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Review: Rough Living by Tokuda Shusei, translated by Richard Torrance

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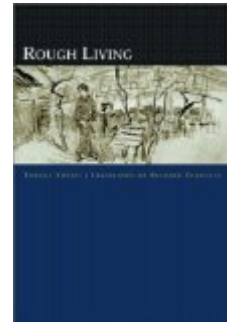
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Tokuda Shusei. *Rough Living*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001. ix + 181 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8248-2336-8; \$22.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8248-2387-0.

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Richard Torrance has given us a fluid, accurate and eminently readable translation of Tokuda Shusei's (1872-1943) most representative work, the novel *Arakure* (*Rough Living*). There is precious little available in English by and/or about Shusei, despite his prominence in the Meiji literary world. Indeed, Meiji period literature is often slighted in both English-language anthologies and Japanese-language compendia (*zenshu*) of "modern literature" (*gendai bungaku*). This somewhat slim volume helps balance the scales, if only a little bit. I should note that the novel was actually published three years after the end of Meiji in 1915, because the events depicted and the concerns of the characters are solidly placed in the late Meiji, the work should rightfully be considered "Meiji literature" and not "Taisho literature."

Having endeavored to teach the Meiji novel in a university undergraduate setting, it is this reviewer's impression that 21st century students often find the concerns and literary styles of late 19th and early 20th century Japan enigmatic—perhaps even more so than those of 11th and 12th century Japan, which they easily categorize in their minds as "classical" and therefore presumably different. Tokuda Shusei's work can be difficult for these students, but Torrance has provided a lucid introduction that explains just enough (but not so much as to be daunting) of the writer and his intent so as to allay reader trepidation. This introduction—free of the literary jargon that so often confuses undergraduates but by no means simplistic—gives us Shusei's background, his literary predecessors, his place within the realm of Japanese Naturalism, and finally focuses on the problematic structure of *Rough Living*. Torrance has been studying Shusei for most of his academic career, and his familiarity and ease with the subject shows in this essay; there are

times when Torrance is even apologetic for Shusei's style (specifically, the erratic chronological order of events), but he need not be. Shusei's work can certainly stand on its own, and all but the most impatient readers will enjoy this novel. For those particular few who find the order of events difficult, Torrance includes a brief plot chronology in Appendix A as a kind of reader's guide, should the lazy reader lose track of the heroine's actions.

The novel itself chronicles in detail the life of a young woman, Oshima, from 1884-1910. Oshima is a strong individual who experiences the gamut of interpersonal and business relationships. In the course of the story, she is adopted; runs away from home twice; marries (legally and through common-law) thrice; has extra-marital affairs; and opens and closes her own businesses numerous times. She speaks her opinion and often pays the price for it, but has little in the way of regret.

Lest the reader jump to the conclusion, however, that Shusei was writing in a "proletarian" vein, or that he was championing women's rights, one should be aware that for Shusei the focus of concern was more on the individual qua individual than on some group category. It is for this reason that some scholars have linked Shusei's writing with that of Hayashi Fumiko (1903-1951); having studied the latter extensively I can see the connection, but frankly feel that Shusei's approach is much more sophisticated than Fumiko's. Shusei was interested in depicting class conflict, but he also wanted to depict in a realistic fashion the lives of the common Japanese. The result is a heroine who is neither a paragon of the working class nor a martyr; she has triumphs and pratfalls, and is eminently human. (Indeed, the character of Oshima is based on Shusei's sister-in-law, Suzuki Chiyo.) Shusei's sophistication

comes from his ability to accurately pinpoint the events in his characters lives that hold the most poignancy. Instead of a grab-bag of vignettes from Oshima's life, we are given what on the surface seems erratic but is actually a careful depiction of her accomplishments—one that gives a full, three-dimensional view of the character. Shusei's intent was to portray a life in Meiji Japan of an average person who was suddenly faced with a daunting wealth of capitalist opportunities—opportunities that presented an equal chance at failure as at success.

One of the issues that Torrance addresses in his introduction is the relative lack of plot in the conventional sense—that is, a distinct introduction, development, climax, and denouement. However, he notes, the novel is “[Shusei's] most accessible and popular novel because of the humor, exuberance, and spirit of rebellion personified by its protagonist, Oshima” (p. 9). If we keep this in mind, we can easily understand why audiences responded so positively to this work. It is hard not to cheer for Oshima, and not to admire her steadfastness. The novel was originally published as a daily serial in *Yomiuri shinbun* from January to July 1915 and Torrance has wisely chosen to preserve the serial format in his translation, thus we can see how it first appeared to the public as a series of episodic events.

Although it is the sort of thing that is often taken for granted, I think that the English of this translation deserves special note. As Torrance writes in his introduction, “the voice of the author is refracted through an enormous diversity of languages: highly original sound

symbolism (conventionally held to be not literary), the representation of regional and urban dialects, nonstandard pseudoclassical narrative forms, beautiful seasonal imagery, and dialogue in mixed dialects. These features make [Shusei's] works difficult to translate” (p. 15). This means that Torrance must make difficult decisions about how to represent as much of these anomalies as possible without making the English seem artificial, and I am happy to say that he is successful in finding the right idiom. His translation does not call attention to itself at all; rather it is a smooth, natural-sounding English. With the exception of a few passages, it is quite easy to forget that one is reading a translation at all. To be sure, some of Shusei's art is lost in the translation, but that is inevitable, and we should not fault Torrance.

On a final, physical note, the volume itself is tastefully presented in a good layout. That the paperback version costs over twenty dollars may deter some faculty from putting this on their reading lists, but I should hope only in a small number of cases. This is also the sort of publication that is often quickly relegated to the annals of out-of-print books, so the interested reader is encouraged to acquire a copy before that happens.

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