towards this instance of globalization in how the narrator positions Shimamura's thoughts and awareness of their significance. The narrator points out that Shimamura derives his pleasure from studying Western dance "even while he was laughing at himself and his work" (25). When Shimamura discusses novels with Komako, he finds that she has "little understanding of literature." Furthermore, "Her manner was as though she were talking of a distant

foreign literature. There was something lonely, something sad in it [. . .]. It occurred to Shimamura that his own distant fantasy on the occidental ballet, built up from words and photographs in foreign books, was not in its way dissimilar” (42). When the narrator describes Shimamura’s forthcoming publication of translations of Valéry and Alain on Russian ballet, he notes that “The book would in all likelihood contribute nothing to the Japanese dancing world,” but Shimamura “pampered himself with the somewhat whimsical pleasure of sneering at himself through his work, and it may well have been from such a pleasure that his sad little dream world sprang” (131). Shimamura and the narrator seem to agree about how “lonely” and “sad” is the “distant fantasy” that results from the simultaneous distance and proximity between Japan and the West created by the circulation of texts and art.

With regard to landscape representations specifically, a recurring theme in the rest of Kawabata’s fiction is the contrast between the aestheticized, sentimentally rendered world of tradition and nature, which he favors (in “*Izu no Odoriko*,” as well as in *Yukiguni*), and the modern urban space of Asakusa (the setting of a series of Kawabata stories from the 1930s), where contact with “the ‘foreign modern’” takes place (Lippit 123). Kawabata’s snow country and Conrad’s island of Samburan both thereby serve as larger metaphors for the world of human relations, globalized and modernized. Both settings are depicted as geographically isolated and pure. In *Victory*, Samburan is like Eden, a paradise into which the fallen world, in the form of Jones, intrudes. While Kawabata’s writings do not allude to the Judeo-Christian creation story, an indication of Kawabata’s similar sense of loss emerges from the trajectory of his fiction. He wrote *Yukiguni* later than his Asakusa narratives; and after the Second World War, he famously devoted himself to “the beauty of Japan” (Lippit 134, 156). Traditional Japanese space ultimately won out over modern globalized space in his order of preferences.

Thus, we might say that Conrad and Kawabata responded in parallel to

what David Harvey has described as the “time-space compression” of the twentieth century, which gave rise to “disorienting and disrupting impact[s]” on “cultural and social life” (284). While Harvey cites late twentieth-century transformations of worldwide commerce and finance, I would place these ruptures earlier in the century, basing them (for Conrad) in the technological transformation of global commerce and (for Kawabata) in the ongoing and troubled integration of Japanese society with the rest of the world. I would argue that *Victory* and *Yukiguni* encode these transformations and anxieties, in fact making these cultural changes the prerequisite for the contrasts on which the narrative action rests.

VII

The question remains: why does metaphorical language in particular feature so prominently in these episodes of landscape description? As we have already seen, such language enriches the narrative at those points; metaphors make verbal transcriptions of visual phenomena more vivid. Yet, as Franco Moretti notes in his extensive study of setting in nineteenth-century European novels, metaphors in literary settings tend to increase near borders and frontiers—borders of any kind, whether they be geographical, economic, cultural, or domestic (46). In his assessment, Moretti draws on Paul Ricoeur’s theories of metaphor. For Ricoeur, metaphors become necessary “in order to explore a referential field that is not directly accessible” (298). Therefore, according to this reasoning, the presence of such spatial borders as the entry into the snow country, or the shores of Samburan, practically demands heightened figurative language. Furthermore, Moretti argues, because metaphors describe the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar, “they also *give form* to the unknown: they contain it, and keep it somehow under control” (47).

What, then, is the unknown in *Victory* or *Yukiguni* that needs containment? In *Victory*, Heyst knows the world outside Samburan only all too well; his skepticism towards a known life is what causes him to

turn away from it. Conrad was familiar with the waters in which he placed his fictitious Samburan, having spent the autumn of 1887 in the Java Sea, and he knew well the wide world of maritime commerce. In *Yukiguni*, Shimamura knows the snow country, while for Kawabata, the pure and valued world of the snow country (like that of the Izu Peninsula) was to him one of the familiar landscapes of traditional Japan. One might conclude that the unknown that needs containment consists of the mystery of the world, in the Conradian sense (especially as he celebrated the “mystery” of the sea), or the enigmatic experiences of travel and human relationships as depicted in Kawabata’s novel. However, I would argue instead that what is being contained in the metaphorical landscapes in these two novels is not the unknown, but instead the disorienting sense of alternating distance and connection engendered by modern globalization.

Significantly, what emerges from both narratives, in their use of figurative geographical depiction, is a set of losses: not only the deaths or apparent deaths of characters, but also perhaps the loss of a sense of the world as a place of reliable boundaries and distances. In *Victory*, the world is an arena in which what is outside invades and destroys. Hence, the last descriptions in the novel focus on Heyst’s bungalow, now only ashes; and the bodies of Ricardo and Jones, which Davidson imagines as already disintegrating; and the very last word of that novel is “nothing” (385). At the end of *Yukiguni*, an intrusion takes place in that ambiguous final image, when Shimamura’s “head fell back, and the Milky Way flowed down inside him with a roar” (175). The image occurs as Shimamura contemplates the warehouse fire, but that fire resembles the one at the end of *Victory* less than it does the fire at the end of Yukio Mishima’s *Kinkaku-ji* (*The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, 1956), where the narrator thrills at the destruction of the temple by the fire he has set to it. To that narrator’s eyes, this “fire delineated the complex shadows of the piles of straw and, giving forth the brilliant color of all the wild

places, it spread minutely in all directions” (259). In both Japanese novels, aestheticized visions interrupt—or erupt into—perceptions of the real world, which is not exactly the same as “The outer world [breaking] upon” Heyst in the form of Jones (261).

Nevertheless, the ending of *Yukiguni* emphasizes separation and then the collapse of distances. When Shimamura first arrives at the fire, we read, “The sparks spread off into the Milky Way, and Shimamura was pulled up with them.” Komako joins him, the narrator tells us, “the pulse of the fire beating on her intent, slightly flushed face.” Shimamura then “felt a violent rising in his chest”; “her throat was bare and arched”; and Shimamura “did not know why he should feel that a separation was forcing itself upon them” (171-72). Remarkably similar language describes Shimamura’s vision, soon afterwards, of Yōko’s face illuminated by the fire: “her throat was arched. The fire flickered over the white face. Shimamura felt a rising in his chest again as the memory came to him of the night he had been on his way to visit Komako, and he had seen that mountain light shine in Yoko’s face. The years and months with Komako seemed to be lighted up in that instant; and there, he knew, was the anguish” (174). This “anguish” results, therefore, not from the sight of Yōko’s unconscious body, but from the sudden erasure of distances of both time and space, mediated ultimately by Shimamura’s memory of the mirroring reflection of the glass.

Perhaps such losses of distances and boundaries form part of what Benjamin sensed, rather than a decline in the ability to tell stories. After all, not too far from the time that he wrote “The Storyteller,” both Conrad and Kawabata similarly crafted narratives whose power derives in part from their metaphorical incorporation of these problems of connectedness in a globalized world. Drawing parallels between the two authors in this way can shed light on the aesthetic capacity of their writings to respond to shared historical phenomena, despite living in remotely separated cultures. Such a reading may invite further thought about links between

Conrad and Kawabata, among other Japanese authors, potentially enabling a better understanding of cultures and their interactions.

Notes

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- ¹ As David Damrosch discusses in “World Literature in a Postcanonical, Hypercanonical Age,” authors such as Conrad have already attracted a wealth of critical attention. However, “cross-cultural comparisons” between well-researched Western authors and other writers who, at first, may seem only remotely related can “prove to be marvelously illuminating and refreshing” (51).
- ² “Island hamlet,” in the words of Michael C. Brownstein, who also discusses the significance of the warehouse fire in *Yukiguni* (487-90).
- ³ Even in terms of readership, the novels share one surprising similarity, as both were read avidly by soldiers in wartime. *Victory* enjoyed some popularity among British troops on the Western Front in the First World War (Northcliffe 108, qtd. in Niland 159), while, as noted later in this article, Kawabata received appreciative letters from Japanese soldiers who had read *Yukiguni* while in Asia and the South Pacific during the Pacific War (Starrs 118-19).
- ⁴ Kawabata, *Snow Country* 3, with brackets marking my translation of the Japanese in Kawabata, *Yukiguni* 5.
- ⁵ Ford’s collaboration with Conrad is described in Delbanco. For more on Impressionism, Peters is a useful starting point.

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