

A Fallen Landmark and the Literary Imagination: The Ryounkaku in Modern Japanese Literature

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ABSTRACT

In the early decades of the twentieth century, Tokyo grew rapidly and underwent radical change as it transformed into a “modern” city. In this paper, I would like to explore the characteristic qualities of Japanese Modernism and post-disaster mentality by focusing on the representations of the Ryounkaku (Palace Rising over the Clouds), Tokyo’s first skyscraper, which was destroyed in the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake, in literary works. Built in the heart of Tokyo’s entertainment district (the Ueno/Asakusa area), the Ryounkaku became an important landmark of the “Civilization and Enlightenment,” and also fostered imaginations towards the mystery genre among writers. After the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923, the eastern downtown area of Tokyo, one of the most damaged areas, was rebuilt, and Asakusa came back to life as a “modern quarter.” However, a close examination of fiction written by Edogawa Rampo, Kawabata Yasunari and Kaneko Mitsuharu leads us to another point of view. In their descriptions of the (fallen) Ryounkaku, the narrator’s gaze at the building serves as a mediator between the past and the future. These expressions reveal some aspects of the post-disaster mentality.

KEY WORDS: Japanese Modernism, post-disaster mentality, Ryounkaku (Palace Rising over the Clouds), Tanizaki Jun’ichirô, Edogawa Rampo, Kawabata Yasunari

傾倒的地標與想像： 近代日本文學中的「凌雲閣」

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摘 要

二十世紀初期，發展迅速的東京轉型成「現代」都市的同時，也經歷劇烈的變動。本文中，我將探討日本現代化和災後心智（post-disaster mentality）的特徵，藉著聚焦在 1923 年關東大地震（Great Kanto Earthquake）中毀壞的東京首座摩天大樓凌雲閣（淺草十二階）（the Ryounkaku (Palace Rising over the Clouds)）於文學作品中的再現。建於東京的娛樂區中心（上野／淺草地帶），凌雲閣變成「文明開化」（Civilization and Enlightenment）的重要地標，也薰陶出作家對神秘文學的想像。在 1923 年的關東大地震後，位於東京東方的鬧區被重建，為最嚴重的受災區之一，而淺草也復生為一「現代區」（modern quarter）。然而，仔細檢視江戶川亂步、川端康成和金子光晴的小說及詩歌，將帶領我們發現另一觀點。在他們描述（倒塌的）凌雲閣時，敘述者對建築物的凝視起了介於過去和未來間的傳遞者作用。這些措辭透露出災後心智的某些層面。

關鍵詞：日本現代化、災後心智、凌雲閣（淺草十二階）、谷崎潤一郎、江戶川亂步、川端康成

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In the early decades of the twentieth century, Tokyo grew rapidly and underwent radical change as it transformed into a “modern” city. In this paper, I would like to explore the characteristic qualities of Japanese Modernism and post-disaster mentality by focusing on the representations of the Ryoukaku (Palace Rising over the Clouds), Tokyo's first skyscraper which was destroyed in the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, in literary works.

Built in the heart of Tokyo's entertainment district (the Ueno/Asakusa area), the Ryoukaku became an important landmark of the “Civilization and Enlightenment,” and also fostered some imaginations towards the mystery genre among writers, such as Tanizaki Jun'ichirō (1886-1965). After the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923, the downtown area of Tokyo was rebuilt, and Asakusa was reborn as a “modern quarter.” However, a close examination of fiction written by Edogawa Rampo (1894-1965), Kawabata Yasunari (1899-1972) and Kaneko Mitsuharu (1895-1975) leads us to another point of view. In their descriptions of the (fallen) Ryoukaku, the narrator's gaze on the building serves as the mediator between the past and the future. These expressions reveal some aspects of the post-disaster mentality.

1. The Landmarks as Symbols of the “Civilization”: Transfiguration of the Ueno/Asakusa District

To start with, I would like to survey the upheaval of the Ueno/Asakusa district at the turn of the century, focusing on two landmarks.

One of the features of urban cities in 20th century was a skyward trend. It began in the United States in the late nineteenth century, and developed with the advent of two new technologies: the elevator and the steel structural frame. The “safety elevator,” invented by Elisha Otis in 1853, was first used in a building in 1870. The 10-story Home Insurance Building, built in Chicago in 1885, was the first tall building to be supported by a steel frame.

Tokyo, in the midst of modernization, lost no time in adopting this urban trend. The Ryoukaku (Palace Rising over the Clouds) was built in 1890 as Tokyo's first skyscraper.¹ It was 50 meters tall, octagonal, of red brick and contained the first elevator in Japan imported from the United States. Although this elevator was thought dangerous and shut down next year, the Ryoukaku building, popularly called the Asakusa Junikai (Twelve Stories),

¹ For further information about Ryoukaku, see Hosoma.

was a symbol of the “civilized Tokyo” in anyone’s view, a showcase for the latest culture, science and technology.

There were theaters, bars and restaurants on every floor. On the second to the eighth floors, wares from all over the world were for sale. People could also catch up on cultural trends there, in art exhibitions, concerts of Western music, or beauty contests. The top floor served as an observation platform; it was furnished with telescopes, offering a view of the city.

The area in which the Twelve Stories was located had long been one of Tokyo's amusement sections but with the construction of this building the Asakusa district became the most important entertainment region of the city. Shows and spectacles had been popular in 19th-century Japan. According to Kawazoe, a show of weaving baskets attracted more than 450,000 visitors in the space of one hundred days in 1819 (38). In the Meiji era, showmen gathered in the Asakusa area; many shows were held there, from circuses to shady freak-shows.

Another “civilized” landmark of Tokyo was the Expo. World Expositions had been held in Europe from 1851, to promote the development of new technologies and urban cities, with some imperialistic connotations. Japan began to participate in the International Expositions in 1867, and soon embraced the concept of the Expo. In 1877, the first National Exposition was organized by the Meiji government in Ueno Park, adjacent to the Asakusa district, which ended quite successfully with many pavilions and visitors.

The Expositions attracted people with various unprecedented amusements: a Ferris wheel, a water chute, and a merry-go-round. The magnificent pavilions were beautifully illuminated. We can see the effects of the Expo boom among citizens of Tokyo in a novel by Natsume Sôseki (1867-1916). Natsume left his post of professor at Tokyo Imperial University to join the staff of a newspaper company, Asahi Shimbun, in March 1907. As a writer under exclusive contract, he made his debut on that paper with a serialized novel named *Gubijinsô (The Poppy)*. In this novel, he depicts the Tokyo Exposition, which was being held at the very moment of the serialization, in detail. As this Exposition organized by the Tokyo Metropolitan Prefecture emphasized the entertaining quality of the Expo instead of industrial projects, one of the interests for the characters in the novel is the large-scale illumination of the Expo, which was a major feature of the whole venue. The author treats the Expo with its illuminations ironically

as a symbol of “civilization” and “civilized people”:

When the civilization is riddled out in a sack of stimulus, an Exposition comes out. When the Exposition is strained through sullen sands of the night, the radiant illuminations come out. If one were alive, he would certainly see the illuminations and be astonished, searching for the evidence of his life. Not until they are astonished do the civilized people paralyzed by the civilization find themselves alive. (195)

The landscape of the Ueno/Asakusa district had been transformed towards “Civilization and Enlightenment,” with these landmarks. However, with hastily erected busy streets, the streetscape of the district was in messy disorder. Indeed, the area was nothing but a clumsy patchwork of Western and traditional architecture; the modern face of urban Tokyo was abruptly constructed on the back of traditional rows of houses and alleys. The launching pad of the Japanese modernization was, in a certain sense, this “superficial civilization” as Natsume indicates.

2. The Emergence of Mystery: Asakusa as a Labyrinthine Area

The confused backstreets of the area, with their mix of values, fostered new forms of creative imagination in the writers. For them, the streetscapes of Asakusa assumed an air of some unknown, chaotic place. The first writer who tried to experiment with the style of mystery genre, taking advantage of the labyrinthine streetscape, was Tanizaki Jun’ichirō (1886-1965).

“Himitsu” (“The Secret,” 1911) was Tanizaki’s first short story to appear in a major literary magazine. Although the elaborate skill of the author was highly acclaimed by critics, the story itself received negative marks for being “extremely boring” (Satō 90-91). However, an analysis from the point of view of the topos, Asakusa, may shed new light on the work. In the story, the protagonist, who has decadent tastes, looks for a hideaway “to try a more unconventional, fanciful, artificial mode of life” (51). He succeeds in renting a room in the monks’ quarters in a monastery run by a Buddhist sect, in the backstreets of Asakusa:

The monastery was in an obscure, labyrinthine neighborhood in

the shadow of the Twelve-Story Tower, reached by following the Shinbori Canal in a straight line from Kikuya Bridge and behind the Honganji Temple. The slum spread over the district like an overturned trash bin, and along one edge of it stretched the other earthen wall that surrounded the monastery. The enclosure gave an impression of great calm, gravity, and solitude. (49)

Here, the contrast between modern Tokyo (the Twelve Stories) and traditional Tokyo (the monastery) effectively creates an unusual and surreal atmosphere. In this hideaway, the protagonist indulges himself in weird and mysterious excitements such as strolling about the town in drag, or littering his room with books like Conan Doyle's *The Sign of Four* and De Quincey's *Murder, Considered as One of the Fine Arts*. It is notable that the atmosphere of the quarter allows his eccentric and decadent behavior. In the course of time he meets a woman who whispers in his ear, "...Arrested at last..." (58) with a look of deep significance. Although he identifies her with his ex-lover, Miss T., her secrecy envelops her, to which the protagonist is addicted.

The scene in which protagonist waits for her at the Thunder Gate crossing is described as follows: "Aside from an occasional trolley spraying puddles of water from the rails as it passed, there were only the lamps placed here and there above utility-pole advertisements, dimly illuminating the hazy, rain-filled air" ("The Secret" 62). Then, he is picked up in an old-fashioned two-passenger rickshaw, his eyes being covered by a silk blindfold. The mixture of modernity (rails, lamps, utility-pole advertisements) and tradition (old-fashioned rickshaw) in the Asakusa district arouses his longing for this mysterious woman. The driver of the rickshaw "spun us around several times in the same spot to mask the direction in which he finally started off" (62). He is lead to a labyrinthine woman in labyrinthine Tokyo.

The fact that the protagonist is attracted to Miss T. only because of the secrecy of the place leads the decadent rendezvous of the lovers to an abrupt ending. Once the secret of the woman's place is revealed, Miss T.'s charm also vanishes. The protagonist discards her without hesitation, and begins to pursue "more vivid, gory pleasures" (68). It is the mysterious vista of Asakusa—the protagonist calls it "the worlds one often encounters in dreams" (50)—that forms the mysterious and decadent feature of "The Secret."

In the first years after his debut, Tanizaki was heavily influenced by fin-de-siècle aestheticism. The jaded decadent of “The Secret” is often discussed as a creation of the writer’s “diabolist” period. However, this work also reveals his acute observation of the mixture of “modern” and “traditional” Tokyo. As a forerunner of his age, Tanizaki pioneered the literary representations of the modernist movement, which had taken over Tokyo in the 1920s and 1930s.

3. Fallen Landmark and the Post-Quake Literary Imagination

The Ryounkaku was destroyed in the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, when its upper floors toppled into a nearby lake.

Edogawa Rampo (1894-1965),² a writer considered to be the father of Japanese detective fiction, selected the disappeared Twelve Stories as the subject of his work. In “Oshie to Tabisuru Otoko” (“The Traveler with the Pasted Rag Picture”, 1929), he recalls the Twelve Stories in the chaotic atmosphere of this area at the turn of the century:

“Did you ever go up the Junikai?” the old man’s voice droned on. “No? What a pity. It was quite a strange building, I must say. I often used to wonder what sort of a wizard had built it. It was said to have been designed by an Italian architect.

“I must explain that in those days Asakusa Park was even more of a show place than it is now. At nearly every turn there was one attraction after another. To cite but a few, there was the Spider Man, a sword-dance show by a group of young girls, a noted circus entertainer with his favorite feat of dancing atop a ball, and peep shows galore. Then there was also the Puzzle Labyrinth, where you could easily get lost in a maze of paths partitioned by knitted bamboo screens. (210-11)

In this story, “the old man” talks about a strange event that happened to his older brother, while showing the narrator a rag picture with two figures: a man dressed in a stylish Western suit and a girl in a classical coiffure and a kimono. The brother, who was “of a very curious disposition and loved all

² His pen name was based on the Japanese phonetic rendering of “Edgar Allan Poe.”

things of foreign origin,” (210) fell in love with a beautiful girl he saw through his binoculars from the observation platform of the Twelve Stories. After looking for her in vain in Asakusa Park, he finally found her in a traditional pasted-rag picture in a peep show. She was a rag-picture doll of Yaoya Oshichi, a legendary 17th century arsonist who committed the crime to see the man she loved.³ This fact makes him choose a strange happy ending. Asking his younger brother to look at him through the wrong end of the binoculars, he joins the girl in the rag picture.

Even the latest technology is depicted in an uncanny atmosphere in this novel: the Junikai is called the “Red Monster,” and the binoculars (also called “wicked”) have a magical power. The combination of these modern objects with traditional articles (the figure of the legendary Oshichi, the pasted-rag picture, and the peep show) in the confusing Asakusa landscape produces a sense of a mysterious and unique world.

This observation of the Asakusa area is based on the same recognition of the topos as Tanizaki’s “The Secret.” The chaotic scene of the quarter serves to foster the sense of mystery in both stories, where the Ryounkaku plays a symbolic role.

What distinguishes Edogawa’s work from Tanizaki’s is a confusing blend of dream and reality. Compared to “The Secret,” the imaginative characteristic of “The Traveler with the Pasted Rag Picture” is conspicuous. It is difficult to distinguish between fact and fiction in this strange tale; every single detail of the old man’s story could be his own invention, or the whole event could be a dream of the narrator. And as far as the valuation of this story is concerned, one must link it to the strong sense of nostalgia throughout the whole story. The old man develops the story of his brother and the girl in the rag picture in his own particular style. Although his tempo is rather slow for a mystery fiction, the strange story sounds intriguing under his melancholic and nostalgic touch.

This distinguishing feature of the novel is not irrelevant to the post-disaster mentality. May not the imaginative features of “The Traveler

³ Oshichi was a 16-year-old girl, the daughter of a wealthy greengrocer (*Yaoya*, in Japanese), who lived in Edo (the current Tokyo) in the 17th century. In 1681, Oshichi fell in love with a young servant boy of a temple while she was seeking refuge there from a large fire. Hoping to see him again, she set fire to her own home in 1682, causing a massive blaze that destroyed a huge section of Edo. She was arrested and executed for arson. She became legendary, and is depicted as a leading character in several Kabuki and Bunraku plays.

with the Pasted Rag Picture” serve as consolation for the sufferers? The interplay of the downward gaze from the observation platform and the upward gaze from the park brings about the synchronous blending of time and space. The fact that the Twelve Stories did not exist anymore would have led the readers of the day to experience a somewhat striking feeling of melancholia and nostalgia, and the melancholic and nostalgic feature of the novel could have consoled the readers by evoking their empathy. From this point of view, it is worth noting that “The Traveler with the Pasted Rag Picture” speaks of the post-quake situation of Tokyo.

Let us examine another novel that depicts the restoration of the Asakusa area. Terada Torahiko (1878-1935) alluded to the fall of the Twelve Stories in an essay written in March 1930:

The giant holding his ground as the last defense of the age of Meiji brick had fallen disemboweled, and then came the age of ferroconcrete, the age of Jazz, the talkie, and the proletarian literature. (187)

As Terada pointed out, the eastern downtown area of Tokyo was rebuilt after the earthquake, and Asakusa was revived as a “modern quarter.” Kawabata Yasunari (1899-1972) depicted the atmosphere of the area in *Asakusa Kurenaidan* (*The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa*, 1929-30). In this work, the Twelve Stories is called “that symbol of old Asakusa,” while the “Model 1930” is “Eroticism and nonsense and speed and comic-strip humor of current events and jazz songs and ladies’ legs...” (31). It seems that the restoration of the area eliminated the confused mixture of modernity and old-fashioned tradition, and it is often pointed out that *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa* depicts the rebirth of the quarter:

After the Great Earthquake of Taisho snapped the Tower of the Twelve Stories, Asakusa fostered a freedom not to be found anywhere else. “All races, all classes, all jumbled together forming a bottomless, endless current.” It became “a foundry in which all the old models are regularly melted down to be cast into new ones.” (111)

Ueda’s interpretation, interspersed with quotes from the novel, is typical

of *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa*. The observation of Asakusa in the novel also coincides with Harry Harootunian's following remark: "For Japanese, modernity was speed, shock, and the spectacle of constant sensation" (18).

However, the citizens would have experienced complex sufferings within, behind the restoration and the wild excitement. In *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa*, a girl mutters: "But where has she gone, and how, that girl I used to be when the Twelve Stories was still standing? When I think about it..." (60). Her statement shares the same melancholic and nostalgic touch as that found in "The Traveler with the Pasted Rag Picture." And she takes another step forward. Looking back to the past that she would never forget and missing the possible future that would never occur, the girl gains courage to deal with reality:

Anyway, you can write as much as you want. I don't mind. Go on, even if they run me out because of something I've done, someday I would like to read it to someone. (60)

While we recognize that the important feature of *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa* is the description of the frenzied merrymaking in the 1930s influenced by Western modernism, we may also interpret the novel as an experiment of the post-quake literature. It talks about "a bold instinct to survive" (101) after the disaster, powerfully and reassuringly.

This post-quake mentality concerning the Twelve Stories was shared by other artists. In his poem "Asakusa Junikai (Asakusa Twelve Stories)," Kaneko Mitsuharu (1895-1975) describes the Twelve Stories grotesquely as "a queer stinkhorn, a phimosis," (3) whereas the theme of the poem is rather serious. The Twelve Stories gives the poet the courage to see himself as he is. His solitude deepens as he climbs the Twelve Stories, and from the observation platform, he finds his "alter ego" through the binoculars:

I adjust the focus on me, the defector, with the blustery heart.
On me, who secretly sobbed looking up at the tragic figure of
the Twelve Stories that rose to the purgatory's sky at dawn.
I say, "I saw your true self."
I take off the glasses. My alter ego disappears.
I feel uneasy. --- Will I ever have a second chance to see me?
(18-23)

Here again, the Twelve Stories and the gaze through the binoculars serve as the mediator between the past and the future. This passage reveals some aspects of the post-disaster mentality.

The re-reading of *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa* as post-quake literature has begun.⁴ An examination of the post-quake representations of the fallen Twelve Stories could also contribute to the discussion of the post-disaster literary imagination.

⁴ For example, see Taguchi Rituo, “*Asakusa Kurenaidan no Dansô* (The Fault of *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa*),” paper read at the 2011 spring meeting of Shōwa Bungakukai, June 2011.

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