

Snow Country

Y.Kawabata

June 6, 2006

Throughout the winter cold winds come down from Siberia crossing the Japanese Sea picking up moisture en route and dumping it as snow on the western slopes of the Japanese Alps. Snow, lots of snow, up to five meters, continually accumulating from November to April. I did not have the faintest idea of this fact until I late in 1974 happened to pick up the short novel by Kawabata. It certainly would have been something that would have intrigued and delighted me as a child. People running in tunnels under the snow, entering and exiting their houses on the second floors. Why was I deprived of this tidbit when I was a child and learning about the world? What a theme for childrens stories, because after all, snow is above all the delight of the child.

The Snow Country of Kawabata is hardly the delight of the child it presents a sad love story told obliquely in the manner of a Japanese haiku according to the translator Seidensticker. The cynical dilettante from Tokyo idly picking up a young geisha and inducing her to love him without being able to reciprocate only to use. It is a story tersely told concentrating on the sensuous detail, the light on the mountain at sunset, the reflection in the mirror of a train window during a cold dark night, the sound of a tea-kettle early a misty morning, the slush of melting snow, the rotting pole in a snow tunnel, the insect slowly dying a small trembling death dwarfed by even a small room. Nothing is described in detail, you do not know how the houses look like, only how they feel. The eaves dropping almost to the ground, the creaking staircase, the smell of old wood, walls covered with paper yellowed with age. The winter is long and cold and dark, the mountain villages cut off from the world, save for the trains that whistle by. It evokes a Japan of the old on the verge of the modern world with cars and taxis. Much of the action takes places at the periphery. There is the sick man who is about to die. Ambiguous relationships, unstated stories, suppressed emotions. The man is an expert on the occidental ballet, but only as a research project pursued through available documentation, the spectacle of an actual ballet would surely bore him. And he knows it. The young geisha herself keeps a diary and a list of books she reads complete with short commentaries. A wasted effort, just like the pursuit of the occidental ballet, the main character muses. The whole love story is a wasted effort going through the motions, just as is the life and beauty of the girl, whose features are never explicitly delineated, only the cleanliness, down to the hollows between her toes. Obviously they make love, but such activities are never described, as they certainly would have been in a modern steamier version, only hinted at through the occasional reference to the feel of touch or to the abandon to drink. The novel was written in the thirties and published in instalments, in the late forties a final addition was made and it shows. The protagonist visits a nearby village known for its Chijimi kimonos weaved by virgins during the darkness and isolation of snowy winters producing out of the blood of their very youth the finest cloth. The fabric of which clothes are made is surely the most ephemeral of arts, and even those superb Kimonos would only survive for half a century, and by then their

weavers would all be dead. The story is too detailed and didactical, more appropriate to a guide book or travel report, than to a novel. He returns and a warehouse catches fire. There is excitement and tragedy, and the novel ends open-ended, but we all know that all is concluded.

Shortly after reading the novel I came across a short article in the New York Times of January 25, 1975. It described the snow country, showing pictures of shovellers, and interviewing some old residents. References to Kawabata's story provided a back-bone, because after all he put the Snow Country on a map. The article was written forty years after Kawabata conceived and wrote his master piece, and still some of the people supposedly depicted in the novel were still alive and interviewed. The story of the hot-spring geisha, lowest on the ladder, was by then of the past, but still with eye-witnesses to tell the tale. Clearly Seidenstickers translation was the source of the journalist text revealed by the tell-tale reference to 'dilettante' used by the translator in his introduction but never appearing in the novel proper.

The newspaper clipping, carefully scissored out from a copy of the paper long since gone into pulp, remains in the book less ravaged by times acid than the jaundiced pages of the book itself. Of my first reading over thirty years ago I recall no particulars except the passing through a tunnel separating the Land of Snow from the rest of the world. For a young person the bittersweet sadness of love may stir but not penetrate, such nostalgia will be reserved for the future.

June 6, 2006 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se