

<BOOK REVIEWS>The Rise and Fall of Modern Japanese Literature By John Whittier Treat

著者	STARRS Roy
journal or publication title	Japan review : Journal of the International Research Center for Japanese Studies
volume	34
page range	238-239
year	2019-12
URL	<a href="http://doi.org/10.15055/00007424">http://doi.org/10.15055/00007424</a>

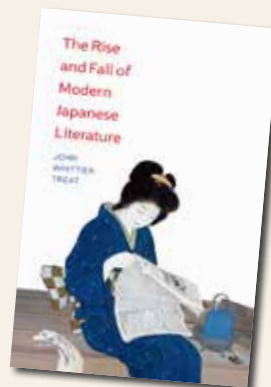
## BOOK REVIEW

*The Rise and Fall of Modern Japanese Literature*

By John Whittier Treat

The University of Chicago Press, 2018  
v + 401 pages.

Reviewed by Roy STARRS



John Whittier Treat's new book offers some brilliantly original, delightfully offbeat perspectives on modern Japanese literature, but its rather overblown title and introduction probably should not be taken too seriously. Treat does not establish himself here as the Edward Gibbon of modern Japanese literature. Indeed, anyone familiar with that vast body of literature may well question whether his book amounts to a "history" of it at all. There is simply too much missing, not only whole genres (poetry and drama) but so many major writers (only two canonical writers, Higuchi Ichiyō and Natsume Sōseki, are given anything like in-depth treatment; others are mentioned only in passing) that the perplexed reader is left wondering exactly what constituted the "rise" claimed by the book's title.

Indeed, Treat himself assures us that "I will soon be lectured on all my omissions..." (pp. 24–25). This does seem highly likely, given that he also tempts fate by inviting comparisons of what he calls "my history of modern literature in Japan" with the three magna opera already available in English (by Donald Keene, Katō Shūichi, and Konishi Jin'ichi), works that actually do offer the sustained argument and comprehensive narrative one expects from a "history." Even more ill-advisedly, Treat attempts some one-upmanship over the late, great historian of Japanese literature, Donald Keene, by implying that his own history is less arrogantly or arbitrarily "confident" or definitive in its judgments than Keene's. To illustrate what he means, he quotes Keene's summary dismissal of a number of Japanese writers that the critical consensus now evaluates more highly. But are Treat's own judgments any less opinionated, or so entirely free of personal prejudice? Of Murakami Haruki, for instance, he writes: "Murakami is not thoughtful enough to be postmodern (though he would like to be) and does not have a unique style (it's familiar, recycled American literary minimalism)" (p. 256). This may or may not be true (I am no great fan of Murakami myself), but it is certainly as definitively dismissive of a popular writer as Donald Keene ever dared to be—and in an even more ad hominem way—and it hardly lives up to Treat's claim to be a humbler kind of literary arbiter.

One might also ask, of course, whether it is actually possible, or even desirable, to write a literary history completely free of one's personal tastes and prejudices. In my view, Treat himself is at his best here when he writes with personal warmth and enthusiasm about certain writers one might describe as "rebellious outsiders" to the Japanese literary

establishment, writers such as Fukazawa Shichirō and Takahashi Gen'ichirō. The eccentricity and quirkiness of these writers seems to seriously tickle Treat's funny bone. Takahashi is the literary hero of the concluding chapter, not so much because his parody fictions do anything to forestall the anticipated end of literature and the nation-state—or, indeed, life on earth as we know it—but because they teach us how to have fun on the way out. Of Fukazawa, Treat tells us that, in lieu of the traditional death poem, he ordered Rod Stewart's "Da Ya Think I'm Sexy?" to be played at his funeral. With obvious relish, Treat writes: "His real-life death poem was poetry written not in the idiom of traditional Japanese aesthetics but in the vulgar, popular, irreverent slang of a British rocker" (p. 197). One might say that Treat's own "history" is infused with the same defiantly unconventional, thumb-nosing spirit.

And certainly, this approach yields some fresh and thought-provoking insights. The chapter on the early days of modern Japanese fiction, for instance, eschews the usual origins narrative that begins with Tsubouchi Shōyō and Futabatei Shimei, and argues persuasively that popular tales of "poison women," real-life female murderers, may be regarded as the true precursors of the newspaper novels that later flourished in the hands of major writers such as Sōseki. As is currently the literary-critical fashion, Treat expands the boundaries of what is considered both "literary" and "Japanese," so that he offers a chapter, for instance, on the "creole Japanese" of the Occupation era, analyzing the sometimes awkward, sometimes charming *mélange* of English and Japanese found in a popular novel, in the postwar Constitution, and in the boogie-woogie songs that were all the rage at that time of the first great wave of Americanization. Likewise, he offers a chapter on the graffiti and manga popular with radical leftwing students in the 1960s, and another on colonial Korean authors who wrote in Japanese, including the "abject" Kim Mun-jip, who achieved some notoriety writing about his infatuation with Japanese women but is now perceived as a sycophantic traitor by his fellow Koreans.

These are all first-rate essays and, of the eleven (including the conclusion that focuses on the aforementioned Takahashi), only one raised some critical resistance in this reader: the chapter on the literature and painting of the Taishō era. It interprets the inward-turn characteristic of the writers and painters of this age in Japan (and indeed globally) along classic Freudian lines as a series of clinical cases of narcissistic self-absorption. To me this seems altogether too reductive and simplistic. For instance, to reduce a novel such as Shiga Naoya's masterpiece, *An'ya kōro* (*A Dark Night's Passing*, 1921–1937) to a mere exercise in narcissism is to deny it that all-important spiritual dimension that made it so profoundly moving to generations of Japanese readers. In the final celebrated scene on Mt. Daisen, the protagonist experiences what is unmistakably a *satori* of sorts, his self-absorption leading not to a narcissistic self-image, as Treat would have it, but to self-dissolution and self-transcendence, and thereby to a sense of unity with the natural world and with the "other." Whatever one thinks about the psychological or ontological status of such "mystical" experiences, their sociocultural significance in Japan, as in other Buddhist countries, makes it hard to dismiss them as mere infantile displays of narcissistic self-absorption.

But Treat's retro Freudianism here is only a momentary lapse in what is, as I have said, a book full of original and provocative insights. Whether a "history" or not, it is greatly to be welcomed at the present time, when there is so little first-rate writing in English on modern Japanese literature.