

The Timely Turn of the Screw

Seven Japanese Tales, by Junichiro Tanizaki, translated by Howard Hibbett (Knopf, 298 pp. \$5), are examples of the Japanese art of compressing an entire landscape into a miniature. Robert Payne's many books on the Far East include *The Barbarian and The Geisha*.

By ROBERT PAYNE

THERE can be few living writers with the range and subtlety of Junichiro Tanizaki. He writes angelically and with a deceptive fluency, for the effects he achieves are the uncommon ones that can be brought about only by tireless experiment. He will describe a whole life in fifty pages, and in five pages he will tell a hair-raising tragedy; he is essentially an artist in miniatures, but in the sense that a Japanese scroll depicting an entire countryside is a miniature. We expect delicacy and refinement from Japanese storytellers. Tanizaki elevates delicacy and refinement, usually associated with the lesser arts, to heroic proportions. Lady Murasaki could do it. Tanizaki, who translated *The Tale of Genji* into modern Japanese, has evidently absorbed a portion of her genius.

Take, for example, "A Portrait of Shunkin," the first of the stories, written at widely different times, collected in this short anthology of his work. It purports to be a portrait of a gifted musician, the daughter of an Osaka drug merchant, based upon a fragmentary biography and the memories of people who knew her. At intervals Tanizaki quotes from the biography and comments upon it, sometimes examining it passage by passage, holding a single sentence up to the light and shaking out of it some unexpected facet of her career. She went blind, became selfish and grasping, and dominated her servant Sasuke, who was also her lover, until he blinded himself, partly in sympathy for his mistress and partly because a thief had poured scalding water on her face and she did not want him to see her. Neither of these characters is particularly sympathetic: both are the slaves of their passions, and they live in the enclosed world of their greed. Yet Tanizaki can pull you down into the page and make you live their lives until you can almost cry out for

mercy. He never falters. At every moment he has exactly the right turn of the screw. It is an art comparable to that of Flaubert's short stories, and there can be no higher praise.

There is the story of a young student who is a habitual thief. He too, is an unsympathetic, ineffective, and unscrupulous character, with nothing to commend him except the depth of his humanity.

"The Tattooer" is a famous story which has become an anthology piece. The subject is an intolerably offensive one, but by the sheer magic of his craft Tanizaki makes it endurable and even oddly beautiful. A sadistic tattoo artist is obsessed with the desire to tattoo an enormous spider on the back of a supremely beautiful young woman. He finds the woman, puts her to sleep with chloroform, and while tattooing the spider on her he relishes the thought of the pain she will suffer. Finally,

when she has bathed and the dyes are embedded in her flesh, she comes to him, triumphant and suffering no pain. "Just then her resplendently tattooed back caught a ray of sunlight and the spider was wreathed in flames."

So the story ends, and we are aware that he is telling us some fairy tale and that there must be a moral somewhere, but what the moral is is beyond all knowing. Tanizaki has the strange gift of making you believe anything he tells you, however recondite or remote from ordinary preoccupations. It is the same in the other stories—"The Bridge of Dreams," a story of erotic confusions, and "A Blind Man's Tale," set in the feudal age, which recounts the stratagems and love affairs of heroes. Only "Terror," a story about a man who is driven to the edge of madness whenever he enters a moving vehicle, is a failure, perhaps because similar stories have been told so often and because there is an element of self-pity.

The blind musician Shunkin had a pet nightingale called Tenko, which means "the drum of Heaven." "This nightingale," says Tanizaki, "had a voice of steady and sustained power, as well as great charm and sweetness." One can say the same of Tanizaki himself.

Autumn Leaves Little Hope

A Day in Late September, by Merle Miller (Sloane, 343 pp. \$4.50), rues the limitations of love and the terrible truth of clichés. Maggie Rennert is an editor and critic whose poems have appeared in SR.

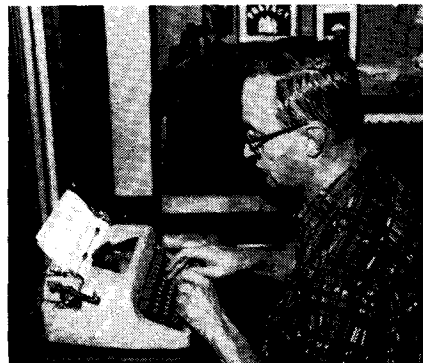
By MAGGIE RENNERT

FEW OF the active, successful, and destructive people we meet during this "day in late September" can look forward to a truly merry Christmas. But those who can manage some small faith, a modicum of courage, a paring of charity may be sustained through the dark of their year. And perhaps, Merle Miller suggests, even into a green spring.

Chief among those who may make it is Mac, a fortyish writer and survivor of many anguishes, now returned from self-imposed exile to reclaim his adolescent son. The boy's mother and her second husband move in their lethal rhythms, as do Everard Carver III, friend of any voter; his rich wife, Janice, friend of nothing; and Gordon Shep-

ley, one-book poet turned professional titillator of *Kultur Klattsches*.

If Merle Miller's knack for the quick, and quicklime, sketch is still unimpaired, so too is his gift for evoking our pity—sometimes slowed by revulsion, but real as a pulsebeat—for the "stranger and afraid." In showing us Phoebe, with whom Mac hopes to begin a new life, Mr. Miller tops his admirable performance in his last novel, with greater economy and without the advantages of autobiography. As he did with Joshua



Merle Miller—knack for quicklime sketch.

Bland in *A Gay and Melancholy Sound*, Miller wears Phoebe's skin, looks out of her eyes, and speaks with her voice.

The author is profligate with his gifts; he tosses over his shoulder half a dozen vignettes each of which, properly force-fed, could have become one of the niggardly little stories on which some reputations are built. Indeed, the compassionate portrait of Dr. Clay Sorenson and his wife, Ida, could have supported another full-length novel. But, when it comes to the nondespairing characters who embody the solid virtues, Mr. Miller has no such abundance. Abel Sorenson, the aged revolutionary who bespeaks commitment and courage and faith, represents a good

try but doesn't quite come off. And Mrs. Sandwich, the only woman in the book whose life is not a total waste, is also unbelievable. The author seems unaware that a good woman can be cranky, preoccupied, discouraged, or funny.

Although Miller writes with the passion of a convert, of the limitations of love and the terrible truth of clichés, his novel is marred by compromise and haste. The conclusion is contrived and the penultimate scene, while fashionably surrealist, is wildly out of key with the painstaking exactitudes that have preceded it. Mr. Miller should have chosen to try a little harder a little longer.

Gover allowed an insufferably pompous college boy and a teen-age Negro prostitute tell, by means of alternating chapters, their versions of a week end together. Juxtaposition of the two viewpoints, upon everything from sex to the Cold War, resulted in memorable comedy. Gover made the most of every irony, faultlessly captured the speech patterns of his furtive frat-house Babbitt and *café au lait* Lolita. The book worked because it followed the simplest possible scheme: that of putting two believable characters into a situation and turning the proceedings over to them, without obvious instruction on the author's part.

In *The Maniac Responsible* (Grove, \$4.50) Gover stands up several cardboard figures and prods them into a classic murder-mystery plot—then abruptly abandons this form and empties a grab bag of personal patter and self-conscious fictional gimmickry. The idea, it seems, is to turn a suburban rape-slaying into a grand parable on the "American sex guilt." The hero is a young reporter named Dean, who covers the killing and serves its sordid details to the public. When he isn't on the beat, he is trying to seduce Rita, a "lowbrow hi-fi buff" who lives in the next apartment; his obsession with "Sweet Reet" and her undulating anatomy somehow fuses with his erotic memory of the beautiful murder victim. Dean "confesses" to the crime and goes meekly off to the psychiatrist, yammering "I didn't do it but I'm guilty. We're all guilty."

THE idea, as handled, is thin and contrived, and it leads to a lot of trivial verbiage, much of it in playscript form, between various alter egos labeled Dean, Dean Dean, Mean Dean, Mean Dean Dean, and Morbid Interest—with an occasional word from a beat poet and a fey, philosophic hermit the reporter has met in the mountains. One soon gets lost in this fantasia. Patience finally fails when Gover, on page 180, has the printer set a diatribe on Unhinged Desire in an inverted typographical pyramid. The speech renders down, at the bottom of the page, into the lonely pronoun "I." We might have caught the point without a picture.

The early pages contain some lively spoofing. And the build-up to the seduction is delectable. Should a big-time hero come on like a swaggering cat, or "nicely nicely villainous with due regard for the avoidance of unorthodoxish mannerisms"? If Gover had stuck to this zany pace, he might have had another comic success. But he seems to want us to believe there's a moral and psychological parallel between a youthful sofa frolic and a hatchet murder. It's impossible to take this ponderous message seriously.

—WALT MCCASLIN.

Always Enter Laughing

Far From the City of Class, by Bruce Jay Friedman (Frommer-Pasmanier-Pocket Books. 217 pp. \$4.50), a short story collection by the author of "Stern," vary from parables of logical inversion to science fiction to not-quite-deadpan reportage. Riley Hughes is associate professor of English at Georgetown University.

By RILEY HUGHES

WITH whoops of scornful laughter Bruce Jay Friedman seizes again and again upon the inanities and irritants in our anxieties and pretensions and applies to them the blasting therapy of logic. Just how "permissive," one may have wondered, must the psychiatrist be with his patient, and how sacred is the professional contract that binds the two? In "Mr. Prinzo's Breakthrough" we have one answer; Mr. Prinzo tests codes and assumptions by murdering his analyst's wife. From the context one recognizes as a cry from the heart the doctor's plaintive reaction, "When I met her she was a *Redbook* reader and do you know that recently I was unable to get my *Virginia Quarterly* away from her?" Does a clean-cut, all-American boy (good at every sport but tennis, which is less all-American anyway) pass all the clean-cut tests? He need only be neurotically, blabbingly ashamed of an elderly relative to earn the author's exact, scornful epithet, "The Subversive."

Alibis crash sickeningly to the ground whenever Mr. Friedman examines them. Mr. Kessler persuades himself, and half persuades Mrs. Kessler, that he should be at a health gym and not the synagogue on the eve of Yom Kipper. "It's

in one of the psalms," he assures her. That is enough to set off, in a yarn of the maddest abandon craftily entitled "When You're Excused You're Excused," a series of surrenders by Mr. Kessler—to the advances of a blonde receptionist, to ham hocks, to marijuana, and to complicity in murder, for after all he is "excused." Excuses for suicide from a high ledge—and, as well, for not committing it—are brushed aside, along with the traditional accompanying heroics, in "23 Pat O'Brien Movies." Plainly, Mr. Friedman is an uncomfortable fellow to have at one's elbow.

Not all of the sixteen stories in *Far From the City of Class* are parables of logical inversion; some are science fiction (sexual fantasy subdivision), and some are sober—but not quite deadpan—reportage. In the latter category is the title story, a restrained enough account of a week end two New York City boys, in exile at a Midwestern college, spend at "Hicksville, U.S.A." hustling groceries and later interviewing a hustler doing her stripper's act for what she assumes are Broadway producer types. The other college story, "The Trip," chronicles the embarrassments of an entering freshman showing up for registration with a veiled, dyed-blond mother, self-described as "a fast thirty years older than he is." This one ought to put a quick stop to Momism, wherever it might still be flourishing. The same indomitable female, by the way, shows up in Mr. Friedman's zanily satiric novel, *Stern*, as homey as a shot glass. Under another name she would probably be good for a few more stories. Or a novel maybe, Mr. Friedman?

Guilt by Association: In *One Hundred Dollar Misunderstanding*, Robert