

DOI: 10.24818/SYN/2025/21/2.10

A REVIEW OF “JAPANESE LITERARY THEORIES: AN ANTHOLOGY”

**Irina Holca (ed.) and Ōura Yasusuke
(ed. of the Japanese version)
Lanham: Lexington Books, 2024. 231 pages.**

George T. SIPOS¹

Originally published in Japanese, as *Nihon no bungaku riron: ansorojī* at Suiseisha in 2017, the volume now made available in English by a team of researchers and translators under Irina Holca's coordination has the potential of becoming an instant reference tool for all students of Japanese literature. In fact, Ōura Yasusuke, the editor of the Japanese version, does indicate in the Preface that more than anything else, the project originated as a way of mapping relevant Japanese theories of literature that were otherwise lesser or utterly unknown to researchers of Western literature. The collaborative research that took place at Kyōto University over four years, between April 2011 and March 2015, resulted in an internal publication that was subsequently shopped around in Japanese studies departments at European and Asian universities. The realization of the need to offer the volume in English rendition as well came from the responses received from students and researchers alike.

The current anthology does indeed fill a gap in the English language body or primary sources of Japanese literary theory and provides a rather wide view of several domains of research in the field. If secondary sources in English are certainly abundant, the field of Japanese theoretical and critical texts available in direct translation remains rather limited. Holca does a good job listing them in her introduction.

Thoughtfully organized around themes, the chapters offer one-to-two-page excerpts from major theoretical texts covering an array of themes such as Theories of the Novel, Theories of Description, Theories of Narrative, Theories of Poetic Language, Theories of Fiction, Theories of the Reader, Theories of Origins/Theories of Emergence. The volume is completed by a chapter provokingly entitled “What is

¹ Associate Professor, Japanese language, literature and culture, West University of Timișoara, gsipos@uchicago.edu

Literature?” and signed by the original Japanese editor, Ōura Yasusuke and co-authored by Nagata Tomoyuki.

Some of the texts included in the anthology have certainly been circulating for a while in English, while others remained only accessible to scholars reading in Japanese. And although the excerpts selected for inclusion in the original volume and translated here are certainly relevant, they barely manage to whet the appetite of scholars interested in the comparative multilogue of theories of literature, one in which Japan must undoubtedly play a role despite the language barrier. Each section of the volume includes five to six excerpts, plus introductory remarks about the texts included and the reasoning behind their selection, all provided by the original editors of the Japanese edition.

One fascinating note about the way the editors chose to distinguish between concepts such as “novel”, “description” and “fiction”, for instance (other such groupings being possible as well), and dedicate separate sections to them, has to do with the very evolution of the sophistication of the Japanese field of Japanese literary theory, and its adoption of Western literary concepts along the way. For instance, the section on Theories of the Novel, opens with a fragment from the famous Tsubouchi Shōyō *The Essence of the Novel* (1885-1886), a text that was still very much grappling with the very infrastructural makings of the literary genre, and ends with Furui Yoshikichi’s “The Magic of Words” (1971), where the analysis goes to the inner workings of language alongside Roman Jakobson’s theories. On the other hand, the section on Theories of Fiction, opens with Mori Ōgai’s “Escaping the ‘Nature’ of History” (1915) to end over 100 years later, in 2003, with Toyama Shigehiko’s “On Fiction” (2003), bringing the discussion very close to our own contemporary frame of reference.

All in all, the new anthology edited by Irina Holca, and based on Ōura Yasusuke’s Japanese original work, is a more than welcome addition to a growing body of primary theoretical sources much needed for the proper understanding of Japan’s evolving literary theory and criticism field.

The author

Dr. George Sipos is an Associate Professor at the West University of Timișoara, where he teaches Japanese literature, language and culture. His research focuses on modern and contemporary Japanese society and literature from a transcultural perspective, in particular on comparative research on Japan and Romania’s modernity, modern nation state, and resistance against authoritarianism. He published articles on Japanese literature and several volumes of Japanese literature in Romanian translation.