



Singular Rebellion

Saiichi Maruya

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We all know, or think we do, that Japan is a conformist society, millions of inscrutable faces all with the same ideas in their heads. Surely that Japanese businessman you met last week, for example, couldn't have had one rebellious thought inside him? Not very likely, of course, if you think about it, and if you want to know just how unlikely, this book will tell you.

Set in the rebellious year of 1969 when rioting students seemed poised to overthrow the whole setup, this novel is about the need all of us have, as individuals, to conform, and also to rebel; rebellion depending on conformity, and conformity demanding that rebellion be a solitary, singular affair. The narrator is a middle-aged employee of an electrical goods manufacturer, a job he has because, when a career civil servant at MITI, he'd refused a transfer to the Ministry of Defense. Those about him see this as a pacifist gesture, a rebellious act, but for him it was nothing as simple as that, for here we have a human being, not an ideological cardboard cutout, and his motives were, and still are, mixed. As the book opens, rebellion takes the form of marrying a young fashion model, a wild act for a former bureaucrat, yet even this seems to come about more by accident than choice, involving him in a more seriously rebellious world as his wife's grandmother turns out to be a murderess (she'd carved up her estranged husband with a razor, more or less by accident too), and the various confusions her coming to live with them gives rise to are the real comic center of the novel.

In society itself an even more singular rebellion is going on, shown in graphic detail in the famous assault on one of the large Tokyo stations. This is seen through the eyes of a young photographer who has his own gesture of rebellion to make, the rejection of a congratulatory speech at a marvelously chaotic prizegiving ceremony which is one of the comic highlights of the book.

The novel deals with serious political and social ideas, but there is no flourishing of slogans or easy images of despair, for comedy does not rub ideas in one's face. Here we have what life was like in Japan fifteen years ago, and it hasn't changed much since then. If you want to know how the Japanese business elite think and feel, and what a Japanese professor is like; if you want to understand the Japanese bureaucratic mind, and what goes on inside the head of a young Japanese woman, or even what goes on inside a Japanese women's prison--then read on. If you don't particularly want any of these things, but just something genuinely stimulating to read, then this is also it.

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Dan Fry:

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Amy Osburn:

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