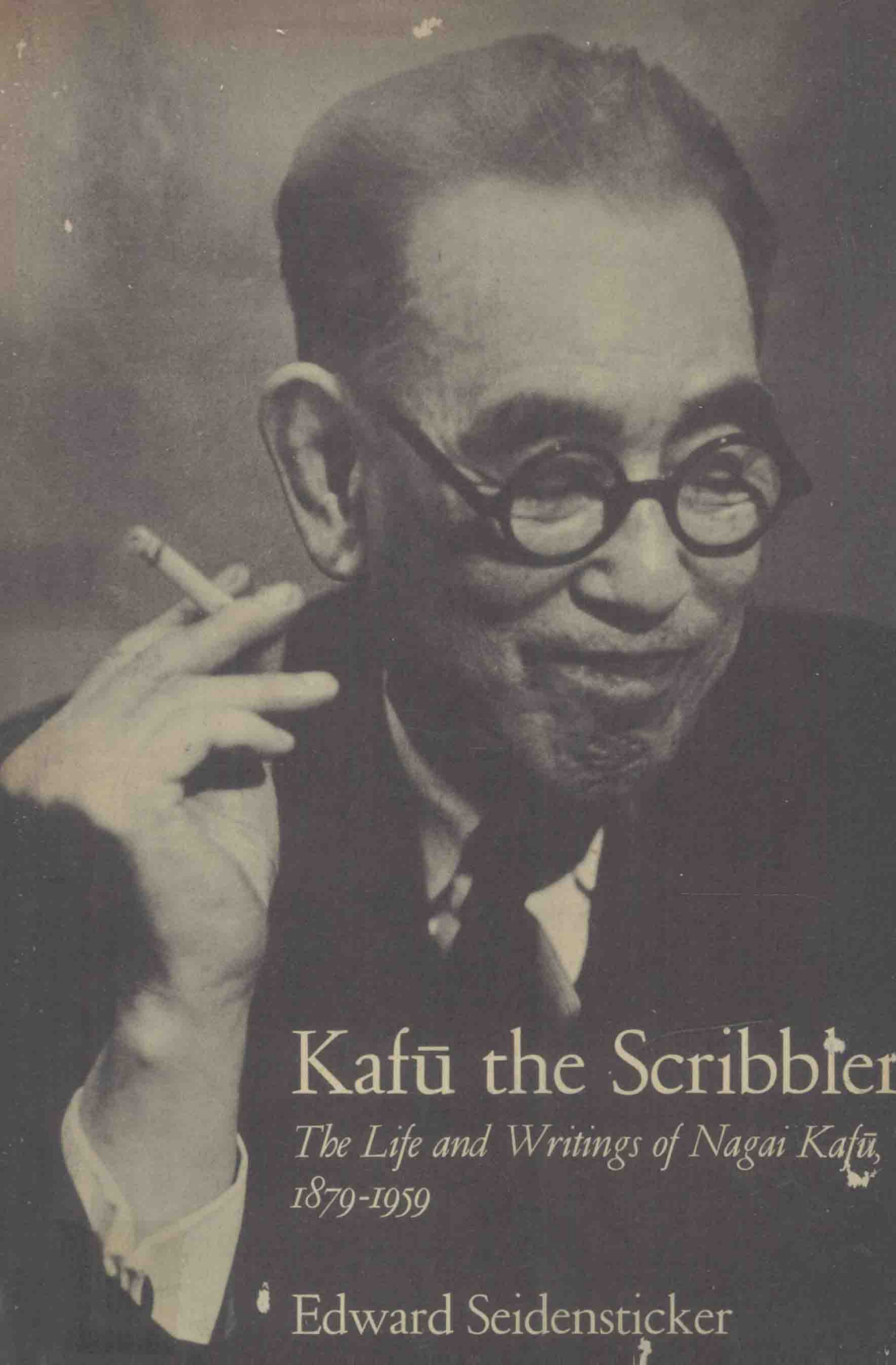

Kafū the Scribbler

The Life and Writings of Nagai Kafū, 1879-1959

Edward Seidensticker

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Nagai Kafū
Self-Portrait, 1932

Preface

This book is based upon two assumptions: that it is possible for an author to be better and more important than any one of his works; and that it is possible for an author to have a certain universal appeal and yet be so firmly attached to a particular setting as to make a knowledge of that setting essential to a complete awareness of the appeal. It follows that a general survey of the writing, together with representative bits and snatches from it, and a description of the setting are necessary if the new reader is to be properly introduced. No single book may seem worthy of translation, and yet the author and his setting may seem worthy of a book.

It is my feeling that Nagai Kafū is such an author. This book is therefore an introduction to the man and his city, accompanied by a fairly generous sampling from his works. It is neither pure biography nor pure criticism nor yet a pure anthology, but a blending of the three. The result will probably seem satisfactory to almost no one, for almost everyone will wish to have had one of the three in a less adulterated form. I doubt, however, if Kafū would have accommodated himself to any other sort of introduction, and I have long thought him one of the fine writers of modern Japan.

It might be argued that the rather fragmentary and in-between form I have chosen is more appropriate for introducing a lyric poet than a novelist. I would reply only that Kafū is a very discursive sort of novelist. Excerpt treatment does not damage the dramatic unity of his works, for there is little dramatic unity in the first place.

Annotation has been limited to identification of obscure persons, works, and places, and again no one is likely to be satisfied. It is hoped that the Bibliographical Note will cover the sources well enough to

make sentence-by-sentence attribution unnecessary. Anyone who wishes to inquire about the sources of particular items will be speedily answered.

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The Japanese name order has been followed throughout the book, with the family name first. When a single element of a name is used, Japanese custom requires that it be a writer's "elegant sobriquet" if he has one. If he has none, the family name is most commonly used. Again, Japanese custom has been respected in this book: Tanizaki (who has no sobriquet), but Kafū.

E. S.

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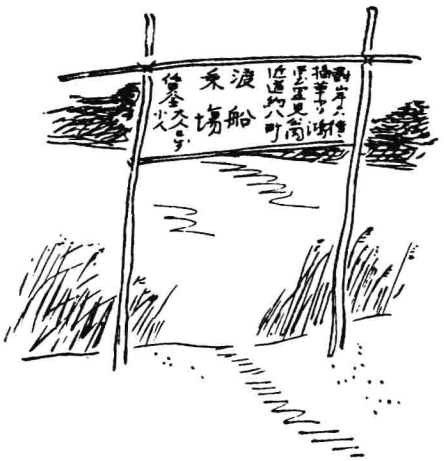
Part one The Life



Chapter one Beginnings

Tokyo in 1879 was a smaller city than it had been a decade earlier, when the Tokugawa Shogunate was overthrown and the young Emperor Meiji took up residence in the city. The mansions and barracks of the military class that had circled the Shogun's castle and sprawled over the hills to the south and west were falling into ruin. The hilly aristocratic regions of the city had always been grim and somber, however, and the changes of the decade had not yet had much effect on the Shitamachi, the flat crescent to the north and east of the castle. The Shitamachi was the land of the artisans and merchants who thought themselves the true sons of Edo, the Shogun's city. To be sure, a new ruling class had moved in from the rustic clans of the far southwest, but the son of Edo could still look around him and see no one approaching him in dash and urbanity.

Yet change was coming, and there was little the Shitamachi could do about it, or even tried very hard to do. "Enlightenment" and "Culture" were in the air. They meant inviting in upon the insular warmth a chilly flood of influences from the Occident. Although the son of Edo may have been a sentimental partisan of the old regime, it was not he, but a dissident group of rustics from the southwest, who presently took arms against the Westernizing Meiji government. The last overt resistance had been put down by 1879, and the city, aristocratic hills and plebeian lowlands alike, was poised on the edge of Enlightenment. The population of Tokyo more than trebled in the next four decades. An occasional rumor that red bricks caused beriberi could, it is true, bring a brief return to the traditional, but red bricks were taking over the Ginza district, the commercial heart of Tokyo. Shimbashi Station and the foreign settlement at Tsukiji were already in

existence, windows on the world. In short, the city was ready for the great leap, whatever its native sons may have thought about the prospect.

Nagai Kafū (or Sōkichi) was born on December 3, 1879, in the Koishikawa district of Tokyo. That day, according to the almanacs, was the unluckiest in the whole Chinese cycle of sixty days, a circumstance in which Kafū was later to take some pride. In those days still on the outskirts of Tokyo, Koishikawa was soon to have the city spilling all around it, and today it is quite engulfed. Urbanization has been able to do little to change its steep hills, but the "pebble brook," the *koishikawa* that gave the district its name, has been driven underground, and the willows and arched bridges of the old guidebooks to Edo are gone. The greatest estate in old Koishikawa, the Kōrakuen of the Mito Tokugawa family, now houses a baseball stadium and an amusement park, and the greatest temple, the Denzūin, mortuary chapel of the mother of the first Tokugawa Shogun, has crumbled away to dusty insignificance. Meanwhile Koishikawa has become a sort of Inner Queensborough, neither in nor yet away from the heart of the city.

Kafū was born almost within throwing distance of the Denzūin and the Kōrakuen. While he was growing up, there were still holdouts from Edo to be observed on the grounds of the Denzūin, most notably a young carpenter known as Demon Tome: "He had a demon mask tattooed all across his back, and his head, save for the topknot, was always a freshly shaven blue-black. He was a handsome and awesome young man. In those days many people still wore topknots, but most of them were over forty. I shall always be grateful to Demon Tome, who gave me a last, fleeting glimpse of the Edo craftsman with all his verve, the sort of artisan who was kept alive on the stage by Kikugorō." (v, 325–26.)*

As for the Kōrakuen, even after being turned into a military arsenal, it was a place to stir the childish imagination: "The blue skies, the roofs of the houses, the trees by the road—everything along the way gave rise to vague, indefinable fears," he was to write later of trips to his grandmother's house. "In particular, the road down Tomisaka Hill from the Denzūin, past the earthen wall of the arsenal and

* Except when otherwise indicated, all references are to the Chūō Kōron edition of Kafū's works.

the deep, dark groves inside, seemed truly terrifying.... Today a streetcar runs down the hill. That laminated gray wall of tile and earth and the high stone embankment from which it rose have disappeared, and most of the trees seem to have been cut down. Whenever I pass on a streetcar, I look out at it, but nothing is left to call back the old darkness and terror." (v, 330–31.)

There were strange and mysterious spots immediately at hand, too, such as the Nagai garden, which contained dark groves and much wild life. At one time it even harbored a fox, most sinister and non-urban of creatures. Then there were slopes with sinister names, such as Christian Hill, suggesting to the true child of Edo outlandish conspiracies against Lord Tokugawa. And these various mysteries were but a beginning, for Koishikawa lay on the outermost circle of the Tokugawa city, the circle of temples and cemeteries. Kafū was still a child when his family left Koishikawa, but he was to continue going for walks through the district and to write about them long after the groves had been cut down and most of the cemeteries moved. When he died, his brother found a map of the Koishikawa house and grounds in his desk.

Although love for the old city and anger at the Enlightenment that was destroying it were to be the controlling passions of Kafū's life, he could not claim to be a real Edo man. He suffered from a twofold handicap: Koishikawa was not a part of the Shitamachi; nor was his family a part of Edo—the true child of Edo was not made in a generation. Kafū's family was from the Nagoya region. It belonged to the prosperous landowning class and not, strictly speaking, to the military class proper; but its affinities were with the latter rather than with the merchants and artisans of Edo. One sometimes detects, in among Kafū's ill-tempered remarks about the rustic Meiji bureaucrat and entrepreneur, a note of envy at the purer pedigree of such colleagues as Tanizaki Junichirō, born in the Shitamachi to an Edo merchant family.

Rebellion against the family was common enough among sensitive young people of the day, but the conflict was generally a rather simple one between up-to-date liberation and old-fashioned restraints. In Kafū's case, the rebellion, when in due course it came, was of a more ambiguous nature. His family was simultaneously too new and too old for him. His father, Nagai Kagen (or Hisaichirō) was in many

ways one of the new men, a successful businessman and bureaucrat. Educated in the West and an admirer of the West, Kagen was an important functionary in the Ministry of Education and later an executive of Nippon Yūsen Kaisha (Japan Mail Lines), and so a servant of the entrepreneurs who were redoing the country. He also seems to have admitted elements of the new in the methods he chose for educating his children. In imitation of Western ways, Kafū wore short pants and short hair to primary school. The Japanese convention called for covered legs and a bare scalp.

Yet Kafū's father was also on the side of Confucian restraints. Thoroughly trained in the Chinese classics, he was able to turn out a passable Chinese poem. He was among the drafters of the Imperial Education Rescript, the definitive statement that Japanese education would be authoritarian, and similar biases seem to have affected his behavior toward his children. He would not allow melons in the house, to cite one minor piece of willfulness, for he thought them vulgar. Kafū was the eldest son, and so the child most heavily barraged with Confucian notions of family responsibility. Kagen, then, was on the side of newness without liberation, and Kafū's rebellion aimed at oldness without restraints. The Edo of his dreams became a place of beauty without fathers; and his father, neither wholly new nor wholly old, a sort of distillation of what he most disliked in the Meiji Period. Had Kagen found it possible to be more completely the Tokugawa authoritarian, matters might have been easier.

There were also ambiguities on his mother's side. His maternal grandfather was a well-known Confucian scholar, whose biography Kafū was to write. Yet his grandmother and mother were both Christians, and the older of his two brothers, adopted into the mother's family, became a Protestant minister. Kafū's father was given Christian burial, though he died too suddenly to have had any say in the matter. The mother had other exotic tastes, too. One day, when still a very small boy, Kafū came home from school to find guests whom he, the family heir, was required to greet. They proved to be two large, pale British ladies, and they gave him a real start. In general, though, Kafū's writing indicates that this adventuresome convert to the new was a model Japanese housewife, frugal and self-effacing, and not one to oppose the Confucian edicts of her husband.

The grandmother was perhaps the deepest enigma of all. She took care of Kafū during a considerable part of his childhood, and it was from her house, in the Shitaya district of Tokyo, that he started going to school. The trip from the Koishikawa house to Shitaya was mysterious, leading past the Kōrakuen, and the Shitaya house was even more mysterious, a dark, empty place with suits of armor in the niches and crows cawing on the roof. Its destruction in the earthquake of 1923 was to be the occasion for Kafū's biography of his grandfather, which was written as much in memory of the house as in memory of his grandfather. The grandmother combined a most Christian manner toward Kafū (who seems to have been excessively grandmothered) with a core of old-world sternness.

Kafū was to write of the enigma later, in an essay called "The House in Shitaya": "I shall not go into the details of my grandmother's funeral. I shall only say that the Shitaya house, where I first saw those two incompatible forces, the sword and the cross, has come to seem indescribably strange." (v, 342–43.) How, he asks, could his grandmother, who had once taken a sword from the wall and defended her house in a most dramatic samurai fashion, have embraced the sweet, apparently permissive alien religion?

It was not always easy for sensitive young minds to accept the delicate mating, effected by their elders, of new methods to old restraints, and Kafū was not in every way the sort of eldest son to delight a Confucian father. There were early signs that he was not concentrating on his studies. As a middle-school student he once sold his overcoat to buy a *shakuhachi* flute, and he went for his *shakuhachi* lessons to the Yanagibashi geisha quarter. His fellow students included such austere persons as Marshal Terauchi, who was to lead the Japanese advance into Southeast Asia in 1942. He seems to have found them unsympathetic, and several decades later he stayed away from the funeral of an admired teacher for fear of meeting some of them. His great friend, one of the few men of whom he was to write with any affection, was a boy named Inoue Seiichi (his pen name was Aa), something of an authority on Edo erotic literature and customs. Inoue was later to affect the ways of the déclassé Edo writer and to die of drink. Kafū himself early read the amatory works of Tamenaga Shunsui, an important fiction writer of late Edo, disguising them as text-

books; and he made trips to the public library to copy out "secret" passages of Saikaku, the great seventeenth-century storyteller.

To the pull of the Edo past was added the sensuous pull of the present city, and new pleasures in which Inoue acted as guide and companion. While still in their teens, the two of them would go off together to the Yoshiwara, the most venerable of the pleasure quarters. Inoue seems to have sold parts of his family library to help pay for the excursions. Kafū later pleaded illness as the excuse for these happenings: "I have been used to illness since my early youth. Illness was so frequent from my teens to my mid-twenties that I may call myself lucky to have survived. Thinking that later regrets would be bad compensation for a youth not properly savored, I first visited the North Quarter at the age of eighteen, all by myself, on my way back from a call on an acquaintance at Ryūsenji." (XI, 92.)*

The moods of Shunsui were still to be found in the daytime city, too. Kafū was later to recall how he made excuses to stay behind while the family was off summering on the Shōnan coast. He would go boating on the Sumida River, and there, in sight of the banks so dear to Shunsui, read the forbidden books. "However violent the assaults of new ideas," he said, "I shall never be able to see the banks of the Sumida apart from the literature of Edo." (V, 280.) Despite the factory chimneys that were already going up on the far bank, sensuous, unthinking Edo still came back on the summer air, for "it is the summer that makes life in Tokyo most beautiful. . . . Bamboo cages with singing insects, painted fans, mosquito nets, sweet-smelling reed blinds and awnings, bells tinkling in the night breeze, lanterns, dwarf plants set into miniature landscapes—where else are there appurtenances of such delicacy? . . . Sometimes, walking along a canal of a summer evening, I have found myself drunk with a mood as of hearing a samisen somewhere—in a courtesan's room, perhaps, in a scene from Mokuami's 'The Robbers.' " (V, 287–88.)

Illness may be blamed in part for his failure to follow the most admired academic course. An intestinal ailment kept him in bed through much of 1895, and he spent long months at a seaside hospital in Odawara and at the family's villa in Zushi, south of Tokyo.

In 1897 he entered the Chinese department of the School of Foreign

* The Yoshiwara was known as "the North Quarter."

Studies. He had earlier taken lessons in Chinese poetry, and in the same year, 1897, he had spent some months in Shanghai, where his father, having left the Ministry of Education, was branch manager for the Japan Mail Lines. The family had already left Koishikawa, tentatively in 1890 and finally in 1896. One of the houses they occupied conjured up all kinds of sinister forms of life: "My father once had an official house in Kōjimachi. . . . The garden gave way abruptly to a cliff on which grew bamboo thickets, and these I must describe as quite terrifying. Late on summer evenings, scores of toads would come crawling out and lie like rocks strewn over the garden. Beyond the garden and a narrow street was a rise, on which the back of the German Legation could be seen, again through heavy groves. Having been nourished on Japanese superstition as a child, I would think on cold nights of ghosts and the like, and forcing myself out alone over the pitch-black veranda to the privy, I would look through the torn paper of the window and see, deep in the trees on the cliff, the brightly lighted windows of that Occidental mansion. I would hear piano music, and think what an inconceivably strange thing the life of a foreigner was." (x, 215–16.)

Of Kafū's career in the School of Foreign Studies there is little to say except that he scarcely went near the place and failed to graduate. Other things occupied his attention. He had written his first short stories while still in middle school. They seem to have been in the manner of Tamenaga Shunsui, stronger on incident than character, and they do not survive. The very first was about a nurse who attended him during his long illness, and who, it is said, was his first love. She, too, was responsible for his "elegant sobriquet" or pen name, Kafū (his legal name was Sōkichi). She was called O-hasu, "Miss Lotus," and Kafū means "Lotus Breeze." His literary efforts were concealed from his family. The art of fiction had been frowned upon by the Tokugawa Shogunate and was still not admired in conservative families.

These efforts began in earnest after the return of the family from Shanghai. Japanese practice required that he enroll himself as the disciple of some literary elder, and so, armed with four or five stories, he went knocking at the gate of Hirotsu Ryūrō, and was admitted. This was in 1898.

Ryūrō was not precisely an elder, being at the time in his late thir-