Japanese Language and Literature
Journal of the American Association of Teachers of Japanese
jll.pitt.edu | Vol. 56 | Number 1 | April 2022 | DOI: 10.5195/jll.2022.240
ISSN 1536-7827 (print) 2326-4586 (online)

REVIEWS

Fate, Nature and Literary Form: The Politics of the Tragic in Japanese Literature

By **Kinya Nishi.** Boston, Mass.: Academic Studies Press, 2020. xviii, 148 pp. $99.00.

Reviewed by
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Fate, Nature and Literary Form is a concise and engaging book about how tragic art manifests in different times and places and what role critical theory can play in our understanding of this genre's power and appeal. It consists of eight chapters divided into three parts: (1) "The Historical Development of the Tragic in Japanese Literature," (2) "The Dialectics of Nature in Japanese Intellectual History," and (3) "Social Crisis and Literary Form." Prior to reading this book, I had not given a great deal of thought to tragedy as a literary form but I understood, as most would, that a tragedy is a narrative featuring a hero or heroine who experiences a reversal of fortunes due to a character flaw, often something quite ordinary such as greed, ambition, distrust or even an excess of love, honor, or loyalty. Nor was I aware that scholars such as George Steiner and Helen Gardner argue that tragedy is particular to certain times and places—namely ancient Greece and sixteenth-century Europe—and therefore must be considered a genre distinct to the European tradition.

So, does that mean that non-Western societies do not produce tragic

art? This seems counterintuitive but the question is raised in chapter 1 where Buddhism and Confucianism's lack of emphasis on the individual self is seen to conspire against the emergence of a strong interest in the tragic hero. Nishi is quick to point out, however, that Steiner's real argument is that tragic art results from periods of profound historical or social change so that it "has already lost its power as a creative literary form because the historical conditions for producing tragic drama have long ceased to exist" (4). Are we to believe, then, that tragedy really shouldn't exist anywhere? Why shouldn't we believe that the constitutive elements of tragic art arise directly from human experience and therefore should be found everywhere? Isn't each culture free to create its own version of tragic art? Nishi makes it clear, however, that this kind of a "multicultural" impulse is not what drives his study; rather, he seizes on the importance of historical transformation in the creation of tragedy and aligns himself with critic Raymond Williams who links "the concept of tragedy to actual historical experience" (6). Historical change, with all its accompanying contradictions and social tensions, tends to leave individual human actors stranded, desperately yearning for some form of human emancipation, and this is what occasions the birth of tragic art.

In chapter 2, Nishi catapults the reader from medieval times with a discussion of Zeami and Nō—especially the play *Semimaru*—to early modern times with an examination of Chikamatsu's *Love Suicides at Amamijima*, and then in chapter 3, Nishi moves on to modern times with a discussion of Natsume Sōseki's *Kokoro*, and the later novels of Ōe Kenzaburō, specifically the *Moeagaru midori no ki* (The flaming green tree) trilogy, and *Chūgaeri* (Somersault). Nishi identifies two important reasons for basing his arguments primarily on just four main texts. First, he wants to focus on "moments of remarkable social transition," times when values and beliefs were being deeply questioned. In such circumstances, a tragic hero may possess a strong sense of morality and is likely to be "destined to suffer precisely because of his or her ethical resolution." Second, Nishi wants to conduct a thorough investigation of the relationship between literary creation and intellectual history, or how perceptions of human fate change under "shifting cultural conditions" (xi–xii). In a word, changing historical conditions are the author's primary focus.

Part two, to which I will return shortly, is the most explicitly theoretical part of the book, though the reader will find references to theorists such as Terry Eagleton, Frederic Jameson, Paul Ricouer, Harold

Bloom, Wang Hui and Raymond Williams scattered throughout its pages. In part three, Nishi resumes his exploration of Japanese literary history showing how a unique "realism" developed in Matsuo Bashō's haiku, paving the way for postwar poets, and later the post-Hiroshima and Fukushima narratives, to contribute to "the universal search for truly human relationships" (xviii). The author is quick to provide a cautionary note, however: "For those readers who expect to discover a unique sensibility in the Japanese tradition of tragic art that is completely different from the Western narrative tradition, this book will be a disappointment." His interest is much more in illuminating how the "Japanese cultural transformation fits into contemporary critical discourse," and how writers were "struggling to fashion a new literary form…that depicts nature as a register of historical contradictions rather than as an unchanging background that corroborates seemingly timeless and harmonious human values" (xvii).

For example, in chapter 2, Nishi turns his attention to Zeami's (1363–1443) Nō play *Semimaru,* which tells the story of the blind biwa player, son (or grandson) of Emperor Go-Daigo, who has been abandoned by the court and is destined to wander alone. Enter his elder sister, Sakagami, she of the "upside-down-hair," who is mentally deranged, thus completing the picture of a world where nothing is as it should be. Otherwise, these characters born to the highest station would not be brought so low, their social status not so inverted. Drawing on the work of intellectual historian Ienaga Saburō, Nishi points to the major revolution in the medieval mindset brought about by the new popular Kamakura Buddhist sects led by Shinran and Nichiren. In the play as in real life, traditional values and assumptions were being overturned.

Another kind of social transformation was at work in the Edo period when Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653–1725) adapted the play for the puppet theatre in 1692, offering his famous and very successful *Love Suicide at Amijima* in 1720, first as a puppet play and later in *kabuki* form. Chikamatsu—dubbed Japan's Shakespeare—is considered Japan's most successful playwright. Urban life and a bourgeoning merchant economy were flourishing in Japan, and Chikamatsu's plays "brilliantly capture the contradictions within this transforming society" according to Nishi (26). Double suicides were not infrequent at this time and theatre goers were mesmerized by the agony and the drama these plays captured. Traditionally, these stories were cast in terms of the conflict between two powerful forces: *ninjō*, or "human feelings," that is, something belonging

to the private realm, and *giri*, literally public duty or obligations but which can also "refer to any rational behavior prompted by the sense of social norm." The *giri-ninjō* binary however only tells part of the story because in the concrete reality of a socio-economic transformation, the realm of private emotions—of passions and desire—were constantly being "covertly permeated by institutionalized behavior" (31). This play, then, is not just about the two star-crossed lovers, Jihei and Koharu, but also incorporates Jihei's wife, Osan, who intervenes by asking Koharu to help save Jihei's life. Tragically, the effort fails, but that it was made at all underscores the complexity of the situation and helps fortify the play as a critique of Tokugawa feudal ideology.

Chapter 3 invites the reader into the world of two extremely important modern Japanese writers, Natsume Sōseki from the early twentieth century, and Ōe Kenzaburō from the late twentieth century. Sōseki's *Kokoro* (1914) is rightly seen as the "first and the most forceful accomplishment of full-fledged tragic narrative" in Japan. Nishi sees *Kokoro* as "one of the most exquisite pieces of literature in the Japanese canon" and in this tragic narrative, "Sōseki practically transformed the moral framework of Japanese people by giving shape to the contradiction of modern society" (34–35). In *Kokoro*, the character Sensei's moral and ethical principles root him firmly in an era which is vanishing around him, highlighted by the deaths of the Meiji emperor and his aide, General Nogi. It is a novel permeated by darkness, and Sensei warns his young protégé that the darkness of which he speaks is a "moral darkness." "True," he allows, "my ethics may be different from those of the young men of today. But they are at least my own. I did not borrow them for the sake of convenience as a man might a dress suit." These values, these ethics are not the superficial stuff of borrowed or imitated ideas; they are genuine, and they stem directly from the heart of things. *Kokoro* is so deeply enmeshed in the Meiji political and social transformation that it should come as no surprise that Nishi would write: "With its power to capture the modern individuality at its deepest level, *Kokoro* is a monumental literary exploration into human beings as fundamentally historical" (42). What enables *Kokoro* to rise to the level of tragic art is its capacity to confront, in Raymond Williams terms, "the real tension between old and new; between received beliefs…and newly and vividly experienced contradictions and possibilities" (38).

The second of Japan's great modern writers to be examined is Nobel Prize winner and voice of the postwar generation, Ōe Kenzaburō. Ōe is

perhaps best known for his writings from the 1960s but Nishi has focused on his later works from the 1990s and early 2000s, specifically, the trilogy, *Moeagaru midori no ki*, which tells the story of the rise and fall of a religious community in Ōe's native Shikoku. Ōe is known for his humanism and his commitment to political activism, but the calls to demonstrate against the building of a new nuclear power plant only end in destruction for the religious leader who is the protagonist of his novel. Nishi feels that if Sōseki's work depicts the historical conditions in which characters strive to achieve modern individualism but are confronted with the impossibility of this task in Meiji Japan, then Ōe's tragic depiction constitutes a "meditation" on "the difficulty of human salvation under mass democracy" (52). Ōe cannot offer a comprehensive solution, but a wonderful quote from 2001 alludes to what he believes must be done:

> To possess a sense of individual self is certainly important, and most difficult to do, I must say. I have spent almost the whole of my literary life, more than forty years, with this sole aim in mind. And in the process of my struggle to establish the self, the most effective resource at hand has been the study on foreign cultures, civilizations and histories—along with the study on those of my own country. (64)

A strong self, situated in the world and willing to act, is at the heart of Ōe's vision.

Although it is it is difficult to do justice to Nishi's theoretical arguments in such a brief review, part two (chapters 4 and 5) is dedicated to their explication. He discusses, among other topics, how Japan's cultural identity became "torn between a sense of inferiority toward the West and the confidence of a modern power" (60). This led many, including Abe Shinzō, to believe that respect for local cultural traditions is "incompatible with a sense of global civil liberty," (61) but as Ōe's quotation above makes clear, solutions will not come in the form of neo-nationalisms, or views that trumpet the eternal, unchanging cultural uniqueness of one society over another, a view that enjoyed tremendous popularity during the "inward turn of the 1970s" when *Nihonjinron* writings were all the rage. Clearly, Ōe stands by the idea that Universality can be something that allows the individual—and the nation—to "escape its insularity" (64).

Part three returns the reader to the consideration of "a handful of serious artists" who produced what is, in effect, "a counter-naturalist tradition." In chapter 6 Nishi sees Bashō, as providing "a key moment" in the development of a new literary form in Japan: the realistic portrayal of

nature, one "unshackled from the medieval concept of nature" (101). Ironically, he achieved this by relying on the ancient Daoist term for nature, *zōka* (造化)—the sum of things that exist in the cosmos—in place of the more familiar term *shizen*, which designates the environment surrounding human beings. His new verse form, haiku, was designed to capture "an active imagination trying to reorganize the order of reality from its own historical position," which inevitably contains a powerful tension between the new, confidant urban culture from which Bashō himself emanated, and the traditional way nature had been depicted and celebrated in classical poetry and painting (102, 108).

Chapters 7 and 8 conclude this book with considerations of "Hiroshima and the Poetics of Death," and "Narrative after Fukushima" respectively. Ōe resurfaces a final time with what Nishi calls his "vision of the human individual disturbed and fragmented by the shock of historical reality" (130). It is this willingness to place history at the center of their narratives, and to "discard a fixed stock of ideas drawn from the past and face up to social conflict," that distinguishes these serious postwar writers to whom Nishi directs our attention. He quotes a poem from one of Ōe's later collections of essays, in which a schoolmaster addresses his pupils:

> Inside myself
> The words of my mother become, for the first time, hardly a mystery.
> As an old man, I desire to say to the little ones,
> "it will not be possible to start living again for me. Nonetheless
> It will be possible for us." (131)

Nishi concludes his book with these words: "human emancipation can only emerge through a realistic perception of history, which, like a convincing tragic plot, grasps the possibility of individual action in the point between despair and hope" (134).

In this compact yet powerful work, Nishi argues that great art can never be merely the expression of the timeless essence of a particular culture but must be part of a forward movement leading to enhanced human relationships. Because he presents his arguments so succinctly in so few pages, there is always room to ponder what the book does not discuss, or to allude to the many writers who are not part of his study. But just as Nishi warned us against looking for treatments of the unique sensitivities of Japanese literature, readers looking for startling new interpretations of classic Japanese texts may also be disappointed. As

teachers and scholars, we are always on the lookout for interpretive works that will help us better unpack texts that we teach or write about. *Fate, Nature and Literary Form* may not be that sort of book. It covers an extensive range of time—from the medieval to the early modern period, then moves forward into both pre- and postwar Japan, finally bringing us into the 1990s and post-Fukushima literature—all in just 148 pages. While the sweep is both stunning and breathtaking, it touches on only a small number of authors and literary works, so some topics are inevitably omitted.

For example, the author's case for Sōseki's importance might have been strengthened (had there been any need to do so) by considering the appearance of the *hisan-shōsetsu*, or "tragic novels," in the years right after the first Sino-Japanese War (1895) when the effects of industrialization began to have their startling impact on workers. A new variety of poverty was being experienced by the emerging industrial working class which was being subjected to harsh working conditions and relegated to slum and tenement dwellings. Some literary critics at the time urged writers like Hirotsu Ryūrō, Izumi Kyōka, Kawakami Bizan, and Kosugi Tengai, who were dabbling in this kind of dark literature, to dig more deeply into this subject matter, and make Japan's experience with modernity the very stuff of their novels. Given the centrality of the tragic to this study, it seems to be something worth mentioning.

One might also wonder, in terms of critical theory, why there was no reference to authors like Northrup Frye, Hayden White, or even Ivan Morris' classic work, *The Nobility of Failure,* all of which have something to say about tragedy. But in all fairness, these kinds of questions focus on what the author did not set out to achieve, rather than on what his book does accomplish. And this is to offer a unique and innovative blend of theoretical musings and provocative insights into the contributions of several major Japanese literary figures whose work cannot be meaningfully interpreted apart from the historical context in which they are rooted. I applaud this effort and find the book both rewarding and stimulating.