

Article

Sound, Smell, Objects, and the Discursive Space of Nagai Kafū's 1920s Fiction

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Abstract: Throughout his life, Nagai Kafū (1879–1959) tackled crucial issues of modernity, such as the urban experience and conflicting notions of selfhood. This article explores some aspects of his narrative practice that enrich our understanding of his literary output while suggesting new avenues for future research on space-time representation in twentieth-century literature. I focus on passive senses such as hearing and smell, and on material objects and physical sensations as narrative devices employed by the author in order to broaden comprehension and enrich the experience of objective reality. In particular, I examine *Yukidoke* (Melting Snow), a 1922 short story understudied thus far but that offers useful insights as regards the author's intent to defy superimposed notions of affect and space.

Keywords: Nagai Kafū; sound; smell; modernity; city in literature

1. Introduction

This article explores issues in the narrative practice of Nagai Kafū (1879–1959), specifically, his use of auditory and olfactory codes in the construction of narrative space and time. My premise is that senses like hearing and smell allow us to experience reality more passively than sight, and are more naturally oriented toward providing a fragmentary representation of the world. Therefore, relying on aural and olfactory inputs when establishing the spatial and temporal coordinates of a story is a way to enrich those coordinates and assign them broader meanings and figurative connotations, vastly expanding their significance beyond that of a space-time visually perceived and, as such, kept under the percipient's control. Theoretical work on this subject has shown that sight can provide a more solid anchorage for knowledge of reality as a whole (Jonas [1966] 2001, pp. 135–56), while hearing and smell are particularly effective at capturing dynamic fragments that can broaden our experience of space (Tuan 1990, pp. 8–10), thus also the meaning and possibilities that are inherent in narrative space-time.

My secondary line of inquiry looks at physical sensations and interactions with tangible objects as narrative surrogates for emotional tensions and existential dilemmas. Bringing objects and spontaneous reactions to objective facts closer to the core of my analysis, I seek to identify concepts and images that mirror and problematize experience as singular, ever-changing, and not fully discernible by the experienter.

Both these narrative strategies, bringing the aural and the olfactory to the fore, and focusing on tangible items and effects, are informed by Kafū's distinctive sense of life and art as historical products shaped by particular circumstances but also by complex, and conflicting, impulses. Elsewhere, I argued that life in the city, both lived and written of, was a mode of knowledge formation for Kafū, who sought within the space-time of his experience in Tokyo (and also in the foreign cities he visited abroad) questions and answers to multiple dilemmas of modernity (Follaco 2017). In what follows, I take a step further and consider his textual construction of space and time not only as a means to

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“familiarize” the material dimension of modernity, thus to make the narrative city suitable for living (ibid., p. 228), but also as ways to imagine a human/non-human interaction more likely to “exhaust the world and its messy possibilities” (Snaza 2019, p. 135). In other words, with the aim to complement previous scholarship that emphasized the visual aspect of Kafū’s poetics, both in his writing on the city (Minami 2007, 2009), and the habit of placing himself and his protagonists in the position of observers in order to question critical issues (Kawamoto 2002; Hutchinson 2007), I look at Kafū’s writing while narrowing the focus down to three points—sound, smell, and objects—on the premise that what is usually subordinated to human subjectivity and agency can provide new insights in the framing of human experience beyond what Nathan Snaza terms “humanizing assemblages,” the long-standing structures that inform and orientate affects, discourses, and practices, towards a superimposed (and largely political) “humanism” (Snaza 2019, pp. 3–6).

In order to do this, I concentrate on a single work, a short story hardly considered in scholarly work regarding Kafū, that was published at the beginning of the 1920s: *Yukidoke* (Melting Snow, 1922), where Kafū devotes the greatest care and detail to the textual re-enactment of the dynamic spatial setting. However, unlike other works, here the space of the story, circumscribed to the maze of alleys around the Hongan Temple, is described primarily through reference to senses other than sight.

2. Knowing through Things

Yukidoke was written in the first two months of 1922 and published in the March and April issues of the literary journal *Myōjō*. *Myōjō*’s editors-in-chief were the poets and critics Yosano Akiko (1878–1942) and her husband Tekkan (1873–1935), who had re-founded the journal in November 1921, trying to revive it after its first series, which had been of great importance for Japanese Romanticism, was discontinued in 1908. *Myōjō*’s significance in the first decade of the twentieth century was not limited to already accomplished writers as a venue for publication of their own works, but it represented, with *Shinsei* and *Bunko*, a sort of mandatory reading material for the literary youth of the time, people who would eventually embrace a career in literature (Nagamine 1997, p. 123).¹

Yukidoke tells the story of Kanetarō, a fifty-year-old former retailer who went bankrupt because of a bad investment and abandoned his wife and daughter for another woman, Osawa, who later became a geisha (Sawaji) and threw him out of the very house he had provided for her, leaving him impoverished, homeless, and lonely. He eventually landed a poorly-paid salesman job and rented a room in an alleyway close to the Hongan Temple in Tsukiji where he spent a quiet, spartan, and anonymous life with no expectations nor commitment to anyone or anything.

At the beginning of the year, Kanetarō meets by chance his estranged daughter, Oteru, who is now eighteen and whom he almost fails to recognize. After this first encounter, she visits him again, and the two talk to each other about their respective situations. Kanetarō finds out that Oteru did not follow her mother to Ōsaka when she remarried, and that soon afterwards she left her maternal uncle’s household, refusing to comply with the rules he had established. Since then, she had been working in several cafés, eventually settling in the Hibiya neighborhood. Oteru tells his father that she is seeing a young man, a Keiō University student from a well-off family, that he cares about her very much, and that she plans to live with him in the near future. Such a story appears even too good to Kanetarō, who nonetheless wishes his daughter all the best but fails to assure her support when she admits that there is a possibility that her plan will not work.

Here, as in many of Kafū’s stories, the space of narration is carefully drawn and reflects the real spatialities of a number of neighborhoods in modern-day Tokyo. Each district has its own identity and atmosphere, as well as a symbolic meaning that has been consolidated through the arts and popular culture, but what makes the difference for the characters who live and act there is not so much these somewhat iconic features, but the contiguous reality of each place within the socioeconomic system that is the Taishō-era

city. Kanetarō's trajectory towards failure is structured within a topographic framework that provides the reader with accurate coordinates, locating him in a lively high street in Asakusa Kawaramachi at first, and in a somber alleyway in Tsukiji five years later, when the story unfolds. Although he is depicted as someone who has already resigned himself to living a miserable life, at one point in the text he seems to retrieve some hope and confidence, as he mumbles to himself that sooner or later he will be back on a high street because he was not made for living in an alleyway. Further, a great part of his conversation with Oteru revolves around their re-locations throughout the city, highlighting how one's material life can be impacted by the space where they live, a space conceived as a social, economic, and political entity. For instance, Oteru recalls that when she worked in Ginza her income was much higher than it was in Hibiya, but that, due to the additional expenses she had to bear in order to perform her duties, it was not that convenient after all. Father and daughter are fully aware of the system of relations underlying city life, thus they do not entertain any illusions regarding the possibility of improving their condition although sometimes they fantasize about slightly alternative realities.

Rabson (1982) aptly observes that in *Sumidagawa* (*The River Sumida*, 1909), one of Kafū's major works, space and climate play very specific narrative functions, that the "application of natural phenomena for poetic effect" enhances the reader's understanding of the vision of reality that the story conveys, and this is particularly evident in the parallel established between the river imagery and Chōkichi's own situation (pp. 228–30). Likewise, in *Yukidoke*, the space of the story is dynamic; it reflects the main character's relation to reality, and it is experienced mainly through the most passive of senses: hearing and smell. Moreover, Kanetarō's feelings and states of mind are never mentioned directly, but rather hinted at through reference to physical sensations.

This is particularly evident in the first paragraph, where his entire situation—the place he lives in, his path from wealth to poverty, the hardships he has to endure in his everyday life, and obviously his emotional reactions to all this—is evoked through sound, touch, and smell. "Kanetarō was awakened by the sound of water drops" (Nagai [1922] 1993, p. 115) is the very beginning of this story, which unfolds following the main character's gradual detection of the physical stimuli provided by the environment. First of all, he realizes that the dripping sound he heard is not due to rain but to residual water drops falling from the eaves. After that, he understands that it is noon as he smells salmon and dried fish from the neighbors' houses; as a matter of fact, the reader is told, "he could make a guess without even looking at a clock" (ibid.). Later on, after outlining Kanetarō's parable from Kawaramachi to Tsukiji, Kafū introduces his job as a sales agent by recounting the horrible commute of the day before, when he had to run about for the entire day through the blizzard, broke his shoes, and got his socks drenched with water (ibid., p. 116). In this particular section, the author succeeds in evoking the character's ongoing state of distress (the socks are still soaked as he wakes up) without mentioning his feelings, thoughts, or actions, but simply by inviting the readers to feel it for themselves through reference to a physical sensation of acute discomfort. The first part of the Japanese word that stands for "drenched," *zubunure*, is in *katakana* rather than *hiragana*, as it is customarily written, to stress graphically the intensity of Kanetarō's unpleasant sensation.

Indeed in this text, there are many onomatopoeias written in *katakana*, whether they refer to the realm of auditory sensations or, though less frequently, olfactory ones. For instance, Kanetarō is awakened from his torpor when a pile of snow from the roof of the neighboring house suddenly falls on the eaves of his room, and the sound he hears, "*shīn*" (ibid.), has a graphic rendering that amplifies the feeling of surprise by, in effect, "detaching" the characters from the page and producing an abrupt change in rhythm that reflects the unexpected alteration in his state of consciousness. Similarly, the appearance of other characters is often announced by onomatopoeias that reproduce the sound of doors opening, such as "*biri biri*" (ibid., p. 117) and "*gara gara*" (ibid., p. 120), whose

katakana brings out such sounds on the page, complementing or anticipating, in any case without making it explicit, Kanetarō's emotional reaction, for example when, at the public baths, a door opens and the young woman who will turn out to be his daughter appears. Such use of onomatopoeias is not limited to the auditory realm, as mentioned above, but also to the olfactory, for example, when the smell of stew is rendered with the expression "pun pun" (ibid., p. 123), which conveys a very distinct olfactory sensation by translating it into another code, the one through which the reader will apprehend it, involving sight (the appearance of the writing) and hearing (the sounds the writing reproduces) in a vivid and precise representation of the character's sensory experience.

The feeling evoked through reference to water, cold, and dampness, appears to be the veritable keynote mood of the entire narration, with physical objects and sensations constantly stressing the coldness and discomfort of the main character's condition. The space of the story—Kanetarō's rented room—is introduced with a handful of words belonging to the semantic field of water such as "drop," "rain," and "drip," that anticipate the appearance of the "daikan," the coldest time of the year (and a traditional *kigo*—seasonal word—for "winter"). This single reference, combined with the description illustrated above, sets the time and space of the story in a way that discourages any optimistic reading of it; the feeling of dampness and cold evoked through these textual strategies sets the mood and orientate the reader's understanding of Kanetarō as a miserable figure even before telling his story.

But throughout the narration we find Kanetarō battling with the low temperatures of *daikan* in many different ways, most of them falling outside the realm of plain sensation; it is primarily through reference to particular objects and gestures that this physical sensation comes to the fore. For instance, twice in the text, Kanetarō appears with a running nose (ibid., pp. 116, 123). These sections remind me of *Kazegokochi* (*Coming Down with a Cold*, 1912), a short, slow-paced story that takes place all in one room, where the miserable conditions in which the protagonists (a man and his companion, a *geisha*) live are evoked through reference to the symptoms of an illness suffered by the woman, who is nevertheless forced to work because he cannot provide for her. In this work, described by Amino Yoshihiro as a "modern *ninjōbon*" (Amino 1993, p. 172), the characters appear as a pretext to represent an environment, which is a dwelling in the Shinbashi pleasure district; they seem almost to think, to feel nothing, their lives are governed by the dynamics of the demimonde and the effects of the environment on the body: like Kanetarō in his room. Very soon in the story we find him "checking if there was any hot coal left in the brazier or not" (Nagai [1922] 1993, p. 116), a few moments later he suggests his landlady to "go warm [them]selves at the public bath" (ibid., p. 117), and finally he notes that "even standing in the sun, it is still freezing," so he prefers not to drink cold milk (ibid., p. 118). Once he is back from the *sentō*, as he sits by the window waiting for his daughter Oteru, "he started to get cold after the bath, so he went to get some coal in the shed on the rear because he wanted to stoke up the flames in the brazier" (ibid., p. 123). A few hours later, when Oteru finally arrives and reaches him in his room, Kanetarō tries again to revive the embers in the brazier and urges her not to take off her coat because it is very cold (ibid., p. 125), and soon after that, he brings the brazier as close to her as possible (ibid.).

The brazier is indeed ubiquitous in this part of the narrative. As Kanetarō and Oteru talk, in an awkward attempt at rapprochement between father and daughter, of which neither seems actually convinced, the object is placed in the middle, as if symbolizing the inevitable frustration of any hope of reconciliation. Or rather as if emphasizing how between the two there is not really a need for reconciliation, because they are so estranged from each other that they are not even entitled to the heat of resentment. It is over, next to, and through the brazier that the mutual acquaintance between father and now-adult daughter is realized. Kanetarō makes a clumsy attempt to show thoughtfulness to his daughter, as if the attention of a moment could make up for the years of absence and the miserable circumstances of his abandonment years earlier, but Oteru apparently does not

show any particular reaction: she does not seem to listen to him when he invites her to keep herself warm, nor does she thank him when he brings the brazier closer to her. She does not seem thankful, or perhaps she does not know how to react to his kindness—as a matter of fact, she does not even seem to suffer from the cold as intensely as her father.

In these passages, the reader gets the idea that Oteru and Kanetarō, while both experiencing difficult life situations, cannot in any way have similar feelings. Here the author resorts to a rhetorical device specific to poetic writing and, relying on readers' supposed knowledge, uses it for two distinct and seemingly opposite purposes: on the one hand, the image of the brazier, evoked in its iconicity, recalls a specific time of the year and establishes an atmosphere (winter, the great cold, the beginning of the year) that the typical *Myōjō*-reader, fond of poetry and well-versed in poetic languages, will undoubtedly recognize; on the other hand, however, he operates a reversal of the familiar image associated with the brazier and makes it the corollary of a now unbridgeable distance between father and daughter, of a family dimension now irreparably compromised. When Kanetarō brings the brazier closer to her, Oteru does not thank him explicitly, but she places a small gift for him next to it. The gift is not precious at all; Oteru admits that she has not found anything better, but Kanetarō appears extremely happy nonetheless. Although Oteru's thoughtfulness revives the reader's hope for a reconciliation between the two, Kanetarō's awkwardness reinforces the impression that he can no longer be a father to her. Thus, as he seems unable to make questions to her as any father would do, it is once again the brazier that provides Kanetarō with an opportunity to get to know Oteru a little better. Indeed, it is when he notices his daughter's skill at heating sake that he surmises what line of business she is engaged in, and finally deduces that she is a waitress at a café (*ibid.*, p. 131).

3. Feeling Passively

However, physical sensations and objects are not the only means of connection (and lack thereof) between people within this narrative. As I anticipated, in *Yukidoke*, olfactory stimuli play no small role either in the communication processes between the protagonist and his surroundings, and this mechanism also extends to his relationship with his daughter.

Remembering his former wife Oshizu, Kanetarō includes her bodily odors among the things that made him dislike her. In particular, it was her underarm odor that bothered him, an utterly unpleasant smell that he thought had been transmitted also to their child. When he finds Oteru, he notices a striking resemblance between her face and her mother's, and wonders if she also smells the same; however, he cannot verify this because downstairs the landlady is cooking, and the smell of food covers all the others. Once again there is an obstacle between him and his daughter, an intangible and yet definitely present barrier separating his consciousness from the object of his perception. It has been noted that "[o]dours are essential cues in social bonding," and that "[...] even when not consciously considered, smells register" (Classen et al. 1994, p. 2). What Kanetarō's sense of smell registered was Oshizu's underarm odor as her olfactory sign, motivating his contempt and disaffection towards his wife. The unpleasant smell thus became a simulacrum of this disaffection. Over time, Oshizu's underarm odor came to represent everything he found unbearable in their situation, and a physical manifestation of the hopelessness of their ménage. Not being able to formulate an olfactory association, or distinction, between Oshizu and Oteru inevitably adds to Kanetarō's sense of frustration vis-à-vis his capacity to re-elaborate his past choices and make sense of his current situation. Such interpretive failure stands in opposition to the confidence with which, in the rest of the narrative and especially in the sections preceding Oteru's appearance, Kanetarō had demonstrated his ability to decode olfactory stimuli in the space around him.

Indeed, when the story begins and Kanetarō is shown in his bed, unwilling to get up and seemingly oblivious to what happens outside of his room, the reader's feeling of

witnessing a miserable character's gloomy slice of life is somehow mitigated by the character's perceptiveness for the acoustic and olfactory codes of the neighborhood; despite being confined in a dark and damp room, Kanetarō appears temporarily in control: he can tell the time without looking at a clock because of the smell of food coming from outside, and he can guess the weather just by listening to street sounds: "A *tōfu* seller passed by his window blowing a whistle. Hearing the splashing sound of his straw sandals, Kanetarō figured that a lot of snow must have melted" (Nagai [1922] 1993, p. 116). All this happens in the dark, because he has not yet looked out of the window and cannot have a visual perception of the external reality. Observing the mechanisms of consciousness enacted by Kanetarō in the absence of visual cues may lead the reader to imagine him as a character, all things considered, capable of managing his own life, but a few moments later this image is reversed and Kanetarō is shown for what he is: a person whose existence is heavily conditioned by events beyond his control, so much so, that he cannot make even a simple decision—staying in bed on a holiday: "After all, it had not been a bad idea to stay in bed all day, thought Kanetarō. All of a sudden, a deafening sound made the ceiling tremble and the snow slid down from the neighbor's roof on the eaves of his room on the second floor of the house" (ibid.). The abrupt and thunderous sound of the snow sliding down the roof (the "*shīn*" discussed above) marks Kanetarō's return to reality. A reality in which he is not in control, but rather exists as a totally passive entity.

This also emerges in another crucial passage of the story, when Kanetarō waits for Oteru's arrival. His waiting is presented as the expectation of a sound, of a sonorous signal notifying him of his daughter's appearance, that "of a door opening" (ibid., p. 122); a little later, when he approaches the window, Kanetarō learns the time because "in a house somewhere a clock struck two o'clock" (ibid., p. 123). At his moment of greatest helplessness, when he can only wait and hope for his daughter to reach him, his attunement to the world is essentially aural, underscoring his fundamental passivity.

At the end of the story, when Kanetarō returns home, he finds once again the environment that he is able to decode through his own understanding of its auditory elements: a man snoring, a woman opening a chest of drawers (ibid., p. 139). As if to mark the closing point of this circular narrative, Kanetarō absentmindedly hears car engines start up and automatically deduces from this (another indicator of his familiarity with those places but also of his passivity) that the customers of the tea house across the street are leaving.

Kanetarō's passivity is substantiated precisely by the prominence of olfactory and auditory inputs around which his experience of reality is organized. While sight is active, hearing and smell are passive. Drawing on Wyburn et al. (1964, p. 66), Yi-Fu Tuan argues for the importance of hearing in space considering it as the most passive of all senses, stressing the fact that, although they can avoid seeing things, human beings are totally vulnerable to sounds, and concluding that, by providing information that falls beyond the visual (i.e., intentionally perceived) field, hearing "extends" our experience of space (Tuan 1990, pp. 8–9). The idea of hearing as the most passive of all senses is also at the center of Hans Jonas' theory of the nobility of sight; comparing the two senses, he remarks that "sound, itself a dynamic fact, intrudes upon a passive subject. For the sensation of hearing to come about the percipient is entirely dependent on something happening outside his control, and in hearing, he is exposed to its happening. [...] In hearing," he concludes, "the percipient is at the mercy of environmental action, which intrudes upon his sensibility without his asking and by mere intensity decides for him which of several qualities distinguishable at the moment is to be the dominant impression" (Jonas [1966] 2001, p. 139). The body of work he produced throughout his life shows that Kafū has always paid keen attention to sound; the soundscape of his literature is complex and multilayered, adding yet another dimension to his lifelong commitment to urban writing. The relation between sound and passivity is explored to its fullest extent in a set of two non-fiction and one fiction work published in the latter half of the 1930s, namely *Kane no*

koe (The Voice of the Bell, 1936), *Terajima no ki* (A Chronicle from Terajima, 1936), and his most important novel, *Bokutō kidan* (A Strange Tale from East of the River, 1937). Here, in the soundscape of political propaganda and cultural decay, percipients (either the author himself in the two essays and his fictional alter ego in the novel) struggle with “intrusive” sounds (Bijsterveld 2008, pp. 43–44) that influence enormously their daily lives and narratives. In *Bokutō kidan*, for instance, the most intrusive sound is that of the radio: “The rains ended, the hot weather came, and, because the windows were open, sounds not heard in other seasons began to come to my ears. The sound that disturbed me most was that of the radio next door, beyond a thin board fence. [...] With the end of the rains, the progress of my *Whereabouts Unknown* was interrupted by the neighbors’ radio. I had done no work on it for ten days and more. There seemed to be a possibility that I would quite lose interest in it” (Nagai [1937] 1972, p. 125). Apart from being the most effective tool of propaganda (Maruyama 2012) and one of the symbols of the interactions between sound media, a resurgence of phonocentrism, and the emergence of a renewed nativist sentiment (Tsuboi 1997, 2008), the radio is a “familiar modernist trope” (Picker 2003, p. 111) that the author, at the culmination of his own modernist phase, employs to enhance the sense of fragmentation inherent in his cityscapes and, ultimately, to put forth the idea that in modern society selves are nothing but fragmented (Follaco 2016, pp. 51–52).

This clarifies further a crucial issue about hearing: that being passive does not make it irrelevant. On the contrary, it can have, and in Kafū’s work it certainly does, a decisive impact on the lives of the characters and the unfolding of the stories: “Sounds [...] produce affects” (Snaza 2019, p. 137) and, as such, qualify in multiple ways the individual’s participation to life and society. The ability to interpret aural codes is commensurate with the degree of participation and belonging in a given environment.

But if the impact of sound on experience is, all in all, easily accessible to our comprehension, that of smell is perhaps less obvious despite the fact that, compared to hearing, smell is a more transparent medium of knowledge. Due to that, it preserves better in so far as it stays unadulterated. Yi-Fu Tuan remarks that “[o]dor has the power to evoke vivid, emotionally-charged memories of past events and scenes. [...] A further point is that seeing is selective and reflects experience. When we return to the scene of our childhood, not only the landscape has changed but the way we see it. We cannot recapture fully the essential feel of a visual world belonging to our past without the help of a sensory experience that has not changed, for instance, the strong odor of decaying seaweed” (Tuan 1990, p. 10). There is nothing selective in smell. Like hearing, is a passive mode of perception, and influences greatly the percipient’s experience of space. This is one of the reasons why smell and hearing often go hand in hand when it comes to describing poor and/or multicultural environments. Kafū himself resorted to both senses in *Amerika monogatari* (*American Stories*, 1908) to describe the shallows of North American metropolises and immigrants’ settlements like New York’s Chinatown district. When literary authors set out to represent the space of poverty, smell is often a prominent, if not the main, feature of their description. Praising Elizabeth Gaskell’s (1810–1865)’s “exceptionally clear view of environmental degradation in the lives of the poor,” (Aberbach 2020, p. 52) David Aberbach quotes a line from *Mary Barton* (1848) where a poor family’s house is described in detail and its smell is “enough to knock one down” (ibid.). Smell is at the center of yet another first-time ride in a New York lower-class neighborhood, in William Dean Howells’s (1837–1920) *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1889): “It was to the nose that the street made one of its strongest appeals”; Gavin Jones aptly notes that the middle-class character’s interest for the poor does not turn into an aestheticizing vision because of the precise moment when the distance from the object of that interest is reduced: “Howells implies that the difference between picturesque admiration and disgust is a function of *distance*” (Jones 2008, p. 67). The signal that distance has shrunk to negligible proportions is indeed the emergence of odor and odor-elicited emotions; paraphrasing Snaza, odors also produce affects.

Being able to smell the odors of a given place is equivalent to being inside that place, and if, as in Kanetarō's case, exercising the sense of smell is a habit and his sensitivity to different odors is an evidence of his belonging to the neighborhood, for a casual visitor the reduction in distance may be too abrupt, arousing a sense of bewilderment and repulsion. Kanetarō has no difficulty interpreting the olfactory codes of the neighborhood because he lives there and they contribute to his apprehension and experience of reality; on the other hand, he cannot decode the olfactory messages sent by Oteru because they are covered by the smell of food. This partial anosmia prevents him from fully getting to know his own daughter, in whom he cannot identify any further traits in common with her mother except a physical resemblance; finally, when she leaves and he watches her go away, he associates her with Sawaji, his former lover who abandoned him (Nagai [1922] 1993, p. 139). This final part represents an overturning of the situation described at the beginning: Oteru, who had been abandoned by her father, is now leaving first, and he finds himself alone and passively affected by someone else's decisions.

4. Conclusions

When *Yukidoke* appeared in the volume edition, it accompanied one of Kafū's major novels, *Ame shōshō*. The two works occasionally overlap in terms of topics and characterization, although Yō, the main character of *Ame shōshō*, lives a privileged life, and is a man of sophisticated taste whose greater distress is that the new generations of women "[...] can't read anything in cursive styles anymore" (Nagai [1921] 1972, p. 103). The most striking common feature between *Ame shōshō* and *Yukidoke*, however, is that they both assign the greatest value to the aural dimension of experience and resort to non-visual filters in order to interpret objective reality. Yō tries to teach *sonohachi* to his protégée in an attempt to keep alive the precious "old tastes" he is fond of, but in the end, he will realize that those sonorities are out of tune, both figuratively and literally, in the modern world. Once he knows that there is nothing he can do to retrieve the past, he seeks consolation in what he considers as unchanging as human feelings: the sounds of nature: "The voice of the wind is an angry one, and the voice of the water a wail. The voice of the rain does not rage and does not complain. It but speaks, pleads. Human emotions are forever unchanging; and who, alone in bed listening to the rain, is not moved to sadness?" (ibid., p. 85).

A particularly interesting aspect of these works is that they were written during the period when Kafū gradually moved away from the public scene and retired to his beloved home in Azabu, the Henkikan. This is a period characterized by a growing disillusionment with the current state of society, which goes hand in hand with his interest in his own family history, particularly the figure of his grandfather Washizu Kidō (1825–1882), which connects to the history of Sinology at the turn of the Meiji era. Like the protagonist of *Ame shōshō*, Kafū seems to want to take refuge in his own passions and in the letters of the past, which, however, indulging a tension toward deconstruction and reworking that he will bring to fruition in the "modernist" phase of the following decade, he uses as a filter through which to read the present.

The nostalgic atmospheres of these years would receive further impetus from the 1923 earthquake, which destroyed Washizu's house in Shitaya just as Kafū was preparing to write about it in a work, *Shitaya sōwa* (Stories from Shitaya, 1926), somewhat unique in his output. Like the culture of the past that in *Ame shōshō* seemed to have been lost, the monument to an era of his own family history and nineteenth-century Sinology will remain accessible to him only in memory, accentuating the sense of loss and fragmentation of experience that will characterize his literary work of the 1930s, his nihilistic attitude towards a space-time he can no longer trust (Snyder 2000, p. 110).

Kafū's cityscapes have always been composite and dynamic images made of a variety of pieces that replicate the individual's experience of modern urbanities, on the one hand, and mirror the fragmentation of selfhood in modern societies that is one of his paramount concerns, on the other hand. It is important to bear in mind that his fictional wanderings

in urban spaces always follow first-hand experiences that influence enormously their representation. From the “combined stench of meat cooked at roadside stands, sweat, and other indescribable filth” (Nagai [1908] 2000, p. 183) of the East Side of New York through the “foul ditch” (Nagai [1937] 1972, p. 138) of the East of the Sumida, this author has worked relentlessly to narrow the distance between percipient and perceived reality, trying to defy the “humanizing assemblages” that imposed one-dimensional and often instrumental versions of reality.

Sound and smell, as passive senses that thwart any attempt to select and manipulate perception, are the perfect tools for his work of “de-humanization”: the percipient is at their mercy, and the effects aroused by them cannot be suppressed. Paying attention to objects, physical sensations, traces, and to the auditory and olfactory codes of reality in literary writing can open new avenues for reflection on, and broaden our comprehension of, crucial issues of the modern experience.

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- ^{1.} After this first publication, the two installments were released together alongside the novella *Ame shōshō* (Quiet rain, 1921) in a volume from the publishing house Shun'yōdō, the 28th of July of the same year.

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