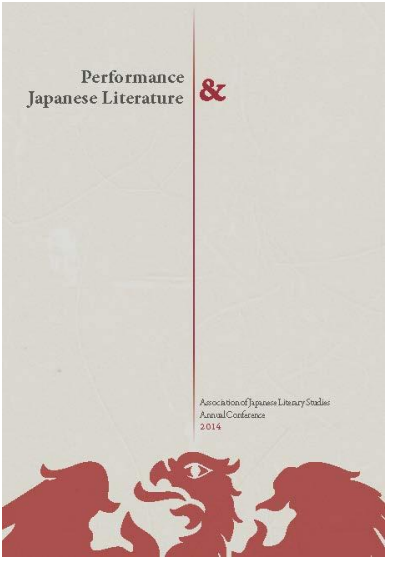
“Performing the Sexuality of the *Flaneur* in Nagai Kafū’s Translations of Baudelaire”

Marianne Tarcov

Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies 15 (2014): 79–86.



PAJLS 15:
Performance and Japanese Literature.
Ed. Michael Bourdaghs, Hoyt Long, and Reginald Jackson

Performing the Sexuality of the *Flaneur*
In Nagai Kafū's Translations of Baudelaire

Marianne Tarcov
University of California, Berkeley

In a sequence of Baudelaire poems from his 1913 translation anthology *Coral Collection*, Nagai Kafū investigates the sexuality of the Baudelairean *flaneur*, a consummate urban dandy at home on the streets of modern cities. In his translations of Baudelaire, Kafū brings out the latent physical and sexual undertones of the *flaneur* persona. More than a detached dandy prowling the modern urban streets, Kafū's *flaneur* engages physically and sexually with the bodies he encounters in his city wanderings. Kafū posits the translator himself as an erotically charged *flaneur* figure who, like the savvy members of the urban crowd with whom he cavorts, reinvents the texts he consumes and performatively expresses the physically charged pleasure of textual production.

For example, in the poem "Death's Pleasures," Kafū looks at the *flaneur* in relation to the crowd as fleshly, sexual beings, suggesting that the *flaneur* desires to become pure flesh, a piece of meat sexually consumed by the bodies of the crowd he encounters. Kafū's translation indicates that the *flaneur* is not merely a passive recipient of the crowd's voracious appetites, but also has the ability to consume and devour in turn. In another poem, "The Moon's Sorrows," Kafū explores the relationship between the *flaneur* and a feminine object of desire, emphasizing the woman's sexuality and agency as a counterpart to the *flaneur*. Kafū cites and re-cites the *flaneur* in his translations, transforming it each time it in the very act of citation, revealing translation's ability "to create and recreate and transform [language], to make it do new things."[1] Over the course of the collection, Kafū stages the rift between translation and mimesis, oscillating between faithful, mimetic renderings of Baudelaire's text, and irreverent departures from it.

In "Death's Pleasures" (*Shi no yorokobi*),[2] the first poem in the Baudelaire sequence, Kafu translates a poem in which the speaker imagines himself as a dead body consumed by worms and carrion. In Baudelaire's poem, the encounter between corpse and carrion is analogous to that between the *flaneur* and the crowd. Like the *flaneur* making his way through the city crowd, the dead speaker loses himself amongst the mass of creatures he meets in the grave. The speaker experiences a sense of merging and a loss of individuality, such that he can lose himself and "sleep in oblivion" (*dormir dans l'oubli*).[3]

[1] Richard Poirier, *Trying It Out In America: Literary And Other Performances* (New York: Farrar Strauss, and Giroux, 2003), 19.
[2] Nagai Kafū, *Kafū zenshū*, vol. 9 (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1992), 7.
[3] Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes,* vol. 1 (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1975), 70.

For Baudelaire, the dead man's relationship to the worms is analogous to the *flaneur*'s with the crowd outside in the streets. It is anonymous and formal, as shown by the use of the second person pronoun *vous*, and it gives rise to a sense of freedom and happiness ("libre et joyeux") from being lost in the crowd on the street.[4] The "happy corpse" (*le mort joyeux*) is happy because of the exhilaration of merging with the worms who consume him: "O vers!" (Oh worms!),[5] he exclaims joyously, punning on the homophone *vers,* which means "verse" or poetry. It is not only on the street that the *flaneur* experiences his "joyous" death and loss of individual self; it is also through the act of creating poetry. The poem becomes a hymn to the joyous loss of individuality that comes when the *flaneur* merges with the crowd and attains a mode of poetic expression that can give voice to this experience.

For Kafū, the *flaneur*'s relationship to the crowd is more intimate and sensual than in Baudelaire. It is not a mere anonymous fleeting glance on the street. Instead, it is a visceral, fleshly encounter among bodies composed of pure flesh, full of pleasure and decadence ("*yorokobi* and *burai*").[6] The translation emphasizes both speaker and crowd as physical bodies and sexual beings. Death becomes a corporeal encounter between the body of the *flaneur* and the bodies of the urban crowd he meets. Kafū suggests that the *flaneur*'s ultimate desire is to be consumed as pure flesh by the parasitic creatures he meets in the grave. The experience of being consumed by the crowd comes with an orgiastic sexual pleasure, the *yorokobi*, or "pleasure" of the title.

Kafu's title, "Shi no yorokobi," uses *yorokobi*, or "pleasure" in Japanese, which has a more sensual and physical connotation than "*joyeux*" in Baudelaire's original title, "*Le Mort Joyeux*." Baudelaire's "joy" becomes Kafū's "pleasure," emphasizing the physical sensation of death rather than the emotional one. Aside from the difference in meaning between *joyeux* and *yorokobi*, there is also the difference between their respective parts of speech, an adjective and a noun respectively. In Baudelaire, the emphasis is on the corpse, who is modified by the word "joyous." In Kafū, the emphasis is on the noun "*yorokobi*" or "pleasure," which is modified by "death" (*shi*). Translated back into French, Kafū's title might read something like "Le Plaisir de la Mort," or "The Pleasure of Death." Where Baudelaire's title preserved a trace of the subjectivity of the speaker (*le mort*, or the corpse), Kafū's title has devoured the speaker without a trace, leaving only pleasure, *yorokobi*, behind.

Baudelaire's poem is about *le mort*, the corpse, and himself; Kafū's is about the perverse sensory pleasures, *yorokobi*, of death. "Is there further pain, or isn't there? (*nao mo nayami no ari ya nashi ya to*)"[7] the speaker asks coyly at the end of the poem, tauntingly begging for more intense, painful

[4] Kafū, 7.
[5] Baudelaire, 70.
[6] Kafū, 7.
[7] Ibid., 8.

sensation. The poem perversely toes the line between pleasure (*yorokobi*) and pain (*nayami*): both seem to be part of his heightened sensory existence as pure "flesh that has lost its soul" (*tamashii wo useshi niku*). The speaker's "enraptured and decadent" (*yorokoberu burai)* voice captures the sensory intensity of the corporeal experience of death as a piece of pure "flesh that has lost its soul."

Throughout the poem, Kafū makes translation choices that deviate from Baudelaire's original poem and emphasize the fleshly, corporeal reality of the speaker as a piece of flesh to be consumed by others. The speaker's existence as a body comes to the fore in Kafu's version, whereas in Baudelaire it is more of rhetorical entity. The speaker revels in his ability to exist as "*seishin wo useshi niku*,"[8] or "flesh that has lost its spirit." Kafu emphasizes the fleshly quality of this line. In the Baudelaire original, it is "corps" (body), rather than *niku* or flesh. Kafu seems to be decomposing the original text: from a body with articulated parts, to mere undifferentiated *flesh*. *Niku* can even mean meat. It is not living flesh, but dead meat waiting to be consumed by the crowd of insects and worms he encounters. Kafū seeks to emphasize the corporeality of the speaker as a piece of flesh, and his desire to be consumed by the crowd of parasites that surround him.

Another instance of Kafū's intensification of the corporeality of the poem comes in the line "*kegaretaru sekizui no hashibashi wo tsubashimen*"[9] (à saigner tous les bouts de ma caracasse immonde).[10] In this case, Kafu translates the word "carcasse," French for carcass or dead body, as "*sekizui,*" Japanese for "spinal cord." Once again, Kafu disintegrates a whole body into component parts, by choosing "spinal cord" as a kind of metonym for "carcass." Kafū's speaker invites the parasitic crows to "peck at my filthy spinal cord from end to end," while Baudelaire's invites them to "bleed my corpse from end to end." While both versions have a palpable, fleshly undertone, Kafū once again substitutes a part for the whole, further objectifying the dead body of the speaker. Rather than a carcass, Kafu portrays the speaker as a collection of bones, a "filthy spinal cord" to be consumed by crows. Baudelaire's version invites the crows to "bleed" (saigner) the speaker, an image that suggests the flesh still has running blood and life in it. For Kafu, the corpse has decayed beyond recognition: it is only bone, no blood. The crows are invited not to bleed it, but to consume it. Once again, the speaker is meat (*niku*), rather than living flesh. He is food for others to consume.

The speaker encounters the crowd not as fellow human beings, but as inhuman creatures, as parasitic carrion who devour him. He uses a direct apostrophe to address the worms (*ujimushi*) who are eating his flesh, creating a sense of intimacy and a relationship between the speaker and his parasitic addressees:

[8] Ibid., 7.
[9] Ibid., 7.
[10] Baudelaire, 70.

おお蛆虫よ。眼なく耳なき暗黒の友、
君のために腐敗の子、放蕩の哲学者、
よろこべる無頼の死人は来る。[11]
O vers! Noirs compagnons sans oreille et sans yeux,
Voyez venir à vous un mort libre et joyeux;
Philosophes viveurs, fils de la pourriture,[12]

Baudelaire and Kafu create very different relationships between the speaker and his addressees, the worms. Baudelaire uses the plural, or formal, second person *vous*, while Kafū uses the intimate second-person *kimi*, often used between lovers. The use of a second-person pronoun in Japanese at all, which often leaves pronouns implied, creates a very strong sense of connection between speaker and addressee. *Kimi* is also a pronoun used in colloquial speech, unlike the far more literary, archaic pronoun *nanji* used elsewhere in the collection. Though *kimi* of course appears in classical literature too, when compared to *nanji*, it is a more intimate pronoun understandable and accessible to readers and speakers of everyday Japanese. It represents the language of the streets rather than that of the stuffy, classical Meiji literati.

The speaker's intimate, sensual encounter with the worms brings the realization that he may in fact be a devouring, rapacious creature just like them. The speaker's identification with the shark sets up a commonality between him and the crowd for which the worms stand in. Like the crowd-as-worms, the speaker-as-shark is a non-human entity who preys on the flesh of others. Kafu's wordplay between "shark" and "deep," *fuka* and *fukai*, suggests that the shark has merged with the void. He has been utterly consumed by the orgiastic encounter with the crowd, and all that remains is a dark void. As a shark lost in the void of post-coital bliss, he possesses the same power the crowd has to consume and devour the flesh of others.

The *flaneur* as pure flesh can either consume or be consumed. Kafū's *flaneur* slips between consumer and the one consumed, from a dead body to a shark prowling the waters. The eroticism of this figure of pure flesh, *niku*, is one of fragmentation, decay, and decomposition: it is with the flesh and bones, not the body as a whole, that the *flaneur* nourishes the parasitic crowd. In offering so fragmented and deconstructed a view of Baudelairean sexuality, Kafū performatively suggests that translation itself is just such an erotically charged decomposition of the body of the original text. In Kafū's encounter with the pure flesh of Baudelaire's text, he parasitically devours it, only to reinvent himself as the very body which he has devoured.

In "Sorrows of The Moon" (*Tsuki no kanashimi*),[13] Kafū once again offers a reinvention of the flaneur's sexuality. Whereas "Death's Pleasures"

[11] Kafū, 7.
[12] Baudelaire, 70.
[13] Kafū, 23.

portrays the sexuality of the *flaneur* with relation to the crowd, "The Moon's Sorrows" portrays the flaneur's sexuality with regard to an individual woman, an idealized feminine figure personified by the moon. Where Kafū offers a fragmented vision of sex as mutual consumption in "Death's Pleasure," in "The Moon's Sorrow" he establishes a sense of feminine agency and desire as a counter to the *flaneur*.

For Baudelaire, the woman in "The Moon's Sorrows" is an idealized figure placed on an ethereal pedestal, in a world of "white visions who rise in the blue like blooms" (visions blanches/Qui montent dans l'azur comme des floraisons").[14] The poet, meanwhile, exists "sur ce globe,"[15] "on this world," completely removed from the feminine grace and ethereality of his beloved. The gaze of the speaker objectifies her, lingering on "le contour de ses seins"[16] ("the contour of her breasts"). The woman has very little voice to express any subjectivity of her own. She weeps a furtive tear ("une larme furtive"[17]) that the poet gathers and collects in his bosom. The woman's only expression of emotion, her tears, are taken by the masculine poet. She is otherwise silent.

The woman's tears are a secret, to be hidden away from the world by the solicitous hand of her lover. The poet hides her tears away "in his heart, far from the eyes of the sun" (dans son coeur loin des yeux du soleil")[18]. The speaker calls himself "pious," (piëux)[19] devoted to his mistress. His piety makes him devoted to the lady of the moon whom he serves, but there is also an oppositional, perhaps subversive quality to his act of hiding her tears. The woman is silenced; we don't know why she weeps. But the poet's act of concealment, from the controlling, surveillance-like gaze of the sun, suggests that were the woman permitted to speak, her words would have quite an intense impact.

In Kafū's version of the poem, he hints at what Baudelaire's silent feminine figure would say if her voice were allowed to speak out. Kafū accomplishes this by using words that allusively suggest the 1901 poetry collection *Midaregami* (Tangled Hair) by the poet Yosano Akiko (1878-1942), a work famed for its frank, open depiction of female sexuality. Her work is often credited with opening the way for Japanese poetry to be able to portray sexuality in a direct manner,[20] so in a sense, Kafū owed the very idiom he was using for his Baudelaire translations to his feminine precursor, Yosano Akiko. Were it not for Yosano's work and her numerous battles with the censors, it is doubtful that Kafū could have used a phrase such as "*mune no fukurami*" (the swell of

[14] Baudelaire, 65.
[15] Ibid., 66.
[16] Ibid., 65.
[17] Ibid., 66.
[18] Ibid., 66.
[19] Ibid., 66.
[20] For more on Yosano Akiko's foundational role in modern Japanese poetry, see Janine Beichman, *Embracing The Firebird: Yosano Akiko And The Rebirth Of The Female Voice In Modern Japanese Poetry* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002).

her chest) in a poem and still have it read as poetic and literary, rather than offensive.

Kafū pays homage to Yosano Akiko using the word "*Midarete*" ("tangled"), which strongly recalls the title of her work, *Midaregami:*

> おびただしきクッサンに乱れて軽き片手して、[21]
> **tangled** upon numerous cushions, lightly with one hand…

Kafū inserts the word *midarete* even though it has no counterpart in the Baudelaire original. The word "tangled" in Japanese poetry strongly suggests the tangled hair of post-coital disarray, and it is because of this sensual association that Yosano Akiko chose it for the title of her collection. Kafū thus emphasizes the disarray and the sensual pleasure experienced by the woman in the poem, as opposed to Baudelaire who describes only her "languidness" (paresse) and her "distracted" (distraite) quality. The "tangled" or "disarrayed" quality of the woman in Kafū's poem gives her more strength and agency. She is not languid and passive; she is sensual and active. The association with Yosano Akiko suggests the woman's agency as a desiring subject—the very idiom Kafū uses to describe her is owed to a woman's writing about her own sexuality.

What I believe is another reference to Yosano Akiko comes when Kafū translates Baudelaire's "sur ce globe" ("on this globe") as "*gekai no omo ni*"[22] ("on the surface of this lower realm"). The word *gekai* has Buddhist connotations and means this physical world as opposed to a higher spiritual one, or it can also simply mean a view from above of something down below. This word appears in the famous opening poem of Yosano Akiko's *Midaregami*:

> 夜の帳にささめき尽きし星の今を下界の人の鬢のほつれよ[23]
> On night's drapes,
> all whispered out,
> the stars now
> are people of the world below (*gekai*)
> with hair undone

As in Kafū's rendering of Baudelaire, Yosano uses the word *gekai* to suggest a world of flesh and sexuality, removed from the ethereal world of "the stars" (*hoshi*). Where Baudelaire places women in the ethereal realm of the moon and stars, idealized and removed from the fleshly reality of sex, Yosano places the presumably feminine speaker (*kami no hotsure*, or undone hair, suggests a feminine speaker, as the image of tangled hair carries that association

[21] Kafū, 23.
[22] Ibid., 23.
[23] Yosano Akiko, *Midaregami* (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 2000), accessed January 29, 2014, http://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000885/files/51307_47033.html. The translation is mine.

in Japanese poetry) in the world below, the *gekai*, to feel and express desire and to actively pursue her sexuality.

Kafū's rendering of Baudelaire thus brings the idealized feminine beloved a little closer to the world of the flesh, to the *gekai* of the poet. She is still an idealized type, but she has more passion and agency than her French counterpart. This translation choice fits with Kafū's attempts in his fiction to create well-rounded women characters with subjectivities and voices of their own, as discussed by Stephen Snyder.[24] Whereas Baudelaire's poem treats the woman as a silent, ethereal ideal, Kafū's translation hints at the woman's physical, desiring body beneath Baudelaire's ethereal vision of feminine grace, her hair "tangled" by the force of the same passion that Yosano Akiko wrote about in her work.

The hints of the woman's subjectivity that emerge suggest a set of productive parallels with the earlier poem, "Death's Pleasure." The parallel titles "Shi no yorokobi" and "Tsuki no kanashimi," which both feature emotions modified with the particle *no* and a noun, suggest that these translations were produced in a kind of dialogue with each other. What would the woman portrayed in "The Moon's Sorrow" say, if, like the corpse of "Death's Pleasure," she could speak? Like the dead body in "Death's Pleasure," which was decomposed into component parts, flesh (niku) and bone (sekizui), the woman finds herself appreciated for her single, disembodied parts (her "tangled" hair, the "swell of her chest,"), rather than for her body as a whole. Perhaps the poet who gathers her tears is in fact as voracious as the worms and creatures that peck at the scattered body parts of the dead speaker in "Death's Pleasure." Kafū's hints at the woman's own voice; the "tangled," "disarrayed" character of her sexual passion; and her connection to the *gekai,* or the world of flesh and desire, suggest that perhaps she too has the capacity to participate in the kind of orgiastic pleasure of the crowd found in "Death's Pleasures." Perhaps Baudelaire's ethereal, lovely vision of grace in "Sorrows of The Moon" is capable of becoming a voracious, devouring shark who navigates the urban waters of sexuality in "Death's Pleasure."

Kafū's interest in sexuality allows him to explore a range of personae in his Baudelaire translations. In "Shi no yorokobi," he inhabits the persona of the *flaneur*, and explores his subjectivity as one member of the crowd. The *flaneur*'s voice is not singular and hermetic; it is produced by interacting with others. The "flesh which has lost its spirit" (*tamashii wo useshi niku*) revels in its orgiastic connection to the "worms" and "crows" that make up the urban crowd, and in so doing, loses its sense of individuality. Ultimately, the speaker speaks as one of the crowd that has devoured him, with the power to devour others in turn. In "Tsuki no kanashimi," Kafū not only gives voice to the *flaneur*, but also, by alluding to the works of Yosano Akiko, hints at the suppressed voice of a woman expressing her own sexuality. Though Kafū's translations stay with the unified lyric voice

[24] Stephen Snyder, *Fictions Of Desire: Narrative Form In The Novels Of Nagai Kafū* (Honolulu, HI: University Of Hawai'i Press, 2000).

of Baudelaire's poems, they allow hints and echoes of other voices and personae to come through. The *flaneur* is never just himself: his voice carries traces of the other voices he encounters that constitute his own, whether it is the voice of the crowd or the voice of his feminine beloved. In his translations, Kafū draws attention to his own assumptions about these other voices. In his translation of "Tsuki no kanashimi," Kafū proclaims himself as the "pious poet" (*chinshi no shijin*)[25] who faithfully preserves the voice of another, the jewel-like tears of his feminine beloved. Kafū the "pious poet" is an irreverent caretaker of the other voices of which his own is composed, whether it be the voice of Baudelaire, of Yosano Akiko, or of the urban masses who inspire him. Translation for Kafū becomes an orgiastic encounter among textual bodies that lose their mutual individuality and blur together in a concord of disparate voices.

[25] Kafū, 24.