

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

his novels *Ferdydurke*, *Pornografia*, and *Cosmos*, is arguably the most significant postwar Polish writer, though he spent much of his life stranded in Argentina. Thompson's work is the first scholarly introduction to Gombrowicz's life and work in English.

The format of the Twayne Series requires that the author present a picture both of the writer and of his literary work. Thompson disposes of Gombrowicz's life in a short chapter sketched with elegant understatement, directing our attention to Gombrowicz the artist and to his unique seeing of the world. Those who are titillated by Gombrowicz the scandal-monger will have to look elsewhere.

Having disembarassed herself from the tricky biography, Thompson concentrates first on the general discussion of short stories, plays, novels, and *Journal* (Chapters 2-5), and then devotes herself to the particularly fascinating areas of Gombrowicz's accomplishment: the language, the rhetoric, and his universe (Chapters 6, 7, 10). Gombrowicz's provocative treatment of female characters inspires the chapter "Women and Other Trivia" (Chapter 8), and his relationship with the greats of literature is discussed separately as well (Chapter 9).

The strength of Thompson's book lies in the discussion of Gombrowicz's novels and *Journal*, though one wishes that she would write about the latter with more abandon. The short stories, inevitably, come out flatly in paraphrase, and the summaries of plays do even less for those who would like to learn about Gombrowicz the playwright. This, of course, is less the fault of Thompson than that of the singular character of plays, which fare badly off the stage. One expects a work from the pen of a drama critic who would interpret to us the difficult, but apparently theatrically very successful plays with which Thompson's reader otherwise gains but a casual acquaintanceship.

If we are to sum up, allowing for simplification, Thompson introduces us to the writer as an artist, experimenter, and thinker. As an artist, Gombrowicz is influenced by and reacts shockingly to the native and foreign literary traditions and influences. Sienkiewicz, Mickiewicz, and Dostoevsky are some of the influential figures selected for discussion here.

The experimenter in Gombrowicz uses neologisms, neo-baroque language, archaisms. Rhetorically speaking, Thompson makes a good case when pointing out the "principle of reduction" (p. 112) as a device that "deforms" objects, achieving a striking effect, especially when coupled with Gombrowicz's "surface realism."

As a thinker (the artist, the experimenter, and the thinker are one), Gombrowicz is situated, or rather located with the help of unlikely markers: Nietzsche, Catholicism, modern Psychology. He is a "post-Freudian writer" (p. 149). The writer's preoccupation with "Form" ("the totality of communicative efforts between people, all that arises as a result of the duel of wills," p. 77) suggests to Thompson the comparison with Jacques Lacan. Lacan, the fashionable, if little understood, high priest of the latest amalgam of Freudianism, Marxism, and structuralism—the flotsam of the most spectacular intellectual shipwrecks of our time—is compared to Gombrowicz, as if to underscore the latter's originality, his prescience, his legitimacy as an innovative thinker. But this is gratuitous. For even though granted so dubious an honor (to sit, on the dais, next to Lacan!!), Gombrowicz's excursus into structuralism reads now as an unintended satire of much of the fashionable discourse beloved of structuralists; it even reads as an unintended parody of "deconstruction": a feat in magical anachronism.

The conclusion Thompson reaches about the universe of Gombrowicz is communicated to us with the help of the myth of Sisyphus, "incessant development is man's most important point of reference" (p. 156). There is a split between the "I" and "Form" we are told. But, it is possible to enjoy the show. Sisyphus does not reach the top of the mountain, there is no defeat. This may be a correct view, all told, but, to this reader at least, it is too cheerful. It leaves out the stark, cold, frightful world of bestial passions, of blood, horror, and darkness of soul.

Gombrowicz is a difficult, strikingly original, and highly provocative author who moves freely in areas where few dare to peek. That, alas, does not constitute a guarantee of lasting success or influence, nor is it desirable in principle. What may be lasting is Gombrowicz's art, his mastery of language, his consciousness of an opening offered to him by the bizarre combination of the talent, the superior knowledge of

native and foreign literary traditions, the thirst for the forbidden, and the uprootedness—both physical and spiritual.

Ewa Thompson gives us an insight into Gombrowicz's art and life in a concise but thorough way. Her analysis of a very difficult work is invariably helpful, and therefore to be welcomed and recommended.

Peter Petro

MANUEL SCORZA  
*La tumba del relámpago*  
Mexico City: Siglo XXI Editores,  
1979. Pp. 280.

Manuel Scorza, a Peruvian self-exiled in Mexico, has seen his works translated into no less than 22 different languages (see *IFR*, 5, No. 2 [1978], 169). The importance of *La tumba del relámpago*, his latest work, lies in the fact that it is one of the few *indigenista* novels written lately in Latin America. At the same time, it is the closing part of a cycle of five novels in which Scorza purported to describe the struggle of the Indians of Central Peru to defend or to regain from the oligarchy their ancestral lands. The title, "The Tomb of the Lightning," betrays the pessimistic outlook that characterizes this work. The "lightning" is a great but fugacious Indian triumph, soon to be suppressed by the right-wing dictatorship. The story—set during the Prado administration in the late fifties—follows the same pattern as most Spanish American novels of social protest; an exposition of grievances, an uprising, and the final imprisonment or massacre of the revolutionaries. But the book also exposes new views: the ever-present influence of the Cuban Revolution on the Latin American mind, the theory that at least in Peru the farmers, and not the factory workers, are the revolutionary vanguard, and the view of the proletariat as the only vital force in the subcontinent. Artistic resources from the writer's pen are varied: interior monologues, translation of Indian metaphors into Spanish, a wealth of Indian sayings

and folklore, and the introduction of living persons—including the author himself—as characters. The end of the novel reinforces the hopelessness of the Indian cause. But through the entire cycle of five novels a progression can be detected: in each, every uprising has grown bigger, to reach in the fifth and last part an almost national scale.

Evelio Echevarría

LES MURRAY  
*The Peasant Mandarin: Prose Pieces*  
Queensland: University of  
Queensland Press, 1978. Pp. 269.

Many of the farcical peculiarities of common Australian speech have become known around the world thanks to Digger troop movements in various wars, to a tourist exodus from Australia by both culturally-cringing and cheerfully philistine Strines, and most recently to the authentic sound-tracks of our movies released for overseas distribution. Less well known to the world at large, however, is that in the sixties and seventies Australian poets, novelists, and dramatists have added vital new dimensions to our native speech as Australian literature moves with increasing confidence towards international recognition. Les Murray, poet and essayist, fights in the vanguard of this movement. In Europe he would be termed an "enfant terrible." In Australia he is a "sabre-toothed wombat" who was wont to emerge unpredictably from his lonely Boeotian lair in the northern mountain ranges of New South Wales to amble down to our cultural metropolises and there cheerfully savage the Establishment, the academic literati and the conservative booboisie. He writes aggressive, witty prose that matches his forthright, eccentric ideas. His satiric anger against both the wilful and the unwitting corruption of language by his lesser contemporaries in Australia is as devastating as that of Karl Kraus for German-speaking central Europe and H. L. Mencken for the U.S.A. earlier in this century. Murray deplores the "ugly jargon words of modern educated speech, snaggy plywood terms like periodicity and refractory" and lam-