

RODICA FRENȚIU, *Unsprezece vederi de aproape asupra imaginarului japonez* (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2024)

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The latest publication by Rodica Frențiu, entitled *Eleven Close-up Views of the Japanese Imagination* is, as foreshadowed by its title, a collection of 11 essays exploring different angles of Japanese sensibility. The carefully selected texts used as corpus include not only titans of the Japanese literary canon, but also lesser-known, rarely-discussed writings, all of which illustrate the linguistic and literary imagination of Japanese culture. As mentioned in the preface of the volume, these essays can definitely be read individually, separated from the rest of the book. It is only by going through them in order, however, that an all-encompassing view is created – that of how literature has preserved the expression of the Japanese spirit throughout the centuries. The title itself, as highlighted by Florina Ilis, pays homage to *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints, icons of the Edo period (1600-1868), particularly to the renowned *36 Views of Mount Fuji* series by Hatsushika Hokusai and to the *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* series by Utagawa Hiroshige. The essays included in this volume are thematically categorised into different parts. The first one, entitled *Within boundaries of close-up and panoramic interpretation*, covers seven studies, each dedicated to a specific literary work or author. The focus here is to trace how history, culture and societal issues intertwine to create a high-complexity key of literary interpretation. The second part, *Re-discovering the Other*, covers four cross-disciplinary studies in which the author parts with the comfort zone of Japanese literature and ventures into complementary areas of research, such as translation studies or foreign language acquisition. Some of these subjects, culinary art for instance, are rarely considered fit for analysis in relation to “high culture,” yet, they are equally relevant for truly understanding Japanese imagination.

The first essay, *Meditative logbook – romantic annotations of lyrical nature*, focuses on the works of Sei Shōnagon (966?-1024?), a palace attendant of the Heian imperial court, particularly her *Pillow Book* (1002?), or *Makura no sōshi* in Japanese. A combination of multiple literary genres, such as the lyrical diary entry, the chronicle-style storytelling and the most-innovative “list” style writing, *The Pillow Book* is considered to be the Japanese literary work with the most numerous textual variants. Rodica Frențiu’s attention is drawn to these aforementioned lists, somewhat peculiar to readers unacquainted with Japanese classical literature. Items grouped by theme are jotted down by Shōnagon as plain lists or fully developed paragraphs, referred to as *dan* in Japanese (paragraph, passage, column). Far from merely cataloguing words, these lists document daily life in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century Japan. Furthermore, the associations tying these lists together are often polyphonic, homonymic or comedic in nature, as Sei Shōnagon fully explores the Japanese vocabulary and its potential for lexical (de)construction. This first essay revolves around words and the creative power they have showcased for millennia – it is not by coincidence

that this is where the exploration of Japanese imagination is initiated, at the most fundamental layer of language.

The next three essays, although dedicated to three different authors, explore variations of the same literary genre, namely *shishōsetsu*, or the *I-novel* as it is known in western literature. Whereas the first study dedicated to Mori Ōgai (1862-1922), Japanese writer, translator and army surgeon, highlights the way in which the Meiji period technological development allowed for history, philosophy and science to revolutionise literature and infuse it with Western ideologies, the following two essays shift the perspective. Each of the analyses that ensue, one of the novel *No Longer Human* (*Ningen Shikkaku*, 1948) by Dazai Osamu (1909-1948), and one of Ōe Kenzaburō (1935-2023)'s *A Personal Matter* (*Kojintekina Taiken*, 1964), reflects on the inability of the human soul to keep up with the social change brought about by industrialisation. Background knowledge regarding the authors is vital to understanding these books, for *shishōsetsu* blurs the edges between historical fact and imagination. Nevertheless, although inspired by true stories, the lack of biographical context does not take away from the beauty of these novels, as fictional worlds are given room to breathe and exist independently from their real-life reference. As Rodica Frențiu points out, it might be due to this masterful combination of fact and fiction that these novels have been extremely successful, both within Japan and outside its borders. They represent archives of their eras as much as they are timelessly relatable, regardless of whether we refer to the reflective nature of the modern human being, illustrated through intertextuality by Mori Ōgai, the failure to adapt to the social class revolution as described by Dazai's "literature of despair," or the prioritisation of collective wellbeing even with the price of self-sacrifice, as described by Ōe.

These four essays included so far in Rodica Frențiu's book have, up until this point, focused on defining Japanese imagination and world-building from an anthropocentric perspective – micro-level units such as the word or the individual. What follows are analyses of a universe to which the human being is subordinated, no longer the main focus nor the decision maker, yet simultaneously a universe defined by the collective subconscious. Two essays elaborate on the topic – another one on Ōe Kenzaburō, this time on his novel *The Silent Cry* (*Man'en gannen no futtobōru*, 1967), and one on Murakami Haruki's use of music in his literary world building. Unlike in the essay on *A Personal Matter*, the point here is to illustrate the new degree of social awareness that Ōe's narrative voice exhibits in *The Silent Cry*. His characters are fully perceptive of the way human existence is never isolated and is constantly influenced by an accumulation of events, both throughout history and in synchronicity. This lucidity also characterises the Japanese sensibility of the times by and large, and it represents the trigger for two different types of resistance – outside literature, in real-life 20<sup>th</sup> century Japan, social movements oppose an increasingly imperialist government; inside literature, old aesthetic ideals are left behind. Rodica Frențiu correlates this existential crisis with the return to and reinterpretation of cosmogonic myths, and the consequences are fascinating in their duality. On the one hand, the indigenous spirituality of Japan, *shintō*, was used by the imperialist government to strengthen nationalist propaganda, and on the other, the ancient sacred *shintō* ritual was seen as refuge from an authoritarian system and as protest against militarisation. By comparing *A Silent Cry* to a "historiographic anamnesis," thus

citing Mircea Eliade, the impact and the “self-healing” goal of these marginal, counterculture social movements are acknowledged by Rodica Frențiu.

The other half of the macro level essay pair is the analysis of Murakami Haruki’s use of music in his literature. Whereas the sacred was the key to transcendence for Ōe Kenzaburō, music is another way of adding a new dimension to literature. When read in order, Rodica Frențiu’s studies illustrate with great clarity the evolution of Japanese sensibility. The creative potential of the word, so dearly cherished by Sei Shōnagon at the beginning of this volume, proves insufficient centuries later, when faced with the expression of a modern human consciousness. Murakami Haruki’s way of filling in that gap, as identified by our author, is music, which may prove capable of facilitating access to a new form of spirituality – a new divine uncontaminated and left untouched by fascist Japan. Moreover, Murakami’s introduction of lyrics in his literature can be considered an anticipation of the multimodal text, pioneering the interdisciplinary trends that dominate 21<sup>st</sup> century creative arts. Rodica Frențiu proves how this innovation too, in true Japanese fashion, can be traced back to honouring tradition by associating Murakami’s music to *renga*, a type of medieval Japanese poem known for its uninterrupted and fluid structure, or to the rhythm and measure of *haiku*.

The ending of the first part of the book consists of a study entitled *Zoopoetics – the overlap of postmodernism and posthumanism. Study case: the Cat and Japanese literature*. Our perspective as readers is completely shifted from human beings and nudged in the direction of the animal world. Perhaps surprising to many, the abundance of literary works featuring or centred around this domestic feline includes texts from canonical writers, such as *I Am a Cat (Wagahai wa Neko de Aru, 1905)* by Natsume Sōseki or *Neko wo daite zou to oyogu (2009)* by Ogawa Yōko. This essay and similar works that investigate the human interference in the ecosystem and our awareness of it are more imperative now than ever, considering how cutting-edge technology has been able to replicate human-like behaviour and performance, with sinister accuracy and to far greater extents than previously anticipated. What does a world without a human at the helm look like? Nevertheless, reflecting on the perspective of non-human animals is old news for the Japanese sensibility, as *shintō* spirituality has hardwired the Japanese psyche to operate within an innate animist framework, even in the face of anthropocentric ideologies like Christianity, Confucianism or Buddhism. For the Japanese, human beings have never taken centre stage.

The second part of *Eleven Close-up Views of the Japanese Imagination* takes a more pragmatic approach, as emphasised by Rodica Frențiu, who refers to these studies as “practical” in the introduction. The first essay argues the relevance of understanding Japan’s political environment when translating Mishima Yukio’s *Star (Sutā, 1960)*, as the 20<sup>th</sup> century writer himself is a symbol of how personal and political convictions can lead to tragedy. The second text delves into the craft of literary translations, particularly the manner in which, through translations, different cultures are brought closer together by making them less of a “stranger” to one another. This time, as expected from an expert in semiotics, Rodica Frențiu references Juri Lotman’s “culture as collective non-genetic memory” and “semiosphere.” The latter, she explains, allows for the centre and the periphery of semiological space to switch places, as described by Lotman in *Culture and Explosion (1992)*. A focus on transferring the linguistic and cultural sign without altering the

overall meaning is what turns translations from a profession to an art form. To go a step further, it can be added that this transfer is as close to perfection as it elicits the same emotional response from its target readership as the original text did from its audience. Such a degree of masterful craftsmanship can only be reached through devotion to understanding the Other. The works analysed by Rodica Frențiu in the pages of this volume offer a glimpse of the mark left by the Japanese imagination on the European sensibility in the last few hundreds of years.

A post-scriptum is what represents the epilogue of this volume, entitled *The Japanese dream: (re)discovering the Other*, in which the author opens up about the vulnerability and the sublime of making contact with a new culture for the very first time. The ending, adorned with calligraphy, memorabilia and confessions, is placed both in the past and nonpast, much like the Japanese verb tense. The Japanese dream materialises as a never-ending thirst for knowledge clad, as always, in the most reverent respect towards another language, another culture and a whole other universe. All eleven essays included in this book hold great importance for those endeavoured with the study of Japanese language and literature; nevertheless, the texts are crystal-clear even to those previously unfamiliar with Japan's linguistic and cultural imagination. Brilliantly switching between detailed contextualisation and coherent argumentation, Rodica Frențiu's concise yet charming penmanship makes for a fantastic read.

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