

Yoichi Nagashima, *Objective Description of the Self: The Literary Theory of Iwano Homei*. Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 1998. 240 pp. ISBN 87-7288-611-0.

The work under review appears at a time of renewed interest in the related questions of subjectivity and autobiographical fiction. In this first full-length study in English, Nagashima has provided an exposition on the theoretical position of Iwano Hōmei (1873-1920) that is part biographical exegesis, part translation, and part comparative commentary. Nagashima interrogates Hōmei's work from the standpoint of narrative structure—a logical choice given the enormous emphasis Hōmei placed on the relationship among author, protagonist and narrative style. Although the work is clearly written, Hōmei's unusual view of logic makes it seem turgid at times, a sense pleasantly meliorated by moments of light humour interspersed throughout the text.

The first three chapters of *Objective Description* are less a critical evaluation than a solid reconstruction of the convoluted and often confounding process by which Hōmei came to profess his theory of *ichigen byōsha*, translated here as monistic narration. Exhaustive in its detail, Nagashima makes an admirable attempt at describing and illuminating the journey that led to a method of narrative technique that was, in the final analysis, valid only for Hōmei's own writing. These biographical details situate Hōmei and his works in the context of the debate over the future of the naturalist movement in Japan, while accurately conveying an arrogance so complete as to be almost parodic of the man who firmly believed that only by adopting his theory would world literature achieve purity. The impression that Nagashima is not entirely successful in his reconstruction results less from a lack of scholarly effort than from his difficulty in obtaining a clear picture in light of the often vituperative and contradictory exchanges between Hōmei and his detractors. Thus, the repetition of facts which would otherwise quickly grow wearisome is a welcome return to order in face of Hōmei's less than cogent arguments.

The next two chapters explore the foundation of Hōmei's idiosyncratic view. A translation of the seminal 1918 article 'Gendai shōrai no shōsetsuteki hassō o isshin subeki boku no byōsharon' [My theory of narration which will renew the idea of the novel today and in the future], an essay central to understanding Hōmei's project, comprises chapter 4. In his copious notes, Nagashima contrasts the version he translated (*Hōmei zenshū*) with the first printing (*Shinchō*) and provides commentary on the text. The issue of translation central to this chapter, however, raises a nontrivial concern. *Objective Description* is a revision of Nagashima's Ph.D. dissertation, originally written in Danish. The Preface states that this book is a translation into English, and the phrasing suggests that it is translated from Danish: this presents a problem as the original Japanese has been filtered not once but twice. Hōmei's logic is challenging

enough without having to trouble oneself with issues such as these.

Chapter 5, perhaps the most intriguing in the work, attempts a critique of *ichigen byōsha*. After first presenting the reactions of Hōmei's contemporaries and his vitriolic rebuttals, Nagashima provides a primer of sorts: extended examples from Hōmei's own works, specifically the five that comprise the novel-series—Hōmei's *chef d'oeuvre*—are used to explore the contentious issue of the relation between the author and protagonist by presenting the same situation(s) narrated 'objectively' through a different mediator in each work. The history of multiple publications and revisions between 1910 and 1918 makes the story of its creation a fascinating examination of the concomitant development of *ichigen byōsha*. Although Nagashima's examples tend to be overly long, they effectively present his argument and convincingly demonstrate the extremely close relationship between the novel-series and Hōmei's theory. The grammatical arguments made in support of his analysis are particularly provocative, yet one wishes that Nagashima had explored the issue more deeply, examining, say, the implications such flexibility in personal pronouns might have had for the overall effect of *ichigen byōsha*.

Chapter 6 tries to examine Hōmei's theory in relation to other theories of narrative. Unfortunately, the rationale behind the selection of those 'others' remains unspecified. Some are obvious choices—Gérard Genette and Norman Friedman for example—while others seem to have been included simply on the strength of their names. It is unfortunate that the promise this section holds out is never fully realised, for although it is a compact introduction to myriad point-of-view theories, much of the analysis goes no farther than deciding whether any given theory adequately addresses the concerns raised by Hōmei.

It is a shame to see all the positive aspects of this study seriously impoverished by a general sense of editorial sloppiness, evident from the moment one picks up the book and discovers

two different subtitles. This is sadly indicative of the general feel of *Objective Description*, for it is riddled with editorial errors: questionable English, inconsistencies of formatting, incomplete sentences and missing words, an undefined abbreviation, unusual rules of citation, and the often unpolished quality of the transitions between the myriad subsections. The two indices are marginal at best, including only works by Hōmei, and biographical identifications. Finally, despite the intervening sixteen years between the time Nagashima completed his dissertation in 1982 and the publication of *Objective Description*, the bibliography shows a remarkable paucity of critical sources published after 1982.

In summary, Nagashima has done a service to the field by making available a wealth of information that, while not necessarily new, is newly accessible to a broader readership. He has helped place in the turbulent context of early naturalism in Japan a figure whose theoretical cogitations paralleled the development of the *watakushi shōsetsu* and whose role in that movement is both central and marginal, a paradox Nagashima profitably explores at length. That the physical presentation of that research is so infelicitous can only be regarded as unfortunate.

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