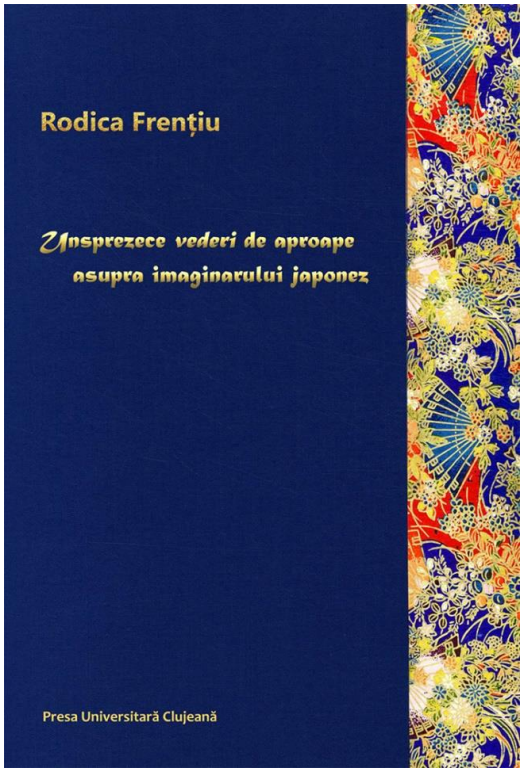
STUDIA UBB PHILOLOGIA, LXIX, 3, 2024, p. 239 - 243
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)

BOOKS

Rodica Frenţiu, *Unsprezece vederi de aproape asupra imaginarului japonez* ['Eleven Close-Up Views on the Japanese Imaginary'], Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2024, 325p.



Coming both as a continuation and a departure from her previous book, which focused on Yasunari Kawabata (*Yasunari Kawabata: Dreams of the Floating World,* 2023), Rodica Frenţiu's latest work is a thorough addition to the relatively small collection of works relating to Japanology in Romania. While not abandoning depth, this volume draws the reader's perspective back and forth, inviting them to alternate between synchronous views of important Japanese cultural landmarks and resulting larger shifts in paradigm, thus taking effective advantage of a format (the compiling of essays) that facilitates the double value that Florina Ilis points towards in her preface to *Eleven close-up* views *on the Japanese imaginary* (2024): each component study has value on its own and can be read as such, but, taken together, they form a greater sculpture with at least eleven recognisable sides, each revealing a different part of the same whole (Ilis 2024, 7-8). As such, much like reconstructing a specific author's artistic inclinations by analysing his works, Japan's imaginary, its idiosyncratic way to view and (re)imagine the world is here being put together by looking at its different manifestations in literary works of art or other cultural

phenomena. In that, this book presents an apparently similar, fragmented, but chronologically linear methodology that looks at significant authors throughout different ages, showing how their works are representative for their individual literary and cultural views while also being the product of larger cultural currents.

However, some structural and mainly thematic particularities give this book a unicity in methodology. To start, the title and this rather abstract introductory description are enough to show that the scope of this volume is simply much wider. When faced with tracing the imaginary of an entire culture rather than one person, one must admit and address the matter of undecidable breadth of possibilities when it comes to deciding what is 'essential,' matter addressed through a second chapter that looks at how the cultural contact necessary for such an assessment even takes place. Moreover, of course, this volume does not even try to be comprehensive, but rather, as the title suggests, to formulate 11 coherent, self-sufficient, but compatible with each other in the sense of outlining a narrative, perspectives on the Japanese imaginary. Dealing with such matters of perspective already provides a slight subjective aspect, which is further reinforced by the presence of a highly personal post-scriptum that can serve as a key of interpretation towards both the structural choices and the basic idea behind the volume.

After having established a general direction and purpose for this volume, it is time to delve more concretely into the chapters and their sub-chapters, getting rid of the previous layer of abstraction in order to highlight the research methodologies used, typology of arguments made and to appreciate the author's perspective on what it even means to understand another culture. The first chapter is entitled "Within the limits of close and distant interpretation," a name that highlights the previously mentioned methodology of a perspective moving back and forth between close reading and distant reading (Ilis 2024, 7). The contained sub-chapters will follow a relatively consistent pattern: a work, and, most importantly, an author that are significant to the Japanese cultural evolution are selected and analysed from a variety of different points of view, showing how they innovated, revolutionised, but also continue a time-honoured tradition of cultural refinement. The author herself points to the fields of poetics, semiotics, hermeneutics, zoopoetics in the 'Argument' (Frenţiu 2024, 18), but it is not to be disregarded that the work also benefits from perspectives informed by general linguistics and literary theory.

First amongst the sub-chapters is an essay on Sei Shōnagon's *Makura no sōshi* (*The Pillow Book*, as it has been translated). The author shows how this 11th century book is revolutionary in its own way, using historic-biographical details related to Sei Shōnagon's milieu, appreciations of ties that link, but do not bind the work to the Japanese literary tradition, linguistic and hermeneutical considerations that demonstrate an exquisite attention to detail during a period some would call 'primitive' and even semiotic revelations beyond the original authorial (conscious) intent that elevate the work's value towards immediate relevance in today's studies. This first outlier is only one instance of a break in form and content as will be shown with writers of much later, first a period of renewed effervescence which will bubble over into skepticism, the famed Meiji period.

Thus, next up is Mori Ōgai, 'one of the "giants"' of the Meiji period (Frenţiu 2024, 47). As before, the author delves into what kind of socio-cultural environment shaped his views, later manifested into his intellectual, literary life. He is shown to have been, chronologically, at the border between a more traditional society and Japanese modernity, being one of the forces that reshaped the possibilities of literary thought under the influence of Western models, whilst not simply copying them. As such, his novel *Seinen* (*Youth*) is analysed from the perspective of an adaptation of the bildungsroman model with its own particularities that combine objectivity and subjectivity into a shifting narratorial perspective that benefits from the author's own experiences (Frenţiu 2024, 54-55). To further its individuality, a semiotic interest is shown to have resurfaced in his meditations upon the relationship between writing and reality (Frenţiu 2024, 53).

Another step in assimilating aspects of Western culture is shown to be made by Osamu Dazai in the next sub-chapter, dedicated to his *No Longer Human*. This is a point where the perspective shifts, creating a contrast between Mori Ōgai, who was deeply entrenched and looked up to as a cultural 'torch' (Frenţiu 2024, 47) and Osamu Dazai, a person who rejected and was rejected by society (85). Writing after the Meiji period and representing an even bigger break from Japanese tradition, his work is shown to be even more closely tied to his personal life (86-87) and thus aiming for completely different aesthetic values, hard to encompass by describing the "political and moral situation of the society within which the characters move," becoming relevant but not all-encompassing to contextualise his writing in the aftermath of the Second World War (87).

The following 2 chapters discuss another interesting break in tradition with Kenzaburō Ōe. Yet again, the reader is faced with an author deeply inspired by personal experience, as demonstrated by his writings that harken back to the birth of his own disabled son (Frenţiu 2024, 118). His work is more socially engaged and optimistic, however, since it has less to do with a judgement of society and more with how to evolve and move past its faults by finding a different meaning for being 'human' (119-122). Delving into what society represents and what it truly means to be human will become a running theme, leading to interesting developments from other revolutionary authors.

To showcase the creativity and uniqueness that succeeded that period of tumult, the next sub-chapter looks at an extremely famous representative of Japanese postmodernism, Haruki Murakami and his poetic, musical design for literature. Not only is he shown to carry the typical postmodern cynicism for the capacity of the word to serve as an accurate means of expression (Frenţiu 2024, 166), but he is argued to believe in a rather unique alternative, that of musical expression (166-167). Moreover, the philosophical aspects that combine this view relating music with the effects on the perception of time within Murakami's works are also brought to the forefront with an analysis of the '*time-as-river*' (174). Combining statements from the renowned author himself and hermeneutical studies of his novel to show a penchant for musical themes, this essay makes apparent another way to perceive, understand and express reality as part of the Japanese imaginary.

Last, but not least of the studies found within the first chapter is a sub-chapter entitled "Zoopoetics at the intersection between postmodernism and posthuman. Case study: the cat and contemporary Japanese literature," where Rodica Frenţiu notices and analyses a trend in Japanese literature, starting most prominently with Natsume Sōseki's *I Am a Cat*, but actually originating from the earliest novelistic writings (Frenţiu 2024, 187-188) that of utilising the image of the cat for literary purposes. The study brings into discussion a large number of writings that take inspiration from Sōseki's satirical work in order to give sentience or narrative focus to feline main characters, creating a unique brand of zoopoetics (192-193). This is all argued to be part of a larger, posthuman cultural movement that would point out the fallacies of anthropocentrism towards a better understanding of what it means to be human, what it means to be an animal and how giving the latter the same courtesy people are given, that of having an individuality and identity, would lead to a better understanding of both human and animal nature (225-228).

To follow these sub-chapters on what one finds when looking at the evolution of the Japanese imaginary and to constitute the second and final chapter of the book, there are 4 perspectives on how and what it means for that process of 'getting to know' to take place: context, manner, difficulties and an actual glimpse into the 'other'. To start, the reader is introduced to Yukio Mishima, with a focus on one of his works which speaks of a position significant to the general purposes of this volume, namely that of the *Star*. A unique and infamous biography paints a picture of what it means to be in the position of the observed. The study delves deeper, associating the writer's life and death with the concept of 'thymos' (Frenţiu 2024, 240), here in a way weaponizing the desire to be recognised in a specific way towards serving Mishima's purpose of promoting conservative ideas that criticise modern and postmodern developments in favour of the traditional '*bushidō*' ethos, for example (240-241).

Next is a chapter that deals with the complexities of translation and what it means to have two cultures interact in this way. She uses Yuri Lotman's concept of the 'semiosphere' in order to first establish what it is exactly that is being spoken of as 'interacting' with another 'something' that may influence it (Frenţiu 2024 244). This leads to addressing the difficulties of translation as an approximation at best according to important scholars, with Frenţiu supporting the idea of a fidelity limited by the resources available to the receiving culture's semiosphere, thus requiring the reader's "meaning-creating initiative" (247). It is interesting to note that she also admits the interpretative, thus creative, nature of translation. In her conception this gives the translator the purpose of guiding the reader towards the deeper meaning of the text, seeking not to domesticate it, but to facilitate a dialogue with the target culture (250).

After having established the context, part of the manner and the difficulties associated with cross-cultural interactions, the author provides a glimpse into the specificity of Japanese culture and its imaginary by analysing its culinary tradition. This essay details the philosophy behind the Japanese culinary mentality, showcasing the symbolism behind and the significance of a cultural practice that must 'activate all 5 senses' (Frenţiu 2024, 264) and relates food with specific seasons in an aesthetic display that turns it into what could be considered an art form (269). To create a full circle, the

next and final sub-chapter returns to an outside perspective, pointing out the state of trying to penetrate that cross-cultural barrier through language and the literature that speaks on that experience. She notes two works in particular that testify to the presence of such a barrier in both directions by relating the experiences of a Westerner learning Japanese and a Japanese person learning French. The conclusions to be drawn from both experiences is that cultural differences may be great, but the barriers are not insurmountable. These ideas very aptly tie to the aforementioned post-scriptum that tells of the author's own adventures of learning a foreign language and discovering a foreign culture, thus returning to the moments that made this very volume possible.

Robert-Giulian ANDREESCU
MA Student
Faculty of Letters, Babeș-Bolyai University
Cluj-Napoca, Romania
E-mail: robert.andreescu@stud.ubbcluj.ro