

# Newspaper Journalism, Realism, and Modernism in Japan: From Kanagaki Robun to Kawabata Yasunari

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**ABSTRACT:** If modernism can be broadly understood as a revolt against Western traditions, this article asks how modernism in Japan relates to the revolt against Japanese and Chinese traditions that ushered modern Japanese literary realism into being. By juxtaposing Kawabata Yasunari’s *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa* (1929–30) with Kanagaki Robun’s *Chronicle of the Telegrams from Saga* (1874) and *A Blade in the Night: The Tale of She-Demon Takahashi Oden* (1879), we highlight the rarely examined role of newspaper journalism in the nascent development of modern Japanese realism and the modernist rebellion against it. Each of the works examined is thoroughly imbricated with the newspaper media of its day. Though the literary aims and motivating principles of the two authors differ, there are remarkable similarities in their exploitation of the newspaper medium to break the mold of what they saw as the stale literary conventions of their respective eras.

**I**N *Topographies of Japanese Modernism*, Seiji Lippit poses the question “What happens when a critique of modernity—a ‘revolt against the traditions of the Western world’—is situated in a non-European context, in which the concept of the modern has been tied to the image of the West?” As an homage to Lippit’s pathbreaking work and an attempt to extend its purview, we ask how Japanese modernism compares to the revolt against Japanese and Chinese traditions that ushered Japanese literary modernity—specifically, literary realism—into being. Juxtaposing *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa* (*Asakusa kurenaidan*, 1929–30) from Kawabata Yasunari’s modernist

period with the literary innovations of Kanagaki Robun from half a century earlier—particularly *Chronicle of the Telegrams from Saga* (*Saga denshinroku*, 1874) and *A Blade in the Night: The Tale of She-Demon Takahashi Oden* (*Takahashi Oden yasha monogatari*, 1879)—we seek to connect the Japanese modernist moment with the modern Japanese past in a way that illuminates the similarities and idiosyncrasies of both.

This pairing brings into sharp relief the rarely examined role of newspaper journalism in the nascent development of modern Japanese realism and the modernist rebellion against it. *The Scarlet Gang* was Kawabata's first novel to be serialized in the newspaper. Serial novels first appeared in Japanese newspapers in the mid-1870s, and Kanagaki Robun played a prominent role in their rise to popularity with the success of his *Takahashi Oden*. Both writers actively exploited particular qualities of the newspaper medium—its claim to represent real events and people in a timely fashion, its unabashed status as a popular commodity, and its capacity to bring a plethora of written styles together in its pages—to break the mold of what they saw as stale literary conventions in their respective eras. Although the vectors of their writings and their effects on readers today would appear to share little in common, we find some uncanny resemblances—their shared interest not only in newspaper reportage and the mixing of styles it afforded but also in prurient stories of female criminality set in the major entertainment district of Asakusa in Tokyo. We begin with the better-known Kawabata Yasunari, at one time a self-proclaimed modernist, and proceed backward in time to uncover resonances between his modernist work and the innovations of his much lesser known forebear Kanagaki Robun.

### KAWABATA YASUNARI AND NEWSPAPER MODERNISM

Kawabata Yasunari (1899–1972) enjoys broad recognition in both Japan and the English-speaking world as the first Japanese writer to receive the Nobel Prize for literature (1968). At the time, the Nobel committee praised Kawabata for his “narrative mastery, which with great sensibility expresses the essence of the Japanese mind,”<sup>1</sup> with particular attention paid to *The Izu Dancer* (*Izu no odoriko*, 1926), *Snow Country* (*Yukiguni*, 1937/1948), and *The Old Capital* (*Koto*, 1961–62).<sup>2</sup> In his acceptance speech Kawabata reinforced this image, referring to a “warm, deep, delicate compassion . . . that has in it the deep quiet of the Japanese spirit.”<sup>3</sup> This global image cast a long shadow over Kawabata's modernist beginnings in the 1920s and 1930s, and it wasn't until 2005 that *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa* appeared in English translation. Contrary to the image of a quiet, eternal Japanese spirit, as an up-and-coming writer Kawabata had been a core member of the upstart New Sensationist (Shinkankakuha) group, which published the avant-garde literary journal *Bungei jidai* (*Literary age*, 1924–27).

The first thirty-seven chapters of *Scarlet Gang* were serialized in the evening edition of the *Tokyo asahi* newspaper from December 20, 1929, through February 16, 1930. From the outset,

<sup>1</sup> “Yasunari Kawabata—Facts,” NobelPrize.org, Nobel Media AB 2020, accessed August 18, 2020, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1968/kawabata/facts/>.

<sup>2</sup> The publication of *Snow Country* (*Yukiguni*) was rather convoluted; while the two dates listed refer to the publication years of the initial novel (1937) and then its complete version (1948), the individual chapters were written and published in various magazines in two batches, first between 1935 and 1937 and then between 1940 and 1947. *Snow Country* was the first of these novels to be released in English translation, in 1956, followed by *The Izu Dancer* in 1964. *The Old Capital* was not released in English translation until 1987, but it was translated into German in 1965 as *Kyoto oder Die jungen Liebenden in der alten Kaiserstadt*.

<sup>3</sup> “Yasunari Kawabata—Nobel Lecture,” NobelPrize.org, Nobel Media AB 2020, accessed August 18, 2020, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1968/kawabata/lecture/>.

Kawabata played with the line between his writing and the reportage surrounding it, prefacing the work as follows:

AUTHOR'S NOTE: It is hard to know what kind of trouble the following novel might cause the members of the Scarlet Gang or any of the others who make their dens inside and outside of Asakusa Park. I hope, however, that it will be forgiven, because, in the end, this is just a novel.<sup>4</sup>

After a seven-month hiatus—during which time the incomplete work was adapted as both a film and a musical revue starring dancers featured in the novel itself—the last two sections appeared concurrently in two different literary journals.<sup>5</sup> Chapter 38 opens with a direct reference to this gap, highlighting the sense of contemporaneity as a core principle of its composition:

A white motorboat approaches, kicking up on the water the shadow of the Kototoi Bridge. That is how far I got in my writing. Right—then from February to July, about five months, I let *The Tale of the Scarlet Gang* rest.

—The sleeve of the white coat, it's dark red! Blood! The fellow watching the telescope from the Subway Restaurant Tower yells this out, while the white-coated Yumiko is being dragged into the boat cabin. So I must continue from here.

But the Ōkawa then was covered in the winter misty dusk. Though winter, that was still 1929. In the streets, the end-of-the-year sales had begun. Now it is already 1930, and the midyear sales have started. And firefly and bug sellers—in the nighttime Asakusa Park, these signs of summer already lag behind the change of season.<sup>6</sup>

The first thirty-seven chapters end with the cliff-hanging scene referenced above, in which it is not clear whether the main character Yumiko is dead or alive. After a few pages of digression and a chapter break, the narrator returns to the problem of how to continue from where he left off: “From here on I will let Haruko do the guiding, dear reader. To put it differently, in the recent movie version of *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa*, Yumiko has died.”<sup>7</sup>

As this brief introduction makes clear, *Scarlet Gang* was self-consciously intertwined with the mass media of its day, for which Asakusa served as a major hub. As has been frequently pointed out, Japanese modernism in the 1920s and '30s was inextricably tied to the rise of mass culture, the proliferation of mass media, and the increasing commodification of literature. The bold literary experiments conducted by writers like Kawabata were responses to the encroachment of such phenomena on the domain of the novel—only established some four decades earlier as an essential literary apparatus for the modern nation-state. Although we focus here on the newspaper, *Scarlet Gang* embraces virtually all mass media, making constant reference to them and experimenting with ways to assimilate their signature elements. It could be argued that the

<sup>4</sup> Kawabata Yasunari, *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa*, trans. Alisa Freedman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxiv. The commercially successful film, no longer extant, was produced by Teikoku Kinema and screened on September 5, 1930, at the Asakusa Tokiwa Theatre. Toeda Hirokazu, “*Asakusa kurenaidan no eiga-sei*” [The movie-like qualities of *Asakusa kurenaidan*], in *Kawabata Yasunari sakuhinron shūsei* [Collected studies of works by Kawabata Yasunari], ed. Ishikawa Takumi and Yoshida Hideki (Tokyo: Ōfū, 2009), 86–97.

<sup>6</sup> Yasunari, *Scarlet Gang*, trans. Freedman, 114. This passage was originally published in the journal *Shinchō* in September 1930, which would have been on sale in August, before the screening of the film. Toeda, “*Asakusa kurenaidan no eiga-sei*.” In the original text as well as Freedman's translation, opening dashes rather than surrounding quotation marks are used to indicate characters' speech.

<sup>7</sup> Yasunari, *Scarlet Gang*, trans. Freedman, 118–19.

newspaper itself suggested a primary method for doing so: simple juxtaposition of disparate styles, voices, and topics.

Aptly characterized as a “documentary novel” by Japanese cultural historian Miriam Silverberg,<sup>8</sup> *Scarlet Gang* offers a heady mixture of fact and fiction that continues to enthrall aficionados of the *modan* (modern) culture that saw its heyday in 1920s and early 1930s Japan. *Scarlet Gang* centers on a writer-narrator who befriends a gang of delinquent youths, who in turn become his readers’ guides to the transgressive subcultures that made Asakusa so dynamic. As a “document” of Asakusa in 1929–30, the novel offers a rich record of the entertainment scene, the rules of street life for the homeless and youth gang populations of Asakusa, and a host of other topics.<sup>9</sup> The *Scarlet Gang* itself, however, is pure fiction, as Kawabata divulged after the work’s publication.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, Silverberg’s description does not point to a novel that follows the lives of real people in a realistic mode. Rather, as already hinted above, Kawabata’s interest in documenting the life of Asakusa in real time supersedes staples of literary realism such as plot, linear progression, character development, and consistency of narrative perspective. For instance, the high drama of Yumiko’s uncertain fate begins in chapter 26, when she lures her nemesis onto a boat on the Ōkawa (Sumida River), then plants an arsenic-laced kiss on him. That potentially climactic moment is then set aside for eleven chapters that weave in and out of a variety of disparate topics, from folktales about the ponds of Asakusa Park to ruminations on the charms of concrete.

The novel’s language is fragmented, polyphonic, and at times teasingly cryptic, in constant defiance of the very notion of transparent expression. Street advertisements, snippets of song lyrics, and obliquities of Asakusa slang jostle against shrine fortunes, monument inscriptions, and pilgrim poetry. Characters appear and disappear, time shifts, and subject matter changes without explanation, challenging the reader to put the narrative fragments together bit by bit. In one instance, the newspaper itself becomes one of the puzzle pieces. Toward the end of chapter 28, the narrator runs into a character (later identified as Haruko) carrying a small package, which she waves in the air as she says:

— This here . . .

“This here” is a famous Asakusa specialty, but for the novel I will leave its name a riddle.

Of course it’s all too easy to guess, though . . .

— To buy this—I know a secret trick. Slide a newspaper across the counter, and it’s absolutely astounding. The shop girl takes it and quickly hides it in her undies. To thank me, she gives me a big discount.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Miriam Silverberg, *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 189.

<sup>9</sup> An abbreviated catalog of these aspects of the novel would include the names of actual Russian and Japanese dancers and the venues where they were performing; performance programs and descriptions; brief bios of actual Asakusa gang leaders; the street rules that defined life for the homeless; and explanations of oblique Asakusa slang.

<sup>10</sup> “Asakusa kurenaidan ni tsuite” [About *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa*], *Bungakukai* 5, no. 5 (May 1951), cited in Nozue Akira, “Asakusa kurenaidan kō—In’yō to kenbun ni kansuru ichi kōsatsu” [On *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa*—Thoughts on citation and firsthand observations], in Ishikawa and Yoshida, *Kawabata Yasunari sakuhinron shūsei*, 51.

<sup>11</sup> Yasunari, *Scarlet Gang*, trans. Freedman, 86. The translation has been slightly modified.

The chapter ends on this befuddling note. Haruko's next words don't appear until part of the way through the next chapter, where they suddenly burst onto the page without explanation:

—Oh, it's really true. Right into their undies, remarks Haruko as she walks with me, looking down at my feet. That's their only hiding place. The shop girls' dresses.... At that store, they have no pockets. Not even in their aprons. But they really like those newspapers. Oh, I shouldn't have said that.

—Was there something special in today's paper?

—Not just today. Every day.... [T]he shop owner absolutely won't let his shop girls read any. Books aren't allowed either.... And so, neon signs—you know, electric letters, right? The girls miss letters so much that they just stare at the ones they can see from their shop. So it's a real thrill when they can get their hands on a newspaper or a book. They hide in the bathroom and read for an hour or more, and, after that they slip it into their undies....

—That's a great story! It's my job to get people to read, you know. Lately they say that literature—that is, reading letters—is losing its charm, but...

—No! You can't write about it. Poor shop girls....<sup>12</sup>

This passage seems to have no purpose other than to tantalize readers with an outlandish-but-possibly-true link between newspapers, underwear, and the hunger for literacy among female members of the working poor. The way it connects the newspaper to sexual titillation, the abjection of the toilet, poverty, aspiration, and the writer-narrator's excitement can be read as a sly metapoetic statement on the values of Kawabata's newspaper modernism in the age of the Great Depression.

The newspaper serialization of *Scarlet Gang* took place in the months leading up to the March 1930 celebrations of Tokyo's reconstruction after the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923, when the emperor led a tour of the city that passed through some of the avenues, bridges, and parks mentioned in the novel but studiously avoided Asakusa itself.<sup>13</sup> While these events are never alluded to in *Scarlet Gang*, the earthquake and its aftermath constantly lurk in the background, rising to the surface at critical moments. The earthquake and the fires it sparked killed nearly 100,000 people and destroyed large swaths of the city, with a disproportionate impact on the low-lying areas to which Asakusa belongs. The natural calamity was further compounded by mob and police violence against ethnic Koreans and leftists immediately afterward. As Lippit puts it, "The destruction of the nation's capital called into question the entire project of modernization, revealing the instability of national institutions and making explicit the violence running throughout different levels of society."<sup>14</sup>

Ironically, the only semblance of a plot to be found in *Scarlet Gang* is tied directly to this trauma through Yumiko, whose nemesis seduced and then jilted her older sister while they were holed up in an evacuation center after the quake. Yumiko's penchant for masquerade makes her the embodiment of fluidity, particularly as related to trauma. In the opening four chapters she appears as a girl who sells rubber balls on the street while dancing the Charleston, as a young woman with cropped hair in a red dress playing piano in a back alley, and as a dirty-faced boy

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 88 (translation slightly modified).

<sup>13</sup> J. Charles Schencking, *The Great Kanto Earthquake and the Chimera of National Reconstruction in Japan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 307–8.

<sup>14</sup> Seiji M. Lippit, *Topographies of Japanese Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 22.

in cap and corduroys; and the list of her personae and costume changes only grows, with a final twist at the novel's end. In melodramatic but illuminating fashion Yumiko tells her nemesis, "I am a daughter of the earthquake. In the middle of the earthquake, I was reborn. . . . I'm going to become a man. I'm never going to be a woman. When hundreds of people sleep, lying together on concrete, legs touching, without anything to cover up their bodies—then a girl starts to hate becoming a woman."<sup>15</sup> Thus, rupture defines the novel on both the formal and the diegetic plane, and in a manner that the modern Japanese newspaper was particularly well suited to both inspire and contain.

### KANAGAKI ROBUN: NEWSPAPER REPORTAGE AND FICTIONAL FORMS

If Kawabata's early career began with a rebellion against the conventions of the modern novel, Kanagaki Robun (1829–94) typically appears in Japanese literary histories as a precursor to their construction. He is best known as a prolific writer of *gesaku* (an ironic, comedic strain of popular fiction that flowered over the course of the Edo period, 1603–1868) from the late Edo period through the early years of Meiji (1868–1912). Secondarily, Robun<sup>16</sup> is noted for his work in newspapers, most prominently his role in the growth of newspaper serial fiction and the "poison woman" stories that boomed in the late 1870s. His professional ties to popular literature and the lowbrow tabloids (*koshinbun*)<sup>17</sup> long relegated him to the shadows of the story of modern realism as it developed in late nineteenth-century Japan. But recent scholarship has taken issue with the prejudicial assumptions by which Robun was cast aside. As Mark Silver put it, "*Gesaku* writings have steadfastly served, since Tsubouchi Shōyō's criticism of them in *Shōsetsu shinzui* [Essence of the novel, 1885–86], as the premodern 'other' against which modern Japanese literature is defined."<sup>18</sup> A closer examination of Robun's newspaper-related work reveals that the crisis precipitated by Japan's turn toward the West sparked literary experimentation and a claim to realistic representation even prior to Shōyō's watershed literary manifesto.<sup>19</sup>

Rupture was as much a defining characteristic of Robun's era as it was for that of *Scarlet Gang*. Born in a Tokyo that was still called Edo and served as the shogun's seat of power, Robun made a name for himself in the 1850s and '60s as a *gesaku* writer and was in his prime when the Meiji Restoration of 1868 ended centuries of shogunal authority, officially marking a beginning to Japan's modern era. The lodestars of the Meiji era were the twin terms "civilization and enlightenment" (*bunmei kaika*), which laid the basis for sweeping legal and social reforms designed to

<sup>15</sup> Yasunari, *Scarlet Gang*, trans. Freedman, 66.

<sup>16</sup> Unlike Kawabata Yasunari, who wrote under the name given to him at birth, "Kanagaki Robun" is a nom de plume, as was long the custom in premodern literary and artistic circles. (Robun's birth name was Nozaki Bunzō.) As a result, where Kawabata is usually referred to by his family name, Kanagaki Robun is traditionally shortened to "Robun."

<sup>17</sup> Literally translated as "small newspaper," the *koshinbun* were the lowbrow, mass-market counterpart to the elite "large papers" (*ōshinbun*). In addition to a literal difference in size—small newspapers were printed on paper half the size of the large ones—small newspapers targeted the common denominator, with stories more likely to focus on scandal, crime, or gossip and with a more vernacular, accessible variety of written styles.

<sup>18</sup> Mark Silver, "The Lies and Connivances of an Evil Woman: Early Meiji Realism and *The Tale of Takahashi Oden the She-Devil*," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 63, no. 1 (June 2003): 6–7. See also John Pierre Mertz, *Novel Japan: Spaces of Nationhood in Early Meiji Narrative, 1870–88* (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 2003).

<sup>19</sup> Silver ("Lies and Connivances") pioneered this reevaluation of Robun.

transform Japan from a disparate collection of feudal domains into a modern nation-state following Western models.

During the Edo period, *gesaku* was certainly popular among those in Japan who could read, but it was considered a vulgar form of entertainment that conferred neither prestige nor financial security on its writers. In the Meiji period, the new governing elite's emphasis on practical learning, technological advancement, and "civilization and enlightenment" exacerbated *gesaku* writers' already precarious social and economic position, and Robun was among the first of them to join the rapidly developing field of newspaper journalism.<sup>20</sup> Already in 1857, Robun lamented that *gesaku* had become nothing but "direct imitations of images and plots / plodding back and forth within familiar, well-worn worlds / tailors' work: patching up and stitching back together."<sup>21</sup> The fledgling newspaper industry offered a new sphere of activity that would alter the course of his writing.

Although newspapers were new to Japan, popular interest in current affairs had a longstanding connection to popular entertainment. Thinly disguised depictions of scandals like love suicides or samurai vendettas frequently graced the pages and stages of the entertainment industry during the Edo period (*gesaku*, ukiyo-e woodblock prints, Kabuki, etc.), paving the way for an organic connection between an erstwhile *gesaku* writer and newspaper journalism. Robun began work at the *Yokohama mainichi shinbun* (Yokohama daily news), one of the elite "large papers," in 1873 and went on to found his own tabloid, the *Kanayomi shinbun* (Easy-reading news), in 1875. During these years he also produced works that fused the publishing formats and styles of *gesaku* fiction with a journalistic viewpoint and content gathered from contemporary newspapers.

Among the first of these was *Chronicle of the Telegrams from Saga* (November 1874), which draws extensively on newspaper articles and other documents to produce a popular history of the Saga Rebellion (February to April 1874), in which former members of the now-defunct samurai class based in Saga Prefecture took up arms against the still-new Meiji government.<sup>22</sup> *Chronicle* served as a response to calls from Meiji elites (from government officials to chief editors of major newspapers) for popular, accessible histories to enlighten the public. Robun, credited not as the author but as the editor of this volume, was particularly insistent on its veracity, making the following claim in his introduction:

Everything recorded in this work is certifiably accurate. It is not to be regarded like the *Taiheiki*, one of those recitations that gradually turns into the tales of the Buddha, volume by volume mixing in fanciful tales and misguided explanations. It contributes an addendum to our public history, and in comparison to fanciful, invented tales of military exploits, it truly deserves to

<sup>20</sup> Public dissemination of information about current events and politics had been officially banned in the Edo period, a prohibition that was quickly lifted by the Meiji government. Newspapers were officially made legal by the Law on Newspaper Printing (*Shinbunshi inkō jōrei*) promulgated in February 1869, early in the first full year of the Meiji government's existence. Itō Masanori, *Shinbunshi gojūnenishi* [A history of the newspaper's first fifty years] (Tokyo: Masu Shobō, 1943), 48–50.

<sup>21</sup> From the author's introduction to *Otokodate azuma no hanakawado* [A heroic tale of the Hanakawado district in Edo], 1857. Quoted in Okitsu Kaname, "Bakumatsu kaikaki bungaku kenkyū" [Research on literature of the late Edo and early Meiji periods], in *Meiji kaikaki bungakushū 1* [Meiji literature of the enlightenment era I], vol. 1 of *Meiji bungaku zenshū* [Complete works of Meiji literature] (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1966), 415.

<sup>22</sup> *Chronicle* was one of the first examples of a genre that came to be known as *Meiji jitsuroku* (Meiji true accounts), popular accounts of current events cast in established *gesaku* publishing formats. The genre of *Meiji jitsuroku* was operative until the 1890s, having a lifespan of roughly two decades.

be called a “true record.” All the more, then, it is a work worthy of the world, not one to be ashamed of.<sup>23</sup>

In the context of mid-nineteenth-century Japan, this is a radical statement. The *Taiheiki* (Chronicle of the Great Peace, ca. late 1300s) is a medieval warrior tale that had served as a source for generations of Japanese entertainers, both in fictional adaptations and addenda and in recitations, songs, and plays. Yet Robun casually dismisses it as a collection of “fanciful, invented tales” next to his own *Chronicle*’s “true record.” His claim of certifiable accuracy is supported by a detailed description of the work’s genesis:

I have in recent years been living in Yokohama, and owing to my lengthy involvement with the newspaper company there, I obtained quite the collection of documents. From the outbreak of the fracas in Saga Prefecture to the triumphant return of the government army, reporters at the newspaper copied down and made reports of public notices, telegrams, and letters received from readers all over. These were published in issue after issue of the [Yokohama] *Mainichi* newspaper, which made it possible to know the entire circumstances and the ultimate outcome of the affair. Because there was no avoiding the occasional misinterpretation or baseless rumor, in cases where records were scarce, I compared my account with each of the various other newspapers and also sought out written reports and the like that came from the scene of the action, selecting only those that were guaranteed to be true, about which no doubt could be admitted.<sup>24</sup>

As Katō Yūji points out, in the early years of journalism in Japan, the undefinable yet pressing mission of reporting “facts” was often resolved by reproducing texts written by others.<sup>25</sup> The same principle can be found in Robun’s attempt to produce a realistic history, using documents culled from newspapers and verified as “facts,” in opposition to the quasi-historical oral storytelling traditions represented by the *Taiheiki*.

However, a careful examination of *Chronicle* reveals that Robun employs a wide variety of narrative voices and written styles—including those drawn from the literary tradition descended from the *Taiheiki*. As the foregoing passage implies, Robun’s reliance on contemporary newspapers for much of his content led it to comprise a diversity of written forms. At the time, “public notices, telegrams, and letters received from readers” were each rendered in their own distinctive written styles, and they shared page space with editorials employing the formal Sino-Japanese style (*kanbun kundoku*) and miscellanea reporting crimes, fads, or humorous anecdotes of life in the city in more vernacularized styles.<sup>26</sup>

*Chronicle* surpasses the polyphony of Meiji newspapers, however. In particular, drawing on Robun’s past as a writer of popular fiction, *Chronicle* frequently employs the narrative techniques

<sup>23</sup> Kanagaki Robun, *Saga denshinroku* [Chronicle of the telegrams from Saga] (Tokyo: Meizankaku, 1874), 5–6, [http://archive.wul.waseda.ac.jp/kosho/ri05/ri05\\_06376/](http://archive.wul.waseda.ac.jp/kosho/ri05/ri05_06376/). Translation into English by the authors. Because the original work does not number its pages, page number citations for *Saga denshinroku* refer to the pages of the PDF files available in the linked digital archive.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Katō Yūji, “‘Jijitsu’ o ‘seido’-ka suru nyūsu—Meijiki no futatsu no hanzai hōdō o megutte” [Institutionalized production of “facts” by newspapers—Articles on two murders in the early Meiji era], *Nenpō shakaigaku ronshū*, no. 13 (2000): 97–108.

<sup>26</sup> The standardization and “modernization” of written Japanese were among the chief concerns of the movement for a national, modern literature sparked in the mid-1880s. Robun’s embrace of polyphony and multiplicity in written form in *Chronicle* and his other *Meiji jitsuroku* is likely one of the factors that led to these works’ long exclusion from the bounds of the canon, as was touched upon earlier. See n. 17.

of *gesaku* to lend drama and entertainment value to its account. As a brief example, an ambush of government forces by the Saga rebels is rendered in the following stirring, literary style:

[B]efore the Fukuoka troops could even raise their weapons they were broken. As they turned to retreat, the rebels cried out, “That’s it! Give chase! Leave none alive!,” and pursued with mighty swings of spears and long swords. The cries of the killed and wounded arose in a great wave; the hills shook and the trees trembled; the flowing blood poured into the river; the dead bodies piled up into heaps. Ah! it seems as though every last Fukuoka soldier will be consigned to the jaws of death.<sup>27</sup>

In its rhythm, imagery, and language, the passage evokes the voice of a narrator in a Bunraku puppet play, a technique commonly used in *gesaku* writing. In turn, this mode of narrating the clash of battle descended from works like the *Taiheiki*—which, of course, Robun had expressly rejected as a model for reference or comparison. Even the physical form of the *Chronicle* aligns with its literary forebears: the work is woodblock printed in a size, layout, and calligraphic style long in use for Edo period *yomihon*, with illustrations sprinkled liberally throughout.<sup>28</sup>

Robun stretches the fusion of traditional fictional technique with nonfictional, contemporaneous content even further in *A Blade in the Night: The Tale of She-Demon Takahashi Oden*, which helped spark a craze for “poison woman” (*dokufu*) stories in the late 1870s and early ’80s.<sup>29</sup> The term “poison woman” originated in the Edo period as a reference to alluring women who were evil at heart. Takahashi Oden is one of the most famous poison women from the early years of Meiji. Arrested for a murder committed in Asakusa in 1877, her two-year criminal trial was reported widely in the newspapers, eventually reaching a fever pitch with her conviction and execution by beheading in 1879. The story was quickly adapted and embellished upon in a multitude of literary works, woodblock prints, and Kabuki plays. Robun’s work, initially launched as a newspaper serialization, then quickly shifting to the *gesaku* pamphlet format known as *gōkan*, purports to give Takahashi’s entire life story, both tracing the causes of her criminality and providing the lurid details of her crimes.

The narrative strays further from the bounds of journalism than *Chronicle*, relating conversations and internal thoughts and feelings that no amount of reporting could plausibly uncover. Crucially, however, Robun maintains the claim to truth that drove his earlier works. He peppers *Takahashi Oden* with excerpts from newspaper articles and quotations from letters, government

<sup>27</sup> Robun, *Saga denshinroku*, 41–42.

<sup>28</sup> The illustrated *yomihon* (book for reading) format first appeared in the late eighteenth century and rose to prominence over the first half of the nineteenth. Woodblock printed and bound with thread, *yomihon* were primarily text, with double-page illustrations occasionally included. This text-dominated format distinguished the *yomihon* from other *gesaku* genre/formats like the *akahon* (red books) and *kibyōshi* (yellow covers), in which pictures dominated the page and text was secondary.

<sup>29</sup> As the name implies, these are true-crime stories, literary adaptations that were based on famous real-life crimes committed primarily by women and that purported to reveal the entire background and circumstances of the criminal and her crimes for the moral edification of the reader (as well as the implied promise of gratifying more prurient interests). The term “poison woman” is a direct translation of the Japanese term *dokufu*, which originated in *gesaku* and the Kabuki stage in the early 1800s. While the origins of the term lie in the Edo period, however, the *dokufu* / poison woman craze of the 1870s and ’80s is responsible for cementing the idea in the Japanese lexicon in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Poison women are not only criminals but also transgressive of all other kinds of boundaries, from gender norms to familial ties to social station. See Christine L. Marran, *Poison Woman: Figuring Female Transgression in Modern Japanese Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xiii–xxv.

pronouncements, and other texts. In the preface, for example, Robun reproduces the full text of the court's verdict in the Takahashi Oden case, pointing out that Takahashi claimed her innocence up to the end, and thus the truth of the matter has remained unknown so far. He then concludes: "This present work has at last meticulously probed into the facts of the affair. Case by case, the tiniest bit of elaboration has been added for the sole purpose of giving young children and women some small sense of virtue and vice."<sup>30</sup> While admitting that some degree of poetic license has been taken, *Takahashi Oden* claims nonetheless to be an account based in truth, not fiction.

### DOUBLE EXPOSURE

The creative fusion of the nonfictional with the fictional, of the claim to real-world referentiality with the free play of the storyteller's imagination—undertaken with a journalistic premium on contemporaneity—is what connects Kawabata's modernist moment of the late 1920s and early 1930s to Robun's engagement, half a century earlier, with the realism that would later be defined as the essential literary apparatus of "civilization and enlightenment." For both writers, the newspaper served as the foundry for experimentation. While Kawabata sought to break free from the strictures of the transparent language of realism that had become the sine qua non of the novel, Robun laid one of the cornerstones upon which claims of referentiality could be made by those who primarily traded in fiction. Kawabata's break from the mold of realism resorts to some of the very same techniques Robun used in trying to build it up: copious "documentation" of texts produced by others and the resultant polyphony of styles, and even the mobilization of a modern-day "poison woman" of Asakusa.

Whether or not the thirty-year-old Kawabata had read the fifty-year-old Kanagaki Robun's *Takahashi Oden*, he nods and winks at the resemblance between Yumiko, purveyor of an "arsenic kiss," and the poison women of old.

The massive steel arm [of the construction crane] again drifts towards the glass window, and Haruko looks up at the sound of the chains, her eyes half shut:

—Oh, I'd like to hang myself. To be pulled up there with a yank—it'd be so good. I keep thinking about it. All made up, all dressed up in deep red, and flailing about struggling to get free. So good. And then, after dangling high up there for a while, after I'd gone limp, I'd plop right down into the Ōkawa...

—But that's something from the days when the term "poison woman" was in style—something truly flamboyant. [...]

—Well, really. Now that is the kind of thing you could say to Miss Yumiko.<sup>31</sup>

Here we find a double exposure: a semitransparent image of Yumiko as the crop-haired, cross-dressing, cutting-edge female embodiment of an electrified, concrete- and steel-laden Asakusa is laid atop an iconic image of transgressive women from an earlier but still proximate world. In closing we hope that, behind the well-known portrait of Nobel laureate Kawabata Yasunari, our readers will glimpse the image not of an eternal Japanese quietism but rather of a late nineteenth-century Japanese writer whose newspaper-inspired innovations continue to haunt the space we now know as "modern Japanese literature." [A]

<sup>30</sup> Kanagaki Robun, *Takahashi Oden yasha monogatari* [A blade in the night: The tale of she-demon Takahashi Oden] (Tokyo: Kinshōdō, 1879), 7, <http://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/883899>. Translation into English by the authors.

<sup>31</sup> Yasunari, *Scarlet Gang*, trans. Freedman, 101–2.