

J. THOMAS RIMER

Modern Japanese Fiction and Its Traditions: An Introduction.

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978. Pp. 313.

Unlike most modern literature of the West, modern Japanese literature was not the result of a gradual process of development; with the opening of the country to Western culture and civilization and with the beginning of the Meiji restoration (1868), Japanese writers experienced a culture shock. The impact of Western literature, art, and philosophy brought about a sudden and complete change in *Weltanschauung*, style, and choice of subject—or so it seemed. The importance of European and American authors and their works for the development of modern Japanese fiction (as well as for that of poetry and the theater) is, of course, undisputed. But for too long, critics have stressed the element of “influence” and neglected the fact that modern Japanese fiction is also firmly rooted in Japanese tradition.

For many years now, good translations of Japanese fiction have been available to the Western reader; the success of those translations is due perhaps more to the “modern” quality of those novels and stories which every reader can appreciate, than to their “exotic” quality which—however entrancing it may be—remains essentially beyond the Western reader’s comprehension. No complete understanding is possible if the reader is not aware of the typically Japanese elements in this fiction. J. Thomas Rimer’s book has, therefore, an important role to play. His study is not simply an introduction to modern Japanese prose literature for the nonspecialist; his main aim is “to indicate certain structural principles important in the tradition of Japanese narrative fiction” (p. vii).

Rimer discusses works by Junichirō Tanizaki (*A Portrait of Shunkin*, *The Bridge of Dreams*), Sōseki Natsume (*Kusamakura*), Akinari Ueda (*Tales of Moonlight and Rain*), Kafū Nagai (*The River Sumida*), Ōgai Mori (*Sanshō the Steward*), Yasunari Kawabata (*Snow Country*), Osamu Dazai (*The Setting Sun*), Masuji Ibuse (*Black Rain*), Shūsaku Endō (*Silence*), Takeshi Kaiko (*Darkness in Summer*) and Kōbō Abe (*The Box Man*) as well as *Tales of Ise*, *The Tale of Genji* and *The*

Tale of Heike. The author did not attempt to create a theoretical framework into which all the works mentioned would fit, rather he shows the reader those aspects of and attitudes to tradition which are most apparent in each individual work. The past, we realize, is kept alive as a nostalgic memory or subjected to a critical examination; the literary masterpieces of the past are still important source books, but the past also serves as a topic in itself; it is foil and counterpart for the present and remains a basis of all concepts of style and aesthetic value.

In choosing the works treated in this book, Rimer has—as he states—paid little attention to whether they are representative or not: he has followed his personal inclinations. His psychological insight into the narratives and his deep understanding of the often hardly definable aesthetic quality of Japanese fiction make Rimer’s interpretations outstanding and a joy to read. Rimer’s book is the response to a real need, and no one interested in Japanese literature—be it comparatist or general reader—should miss it. An appendix with Donald Keene’s translation of “The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter” and extensive quotations in the book encourage further reading. In a second edition, the author might consider enlarging chapter XII, which deals with contemporary writers somewhat briefly (Ibuse, Endo, Kaiko, Abe), and he should add a bibliography of critical works in Western languages.

Ingrid Schuster

EVA M. THOMPSON

Witold Gombrowicz

Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979.
Pp. 171.

“This book has been written as a concise analysis of Gombrowicz’s literary work” (p. 9). The claim is substantiated in an admirable way in Thompson’s contribution to Twayne World Authors Series, despite some rather daunting requirements of the format of the Series, for which, needless to say, the authors are not responsible.

Gombrowicz, novelist, playwright, thinker, enfant terrible, known mainly for