

Book Reviews/Features

The Authoritarian Ethos

"Tomiko watched her father's broad back, still standing in the doorway. She saw him slowly and with dignity descend the two steps that led to the narrow strip of soil between the latticed fence and the house wall. He was handling his bonsai trees . . . was cutting more branches off the dwarf trees to shape their growth. . . . He forms everything to his will, Tomiko thought. . . . Doubt never seemed to enter him. He was always certain that what he did was right. He had very high standards for himself and would never have forgiven himself for failing. He always strove for the greatest perfection. The way he dressed, the way he walked . . . how he moved his hands, lowered his head — even his breathing — was free of haste and restlessness. He was so sure of himself that nothing of whatever happened around him disturbed his perfection. That was how he imposed his order on everything."

And that is how he blighted and ruined everything he touched, this anachronistic man whose standards excluded eventually all humanity, the subject of an extraordinary new novel (*) which is about lingering Japanese tradition in the new Japan.

Tomiko herself sees what is happening. Her husband Nagayuki is made a *yoshi* so that the Hayato line can continue and he is shortly sent off to America by her father. His own ideals would not permit his sending this new son as a businessman. He instead clothes him in expensive kimono, confident that all American doors will open to a scion of the Hayatos and that he will come back wealthy, "clothed in brocade" as is the local saying in this provincial town.

The father does not know that kimono is not worn in America. He is not even aware that it is no longer much worn

in his Japan — the first decades of this century. He has put much of the family money into timber for shipbuilding, not aware that ships are already made of iron; he loses more money because Japanese gentlemen do not sign contracts, a spoken agreement is sufficient; he finally loses the rest and goes into bankruptcy because, in his lordly manner, he trusts the untrustworthy. At the end of the book, unwillingly convinced that Na-

contentment, if not happiness, must also count for something.

One of father's occupations, bonsai, becomes a metaphor which extends throughout the book. Without the shaping hand the little trees would not exist or at least would not exist in their perfect form. Yet, at the same time, one must also see the trees as monstrously dwarfed, their own will and destiny, as it were, taken from them.

What the author has beauti-

the other. Indeed, Tomiko admires her father. Does this mean that the question is so subtle that she must admit the philosophical rightness of the way even though the result is tragedy, or does it mean that she too has finally become infected by this formal disease, the mania for the completely perfect, which is also the completely dead? The way in which the way is practiced is indicted, but the way itself is only elucidated. It is this, and the ultimate question which this interpretation poses, which gives this fine book its importance.

The author, Hisako Matsubara, is herself (I think) an expatriate. She lives in Koeln and writes for *Die Zeit*, she is also a student of Heine (who, incidentally, would much, I think, have liked this book), and she wrote this book originally in German. (This is the English translation, by Ruth Hein — it reads quite well though references to temple "gongs" should have been translated "bells," and sake is not drunk from bowls but from cups.)

While it is certainly good that a book of this importance is translated, I do wish that the American publishers had not insisted upon their present title. The original German title, "Brokatrausch" (a neologism which means "brocade drunkenness") fits the book very well. "Samurai," even though the book is about the results of the samurai ethos, is inaccurate and cheapening. "Shogun" was probably thought of and so far as the title goes emulated. This is a shame. It will probably keep away rather than attract the kind of reader that this very fine book deserves.

(*) *Samurai*, by Hisako Matsubara. Times Books, Three Park Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10016. Pp. 218. \$9.95.

The Asian Bookshelf

By DONALD RICHIE

gayuki, now working as an impoverished immigrant fruit-picker in California, will not come back clothed in brocade, he unilaterally has Tomiko divorced, without her knowing, and marries her off to one of the most despicable of those who fleeced him, sincerely believing that this is best for the family, for the continuation of the noble line of the Hayatos.

The man is a monster, of course, but the author never says so. Rather she, with great wisdom, indicates that a hundred years before, the same actions would be considered virtuous, that the father's tragedy (or rather, that of those about him, since he never realizes or admits the tragic consequences of his actions) is caused because he is an anachronism, a man in 1910 living by the standards of 1810.

Since hers is a full-scale portrait in which she refuses to indict her main character, she ends (as was, I think, her purpose) by indicting the very standards by which he lives. In fact, this book is one of the strongest indictments of this form of the traditional way that I know. Yet (and this the author makes certain we understand), this stern ethos has a beauty and a proportion of its own. It is despicable only if we would argue that individual

fully here presented is a human dilemma which extends far beyond Japan. To what extent can the shaping hand (religion, philosophy, metaphysics, social standards) be allowed to give form? When does form become restriction and what indeed is the median between chaos on one hand and dead perfection on the other? There are no answers to these questions and yet solving them is one of the necessities of living.

The question is most elegantly phrased in this very fine book because the author herself never makes judgments. She shows us what happens to these people and we cannot but feel the cruelty and the waste. But she does not say that this always or invariably happens. Bonsai training, the Noh, tea-ceremony (the father's avocations) are not shown as the tools of villainy, because this they are obviously not. Yet, we cannot but be aware that they (like everything else) can be turned into such agents — that the entire structure of traditional Japan, so forming, so restricting, in all senses, good and bad, can easily (and in this case has) become so restrictive that it kills life itself.

The author thus makes no easy generalizations and never openly espouses one side or