Yokomitsu, Riichi 横光利一 (1898-1947)

Riichi Yokomitsu was a Japanese novelist, who, as one of the founders of Shinkankaku-ha (New Sensation School), helped introduce European avant-garde literature into Japan during the interwar period and opened the door to Japanese modernist style. His stylistic innovation, opposition to the proletarian literature favored by Korehito Kurahara, and theory of the novel opened up Japanese fiction to possibilities other than realism and the I-novel.

Yokomitsu was born Toshikazu Yokomitsu in Fukushima prefecture in 1898. After attending—and later expelled from—Waseda University, Yokomitsu started a magazine, *Bungei Jidai*, (Literary Age) in 1924 with Yasunari Kawabata, Teppei Kataoka, Yoichi Nakagawa, Toko Kon, and others. *Bungei Jidai¸* which became the major vehicle for the New Sensation School, marked the beginning of the Showa period in literature, along with the proletarian writers’ *Bungei Sensen* (Literary Frontier), which was launched in the same year.

The aesthetic sources of the New Sensation School can be traced back to Dadaism, Futurism, and Expressionism, although its most direct inspirations were Georg Kaiser’s play, *Die Bürger von Calais* (1914; The Burghers of Calais), the German Expressionist film, *Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari* (1919; The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari), and Paul Morand’s novel, *Ouvert la Nuit* (1922; Open All Night). Alongside these aesthetic influences came a more material one: the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, which killed more than 140 thousand people and destroyed seventy percent of the structures in Tokyo. This massive destruction of human culture and achievement produced a nihilistic and aestheticizing turn among the Japanese avant-garde, an impact not dissimilar from the effect of World War I on such European modernists as T.S. Eliot or Ezra Pound.

Yokomitsu’s story, “Atama narabini Hara”(Heads and Bellies), published in the first issue of *Bungei Jidai* and eventually considered the archetype of the New Sensation School style, illustrates the movement’s commitment to aestheticism over materialism, form over content. In this story, by describing subjective sensations stimulated by a material situation in which the main character is located, Yokomitsu does not report the facts of the situation but attempts to grasp directly an experience in which subjectivity encounters a thing itself prior to being translated into a concept, regardless of the meaning of the experience. Naturally this aesthetic and stylistic project of the New Sensation School developed to an opposition to the proletarian literature. In 1928, Yokomitsu indeed criticized such proletarian critics as Kurahara and Hatsunosuke Hirabayashi, who had insisted that content determined form, and evoked what is now commonly known as “Keishiki-shugi Ronso”(Formalism Controversy).

After his first novel, *Shanhai* (Shanghai 1928-31), the focus of Yokomitsu’s writing shifted from sensation to psychology. He wrote a story, “Kikai”(The Machine 1930), by adopting the technique of stream of consciousness; it was appreciated by the contemporary critics as one of the first attempts by Japanese writers to experiment with the forms of Proust and Joyce. After the success of *Shin’en* (The Garden of Sleep 1930) and two other novels, Yukomitsu provoked yet another controversy with his essay, “Junsui shosetsu ron”(Theory of the Pure Novel 1935). In this essay Yokomitsu argued on the mixture of popular and highbrow novels. This theory was put into practice later in *Kazoku Kaigi* (The Family Council 1935).

During a trip to Europe in 1936, Yokomitsu conceived the idea of his last novel, *Ryoshu* (Travel Sadness), but his death in 1947 left the novel incomplete. The New Sensation School has been often regarded as a failed literary project and Yokomitsu its representative, and indeed none of his style or theory survived the World War II, but it should not be forgotten that his work brought Taisho literature to an end and liberated Japanese fiction from the dominance of realism and the I-novel.

List of Major Works

“Atama narabini Hara”(Heads and Bellies 1924). (The short story that resulted in the birth of Shinkankaku-ha is a sketch of an express train, which stops suddenly and thereby leaves its passengers in confusion.)

*Shanhai* (Shanghai 1928-31). (Yokomitsu’s first novel is his attempt to capture the misery of the Orient under the Western powers through the eye of a Japanese man, who is in Shanghai during the time of the May Thirtieth Movement.)

“Kikai”(The Machine 1930). (Although Yokomitsu’s literary fame significantly declined after his death, this story has always been esteemed highly since its first appearance. It is a first-person narrative by a man working at a chemical factory with two other workers and its owner, describing the interactions of the minds that operate almost like machines. English translation is included in “*Love” and Other Stories*.)

*Shin’en* (The Garden of Sleep 1930). (Termed favorably a “salon novel,” this psychological novel is Yokomitsu’s analysis of the leisure class, centering around the relationship between a man and his childhood girlfriend, who is married to another man.)

*Kazoku Kaigi* (The Family Council 1935). (Against the background of the opposition between Tokyo and Osaka, this novel explores the world of stock market, but it is also a romantic story of a man, who is courted by four women and finally chooses one of them. This work is regarded as a practice of Yokomitsu’s theory of the pure novel.)

*Ryoshu* (Travel Sadness 1950). (Published posthumously, Yokomitsu’s last novel is a romantic narrative set in both Europe and Japan, but it is also his last meditation on the relationship between the East and West, tradition and science, in the post- Manchurian Incident era of Japan.)

Authoritative Text

Yokimitsu Riichi (1981-87) *Teihon Yokomitsu Riichi Zenshu*, 16 vols. Tokyo: Kawade.

English Translations

Yokomitsu Riichi (1974) *“Love” and Other Stories of Yokomitsu Riichi*, Trans. Dennis Keene, Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press.

——— (2001) *Shanghai: A Novel*, Trans. Dennis Charles Washburn, Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, the University of Michigan.

Reference and further reading

Keene, D. (1980) *Yokomitsu Riichi: Modernist*, New York: Columbia University Press. (A thorough assessment of Western modernism’s influence on Yokomitsu, focusing on his role in the movement of the Shinkankaku-ha.)

Lippit, S. M. (2002) *Topographies of Japanese Modernism*, New York: Columbia University Press.(Includes a chapter on *Shanghai*, in which Lippit investigates Yokomitsu’s figuration of “grotesque” modernity in the age of Western and Japanese colonialism.)

Golley, G. (2008) *When Our Eyes No Longer See: Realism, Science, and Ecology in Japanese Literary Modernism*, Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center. (Pointing out a crisis of perception in 1920s’ Japan as the background of Japanese modernism, this book examines the negotiations between science and literature in the works of Jun’ichiro Tanizaki, Kenji Miyazawa, and Yokomitsu.)