

Aesthetics as a space of difference

The implicit sociology in Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's *A Golden Death*

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Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's short story *Konjiki no shi* ('A golden death,' 1914) tells the weird tale of a friendship between two young aspiring artists in early twentieth-century Japan. *Watashi*, the narrator, is a diligent student, has conventional ideas, and becomes a conventional writer, while his friend Okamura, who is extremely wealthy and free to pursue his wildest ideas, develops to the most bizarre consequences his own original aesthetics based on the senses and the beauty of the human body.

This story can be read by adopting a perspective that brings out its implicit sociology. *Konjiki no shi* describes the social trajectories of the two protagonists by tapping into Tanizaki's "sense of the social." By resorting to some socio-critical tools and to Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theory, I will investigate how this story constructs and narrates the relationship between the two main characters and its evolution. Secondly, I will show how aesthetics, as understood as a set of historically situated practices and discourses dispersed in the story, constitutes a significant aspect of the differential characterization of the two protagonists and an important element to interpret their conducts. Tanizaki succeeds in summoning before the readers' eyes the intersection of two social and aesthetic trajectories that do not appear to be governed by chance or the whim of invention, but respond to his awareness of their social matrices and evolutions, their stakes and costs.

Keywords: Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, modern Japanese literature, literature and sociology, aesthetic theory in twentieth-century Japan

1. Introduction

A novella *à thèse*, a philosophical story, an exercise in rewriting E. A. Poe, a piece of literature of the eccentric and the bizarre, an early exposé of aesthetic ideas that its author would abandon soon after having had a taste of them—these are some of the categories that could be evoked (and that in some cases have been evoked by commentators) to describe *Konjiki no shi* ('A golden death,' 1914) by Tanizaki

Jun'ichirō (1886-1965).¹ This story is often considered a minor text within the author's early period, mainly due to the fact that he decided not to reprint it in the editions of his complete works (*zenshū*) published during his lifetime, almost as if he wanted to distance himself from it and brand it as an anomalous or immature product. This is despite the appreciation paid to *Konjiki no shi* by Edogawa Ranpo (1894-1965), who, as shown by Luisa Bienati (2018), admired this story and drew inspiration from it for one of his most famous novels, *Panoramatō kidan* ('The strange tale of Panorama Island,' 1926-1927).

Konjiki no shi was serialized in the *Tōkyō Asahi shinbun* between December 4 and 17, 1914.² At that time, Tanizaki was establishing his position as a rising star in the literary firmament; starting with *Shisei* ('The tattooer,' 1910), he had published a number of short stories that had been favorably received by the literary world (*bundan*) and the public alike.

The unnamed narrator of *Konjiki no shi* (identified by the pronoun *watashi* and only once as a member of the Shimada family) is an aspiring writer from a well-to-do background. Since childhood, *watashi* has been friends with Okamura, a man of the same age and a wealthy heir to immense fortunes. Both are bright children and, later, ambitious young men who aspire to become artists (*geijutsuka*). While *watashi* has more conventional ideas, Okamura develops an original aesthetic theory in which he attaches an inordinate importance to the practical and sensible arts. This leads him to embrace a cult of the beauty of the human body. While Okamura devotes himself to an eccentric lifestyle and neglects his studies, *watashi* attends university and embarks on a career as a writer. His work is initially well received, but later his inspiration dries up, the consideration he enjoys in the literary world wanes considerably, and he is forced to write for money. When the two characters are around twenty-seven years old (Tanizaki was twenty-eight when he published this story), Okamura, freed from the control of his guardian uncle, employs his fortune to realize an ambitious project: a total artwork. After a lengthy period of silence, *watashi* receives an invitation from his friend to visit his new residence, his

¹ Reference Japanese text: TJZ, vol. 2, 463-499. Page numbers for quotations from the story refer to the English translation (Tanizaki 2013). Unless otherwise indicated, other translations are mine.

² The story was later reprinted in the collections *Konjiki no shi* (Nittōdō, 1916), *Kin to gin* (Shun'yōdō, 1918), and *Konjiki no shi hoka sanpen* (Shun'yōdō, 1922). In a brief preface to the first collection, Tanizaki mentions the fact that the three short stories collected in that volume (the other two being *Sōzō* ['Creation,' 1915] and *Dokutan* ['The German spy,' 1915]) have met with "little popularity" ("*Konjiki no shi jo*," TJZ, vol. 23, 18). Excluded from Tanizaki's first two *zenshū* (the Kaizōsha one of 1930-1931 and the Chūōkōronsha one of 1957-1959), *Konjiki no shi* was included in vol. 2 (1966) of the second Chūōkōronsha *zenshū*, the first published posthumously. As Fujisaki Sanae (1996: 58-59) noted, Tanizaki, at least initially, was confident in the value of *Konjiki no shi*, as suggested by the fact that he chose this very story to debut in one of the most important newspapers of the time, the same that had signed an exclusivity contract with Natsume Sōseki.

“paradise of art” (*geijutsu no tengoku*) built in a valley several dozen leagues from Tōkyō. Thus begins the part of the story (chapters 12-14) that, as pointed out by Bienati (2006), is most indebted to Poe’s *The Domain of Arnheim*. In a veritable *tour de force*, *watashi* witnesses the marvels of Okamura’s estate. Here, in a phantasmagoria of buildings in different architectural styles, animals and plants of every kind, and reproductions of works of art from the most diverse periods and countries, he witnesses a succession of *tableaux vivants* created by his friend with the aid of dozens of men and women. At the end of his ten-day stay, the last scene that appears before his eyes reproduces the death of the Buddha (*dainehanzō*): after dancing dressed as Buddha Nyorai, Okamura is found dead the next day and is immediately surrounded by dozens of persons dressed up as *bodhisattvas*, *arhats*, and weeping mythological figures, the pores of his skin clogged by the gold leaf with which he had covered himself. The narrator wonders about the meaning of Okamura’s death, at once the supreme fulfillment of his extraordinary artistic project and the self-destructive consequence of the imminent depletion of his wealth.³

2. A story of a death, or rather, of a life, or rather, of two

The initial exclusion of *Konjiki no shi* from Tanizaki’s complete works has attracted the attention of commentators. In itself, this circumstance should not be sufficient to set this story apart from a significant number of stories from the same period (at least thirty according to some calculations), “*oeuvres de jeunesse à la tonalité baroque*” (Sakai 1997: 1637), which received a similar treatment from the older Tanizaki. Another factor, however, has peculiarly colored the discourse around *Konjiki no shi*, contributing to the idea of a strong causal connection between its contents and the author’s decision not to reprint it in his *zenshū*. The critical discourse on this story was somewhat hijacked by the highly idiosyncratic rediscovery that Mishima Yukio (1925-1970) made of it in 1970.⁴ Mishima saw in this story, which he judged a failure, an anticipation of his own nefarious aesthetic concerns: in his view, Tanizaki intuited that “if he had put the idea into practice [...] his art would have become an unprecedented art [...] with only one aim: death” (1976: 391). Mishima suggests that, reluctant to draw the extreme conclusions from this intuition about the aesthetic value of suicide, Tanizaki recoiled,

³ Critics are divided between those who understand Okamura’s death as a suicide and those who interpret it as an accident. For a summary of critical positions, see Kimura (2017: 46).

⁴ Mishima’s comments are found in the accompanying essay (*kaisetsu*) in vol. 6 (devoted to Tanizaki) of the *Shinchōsha* “*Shinchō Nihon bungaku*” series, originally published in 1970. Bienati (2006) offers an insightful presentation of the main points of this essay, including the Italian translation of crucial passages.

returning to safer paths in his following works. Mishima's reading neutralizes the irony, the playful modernist manipulation, and the proximity with the mystery genre that underlie this and many other Tanizaki stories of this period and does not take into due consideration the historicization of the veritable *bricolage* of motifs and philosophical and artistic references that can be found in this text. This last aspect, which finds its supreme expression in the unbridled eclecticism of the total artwork built by Okamura, is indeed stigmatized by Mishima, who, as an advocate of the purity of national aesthetics, sees it as further proof of the intolerable cultural hybridism of Taishō Japan, of the “ugliness of Japanese culture that had lost its unifying style” (1976: 392). Despite its limits, and also because of the canonical status Mishima enjoyed in the second half of the twentieth century, this reading became a point of view that demanded to be mentioned in subsequent discussions of this story, from those by Shimizu Yoshinori (1987) and Chiba Shunji (1989), to those that are found in the apparatuses of the Italian (2006 [1995]), French (1997), and English (2013) translations.

The construction of death, or rather of a beautiful corpse, as the ultimate aesthetic object is unquestionably a central theme of this story, as referenced in its very title. Undoubtedly, *Konjiki no shi* is teleologically constructed around it: literally, we read a story that from its first lines tends to find its fulfillment in the moment when the narrator and the readers contemplate the “golden death” of one of the protagonists and that, having accomplished this task, ends within a few lines of enunciating it.

In my reading, however, I would like to tread a different path. Okamura's incredible death perhaps overshadows the fact that *Konjiki no shi* is only in small part the story of a death; in fact, it is largely the opposite: the story of an entire life. Actually, of two. Therefore, I would like to focus my reading on the ways in which these two lives are narrated and described. For the purposes of my analysis, the most interesting part of the story is not the visit to Okamura's estate (generally the object of most critics' interest), but the part that precedes it, which prepares the final denouement. In this part of the story, the narrator appears to locate the origin of the two protagonists' behavior in their different social backgrounds, showing how these backgrounds, in connection with the contemporary cultural field, affect their social and existential trajectories and their aesthetic choices.

In his survey of the reception of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theories in the studies on Chinese literature, Michel Hockx has noted how the “intrinsic” side (focused on the close reading of texts) that is present in Bourdieu's work has been mostly ignored in favor of the application of his contextual and extrinsic theories aimed at the reconstruction of the literary fields (2012: 55). This is also true for the studies on other national literary fields. With this essay, I would like to conduct an

exercise in an under-practiced territory of the applications of Bourdieusian ideas to the study of literature.⁵

First, by resorting to some socio-critical tools, I will investigate the relationship between the two main characters—the narrator and his eccentric friend, Okamura—showing how it points to a sociology implicit in the narrative. Through this sociology, Tanizaki constructs the dispositions of the two protagonists and sketches a space of positions and position-takings in which their trajectories develop. Regarding these trajectories, as Pau Pitarch Fernandez has already noted, “Tanizaki sets up an opposition between the narrator and Okamura in terms of their positions on aesthetics” (2014: 124). Accordingly, I will elaborate on how aesthetics—which I understand not as a voluntaristic or transcendent dimension (as in Mishima), but as a set of historically situated practices, discourses, and philosophical, pedagogical, and academic notions that are dispersed in this story—constitutes a significant aspect of the differential characterization of the two protagonists and an important element through which to interpret their conduct.

3. The implicit sociology in *Konjiki no shi*

It was Pierre Bourdieu in the early 1990s who revitalized the problematic of the relationship between literature and sociology. In *The Rules of Art*, originally published in 1992, the French sociologist devoted a dense chapter to a memorable examination of the “sociological analysis” expressed by Gustave Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education* (1869). Unlike other parts of his important volume, Bourdieu was here not concerned with the sociology of literature, but with sociology within literature.

Bourdieu acknowledged in Flaubert’s work of fiction an ability to produce an analysis of the social world—that is, an objectivation of certain structures and laws of the fictional world and the co-textual world that constitutes its model—by using the specific tools of literature. According to Bourdieu, literary texts, by appealing to the sensible aesthetic dimension, give the structures of the social world “to be *seen* and *felt* in *exemplifications* or, better, *evocations*” (1996: 32; italics in the original) that are at once metaphorical and metonymical, symbolic and referential. The analysis of the social space conducted with the means of literature is partial and lacks the scientific method that distinguishes

⁵ Perhaps Bourdieu is not as popular today in the canons of critical theory as he was in the early years of the twenty-first century. However, I am convinced that his work (and those that have responded to it, both by followers and critics of his ideas) can still provide invaluable insights and contributions to the problematic of the specific knowledge produced by literary texts.

sociology proper,⁶ but, according to Bourdieu, it retains the capability of attaining a reflexive dimension above the mere pre-sociological common sense (Bourdieu 1996: 28-34; Speller 2014: 103-109).

Further reflections and clarifications on this theme have been produced especially in the French-speaking academia. Delving into the question of a sociology *through* literature or arising *from* the literary text, these studies have refined the distinction between the specificities of sociological analysis (explicit, formalized, systematic, conceptual) and the prerogatives of the “implicit sociology” (intuitive, spontaneous, particularistic, practical) present in literary texts. This “implicit sociology” emerges as a particular “sense of the social” (*sens du social*) present in the authors and is reflected, negotiating with the specificities of literary formalization, in the construction of the fictional world of the narrative text.⁷

Citing *Konjiki no shi* as an example, Ken K. Ito remarked that one of the features of Tanizaki's writing is his penchant for “world building,” which is manifested either as a thematic resource or a propensity to experiment with language and fictionality (1991: 3-5). Mentioning this story, Ito has in mind the artificial paradise created by Okamura in his estate, which we might see as a kind of *mise en abîme* of this component present in Tanizaki's works in general. But from the perspective of my argument, this story features equally acute world building precisely in the parts that Ito does not signal as such, namely those that precede Okamura's phantasmagoria—those parts that construct the social world within the story and the ways in which the agents move through it.

In terms of internal analysis, we might see the story as a “possible world:” an aesthetic artifact, a semiotic object that is to some extent enclosed and self-regulated, endowed with its own laws and properties (Doležel 1998: 14-15). However, in a text that, like *Konjiki no shi*, follows the conventions of realist fiction, these properties present a number of isomorphisms with the social and mental structures of what the author or readers configure as the real social world, thus contributing to what Bourdieu calls a “belief effect” (1996: 32).

Konjiki no shi does not limit itself to furnishing its fictional world, mimetically shaped on the “real” one, with information on the material lives and social options available to the protagonists (thus

⁶ Pierre Popovic sums up very adroitly the fact that we can consider a literary text as sociology “à la condition expresse de faire table rase et fi de toute considération épistémologique sérieuse, sur les modes de construction des objets, sur l'élaboration des méthodes, sur la construction et l'usage des concepts, sur les outils de mesure, sur les procédures d'enquête, sur les protocoles de vérification et de retour sur les hypothèses premières, sur les règles de formulation et de validation des résultats, sur l'ambition prédictive et sur le désir de modélisation théorique. Ce qui fait beaucoup” (2017: 8).

⁷ David Ledent (2013, 2015) provides a comprehensive survey of the state of this matter.

fulfilling, in an obviously stylized way, the empirical, even ethnographic, part of a sociology); but it grasps, or better, unveils some social laws that underlie the fictional world of the story and are also present in its “real” counterpart (thus fulfilling a function of reflection on and analysis of the social world described). As Bourdieu argued, this unveiling occurs in a paradoxical way, because it simultaneously veils what it uncovers through textual formalization and fictionality.

Despite the schematism of a short story whose protagonists appear rather as types (or perhaps because of this), the implicit sociology in *Konjiki no shi* is offered mainly in two aspects, in which patterns of intelligibility of the social world are found. The first is the explicitly comparative description of the generation and development of the trajectories of the two protagonists. The second is the reconstruction of certain positions offered by the social fields (particularly the artistic-literary one) as a “space of possibles;” such fields open up before these two “new entrants” and aspiring artists, but also, to a certain extent, before the author of the story himself.

But that is not all. In fact, as Florent Champy points out, we should avoid a purely immanentist approach to the fictional world described in a literary work and “objectivate the objectivation” operated by literary writing itself (2000: 362-363). That is, it is important to consider the specific mediation exerted by the literary text, particularly by its diegetic and enunciative functions, such as the voice of the narrator (in this case the homodiegetic narrator *watashi*), through which the knowledge of the fictional world is summoned.

It is also necessary to reflect on how, in the specific modes of literary writing, the text incorporates the point of view of the author, who is socially and historically situated (with their own lived experiences) and the bearer of a particular gaze (more or less intuitive or theoretical) on the social world and the practice of writing itself. This is the level that David Ledent calls that of the “romancier qui s’exprime par le roman” (2015: 381).

To sum up, the objectivating description of the social world in a story primarily provides the basis for an internal analysis of that possible social world. To this level, we can add the heuristic implications of the isomorphisms and referential interactions that the fictional world establishes with the real world. Finally, the narrative is indeed knowable as a fictional possible world, situated “between representation and symbolization” (Sapiro 2014: 64); but it also reveals, in a literarily mediated (or, to use Bourdieu’s Freudian term, *denegated*) form, the author’s social competencies and existential investments with respect to the real social world in which the very act of their writing is situated.

In this sense, the element of the double protagonist, which Tanizaki reprised many times later and of which *Konjiki no shi* is in a sense the prototype,⁸ particularly responds to these prerogatives. Not only does it facilitate the objectivation that the narrator conducts on his own and Okamura's trajectories within the fictional world of the story, but it also contributes to the self-reflexive and extra-textual potential underlying *watashi's* narration.

In fact, the recourse to a double protagonist accentuates the comparative traits between Okamura's and *watashi's* trajectories. Given the equal age of the two characters, this comparison can be conducted in contrastive terms almost at a punctual level, moving smoothly between different chronological points in the biographical trajectories of the two.

In addition to this, *watashi* can also be seen as a fictional double of the empirical author in the light of a number of common biographical elements (his age, his mercantile origins, the area of the city he is from, his academic curriculum, his profession as a writer, etc.).⁹ Undoubtedly, this self-analytical refraction is conducted with an ironic spirit, but it also enables Tanizaki, little more than a newcomer in this period, to attempt a narrative objectivation of his own trajectory as a cultural producer up to that point. In this regard, it is interesting to note how *watashi* reflects the sense of precariousness that Tanizaki, *enfant terrible* on his way to normalization after the scandalous success that marked his debut in the years 1910-1911, must have felt about the evolution of his career within such a voluble literary world as the Japanese one of that time. The horror with which *watashi*, having lost inspiration and with a family to support, describes his abdication to the rules of the publishing market could be attributed to Tanizaki himself, reflecting a personal fear.

Watashi is therefore doubly a "double:" of the empirical Tanizaki and of Okamura, who represents a sort of alternate virtuality that *watashi* at once admires, despises, fears, and envies.

4. The trajectories of the characters

Applying the theoretical concepts elaborated by Bourdieu (1996), we can say that *Konjiki no shi* exposes the homologies between: social positions (starting points—mostly inherited—and positions gradually

⁸ The most significant cases are the stories *Kin to gin* ('Gold and silver,' 1918), *A to B no hanashi* ('Story of A and B,' 1921), and *Tomoda to Matsunaga no hanashi* ('The story of Tomoda and Matsunaga,' 1926). See in this regard Bayard-Sakai (1998) and Pitarch Fernandez (2014).

⁹ To a lesser or different extent, this is also true of Okamura, who, like Jōtarō or B in their respective stories, can be seen, within the space of possibles offered by the literary field of that time, as an experimental virtualization, conducted to its most hyperbolic results, of the decadent and aestheticist postures of Tanizaki himself.

occupied by the agents in the field); dispositions (incorporated principles of vision and division, and matrices of social conducts in relation to a given field—what Bourdieu calls *habitus*); and position-takings available or produced by the protagonists in the social world and, more specifically, in the literary field. The dynamic between these three elements generates the social trajectories of the two individuals, as summarized below and further detailed in the analysis that follows.

<i>Social position</i>	<i>Position in the literary field</i>	<i>Dispositions (habitus)</i>	<i>Aesthetic position-takings</i>
• Watashi			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Commercial bourgeoisie (sake wholesalers), affluent but progressively impoverished – First-born male – Inherits debt and family (mother and three siblings) to support – High cultural and educational capital 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Promising beginnings in the <i>bundan</i> (literary world) but gradual downgrading of his position in the field; commercial art (writes for a living) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Desire to become an artist (recognition of the stakes and logic of the cultural field [<i>illusio</i>]) – Cultural goodwill – Heteronomy: search for recognition at first from school (diligent student), then from the cultural world (unoriginal writer) – Passiveness – Disinterest in caring for his own body 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Subscribes to the current canon of art – Conventional ideas – Academic, canonical, respectful aesthetics – Poetry in modern forms (<i>shi</i>) and fiction (<i>shōsetsu</i>), modern genres that are in vogue
• Okamura			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Upper middle class (but not aristocratic) – Only child, dead parents, sole heir to immense fortunes – High cultural capital; problematic acquisition of educational capital 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Amateurism, isolation; does not need to work, nor recognition from the literary world 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Desire to become an artist (recognition of the stakes and logic of the cultural field [<i>illusio</i>]) – Autonomy (arrogance, eccentricity; does not care about school or current opinions) – Investment in caring for his own looks and body – Propensity to shape his own body, life, and the world in his own way; preference for 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Subscribes to the current canon of art, but reworks it in an original and active way: see his “paradise of art” – Radical and innovative ideas – Art-life, practical aesthetics, activism – Eccentric and/or under-consecrated/marginal

		practical arts and disciplines, “first, languages; next, apparatus gymnastics; then, drawing and singing” (2013: 164)	disciplines: fashion, gymnastics, architecture, total art, etc.
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Starting from the initial positions of the two protagonists, we can say that both, hailing from economically well-to-do families of which they are the first-born males, are orientated to reproduce at least their initial social positions. They are therefore heirs. However, as noted before (Fujisaki 1996), one immediately grasps a difference in rank between the two. While *watashi* comes from a prosperous family of sake wholesalers (*sakadon'ya*)—which places him in the commercial bourgeoisie—Okamura, though not a nobleman (which he singularly claims to regret, to *watashi*'s disdain), is the only son of an upper middle-class family whose fortunes, made up of stocks, forests, mines, and land, are so huge that they are said to reach “at least half the size of the Mitsui or Iwasaki fortunes” (2013: 163), big magnate families of the time. Moreover, while the day when *watashi* will inherit the family estate is indefinite at the beginning of the story and then fades away completely because of the impoverishment of his family, the orphan Okamura knows that after reaching the age of majority he will be able to get rid of the guardianship of an uncle who administers his estate.

The difference in wealth between the two is made evident as soon as Okamura enters the scene, at the very beginning of the story, where we find a clear operator of social status (a maid): “Okamura and I were friends from childhood. In early April of the year I turned seven, I began attending an elementary school not very far from my home in Shinkawa. Okamura commuted to the same school, escorted by a maid [*jochū*]” (2013: 162; italics mine).

The following chapters, devoted to the protagonists' childhood and adolescence, contain further details about Okamura's refined manners and clothing (often Western-style, and including at one point a gold watch and a diamond ring), which are more refined than little *watashi*'s bourgeois clothing, furtherly clarifying the distinction of his social background.

Despite these differences, a relationship of friendly competition develops between them. While *watashi* proves to be a diligent and studious pupil, obsequious towards the school system whose rules and promises he implicitly accepts (and to which, in the absence of a predisposing family environment, he owes—as does Tanizaki himself—the acquisition of a *habitus* that so crucially values art and literature), Okamura manages to excel thanks to his intellectual gifts, apparently without any particular effort or application, indifferent to his own school results.

In addition to incredible wealth, Okamura is endowed with handsome features, a melodious voice, and a healthy and harmonious physique (he is about 180 cm tall, a statuesque size for the average Japanese of the time), which he begins to exercise by practicing various sports, particularly gymnastics. As an adult, his beauty is such as to captivate geishas and women of all backgrounds, as well as provoke feelings of admiration on the part of the narrator himself, not unlike those noted by commentators regarding the relationship between Deslauriers and Frédéric in *Sentimental Education*.¹⁰

As *watashi* himself notes (ch. 4), the parallelism between the trajectories of the two protagonists is significantly altered when they are about to finish middle school, around the age of eighteen.¹¹ *Watashi's* family suffers severe economic setbacks, compounded by the sudden death of his father shortly before graduation. *Watashi* finds himself impoverished and responsible for the support of the rest of his family, but, in defiance of his role as firstborn and heir, he resists pressure from his relatives to undertake university studies that should give him greater professional and economic security (engineering, medicine, law), persevering instead in his desire to study literature.

The lives of the two protagonists then begin to diverge. *Watashi*, an impoverished bourgeois who, since childhood, had invested everything in his schooling, accentuates, if possible, his nature as a diligent student, thus managing to enter the prestigious First Higher School, which will lead him to the Tōkyō Imperial University. The awareness of having become an “impoverished student” (*hinkyū na gakusei*) pushes him to devote himself with increasing zeal to study, reflecting the typical petit-bourgeois propensity to have one’s own goodwill as one’s only resource (Bourdieu 1996: 17). Excessive strains give him severe myopia and a condition of prostration described with a modern formula characteristic of the time, *shinkei suijaku* (“nervous exhaustion” or “neurasthenia”).¹²

On the other hand, Okamura, who even as a child devoted himself to a selective study of only those subjects that interested him, disdaining in particular the technical and scientific ones, perseveres in an amateur approach to scholarship (*gakumon*) (which he holds anyway in high regard) and in an increasingly eccentric behavior, far from the ascetic bourgeois seriousness practiced by *watashi*. This leads him to fail the entrance exam to *watashi's* high school on his first attempt.

¹⁰ “[...] here he had on a form-fitting exercise outfit of a vivid indigo, and his nearly half-naked body was strangely beautiful and alluring [*fushigi ni utsukushiku yōen ni kanjimashita*]” (2013: 166); “Frequently, as I was about to speak to him, I was so struck by his beauty that I fell silent” (179).

¹¹ In the school system of the time, middle school (*chūgakkō*) corresponded to the second cycle, and its attendance, reserved only for males, was not compulsory. It consisted of five years. Although the minimum age for admission was twelve, it was not uncommon for many students to start and then finish this cycle at a later age.

¹² This partially autobiographical motif appears in other short stories of this period, such as *Kyōfu* (“Terror,” 1913). On the theme of neurasthenia in early twentieth-century Japan, see Hill (2010).

Even the social spaces frequented by the two come to progressively differ, describing a stratification reminiscent of that of the nineteenth-century French novel between high society / equivocal *demimonde* / proletarian *bohème*, with Okamura decidedly projected into the first two (“not only restaurants and teahouses but garden parties and soirées of all sorts;” 2013: 179) and *watashi* finding himself stuck in the latter. As the narrator notes with almost unintentional acumen, Okamura, after all, can access various social spaces by “exploit[ing] his family’s status [*iegara*]” (2013: 179).

Upon starting university, the distance between *watashi* and Okamura widens when the latter twice fails his finals at the First Higher School (it is not told if he ever graduates). In the meantime, *watashi* starts to publish, becoming an “up-and-coming author” (*shinshin sakka*). At first his works elicit good reactions from the literary world (*bundan*), so much so that he fantasizes about equaling the fame of exponents of the first generation of Meiji writers, such as Ozaki Kōyō (1868-1903), Higuchi Ichiyō (1872-1896), and Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902) (this relatively outdated canon of models is also indicative of *watashi*’s cautious and conventional aesthetic dispositions). He thus feels that he has beaten Okamura, who moreover shows not the slightest jealousy toward his rival’s achievements, indifferent to the accolades of the literary world. As time goes by, however, his expectations of a literary career founder in the face of the poor reception of his following works and the exhaustion of his inspiration. Expelled from the most advanced sectors of the literary field, those of the high art that he so intensely covets, *watashi* finds himself forced to write for money due to increasing economic constraints. Full of “anguish” and “desolate feeling[s],” he repositions himself at the pole of commercial art, now resigned to spending the rest of his “meaningless” and “unartistic” life writing “idiotic stories” (2013: 180). While the narrator painfully acknowledges his own failure as an artist, Okamura, who up to that point has not published a single work and has limited himself to expressing his ideas about art only through conversations with his friend, begins his grandiose project.

5. Aesthetics as a space for the articulation of social difference

While Okamura appears free to not pay his respects to any authority, *watashi*, whose fortunes depend on the recognition and validation he receives from school and the contemporary *bundan*, tends to stick to accepted and current scholastic and academic opinions. This polarity of autonomy versus heteronomy also informs the life choices of the two: *watashi* is compliant and disciplined, Okamura is indifferent to assignments, exams, and subjects that do not interest him; *watashi* wants to establish himself in the genres configured as richer in symbolic capital and modern consecration (above all the novel), Okamura wants to radically undermine the hierarchy and compartmentalization between the arts.

Watashi, well aware of the enabling effects of economic security on artistic creation, formulates a chiastic empirical law on the necessary and sufficient conditions of beauty: “Wealth [*tomi*] is not always accompanied by beauty; but beauty is always dependent upon wealth [*tomi no chikara*]” (2013: 168). In the story, Okamura’s nonchalance is clearly correlated to his lack of material concerns, his aristocratic social origin (in fact, though not in name), and his *habitus* as a wealthy heir. This corresponds to Bourdieu’s point: “the conditions of existence associated with high birth favor dispositions like audacity and indifference to material profit, or a sense of social orientation and the art of foreseeing new hierarchies” (1996: 262).

Even in the sphere of artistic position-takings, *watashi* is a reproducer of current and accepted ideas, while Okamura, who is just as knowledgeable about them (if not more), shows the ability to rework, manipulate, and criticize them at will. “Okamura’s attack upon Lessing was extraordinary [*hijō na mono*]. He tore into *Laokoon*, subjecting passage after passage to the most withering critique” (2013: 172). This passage comes from the central part of the story (chapters 6-8), which consists in a rather technical dialogue between the two protagonists, with long quotations directly in German, focusing on Okamura’s critique of the aesthetic conception of G. E. Lessing.

It is worth noting the disruptive effect that this long digression produces on the organization of the plot. The narrative, which up to that moment had proceeded by covering entire periods of the protagonists’ lives at a swift pace, suddenly comes to a standstill in an ostentatious display of erudition, which certainly does not contribute to making the story more enjoyable to read today, as it presumably did not at the time for the varied audience of the large daily newspaper that originally featured it.¹³ The very sacrifice in terms of readability to which Tanizaki subjects the story signals the central importance of this part in articulating the difference between the two protagonists.

From a cultural-historical point of view, these chapters testify to the development and pervasiveness of the academic discourse on aesthetics (*bigaku*) in Meiji-Taishō Japan, a country where, as evidenced by the very early establishment of a university chair in this subject (1893), this discipline enjoyed particular credit and prestige, such as to percolate even in the literary world. Mirroring the *habitus* of his double *watashi*, Tanizaki lavishes knowledge of it “avec une application de bon élève” (Sakai 1997: 1638). Lessing’s *Laocoon* (1766), around which the two young men debate, is certainly a pivotal text in the academic discourse on the discipline, even if somewhat passé when compared to the

¹³ Apart from possible foreign models, the short story *Ka no yō ni* (‘As if,’ 1912) by Mori Ōgai (1862-1922) represents a precedent for this type of narrative based on philosophical dialogue. In its final part, the protagonist also discusses with a friend the merits of a European philosophical doctrine, in this case the so-called “as if” (*Als Ob*) philosophy of Hans Vaihinger. Tanizaki was almost certainly familiar with Ōgai’s story, which was originally featured in the magazine *Chūō kōron*.

developments infused with neo-Kantianism and experimental psychology that dominated aesthetics in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Okamura rejects Lessing's famous distinction between dynamic or temporal arts (such as poetry) and static or spatial arts (such as painting).¹⁴ The intertextual refractions between *Konjiki no shi* and contemporary discourses on aesthetics are such that some of the positions expressed by Okamura and *watashi* on the aesthetic specificity of the visual arts seem to echo a famous debate on historical painting that had opposed Tsubouchi Shōyō (1859-1935) and Takayama Chogyū (1871-1902) around the turn of the century (Watanabe 2001: 115-122).

In their conversations, *watashi* often plays the role of the uptight straight man, dropping comments imbued with veiled symbolic violence that, by resorting to authority or common sense, aim to depreciate Okamura's ideas and conduct. In one instance, we see *watashi* directly appeal to the institutional nature of aesthetic knowledge:

[Okamura:] "The circus orchestrates the bodies of living people to create a kind of music. That is what makes it the supreme art."

Then there were comments like this: "When architecture and fashion are considered to be fine art, why cannot cuisine¹⁵ also be called a branch of fine art? Why is a pleasurable taste not considered artistic? This is a puzzle to me." I told him, "The points you are raising here are a result of your not knowing aesthetics [*bigaku / esutechikkusu*]." But he paid me no heed, replying, "Of what use are aesthetics [*bigaku*]?" (178)

Instead, Okamura has the autonomy to question and criticize the received ideas, starting from the very usefulness of philosophical aesthetics. Okamura succeeds in the doubly prodigious enterprise, indeed worthy of someone who in the story is qualified as a "genius" (*tensai*), of provincializing his Japanese interlocutors when he shows off a better knowledge of the Western texts of reference, which, moreover, he accesses directly in the original language ("in French, Maupassant sounds so beautiful," he once says to poor *watashi*);¹⁶ and, conversely, to provincialize these same Western authors when, as

¹⁴ Lessing's distinction between visual arts (spatial) and poetry (temporal) must have been quite well-known in Japanese literary circles. For example, a famous passage from Natsume Sōseki's novel *Sanshirō* (1908) echoes it. Professor Hirota meets in a dream a girl with whom he was in love several years before, discovering that she has remained unchanged. He compares her to a painting; she, in return, compares Hirota to a poem, noting how he has changed in time.

¹⁵ According to Kimura Manami (2012: 132), the reference to cooking foreshadows the theme of the short story *Bishoku kurabu* ('The gourmet club,' 1919), showing a continuity between these two texts in Tanizaki's aesthetic reflection.

¹⁶ The practical competence of languages is another element that characterizes Okamura as one able to actively appropriate and rework cultural contents. It is reported, moreover, that he managed to refine his knowledge of languages with private Western tutors (164), a further sign of the role played by his financial means in the formation of his aesthetic ideas.

in the case of Lessing, he criticizes them in an articulate manner, defrauding them of the absoluteness and universality attributed to them by contemporary intellectual discourse, which *watashi* seems to follow, often pedantically. Okamura has such a concentration of cultural and symbolic capital that his stances are taken seriously, although they inevitably appear as “eccentric” (*kikyō*) in the eyes of *watashi*, who is increasingly animated by a resentment that “condemns in the other the possession one desires oneself” (Bourdieu 1996: 17).

Both share the fundamental idea that art should be autonomous and gratuitous (*l'art pour l'art*) (Okamura also with a certain emphasis on its amorality, as suggested by his scathing comments on the episode of the death of Thersites taken from Lessing); but while *watashi* does not conceive of it except within accepted artistic practices (painting, literature) or at a merely theoretical and bookish level, Okamura, starting from a reevaluation of the sensible (etymological) component of aesthetics, is able to project it into a totalizing dimension, that of art-life. Although both share a late-romantic and decadent background, it is only Okamura who can actively extend the domain of art to everyday life, with a subtly subversive sensibility that, as proven by his praises of material culture, cuisine, and the world of circus,¹⁷ already foreshadows the historical avant-gardes.

Okamura thus comes to articulate his own totally sensuous aesthetics (anti-spiritual, anti-rational, anti-conceptual):

“Beauty is not something one thinks about. It’s something you see and feel immediately. It’s an extremely simple process.” (173)

“I cannot admit any kind of beauty other than that which is materialized clearly in front of me—that which I can see with my eyes, feel with my hands, hear with my ears. Unless the sensation of beauty is as intense as a bolt of light shot from an arc lamp, with no room for ‘the imagination,’ I cannot be satisfied.” (176)

“Art is the manifestation of sexual desire [*seiyoku*]. Artistic pleasure is one type of physiological, even erotic, pleasure [*seiriteki moshikuwa kannōteki kaikan*]. Thus art is not something spiritual, it is sensual [*jikkanteki / senjuaru*], through and through. Painting, sculpture, and music are of course included in this; even architecture is not outside the realm of consideration here. . .” (178)

¹⁷ The enthusiasm for acrobats and circus practices is a recurring trope in the early historical avant-gardes. Suffice here to remember the Futurist manifesto of variety theater (1913) with its exaltation of “body madness.”

From this, an anti-hierarchy of the arts descends:¹⁸

“The most humble art form is the novel. Then comes poetry. Painting is greater than poetry, sculpture greater than painting, the theater greater than sculpture. But the greatest art form of all is the human body itself.” (177)¹⁹

The human body is both the object (as “beauty of the body,” *nikutaibi*) and the subject of aesthetic enjoyment. For the cultivation of the former aspect, “physical education” (*taiiku*) and “gymnastics” (*taisō*) are necessary; for the maintenance of the latter, Okamura prescribes what in referring to his exercises he calls “Grecian training” (*girishateki kunren*), that is, a regimen of bodily pleasures; to quote Foucault’s *Use of Pleasure*, Okamura’s is a veritable “dietetics,” an “art of the everyday relationship of the individual with his body” (1990: 93), aimed, however, not to a full and temperate mastery of self, but to the achievement of a more efficient hedonistic technology. “Liquor and tobacco numb the senses, with the result that you cannot sufficiently savor pleasure. If you do not maintain perfect health, you will not be up to receiving strong stimuli” (2013: 179), Okamura states to justify his rejection of revelry and intoxicating substances: a further paradoxical reversal of the discourses on the *vie d’artiste* localized in Japan by groups such as the Pan Society, frequented by Tanizaki himself.

The Hellenism that Tanizaki attributes to Okamura is infused with European decadentism, with recognizable echoes from Wilde and Pater (the latter quoted directly in the text). Moreover—in this perfectly consistent with his critical reading of Lessing—with its exclusive emphasis on the sensitive-bodily dimension and disinterest in its synthesis with the intellectual-abstract one, this Hellenism appears stridently divorced from that propounded by other authors of the classical age of philosophical aesthetics, such as Schiller.

However, as extreme as it is, from a historical point of view, Okamura’s aesthetics is much less extraordinary than the narrator would like to suggest, even going as far as to define it as “morbid”

¹⁸ Okamura’s classification of the arts, which also contemplates “minor” and applied arts, is perhaps influenced by Eduard von Hartmann’s *Philosophy of Beauty*, which had a wide echo in Japan in its translation (1899) by Mori Ōgai and Ōmura Seigai (1868-1927).

¹⁹ This passage bears an obvious resemblance to the “empirical aesthetics” (Ciccarella 1992) embraced by Jōtarō in the story that bears his name, published a few months before *Konjiki no shi*: “What he called ‘beauty’ was entirely confined to an empirical and sensuous [*jikkanteki na, kannōteki na*] realm; therefore, he considered of the utmost importance the act of savoring beauty in actual life rather than imagining it in literature. In other words, for him, an aesthetic sensation [*bikan*] dissociated from the feeling of the thing in reality was nearly impossible. He strove to avoid any distinction between the two. Thus, painting evoked in him an aesthetic sensation more intense than that evoked by literature, and sculpture more than painting, and theater more than sculpture, and the actual bodies of the actors on the stage most of all” (TJZ, vol. 2, 359).

(*byōteki*). In fact, it reproduces the physiological structure of much of the experimental aesthetics of the period, sharing with it the “aesthetic sensation” (*bikan*), placed within a dynamic of “stimuli” (*shigeki*) and reactions, as the basic sensory-transcendental unit of the experience of beauty.

If there is anything that makes Okamura’s aesthetics truly extraordinary, it is his hyperbolic willingness to expand the domains of the aesthetic and manipulate artistic matter, as evidenced by his “paradise.” This matter is enormously extended in spatial terms (a vast area in the valleys west of Tōkyō) and objectual terms (countless human and non-human items are involved), as well as in trans-cultural and trans-historical terms, assimilating references and works from the most disparate eras and traditions, “ancient and modern, East and West” (*kokon tōzai*) (181). If one could discern a synthesis in the chaotic and kitschy jumble of artistic forms built by Okamura, one might perhaps detect in it a strange continuity, perhaps parodic, with the idea that had been dear to Okakura Kakuzō (1863-1913) in his time: that of Japan as a museum and distillation of all the civilization of Asia.

These were the same years in which the members of the magazine *Shirakaba* (‘White birch,’ founded in 1910) contributed, with an attitude as heirs of the legitimate culture that reflected their upper middle-class or aristocratic upbringing, to the diffusion of the cult of European art, but also of certain strands of Asian and Japanese art. The articles, the photographic reproductions, and the layout of their magazine, not to mention the collateral activities connected with it (pretenses of art connoisseurship, organization of exhibitions, contacts with foreign artists, etc.) were infused with a characteristic form of highbrow cosmopolitanism.

In fact, Okamura’s “paradise of art” reproduces many of the artistic references brought into vogue by *Shirakaba*: a characteristic admixture of Asianist archaeological antiquarianism with universalist classicism (the *Apollo of Piombino*, the Renaissance—transfigured via Pater—and Ingres) to begin with; but also the cult of Auguste Rodin, and an attentive eye to the latest novelties of the post-impressionist avant-garde of Paris (in *Konjiki no shi*’s case, the Ballets Russes).²⁰

One wonders if Okamura shares the same class *habitus* as the members of *Shirakaba*, even as a parody of them. It is worth remembering that he himself qualifies at one point as the only son of “an immensely wealthy man [*fugō*]” (168) and that the subtitle that accompanied the first publication of the story was precisely “story of a Croesus” (*aru fugō no hanashi*). This appellation certainly conveys the implicitly moralistic idea that modern society opens incredible possibilities to those who are extremely

²⁰ On Tanizaki’s knowledge of the Ballets Russes in the period of *Konjiki no shi*, and for an interesting theory that detects in the final scene of the story the possible echo of *Le Dieu bleu* (1912), a lesser-known work in Diaghilev’s company’s repertoire, see Kimura (2017: 53-55).

rich. In this regard Okamura expresses, to the horror of *watashi* and in the face of his warnings of petty-bourgeois asceticism, an unrepentant freedom in the use of his own wealth and the scandalous propensity not to euphemize it: “No worries on that score. A rich man is corrupted only while he’s engaged in business in the hope of further adding to his fortune. But if a fellow who has money doesn’t work, and just fools around instead, then he’s always happy” (2013: 169).

This trope of the mad capitalist, of the rich man who perverts the imperative to profit with parasitic, idle, or aberrant conducts, with results both salvific and sinister, is part of that lineage of affection for anti-economic conducts, of dissipation (*hōtō*), very dear to the literature of Japanese decadentism, which Amano Ikuho has placed under the category of “spectacle of idle labor” (2013). The narrator eventually connects Okamura’s dissipation to the great specimens of squanderers and libertines of the Edo period, a move that perhaps can be understood as a critical jab directed at the instrumental and rational use of wealth that characterized the Meiji-era capitalists.

At the same time, the Okamura made omnipotent by the “power of wealth,” almost as rich as the Mitsuis and the Iwasakis, inhabits (but with much less pathos and ethical tension) the same universe of evil of certain paranoid fantasies of Natsume Sōseki (1867-1916), which he presented to an audience formed by the students of the Gakushūin, the original breeding ground of *Shirakaba*.²¹ And certainly, as the retrospective continuity with the work of Poe and the prospective continuity with the taste of Edogawa Ranpo testify, the plot of *Konjiki no shi* and a character like Okamura resonate with the tropes of mystery fiction, bringing our “rich man” closer to an embryonic “mad scientist” or “crime artist.”

Once again, in the characterization of this protagonist, we notice the *bricolage* of disparate literary and cultural elements, of high and low register, which, animating Tanizaki’s vernacular modernism, exposes at the same time the correlations between positions, dispositions, and position-takings of subjects within a given social space.

²¹ I am referring to the famous lecture *Watakushi no kojishugi* (‘My individualism’), from the same year as *Konjiki no shi*: “Or again, what if one of the great magnates [*gōshō*]—Mitsui, say, or Iwasaki—were to bribe our maid and have her oppose me in everything? If these individuals have the slightest bit of what we call character behind their money, it would never occur to them to commit such an injustice” (Natsume 2011: 169). As an aside, it should be noted that *Konjiki no shi* somewhat reflects the way in which Tanizaki established himself in the literary field “with and against” Sōseki (to use Bourdieu’s expression). Indeed, one of his first published writings was a critical review of Sōseki’s *Mon* (‘The gate’), which appeared in 1910. Ishii Kazuo (1996) has advanced the suggestive hypothesis that *Konjiki no shi*, appearing a few months after the conclusion of *Kokoro* in the same newspaper, may be seen as Tanizaki’s response to the treatment of the theme of suicide.

6. Conclusions

Among the many persons recruited to take part in the *tableaux vivants*, a physician resides—very conveniently—at Okamura’s villa. He is the one who issues the diagnosis that the great artist died from the obstruction of the pores of his skin by the gold with which he had covered himself. Accidentally or deliberately? This is not clearly stated. In spite of Mishima, who read this tale very seriously, this story plays with irony, paradox, and the epistemological uncertainty typical of mystery fiction until its final lines.

One of the ways Tanizaki manages to do this is through the adoption of an ambiguous and wavering narrator, whom Okamura’s actions and ideas simultaneously attract and repel. This allows Tanizaki to leave unanswered the question of which of the two courses of action in the artistic world ultimately proved truly successful. By *watashi*’s own final admission, Okamura, the genius, managed to live as a “fortunate man” (2013: 190), devoting himself absolutely to art. But he had to pay a very high social cost: loneliness (the only interlocutor he was able to find is *watashi* himself, with his skeptical if not hostile attitude) and the incomprehension of the rest of society, as *watashi* notes in the rhetorical question that closes the text—which can be seen (Sakai 1997: 1637) as a final ironic jab, a final distancing: “But considering the life that he led, will the world ever appreciate him as an artist?” (2013: 191). *Watashi* thus finds himself the only qualified witness of a lifework that “may have been a fleeting phantom” (190). It is up to him to save it from oblivion through the act of narration that is *Konjiki no shi*, which responds to his need to make so that the name of the “great genius” and “indeed peerless artist” might “be remembered forever” (190-191).

The gesture with which Tanizaki, through the oscillations of *watashi*, leaves undecided the value to be attributed to the conclusion of the events probably reflects his experience of the tensions and contradictions, equally unresolved, in which the artist-aesthete he aspired to be at this stage of his career was struggling. This enabled him, through literary writing, to imagine the possibilities offered by this indeterminacy that—just like the lives of the two protagonists as the narrative progresses—was inevitably shrinking as his career proceeded. This is a further aspect of Tanizaki’s (self-)reflection, fueled by an all-practical “sense of the social,” on the stakes and constraints inherent in playing the Japanese literary field of those years. As I have tried to demonstrate by highlighting the implicit sociology that lies in this story, Tanizaki succeeds in summoning before the readers’ eyes the intersection of two social and aesthetic trajectories that do not appear to be governed by chance or the whim of invention, but respond to his awareness of their social matrices and evolutions, their stakes and costs. *Konjiki no shi* exploits and explores this awareness by resorting to the specific means of literary writing.

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