

NOTES AND REVIEWS

Naturalism in Japan: Natsume Sōseki's *Michikusa*

There is no general agreement as to what the term "naturalism" means. Depending on the individual, the country, and the time, interpretations and definitions vary considerably. In terms of literary history, however, "naturalism" can be more easily identified: when we think of "Naturalism," we usually think of the movement centered around Emile Zola in France and Arno Holz in Germany. The historical factors that shaped this movement were the Industrial Revolution, the belief in science and progress, and the theories of evolution. Naturalistic writers shared a gloomy outlook on life; at the same time they were convinced that it was the artist's duty to depict man, society, the world as he found it—however depressing this reality might be. Man was no longer considered by everybody to be God's creation, endowed with a free will; in fact man was little better than an animal, biologically determined by heredity, and sociologically conditioned by his environment. No wonder Zola demanded that a writer should observe and dissect man like a surgeon, that he should analyze his mental and physiological setup and show how the "bête humaine" reacts under certain circumstances.

At the turn of the century, European naturalism became known in Japan. Like almost everything Western at that time, it was eagerly adopted and imitated. For the Japanese intellectual of the Meiji period (1868-1912), however, the naturalistic theory did not simply mean a further step forward in the continuity of cultural development, as it did for the European intellectual. To the Japanese intellectual, naturalistic theory meant in many respects an antithesis to his own cultural tradition. It is not surprising, therefore, that the works of the Japanese naturalists turned out to be very different from those of their European colleagues. Arima Tatsuo sums it up this way: "Preoccupied with the emancipation of the self, the naturalists often deteriorated into insufferable egoists, identifying all others with society as incubus."¹ Of special concern to the Japanese naturalists were man's "antisocial" impulses and passions; what Arima states (p. 77) of Tayama Katai (1871-1930) is true for many other writers as well: "Thus, through fictionalization, the deterministic factor in human action is internalized into the drives of lust and passion. Leaving the intricacies of environment untouched or unanalyzed—presumably on grounds of stylistic principle—Tayama described his hero's catastrophe in terms of what might be called libertine determinism." Whereas in Europe the naturalistic writers concerned themselves with social outcasts and underprivileged groups, dissecting their lives like surgeons, the Japanese naturalists "were thrown back upon the literary analysis of the self, and the full-scale emancipation ended in the genre of shishōsetsu (I-novel)."²

Natsume Sōseki (1867-1916) is—together with Mori Ōgai (1862-1922)—the most eminent writer of the Meiji period. He does not belong to the Japanese school of naturalism (though he was well aware of it); usually he is considered by literary critics as belonging to no movement or school. On occasion, he has been called an idealist, an impressionist, and even an "anti-Naturalist."³ But is he not really a naturalistic writer in the European sense? It is, of course, an oversimplification to call Sōseki's whole oeuvre *tranches de vie* in the European naturalists' manner.⁴ There are, however, elements in some of Sōseki's works that are strongly reminiscent of European naturalism—and nowhere more so than in his autobiographical novel *Grass on the Wayside* (*Michikusa*).⁵

What is *Michikusa* all about? It can be summed up in a few sentences: Kenzō, a University professor recently returned from Europe, must come to terms with his past and with his own life. Up till now, Kenzō has lived—more or less—in a world of Western thought; in a way, Japanese society had rejected him. Kenzō had been born when his parents were already rather old; they had felt embarrassed to have another child at their age. When Kenzō had been about two years old, they had given him up for adoption. But it had not worked out, and six years later they had reluctantly taken him back again. In order to escape the indifference of his father and the possessiveness and greed of his foster father Shimada, Kenzō had wanted to make something of himself and to leave his past behind: “He was old enough then—exactly how old, he could not now remember—to be ambitious; he wanted to study hard and become important” (p. 149). Like any Western youth, Kenzō had believed in individual freedom and accomplishment; now he feels superior because of his education and because of the work he is doing. Sometimes he wonders how he has managed to become what he is—but “there was conceit in the question, for it not only suggested a pride in having overcome his environment but assumed also that he was now what he had wanted to become” (p. 149). For the sake of his personal freedom, Kenzō has willingly accepted poverty: “He did not mind being poor so long as he believed himself to be superior in other respects” (p. 96). The climax of Kenzō’s education has been his stay in Europe; now that he has returned to Japan, he wants to accomplish “something worthwhile” (p. 92). What exactly Kenzō wants to accomplish, Sōseki does not say; it can be inferred, however, that it would be in line with Western thinking: a scientific book for instance.

But Kenzō, full of ambition and self-confidence, is deceiving himself. The cruel irony of the story lies in the fact that Sōseki presents Kenzō as a self-centered person who believes in his individual power to decide and arrange his life, who toils hard to achieve his aims, while in reality all his actions are determined by his environment and by the past which has shaped his character.

Kenzō realizes neither what the West really means to him nor what role his own past plays in his life. On the one hand, he wants to leave the West behind: “The smell of the alien land that he had left not so long ago seemed still to linger about his body. He detested it, and told himself he had to get rid of it” (p. 3). The narrator, however, gives Kenzō’s attitude a different twist: “That he [Kenzō] was also rather proud of it [his experience in the alien land], that it gave him a certain sense of accomplishment, he did not know” (p. 3). On the other hand, Kenzō also resents his Japanese past—he believes he has overcome the limitations of Japanese tradition. When Kenzō’s wife, his sister, his brother, his foster father, his in-laws start to make demands on Kenzo’s time, money, and sympathy, Kenzō feels threatened in his very existence: “They all carried with them the stink of decay. And his life was tied to theirs by blood and a shared past” (p. 39). Soon Kenzō’s life becomes intolerable: His job leaves him hardly any time for his own work. The demands made on him by his wife and relations exhaust him. “He noted the contrast between the past and the present. He wondered at how such a past could have developed into such a present. But he failed to note that it was in the present that he suffered” (p. 150).

As the story progresses, Kenzō loses more and more of the little freedom he might have possessed; it is not *he* who arranges things—things happen to him. His foster father—“a ghost of the past” (p. 74) to Kenzō—starts to pester Kenzō for money; his in-laws need money; his sister is sick and needs money, his brother is sick, his wife is expecting a baby. The narrator describes Kenzō’s

reaction: "He was beginning to tire of being neither rich nor accomplished. But it was too late for a man as ignorant of the ways of the world as he to start trying to make money. On the other hand, he was beset by too many worries to do well what he wanted to do. . . . He felt quite lost, not knowing where to turn (p. 92). There is no relief for Kenzō in his family life; his children fear him, his wife and he do not understand each other. Though there is a bond between them, they can never stop quarrelling: "Others might say that they were perversely trying to perpetuate a state of disharmony between themselves. But in fact the unhappy situation was no more controllable than their own stubborn characters" (p. 129). The way Kenzō was brought up has turned him into a reserved egocentric who cannot show affection even when he feels affectionate.

More and more Kenzō is drawn into the past, less and less can he ignore the resulting social obligations. "He tried to cut his life in two, the past and the present. Yet the past refused to be sliced off, and was with him constantly. His eyes were focused on the future, yet his legs took him in the opposite direction" (p. 61). In the end, Kenzō learns to pity the people around him: are they not all living in some sort of hell, and have they not even less money than he? He pities his wife whom he compares to an animal: "You find contentment in your children. You have paid dearly for it, and though you may not know it, you'll go on paying for it. Even in your contentment you're to be pitied" (p. 153).

Kenzō is not able, however, to see himself with the same clarity. It is the narrator who shows that Kenzō is no less to be pitied: "He had fought with Shimada, he had continued to hate Otsune [his foster mother], he had moved away from his brother and sister and from his father-in-law—all because of what he was now. He had survived to the present, it was true; but in a sense one could pity this man who had in the process of surviving turned himself into what he was" (p. 150). Life will not change much for Kenzō now, even though he has managed to earn a little extra money to pay Shimada. He will struggle on, he will become older, he will become sicker, but there will be no more hope. Kenzō's last words in the novel are not optimistic: "Hardly anything in this life is settled. Things that happen once will go on happening. But they come back in different guises, and that's what fools us" (p. 169).

Sōseki has exposed the dream of individual freedom, of development and accomplishment as an illusion; all man can do is to struggle in order to survive. Whether Sōseki was conscious of using European naturalistic motifs or not, does not really matter; the fact remains that Sōseki portrayed man as a victim of environment just as his European colleagues had done. There are other features of European naturalism present in *Michikusa*: the tone of the novel is somber, there is no defined crisis, no solution. Man's problem is survival, and therefore, ultimately, there is no hope. *Michikusa* is not violent like *Thérèse Raquin*, not "immoral" like *Nana*. Kenzō is neither hero nor outcast; his milieu is characterized by squalid banality rather than by an extreme deprivation. *Michikusa*, written by a dying man, is, in effect, a disturbing picture of the human condition in general and makes unforgettable, though depressing reading. As to the "typical" Japanese element in the novel, it is the Japanese structure of society, its system of social relations and obligations which is criticized.

Sōseki lets an omniscient narrator tell the story (which the European naturalist—at least in theory—tried to avoid), but there is just as much psychological dissection in *Michikusa* as in *Thérèse Raquin*. The fact that the narrator puts a noticeable distance between Kenzō and himself improves the

objectivity of the story: Kenzō's own subjective analyses of his situation are supplemented and corrected by the observations of the narrator. In this way Sōseki avoids the dangers inherent in autobiographical writing: there is no self-pity, no distorting of facts to gain the reader's sympathy for the hero.

One might argue that Sōseki, in *Michikusa*, expressed his preference for the Japanese way of life—in contrast to the Western way of life. Kenzō has become a rather repulsive outsider, one might argue; therefore it is "right" that he should suffer. But I think such an interpretation would miss the point. Kenzō has no choice; besides, all other persons in the novel—who have no Western education and have never left Japan—suffer too. Soseki's Japan is undergoing a period of development which can be compared to the Industrial Revolution in Europe 50 years earlier. Kenzo is a symbol of the active "Western" trend in Japan, while his relatives cling passively to Japan's traditions. As long as no valid compromise can be reached, both parties have to suffer.

In contrast to Kenzō, Sōseki himself succeeded in accommodating East and West. In *Michikusa*, European method and thought blend well with Japanese milieu and traditions. Of course, Soseki knew Western literature well. But there is another aspect to consider—the aspect of natural affinity. The Japanese Zen-Buddhist concept of man and the European naturalists' theory of man as a victim of environment are less far apart than one might think at first glance. Sōseki had studied the philosophy of Zen in depth;⁶ fatalism of any kind must have seemed to him a confirmation of Buddhist ideas. On the other hand, the brothers Goncourt (who played an important role in "launching" the naturalistic movement in France), Daudet, and Zola shared—with the Impressionist painters—the desire for truth; the painters as well as the writers wanted to render reality just as they saw it. The painters found inspiration (and the confirmation of their ideas) in the work of *Japanese* painters, whose *kakemono* (scrolls), *byōbu* (screens) and *ukiyo-e* (woodblock prints) were just then becoming famous in Europe. Is it surprising that the brothers Goncourt, Daudet, and Zola became ardent lovers of Japanese art? In Japanese art they found truth, and also a new style to express this truth; in 1864, the Goncourts wrote in their *Journal*: "L'art chinois et surtout l'art japonais, ces arts qui paraissent aux yeux bourgeois d'une si invraisemblable fantaisie, sont puisés à la nature même. Tout ce qu'ils font est emprunté à l'observation. Ils rendent ce qu'ils voient . . ."⁷ At the base of this "naturalistic" Japanese art is the Buddhist philosophy of Zen. Zen gives it its depth, its real meaning. The very name of the woodblock prints—*ukiyo-e* or "pictures of the floating world"—illustrates this fact: it underlines the transient quality of all worldly pleasures, of the world itself. It also reminds man that he is a part of nature, not its master.

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¹Tatsuo Arima, *The Failure of Freedom: A Portrait of Modern Japanese Intellectuals* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 75.

²Tatsuo Arima, p. 81.

³Masao Miyoshi, *Accomplices of Silence: The Modern Japanese Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), p. 73. Miyoshi concedes, however, that in *Michikusa* Sôseki "gave in somewhat to the naturalistic pressures . . ." (p. 74).

⁴Donald Keene, *Japanese Literature: An Introduction For Western Readers* (London: John Murray, 1953), p. 99.

⁵Sôseki Natsume, *Grass on the Wayside (Michikusa)*, trans. and Introd. Edwin McClellan, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974). Subsequent page references will be indicated in the text.

⁶Sôseki's fascination with Zen is evident in several of his works, specially in his novel *The Gate (Mon)*.

⁷Edmond et Jules de Goncourt, *Journal: Mémoires de la vie littéraire*, ed. Robert Ricatte (Paris: Fasquelle et Flammarion, 1956-58), p. 245.