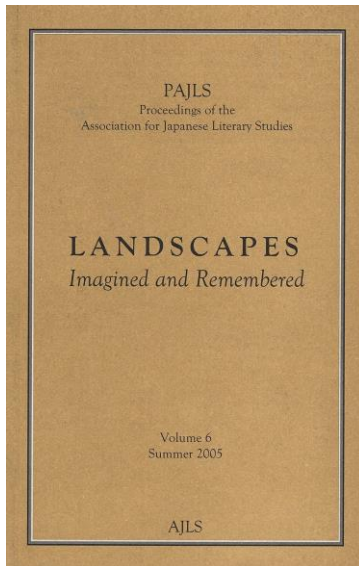


“Viewing the Ruins: Devastated Cityscapes and the Urban Observer after the Great Kantō Earthquake”

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**Viewing the Ruins:  
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Earthquake**

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The Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923 and the firestorm that followed it destroyed more than half of the city of Tokyo, and left approximately 150,000 people dead or missing. No sooner had the fires died down than throngs of people descended on the devastated downtown area of Tokyo (*shitamachi*). Some were returning to their own neighborhoods to rummage through the ashes for personal items to salvage. Others who had safely weathered the destruction came to the ruined city in a phenomenon labeled *yakeato kengaku* 焼跡見学 (viewing the ruins). *Yakeato kengaku* was a mass phenomenon, and among the masses were writers and artists whose observations served as fodder for their craft. Chief among the writer-observers of post-earthquake destruction was Tayama Katai 田山花袋 (1871-1930). Katai's earthquake writings, collected under the title *Tōkyō shinsaiki* 東京震災記 (Record of the Tokyo Earthquake, 1924), are the textual products of *yakeato kengaku* performed by a *flâneur*.

The *flâneur* is a figure historically situated in mid-nineteenth century Paris and theorized by Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin, among others. In Baudelaire's essay "The Painter of Modern Life," the ur-text of the *flâneur*, he (and it is gender specific) is a wandering urban artist or poet with a keen eye for capturing "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent" that is modernity. This *flâneur* "enters into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy," allowing himself to be influenced by its ebbs and flows.<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin takes Baudelaire's definitions, but highlights the social and economic class of the figure.<sup>2</sup> For Benjamin, the *flâneur* is inseparable from his bourgeois identity and thus keeps his distance from the crowd.

Katai's narratives of his journeys into the devastated city, like those of the *flâneur*, attempt to capture the fleeting experience of the present and comment on modernity. Though gazing on death and destruction rather than on a lively urban center may seem to limit the appropriateness of the concept

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life, and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1964), 9-10.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: NLB, 1973).

of the *flâneur* in describing Katai's observations, it is the similarities rather than the differences that draw my interest. As scholarship pertaining to it has repeatedly asserted, the trope of the *flâneur* reveals less about the objects of the gaze than it does about the subjectivity of the observer.<sup>3</sup> Thus, it is the attitude of the observer, rather than the state of the observed, that matters most. Katai maintains the detachment that Benjamin sees as inherent to the social class of the leisure observer; ultimately, his outward gaze into the city is refracted back into the self. Though the Parisian *flâneur* sees himself as the very embodiment of cosmopolitan *joie de vivre*, Katai sees himself, and only himself, in the ruin. Paradoxically, it is through his extreme detachment that Katai is able to project himself onto the ruined city. This detachment, both in style and in class, allows for the philosophical musings on the ruin by a self that ignores the surrounding death and suffering.

### The *flâneur* and the self

Though he is an observer of the external world, the *flâneur* and his writings are intimately concerned with personal identity. Keith Tester has described the *flâneur* as "the sovereign spectator going about the city in order to find the things which will occupy his gaze and thus complete his otherwise incomplete identity."<sup>4</sup> In this definition Tester draws from Baudelaire, who identifies the *flâneur* as a mirror reflecting the crowd: "We might liken him [the *flâneur*] to a mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life."<sup>5</sup> It is the modern urban crowd that gives this "painter" his identity and his subject matter. The *flâneur* draws energy from the crowd and reflects them; the reflection, however, is distorted by the kaleidoscope that is his subjectivity. The *flâneur* asserts the "I" at the same time that he is defined in part by the crowd external to that "I." Tester thus sees the *flâneur* as caught in "a dialectic of self definition and definition from outside."<sup>6</sup> As he records the chaotic transience of modern life, it is impossible for Baudelaire's *flâneur* to remain uninfluenced by that life's ebbs and flows.

The interaction with the crowd, even in Baudelaire, never erases the hierarchy of observer and observed. Tester points out that the spectator is "sovereign" and Baudelaire calls the *flâneur* a "Prince incognito." The *flâneur* of Baudelaire and Tester, however, is almost unrecognizable in Benjamin's study. Benjamin highlights this hierarchy by linking it to socio-economic class. In so doing, Benjamin prohibits intermingling with the crowd and replaces the

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 16.

<sup>4</sup> Keith Tester, "Introduction," in *The Flâneur*, ed. Keith Tester (London: Routledge, 1994), 7.

<sup>5</sup> Baudelaire, *Painter*, 9-10.

<sup>6</sup> Tester, "Introduction," 8.

fluid subjectivity of Baudelaire with a rigid sense of self and social hierarchy: “There was the pedestrian who wedged himself into the crowd, but there was also the *flâneur* who demanded elbow room and was unwilling to forgo the life of a gentleman of leisure.”<sup>7</sup> Benjamin’s *flâneur* keeps his distance as a wandering, bourgeois, urban observer who refuses to be influenced by the crowd. Benjamin rightly points out the social class of the observer; it is this detachment from the crowd, rather than Baudelaire’s free-flowing kaleidoscope, that resonates with Katai’s recorded observations.

### The urban observer in *Tōkyō shinsaiki* and “Yakeato”

Katai’s earthquake memoir *Tōkyō shinsaiki* is filled with the observations of a disaster *flâneur*. It is explicitly linked to the experiences of the author and, more particularly, to his wanderings and observations of the devastated city. Because the book as a whole was paid little attention in literary circles, let me begin with an excerpt published separately entitled “Yakeato” 焼跡 (Burnt Ruins).<sup>8</sup> “Yakeato” follows the narrator/protagonist as he ventures across the devastation of Tokyo to inquire after his mistress. The excessive descriptions of geography and scenery, however, overshadow the *shishōsetsu*-like plot. Near the beginning, the narrator relates the route he took as though giving detailed directions:

I went left from Taisōji in Shinjuku, through a narrow road, and came out in Nukebenten in Ōkubo. . . . From Nukebenten I went into Wakamatsu-chō and . . . on to Kaitai-chō. It was pretty bad there. Houses had toppled onto houses. In some cases the second floor had collapsed onto the first and others were just in complete shambles. I thought at the time that this must be the worst spot in the whole Yamanote area.<sup>9</sup>

I would like to draw attention to two aspects of this passage: first, the focus on detailed location, and second, the focus on the “I” or the subjective experience. Both the detail and the first-person narration invite the reader to retrace the narrator’s steps mentally, if not physically. The text conveys the subjective experience of *yakeato kengaku*, of passing these locations and discovering them in ruins.

The excessive focus on geography was noted by Tanaka Jun in a review of “Yakeato” published in the *Yomiuri shinbun* just after the work appeared. Tanaka reported, “I’ve grown weary of ‘earthquake pieces’ but I was in Kamakura during the quake and know little of post-quake Tokyo, so I read it as a *kenbutsu-ki* 見物記 (record of observations). It was perfect for that sort of

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, 54, 129.

<sup>8</sup> Tayama, “Yakeato,” *Shinshōsetsu* 29:3 (March 1924), 67-80.

<sup>9</sup> Tayama, *Tōkyō shinsaiki* (Tokyo: Hakubunkan, 1924), 59-60. All translations are my own.

thing because the places were named in detail.”<sup>10</sup> Tanaka refrains from calling the work a *shōsetsu* (work of fiction), using instead the unusual word *kenbutsu-ki*. *Kenbutsu* 見物 in Japanese is ambiguous because it can refer to the person watching, the object being watched, or the act of watching. After the quake, there was an explosion of images depicting the damage, as well as the “earthquake pieces” mentioned by Tanaka. With countless journalistic descriptions and photographs of the destruction available following the quake, it is hard to imagine that objective descriptions interested Tanaka on the basis of the scenery. It was not the objects of the gaze, but the fact that the work was a “record of observing” or a “record of the observer” that Tanaka found remarkable. The one thing other representations of the earthquake lacked was the ability to portray the subjective experience of *yakeato kengaku*, of being a *flâneur*.

### Artistic detachment

The difference between Katai’s observations and other available descriptions is foregrounded in the preface of *Tōkyō shinsaiki*: “Those [other representations] are mostly *kijutsu* 記述 (descriptions) and explanations, they are not *byōsha* 描写 (portrayals), and so though you may know what happened, you will not understand the real scenery and the feel of the earthquake.”<sup>11</sup> The contrast between *byōsha* and *kijutsu* stems from Katai’s theory of *heimen byōsha* 平面描写 (often rendered as “objective description”), which he proposed over a decade earlier. In Katai’s theorization, *heimen byōsha* paradoxically emphasizes both subjective experience and objective observation.<sup>12</sup> The latter is particularly evoked in the detached narrator/spectator of *Tōkyō shinsaiki*.

One of the striking elements of “Yakeato,” and of *Tōkyō shinsaiki* as a whole, is the degree to which Katai successfully maintains the style of *heimen byōsha*, devoid of emotional commentary. Katai’s descriptive style serves to distance the narrator from the objects he is observing, a technique that extends to his portrayal of the dead, who comprise merely one part of the scenery:

There I saw half burnt houses and garments spread all over. I saw lots of metal from dressers, cans, knobs in heaps. They said that most of the dead should have been cleared away by this point, but here and there I saw bodies with arms raised or legs in the air tragically lying where they died. I saw three or four horses collapsed and displaying their bloated

<sup>10</sup> Tanaka Jun, “Bungei-ran,” *Yomiuri shinbun* (25 March 1924).

<sup>11</sup> Tayama, “Preface,” *Tōkyō shinsaiki*.

<sup>12</sup> See Tayama Katai, “*Sei ni okeru kokoromi*,” in *Kindai bungaku hyōron taikai*, vol. 3, ed. Yoshida Seiichi and Wada Kingo (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1972), 448. The ideal requires an objective narrator limited to the subjective experiences of seeing, hearing, and feeling.

stomachs. The stench of things burnt or rotting hung suspended in the bright dirty yellow air so that there was no one who could pass without covering their noses.<sup>13</sup>

In this quote, the human dead are part of the scenery, along with metal debris and horses. Along with the cool indifference to scenes of death and destruction, there is a focus on the subjective, evidenced by the repetition of “I saw.” In fact, the distance between the narrator and the objects of his gaze is in part created by the extremely narrow focalization in the first-person narration. In the introduction to *Tōkyō shinsai*, the author tells us that what follows is what *he* sees and hears; the reader is denied insight into any other character, let alone into the crowds of people in the streets. The practiced indifference and narrow focalization are emblematic of the *heimen byōsha* style, and serve to increase the distance between the narrating self and the objects of his gaze, thus precluding any opportunity for sympathetic identification with the suffering crowd.

### The “man of leisure” and the crowd

Like Benjamin’s “gentleman of leisure,” the wandering “I” of *Tōkyō shinsai* desires distance from the crowd. The masses of people in the streets become merely part of the landscape, like the bodies of the dead, or obstacles to overcome in his journey: “Even though I wanted to walk on the cooler, shaded side of the street, I couldn’t. No matter how hot, or whether the sun was shining from the front, there was nothing I could do but walk on the left side of the street, carried by the people and the carts.”<sup>14</sup> The narrator is being carried by the ebb and flow of the crowd, but rather than take pleasure in the experience, as the *flâneur* of Baudelaire is wont to do, he is annoyed that he is unable to walk freely where he feels entitled. It becomes apparent that the narrator, like Benjamin’s *flâneur*, demands “elbow room.” Though he craves the detachment offered by his social class, as an actual physical body he is subject to the motions of the crowd. The narrator, however, responds by keeping his distance in other ways, by maintaining his focus on the self.

The separation of the narrator from the crowd is made possible in part by both the narrator’s physical distance from the destroyed areas of Tokyo and his separation from the sufferers in terms of social class. At the time of the earthquake, the narrator (and Katai himself) lived in Yoyogi, which was then a quiet suburb of Tokyo, and weathered the tremors without injury to home or family. Though the poorer region of town, the *shitamachi*, was devastated, the wealthier Yamanote region and the suburbs escaped relatively unharmed. Figures for Yoyogi are difficult to ascertain because it lay beyond the city

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<sup>13</sup> Tayama, *Tōkyō shinsai*, 73.

<sup>14</sup> Tayama, *Tōkyō shinsai*, 61.

boundaries; however, a simple comparison of the ward closest to Katai (Yotsuya) with the predominantly working-class ward in which his mistress lived (Honjo) illustrates the vast difference in degree of devastation. Yotsuyaku reported a total of three deaths following the earthquake. In comparison, Honjo-ku, where Katai's mistress Iida Yone lived, reported over 58,000 dead and missing, well over half the total for Tokyo.<sup>15</sup> This difference in class and earthquake experience is the unspoken foundation for the studied detachment apparent in the work.

As a man of leisure, Katai had the ability to wander in the ruins and observe freely without concern for rebuilding home or workplace. The very practice of *yakeato kengaku*, touring the devastation from a privileged position in the suburbs, highlights class differences. When Tanaka Jun labels "Yakeato" a *kenbutsu-ki*, he not only draws attention to the act of observation, but also to the hierarchies inherent in such observation. Other words, such as *haiken*, imply respect for the object of the gaze, but *kenbutsu* is used for spectacle. *Kenbutsu* 見物 is the counterpart to *misemono* 見せ物, etymologically the combination of "show" and "thing" used to refer to Edo freak shows and their ilk. The object of the gaze in *kenbutsu* is a "thing" granted neither subjectivity nor respect. In other words, as a *kenbutsu-ki*, *Tōkyō shinsaiki* reveals little about the destruction or the crowds of sufferers – the objects of the gaze – but rather retains its focus on the subjectivity of the observer.

Though the crowd is the source of the *flâneur's* identity in Baudelaire, it is the city itself and the changes that have befallen it that are the mirror for the narrator in *Tōkyō shinsaiki*. This difference is crucial. Like Benjamin's *flâneur*, Katai's narrator maintains his distance from the crowd to the point of its disappearance; he sees in the destruction nothing more than the self. Rather than see the site of death and suffering, Katai sees the ruined city as a site for philosophical ruminations on rebirth and the self. As he surveys the wasteland that was once his lover's neighborhood in Honjo, the narrator muses, "I felt I saw in the large ruins of Tokyo the smaller scale personal ruin within myself."<sup>16</sup> There is an odd contradiction in the dialectic of distance and intimacy discernable in this passage: the large-scale view of a desolate expanse and the intimate view of the self. What exactly did the narrator see in the ruins, and what was the personal ruin within himself? This passage must be explored within the context of Katai's philosophy of the ruin.

<sup>15</sup> The Home Office of the Japanese Bureau of Social Affairs and Fujisawa Morihiko, *The Great Earthquake of 1923 in Japan* (Tokyo: Naimushō Shakaikyoku, 1926), 87-88.

<sup>16</sup> Tayama, *Tōkyō shinsaiki*, 78.

## The ruined city, the ruined self

In Katai's brand of Naturalism, different from his European counterparts', there is a fundamental distinction between nature and society, and humanity falls specifically on the side of nature. This idea appears in Katai's oeuvre as the opposition between the natural individual and the requirements of society. For example, the conflict in Katai's *Futon* revolves around the protagonist's "natural" yearnings for his pupil and his inability to act on that desire because of propriety. His concept of the ruin stems from his Naturalism and becomes a dominant theme during the late teens and early twenties. It is in this mode that most scholars read *Tōkyō shinsaiki*.<sup>17</sup> In the physical ruin Katai sees the natural overtaking the monuments of society, its structures. Though ultimately my goal is to discuss the place of the self in the ruin, the ruin is also important in the treatment of modernity in the work, for the earthquake as depicted in *Tōkyō shinsaiki* can be seen as a metaphor for modernity, and the ruins it creates become a site for the birth of the modern city.

After the excursion to the city depicted in "Yakeato," the narrator returns home to find his brother visiting from the countryside. In a subsequent conversation, found only in *Tōkyō shinsaiki*, they discuss the loss of old Edo: "Until now, though we called it Tokyo, there remained the feel and flavor of Edo spread haphazardly in spaces throughout the city and it wasn't able to become completely 'Tokyo.' But now, with this, *because* of this, we can perhaps start afresh and build a pure 'Tokyo.'"<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere, the narrator goes so far as to say, "I thought that this time for certain, the center of Tokyo would become truly vibrant, like a real city."<sup>19</sup> For Katai, the city is changing and its transformations are both tinged with melancholy for a past that is gone and filled with the promise of progress. The idea that progress comes from sacrifice also appears in Katai's *Tōkyō no sanjūnen* (Thirty Years in Tokyo), written six years before the earthquake: "Achievement [*kōgyō* 功業] necessarily destroys people. It necessarily calls for sacrifice."<sup>20</sup> Often, the nostalgic scenes recreated by Katai in the pages of *Tōkyō shinsaiki* disappeared even before the earthquake, sacrificed not to nature, but to the

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Takematsu Yoshiaki, "Metsubō suru teito: bungakushijō no Kantō daishinsai," in *Haikyo no kanōsei: gendai bungaku no tanjō*, Kurihara Yukio, ed. (Inpakuto Shuppankai and Izara Shobō, 1997), 175; and Sawa Toyohiko, "Kisei sakka no daishinsai: Tayama Katai to Nagata Mikihiko no ba'ai," *Shakai bungaku* 8 (1994). The other common thread treats *Tōkyō shinsaiki* as a nostalgic elegy for lost Edo. See, for example, Haruno Ogasawara, "Living with Natural Disasters: Narratives of the Great Kantō and Great Hanshin Earthquakes" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1999), 81-82. Nostalgia is certainly present as a theme of the text, but that nostalgia is part of a larger concern with modernity.

<sup>18</sup> Tayama, *Tōkyō shinsaiki*, 113.

<sup>19</sup> Tayama, *Tōkyō shinsaiki*, 124.

<sup>20</sup> Tayama Katai, *Literary Life in Tokyo, 1885-1915: Tayama Katai's Memoirs 'Thirty Years in Tokyo.'* trans. Kenneth G. Henshall (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 250.



altar of progress. *Tōkyō shinsaiki* implies that by destroying the city and allowing for the new to emerge, the earthquake merely sped up the process of modernity. The earthquake serves as a metaphor for the violence inherent in modernization, but it is a beneficial violence without victims.

In *Tōkyō shinsaiki*, the people destroyed are ignored since the quake is seen as both a part of nature and the progress of modernity. This erasure is necessary for Katai's philosophical link between the ruin and the self. In a reworking of the theme of the destroyed city and its rebirth, Katai likens the ruin of the buildings to the ruin of the human: "Do not ruins continuously repeat themselves within the human heart? Do they not reveal themselves within human debauchery, ennui, indulgences, and fatigue? And from within that 'ruin' there emerges a new sprout. A new love is born. A new heart is awakened."<sup>21</sup> To Katai, human degeneracy is like the earthquake: productive, a point from which to begin again. Katai erases the violence of the earthquake and the violence of modernity by simply equating the ruins in the heart with the ruins of the devastated city that surround him.

The sociologist Georg Simmel, a contemporary of Benjamin, was also interested in "the Ruin." In an essay by that name, Simmel discusses the attraction of architectural ruins, which he believes stems from the internal tension between the competing drives of nature and spirit – by which he means human creation, or culture. Though for Katai humanity *is* nature, for Simmel the spirit is that which distinguishes humanity from nature. Therefore, Simmel makes a distinction between the noble melancholy of the architectural ruin and the degeneracy of human "ruins." He writes, "The aesthetically satisfying impression, which is associated with the tragedy . . . of destruction is so often lacking when a person is described as a 'ruin.'"<sup>22</sup> For Simmel, the fall of humans into ruin is degeneration because the negative drives of the body destroy the very things that make the human different, namely, the mind and spirit. The result is a ruin without the nobility of tragedy, a ruin that is merely (and this is his term) "sad." For Katai, there is no philosophical difference between architectural ruins and human ruins. When the narrator of *Tōkyō shinsaiki* sees himself in the ruins, he sees nature emerging from its confines. This is not the negative degeneration that Simmel detects. It is, rather, a ruin that promises new life, just as a glorious modern city will emerge from the ashes of Tokyo.

The self that Katai sees refracted through the mirror of the ruins is a self without the trappings of society, not degenerate, but renewed. The violence of the transformation is elided and a glorious new self emerges. With Baudelaire, the *flâneur* is the mirror that allows the energies of modernization to flow through him and create him as a subject. With Katai, it is the world that is his

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<sup>21</sup> Tayama, *Tōkyō shinsaiki*, 97-98.

<sup>22</sup> Georg Simmel, "The Ruin," in *Essays on Sociology, Philosophy, and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Kurt Wolff (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 263.

mirror; he looks out into the destruction, but sees only himself, not others. Ultimately, this is only possible because of the distance he maintains between himself and the external world. In that distance, he denies substance to that which he sees and thus the outside world is empty and able to be filled with his own reflection. Again, “I felt I saw in the large ruins of Tokyo the smaller scale personal ruin within myself.”<sup>23</sup> He sees a new birth and a new love welling up within. Must we feel joy for this poet finding new love in the ruins of the city? Katai gives us a view of destruction focused on himself, but when faced with the very real suffering experienced by others in that destruction, can we say that it is an ethical view? The detached gaze of the *flâneur* can give us an insight into modernity and into the *flâneur* himself, but it cannot give us insight into those who suffer from the violent upheavals of modern life and the earth.

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<sup>23</sup> Tayama, *Tōkyō shinsaiki*, 78.