

FLORINA ILIS, *Introducere în istoria literaturii japoneze de la începuturi până în epoca modernă* [Introduction to the history of Japanese literature from its beginning to the modern age]
(Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2020)

The volume *Introducere în istoria literaturii japoneze de la începuturi până în epoca modernă* [Introduction to the history of Japanese literature from its beginning to the modern age] is an exploration of the history of Japanese literature that successfully combines, in an original manner, the traditional chronological view of literary evolution, with a hermeneutic approach based on closed reading that is meant to illustrate certain aesthetic concepts.

Structured in four chapters, which cover the Nara Period (710-794), the Heian Period (794-1185), the Medieval Period (1185-1573), and the Edo Period (1600-1868), the volume opens with the preface *Condiții specifice de evoluție a literaturii japoneze* [Specific conditions for the evolution of Japanese literature]. Here, the author provides an overview of the Japanese literary history, criticism and theory, and delineates her territory of applied research, which is comprised of the literary works that *claim* to depict the world and successively become reference models for new texts. Florina Ilis proceeds by listing some of the defining features of Japanese literature: an inclination towards *writing practices*, rather than towards the systematic accounts of literary theory, the extraordinary aesthetic *maturity* and the acute *awareness* of its value, the commitment to poetic conventions and the maintenance of formal genre characteristics (*waka*, *haiku*, *nō*, *kabuki*, *bunraku* etc.). These features enable the author to set the interpretive frames within which she approaches all the literary texts chosen as representative for each period. However, well aware of the fact that literature is also an art of the language, the author fruitfully combines the aforementioned aesthetic analysis of literary works with a text-centred perspective, focused on linguistic, stylistic and rhetorical registers. These two coordinates that frame the readings are constantly backed by a historical perspective that remains essential in order to understand every epoch in itself. Florina Ilis thus manages to make an extremely interesting foray into the first millennium of one of world's oldest literatures.

Chapter I (*Epoca Nara și începuturile literaturii japoneze* [The Nara Period and the beginnings of the Japanese literature]) opens, like all the following chapters, with a historical breviary, aiming to explain the emergence of the main works of the classical tradition, between 710-794: the *Kojiki* (711-712) and *Nihon Shoki* (720) chronicles, and the *Man'yōshū* (759) poetry anthology. By emphasising the means through which the aforementioned chronicles make the transition from the country's mythological age, characterised by oral culture, to the historical or written age of the Japanese culture (pages 22-27), the author focuses on *Colecția celor zece*

mii de file [The Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves], as one would translate the title of the first poetry anthology in the Japanese literature, in order to argue, by examining the ages of the collection (629-672, 672-710, 710-733, 733-759), an outline of “an evolved consciousness of the idea of the perpetuation of poetry,¹” in parallel with the phenomenon of the poets’ quasi-deification.

Chapter II (*Perioada Heian și apogeul culturii aristocratice* [The Heian Period and the climax of the aristocratic culture]) analyzes the Japanese aristocratic period (794-1185), during which the capital city had been moved from Nara to Heian (Kyoto), and “literature flourished in almost all genres known at the time,” namely poetry (*waka*) in *Kokinshū* (*The Collection of Japanese Poems of Ancient and Modern Times*, 905), the novel (*monogatari*) in *Genji monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*, 1008), by Murasaki Shikibu, and the journal (*nikki*), in *Makura no sōshi* (*The Pillow Book*, 1002), signed by Sei Shōnagon. A writer herself, Florina Ilis praises the novel *The Tale of Genji* as a parallel chronicle that opens different types of meditations, be they literary, psychological, political or religious, and provides her own, literary-enhanced interpretation, with plenty of convincing arguments. This proposed rereading once again rediscovers the novel as an unmatched masterpiece of world literature.

When Murasaki Shikibu picked up the paintbrush in order to write *The Tale of Genji*, local literature was witnessing an effervescence of writing in vernacular language, at the heart of an aristocratic court that valued the official recognition of the culture of the Chinese language and of Japanese poetry, and within which a prominent role was played by the ladies of the imperial court, or from “the palace beyond the clouds”. However, the *path* of letters cherished poetry at the time, at the expense of the novel genre. The novel (*monogatari*) was then regarded as a marginal literary genre, and was sometimes criticised for its frivolity and association with the fictional lie. It was seen as a form of entertainment and a pastime, that was meant to fill the moments of boredom and idleness. As part of the entourage of the empresses and of high aristocrats, the ladies in waiting, including Murasaki Shikibu and Sei Shōnagon, formed female social “salons” with brilliant women that displayed vast knowledge of poetry and the arts. Therefore, *Genji monogatari* not only narrates the tale of Genji, the devilishly handsome imperial prince, gifted with special artistic talents, within an aristocratic environment filled with political and amorous intrigues, but also provides a compendium of *waka* or *yamato-uta* poems (lit. ‘Japanese song’), whose social and ceremonial functions add to the theoretical-literary debate pertaining to the concept of “novel”. *The Tale of Genji* was met with

¹ Florina Ilis, *Introducere în istoria literaturii japoneze de la începuturi până în epoca modernă* [Introduction to the history of Japanese literature from its beginning to the modern age] (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2020), 29. Original text: “unei conștiințe evolute a ideii de eternizare a poeziei.”

² *Ibid.*, 51. Original text: “înfloritoarea literatură care a culminat în aproape toate genurile literare cunoscute atunci.”

wide acclaim from its first publication, and remained undisputedly successful, as proven by its numerous copies. If the novel was initially written for the aristocratic and the poetry-trained public, at least until the printed version from the 17th century, several fragments of the book were later popularised through the *nō* theatre, or through other popular genres that were connected to music and dance. Moreover, during the 18th century, the revival of national studies determined Motoori Norigana to read *The Tale of Genji* as a unique testimony to the Japanese sensibility defined by the concept of *mono no aware* (the beauty of simple and ephemeral things).

Chapter III (*Epoca medievală și apogeul culturii războinicilor* [The medieval period and the climax of the culture of warriors]), after an introduction to the Kamakura (1185-1333) and Muromachi (1336-1573) periods which summarizes the conflict for power between the Minamoto and Taira (Heike) families, discusses the main literary works of the period: the heroic epos *Heike monogatari*, a collection of war stories whose authors remained anonymous, and the anthology of the one hundred poems, written by one hundred poets, entitled *Ogura Hyakunin isshu*, edited by Fujiwara no Teika. Although rather tumultuous from a military point of view, the respective epoch also witnessed a cultural rebirth, which the author explores in the subchapters dedicated to the dramatic arts and the *renga* poem (*the linked verse*). The fascinating portrait of the *nō* universe is outlined by carefully selected information about the history and the evolution of the *nō* theatre, the preparation of performances and roles, and the remarkable contribution of theoretician and actor Zeami, who was considered the spiritual patron of the *nō* art, and whose troop was instrumental in the development of this theatrical form. With great attention to detail, Florina Ilis completes the image of the dramatic arts of the period in the following chapter, by focusing on the *kyōgen* comedy. The author points out that *nō* drama “cannot be conceived, as a performance, in the absence of the *kyōgen* plays,” since the two forms of theatre complete each other “with respect to both the aesthetic purpose and the means of creating and obtaining the artistic effect.”³ However, the innovative literary landscape of the age also counted the emergence of the *renga* poem, a poetic genre that encouraged “social interactions by jointly practicing the stimulative activity of poetic creation,”⁴ a cultural gesture that marked the warrior elite’s (*shōgun* and *samurai*) attempt at cultural “legitimacy” in relation with the Imperial Court, from which it had already taken the prerogatives of political and military power.

³ Ibid., 170. Original text: “atât în privința scopului estetic, cât și în ceea ce privește modul de realizare și obținere a efectului artistic.”

⁴ Ibid., 142. Original text: “interacțiunile sociale prin practicarea în comun a activității stimulative a creației poetice.”

Chapter IV (*Perioada Edo și apogeul culturii orășenilor* [The Edo Period and the climax of urban culture]) presents the Edo Period (1600-1867) and its main characteristics. The development of the great urban centres, that emphasise “the desire to enjoy the pleasures of life,⁵” favoured the extraordinary momentum of the fine arts, the Genroku culture being considered “an artistic peak” that influenced literature, arts and theatre at the threshold between the 17th-18th centuries. In this context, three representative names stand out: Chikamatsu Monzaemon in theatre, Matsuo Bashō in poetry, and Ihara Saikaku in prose, whom Florina Ilis analyzes in turn.

The course of Japanese literary history from the first millennium of its existence is rounded off by a glossary of terms, a welcome contribution that is meant to familiarise beginners with the defining concepts of the Japanese literary history and aesthetics.

By exploiting a vast bibliography in the field, through an intro- and prospective overview of the evolution of Japanese literature, placed in detailed historical and social contexts, whose related information is readdressed throughout the chapters, the volume *Introducere în istoria literaturii japoneze de la începuturi până în epoca modernă* [Introduction to the history of Japanese literature from its beginning to the modern age] is a wonderful reading gift. As a unique contribution to the field, although the study aims, first and foremost, to be a university course addressed to the students of the *Japanese Language and Literature* major, this book can, at any point become, due to Florina Ilis’s remarkable art of writing, an essential bibliographical source to all those interested in literature in general and in Japanese literature in particular, since it is also fairly easy to read for a larger, unspecialised audience.

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⁵ Ibid., 179. Original text: “dorința de a se bucura de plăcerile vieții.”