The Detective Fiction of Oguri Mushitarō. Beyond the Orthodox and the Weird

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ABSTRACT
Oguri Mushitarō (1901-1946) was a popular fiction writer whose main period of activity were the 1930s. Renowned for his idiosyncratic and often impenetrable style, labyrinthine plots and otherworldly logic, he never achieved the popularity of his contemporaries Edogawa Rampo or Yokomizo Seishi. In fact the eminent detective literature historian Itō Hideo dismisses one of Oguri's novels as “unfathomable” and “not for the casual reader”. In spite of this, in the last few decades Oguri's works have been reappraised, with his most famous novel Kokushikan satsujin jiken [the plague house murder case] (1934) placing 14th in the Shūkan Bunshun magazine's recent poll of 100 best Japanese mystery novels.

In this paper I look at the novels that feature the detective Norimizu Rintarō, compare the works of Oguri to those of other mystery writers in Japan and abroad and try to argue that Oguri's originality lies in his unwillingness to adapt either to the honkaku (the detective novel ‘proper’) or the henkaku (the ‘unorthodox’ mystery) schools that formed the early Showa era mystery fiction literary scene.

KEYWORDS: mystery, Japanese literature, detective fiction, popular fiction, 1930s

Introduction
It can be argued that detective fiction, like no other type of modern fiction, relies on strict adherence to certain established forms and patterns. Thus

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1 Please note that the paper gives away crucial plot details of the following works: Edogawa Ranpo’s Nisen dōka, Injū; Oguri Mushitarō’s Gokō satsujin jiken, Kokushikan satsujin jiken; S.S. Van Dine’s The Canary Murder Case, The Greene Murder Case, The Bishop Murder Case.

2 By detective fiction (detective story, detective novel) I mean the subgenre of crime fiction that concentrates on the investigation of a criminal mystery by a representative – professional or not – of the forces of law, who by gathering evidence, witness statements etc. and by means of logical reasoning finds out the identity of the perpetrator and reveals it at the climax of the story. Also referred to as whodunit, pure puzzle, or formal detective novel (Grella 1980), detective fiction is traditionally traced back to Poe’s 1841 short story The Murders in the Rue Morgue.
the problem of form has long been central to the debate of the genre, be it among the writers, critics or academics (Cegielski 2015). This is evidenced by numerous attempts – characteristic especially of the so-called “Golden Age of Detection”, i.e. the 1920s and 1930s – to strictly define the detective novel, to outline its purest form and to defend it from any deviations. The famous Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories (1928) by Willard Huntington Wright, better known by his nom de plume S.S. Van Dine, is an oft-cited example of a detective novelist proposing a codification of the rules of detective fiction (Symons 1993). Among this set of commandments one would find, for instance, the insistence on “fair play” with the reader, no supernatural phenomena, no professional criminals, no butler-as-the-murderer type clichés and above all no formal experiments (Van Dine 1947).³

The urge to separate “true” detective fiction from the contamination of outside influence was not exclusive to the English language literary scene, and can also be observed among Japanese writers, as shown by the honkaku-henkaku debate that took place concurrently to similar ones in Great Britain and the United States. However, this was at its core an altogether distinct disagreement, even though the questions raised seemed quite similar. This is because the development and the social roles of the Japanese variation of the genre, albeit largely influenced by Western – mostly English and French – crime fiction, have taken a different path than in the homelands of Doyle or Leblanc.

This paper is an attempt to present the detective fiction of Oguri Mushitarō, an author whose body of work is one of the most striking examples of the genre that took the name of tantei shōsetsu.⁴ On the one hand Oguri was praised as an innovator, on the other, he was often criticized for his often confusing and uncompromising style. Often seen as a highly original writer, he nonetheless never shied away from borrowing from others, including the plot of his best-known work. In this paper I shall try to look at the controversial Norimizu series, that is the novels and short stories which

³ The tone of Van Dine’s remarks is humorous, but as his own novels show, he was very serious about adhering to the rules.

⁴ Although the term tantei shōsetsu is a direct translation of “detective novel” and at its core denotes a genre that took European and American detective fiction as its starting point, its scope eventually became much broader than that of its English language counterpart. By the end of the Taishō era, the label tantei shōsetsu referred to virtually all kinds of foreign literature concerned with the out-of-the-ordinary i.e. apart from crime and detective fiction, it also denoted adventure novels, humorous literature and even science fiction (Taniguchi 2013: 6-7). In this paper, in order to avoid confusion I shall refer to Japanese detective fiction as tantei shōsetsu, denoting all variants of Japanese detective (and crime) fiction, however far from the Western understanding of the term they may be, provided that they possess at least some aspect of mystery or criminality.
feature detective Norimizu Rintarō as a main character, and discuss them in the context of the dispute about the forms of Japanese *tantei shōsetsu* as well as the forms of detective fiction in general.

**The Detectives Invade Japan**

Detective fiction – like most other achievements of the 19th-century modern society – arrived in Japan in the Meiji era. From a cultural perspective, the whole period can be seen as a process utilizing foreign influence to create, by trial and error, an altogether new expressiveness that would befit a modern nation, ready to compete with the mythicized West. As far as literature was concerned, that goal was reached with the arrival on the literary scene of Natsume Sōseki, arguably the first writer to bring the Japanese novel to a new level, independent from both the slavish following of European literature and the nostalgia for the Japanese classics (it was no coincidence that Sōseki’s debut as a novelist was simultaneous with Japan’s triumph in the war against Russia, an event that punctuated the emergence of Japan as a modern global state).

Japanese detective fiction developed in much the same way as modern literature in general, that is starting from copious borrowing from foreign sources and gradually transforming these into a new sensitivity. Therefore, the history of the genre in Japan begins with translations and adaptations of English and French language novels. Starting from 1888, newspaper journalist Kuroïwa Ruikō delivered a string of immensely popular retellings of Émile Gaboriau⁵, Anna Katharine Green⁶, Fortuné du Boisgobey⁷ and others (Itō 2002: 78-88). Even though there were attempts at original writing – such as Ruikō’s own 1889 novel *Muzan* [cruelty] – the reading public associated the genre mainly with localized versions of foreign works. Notable original *tantei shōsetsu* had been written in the years after the first surge of the genre’s popularity in the 1890s; however, none of them captured the reading public’s imagination as much as the adventures of Sherlock Holmes⁸, Arsène Lupin⁹, or Dr. Kureta (the name given in Japanese translations to R. Austin Freeman’s¹⁰ Dr. Thorndyke).

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⁵ French popular fiction writer, creator of detective Lecoq, author of *L’Affaire Lerouge* (*The Widow Lerouge*, 1866), *Le Crime d’Orcival* (*The Mystery of Orcival*, 1867), considered one of the most important writers in the history of detective fiction.

⁶ Pioneering author of detective fiction in America, best remembered for the 1878 novel *The Leavenworth Case*.

⁷ French author of popular fiction, follower of Gaboriau.

⁸ Although introduced as early as 1894 (*Kojiki dōraku* [begging for pleasure] an anonymous translation of *The Man With the Twisted Lip* (1891) that somehow manages to give away the final reveal in the title), Doyle’s Holmes stories didn’t grab the reading public’s attention before 1899 and the publication of an anonymous translation of *A Study in Scarlet* (as *Chizome no kabe*
The popularity of detective fiction ignited, however, the ire of certain literary critics. As early as 1894 Shimamura Hōgetsu argued that detective fiction is devoid of serious esthetic merit, being nothing more than an intellectual pastime. Furthermore, it is improper to consider such books as novels due to the fact that they fail to create a realistic representation of contemporary society. Many similarly critical views emerged in later years, and detective fiction, despite attracting in its early period the attention of such important literary figures as Tsubouchi Shōyō or Kōda Rohan, began to be ostracized or treated as immature. Sometime later, however, young but already critically acclaimed writers of the Taishō era (Tanizaki Jun’ichirō, Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, Satō Haruo among others) displayed an interest in detective fiction and started incorporating its elements into their works. Even though their interest in the genre was on the whole short-lived (only Satō continued to write fiction of this kind well into the Shōwa era), it proved to be an impulse significant enough for a new generation of authors, who arrived in the 1920s. Edogawa Ranpo was the first of them, but others followed in his wake, after the success of his debut story Nisen dōka [the two sen copper coin] (1923), published in the Shinseinen’ magazine, the flagship of this second tantei shōsetsu boom.

If Kuroiwa Ruiko was the Tsubouchi Shōyō of tantei shōsetsu, then Ranpo has to be considered the genre’s Sōseki. Whether it was the kanji-based cipher from the The Two Sen Copper Coin or D-zaka satsujin jiken [the
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D...zaka murder case] (1925) and its locked-room mystery situated not in a library of an English manor house, but in a rather frail Japanese building – Ranpo was the first to believably adapt detective fiction to the specific background of his country. What is more, as Gōhara (2010: 203) observes, he successfully managed to distance himself from the introspective, self-conscious approach to writing that dominated in modern Japanese fiction for the previous three decades.

The Elusive “True” Detective Novel

The formal rigidness of Western detective fiction bespoke its origins as the literature by which the middle classes could confirm their newly attained social status and be reassured of the society’s stability. The detective, often deified for his superhuman powers of reasoning, together with the policeman, the law enforcer etc. could now become a literary hero, functioning as a guarantee that the chaos brought about by the crime would be inevitably followed by the return of order (Symons 1993). Another factor contributing to the development of detective fiction was the modern man’s desire for reason and therefore peace of mind in the ever-changing world (Haycraft 1947: 164).

When Ruikō’s wrote his translations of foreign novels, he had a similar aim: they were meant to serve as an introduction of sorts to the functioning of the Western justice system (Silver 2003). However, after the emergence of Doyle and the overwhelming popularity of his Sherlock Holmes stories and novels in the 1890s, European and American detective fiction largely evolved in the direction of the “pure puzzle” form, deliberately distancing itself from any pretense of “art” or attempts at socially conscious discourse, taking on a role of a “find the murderer” parlour game instead, with the promise of a thrill at the final unmasking of the culprit. On the other hand, the tantei shōsetsu of the Taishō and early Shōwa eras were – for various reasons – largely unaffected by this, gradually progressing in a direction different from their Western counterpart. That is not to say that stories of the more formulaic type were completely absent. All the same, an inclination towards the bizarre, the weird and the unexplained was obvious. In other words, the late Taishō and early Shōwa era tantei shōsetsu possessed a distinctly romantic flavour, and, what is more, they often ignored principles of logic, so valued by detective fiction authors overseas. Already in the first Ranpo story the motif of pursuit of truth with the aid of logical reasoning is put to the test. The impressive feat of solving a

14 Authors of original tatei shōsetsu of the “regular” type at the time include Emi Suiin or Matsumoto Tai.
complicated cipher by the protagonist Matsumura is rendered meaningless when the whole thing is exposed as a prank set up by his friend who narrates the story. This is just one of the instances of what Matsuda (2015) calls the “breaking away from the great detective trope” “meitantei« kara no itsudatsu” 「名探偵からの逸脱」. And then there are stories like Yaneura no sanposha [walker in the attic] (1925), where the author’s interest in exploring perversities of the human mind, in this case voyeurism, overwhelms the criminal plot; Kagami jigoku [mirror hell] (1926), a story of a young man obsessed with mirrors and lenses, where there is no crime or puzzle element at all; or Ranpo’s first novel, Yami ni ugomoku [squirms in the darkness] (1926, finished in 1928), which begins as a mystery, but eventually turns into a horror tale with a subplot of cannibalism, one of the author’s many ventures into the realm of the macabre. One is therefore not surprised that Ranpo wholeheartedly embraced the following definition of detective fiction, proposed by Satō Haruo in 1924 (quoted by Ranpo in 1931):

“Detective novel is ultimately a branch from the plentiful tree of romanticism, the fruit of curiosity-hunting, the mysterious gleam of one of the many faces of the jewel called poetry; it is formed when the root that is the inexplicable inkling towards evil common to every man, and the singular state of mind of the desire to witness terror, is on the other hand intertwined with the sensible mentality that favours lucidity.” (Ranpo 2015b: 48)

The term “curiosity-hunting” is worth noting as – usually in the Japanese spelling ryōki – it would soon become no less than an esthetical category of the pre-war tantei shōsetsu, a very fitting description of where the interests of authors like Ranpo or Yumeno Kyūsaku lay. As far

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15 On a similar note, Ranpo ends his best regarded and most analyzed work Injiū [beast in the shadows] (1929) with an epilogue, in which the detective doubts whether the person he denounced to the police is the real murderer.

16 In fact, a magazine of this title was published in the 1930s.
as Ranpo’s ideas on the scope of *tantei shōsetsu* are concerned, it is necessary to take note of his numerous critical essays. While often admitting the importance of the formal detective novel (ibid.: 40), he never fails to advocate the broader meaning. The article *Honmono no tantei shōsetsu* [the real detective novel] (1927) is a case in point. The titular distinction is bestowed upon the writings of Kosakai Fuboku (the article is a review of his latest collection of short stories *Keu no hanzai* [an unusual crime]), an author and doctor of medicine, who in his often bizarre and macabre works, written in a style mixing callousness and black humour, would repeatedly employ his medical knowledge. In his review Ranpo stresses that Kosakai’s tales are never vague, always on point and, most of all, original in their ideas, without resorting to a parade of weirdness for its own sake (one can detect a hint of self-criticism), which makes him the only author of “real” *tantei shōsetsu* (Ranpo 2015a: 575-576). As Ranpo’s evaluation proves, what many of the writers of the genre rated highest were not minutely constructed criminal plots, but originality in the quest for the bizarre, in hunting for curiosities.

As we see, most of *tantei shōsetsu* written during this period resembled the works of Ranpo in that they often ignored or downplayed the criminal or logical puzzle element, so the appearance of advocates of a more “orthodox” approach in line with the formal detective novel of the English type was only a matter of time. As early as 1924, Hirabayashi Hatsunosuke, a critic belonging to the proletarian literature movement, and eventually a detective fiction writer and translator, observed that Japanese detective fiction was biased towards what he called *fukzen tantei shōsetsu* (‘morbid, unhealthy detective fiction’), which he defined as “overly pursuing worlds that are too artificial, weird and unnatural” and made a plea for the emergence of its opposite *kenzen tantei shōsetsu* (healthy detective novel). Two years later the writer Kōga Saburō proposed to distinguish between the *honkaku tantei shōsetsu* (proper detective fiction), a variant akin to Western detective fiction, concerned with solving a criminal riddle, and the *henkaku tantei shōsetsu* (irregular, improper detective fiction) “which is called detective fiction, but at the same time deals with abnormal mentality and morbid [themes]”.

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17 For example, the eponymous short story of the collection deals with an attempt of two jewel thieves to obtain from a dissection room the stomach and bowels of their former companion who, before being killed by the police, managed to swallow the trio’s latest acquisition – a priceless diamond.

18 「余りに人工的な、奇怪な、不自然な世界を追いすぎている」

19 「異常心理や病的なことを扱いながら探偵小説と呼ばれているもの」
Hirabayashi stresses “believability” not necessarily meant as an ultra-realistic methodical approach, but rather as the creation of an acceptable illusion of reality. Kōga, on the other hand, proposes a topical classification, but it is safe to say that both the kenzen/fukenzen and honkaku/henkaku divisions cover roughly the same area, and, what is more important, they single out the whodunit as “pure” detective fiction, at the same time putting aside all that does not match this label, which of course means virtually all tantei shōsetsu written up till then. However, even though Kōga’s terminology was widely accepted and used during the course of the next decade⁵¹, the appeal for a “real” detective novel was to remain unanswered, as proved by the 1932 essay Tantei shōsetsu wa korekara da [detective novel is just beginning], in which Kōga laments that this “«pure» detective novel that would appeal to the intellect of the reader”, the type advocated by Van Dine, has yet to appear.

For Kōga there was no greater writer than Arthur Conan Doyle, whose stories gave him the first impulse to take up writing, and whose spiritual heir he considered himself to be (Kōga 1987: 1). Edogawa Ranpo, on the other hand, while never denying Doyle’s greatness, stressed – and one only needs to look at his pen name for proof – that it was Edgar Allan Poe who taught him the true meaning of the detective story (Ranpo 2015a: 585). This was the fundamental difference between the two camps. We must not forget that Poe is not only the creator of the modern detective story, later perfected by Doyle, but also the author of The Black Cat, The Masque of the Red Death and The Fall of the House of Usher and these both sides of Poe combined formed the Japanese understanding of tantei shōsetsu as “a branch from the plentiful tree of romanticism”.

**Enter Mushitarō**

In the spring of 1933 Kōga Saburō received a letter containing a manuscript of a short story titled Kanzen hanzai [a perfect crime] sent by Oguri Mushitarō, an aspiring writer, whom he had never met before, asking for a recommendation to have it published. Showing none of the undecidedness of a newcomer, it was a tour-de-force locked-room mystery with an intriguing trick. What is more, the unusual exotic setting of A Perfect Crime – set in contemporary China during the civil war, in a Red Army battalion led by a commander from Soviet Russia, a former Cheka and GPU investigator Zarov – distinguished it form other works of Japanese literature of that period. For Kōga this seemingly out-of-nowhere appearance of a fully-formed author must have seemed like a fulfilment of

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⁵¹ The term *honkaku* is still used today when referring to the “classic style” detective fiction.
the prophecy contained in the title of the aforementioned 1932 essay. He promptly wrote a letter of recommendation to Mizutani Jun, the editor of “Shinseinen” at the time, and thus the story appeared in the July issue of the magazine. (Oguri 1987)

Said to have taken up writing on a whim after reading Ranpo’s early work and deciding he could create something similar (Matsuda 2015: 68)•, Mushitarō wrote regularly since the first half of the 1920s, but – apart from one short story in 1927 – did not publish anything until his proper debut. After A Perfect Crime he quickly became an important presence in the tantei shōsetsu world, a position maintained on the strength of the stories and novels published in quick succession in the following months. Around 1935 he started to drift away from the genre that brought him recognition into fantasy-tinged adventure fiction territory, best represented by the Jingai makyō [terra incognita] (1939-41) series (Gonda, Shinpo 2000: 78)•. Although these led to Mushitarō being counted among the pioneers of science fiction in Japanese literature, his best remembered writings are stories and novels describing the exploits of Norimizu Rintarō, an eccentric criminal lawyer (later a private detective) who appears in the following works (Tanemura 1997: 340):

1. Gokō satsujin jiken [the halo murder case] Shinseinen (Oct. 1933);
2. Sento Arekisei jiin no sangeki [the St. Alexey Church tragedy] Shinseinen (Nov. 1933);
3. Yumedono satsujin jiken [the Yumedono Temple murder case] Kaizō (Jan. 1934);
4. Shitsurakuen satsujin jiken [the paradise lost murder case] Shūkan Asahi (March 18th 1934);
5. Kokushikan satsujin jiken [the plague house murder case] Shinseinen (Apr.-Dec. 1934);
6. Oferia goroshi [the murder of Ophelia] Kaizō (Feb. 1935);
7. Tekkamen no shita [the tongue of the iron mask] Shinseinen (Apr.-May 1935)21;
8. Ningyo nazo Oiwagoroshi [the mermaid’s mystery – the murder of Oiwa] Chūō Kōron (Aug. 1935);
9. Nijisseiki tekkamen [the twentieth century man in the iron mask] Shinseinen (Jun.-Sep. 1936);

21 In 1938 enlarged and retitled Senkōtei “Habihitsuburku” [the Habichstburg midget submarine].

Each of the works, almost all of them short stories – apart from The Plague House Murder Case and The Twentieth Century Man in the Iron Mask – describes a separate case tackled by Norimizu, an investigator seemingly unparalleled in the art of logical detection. All of the instalments – with one exception, Twentieth Century... being a fantasy-adventure – are murder mysteries with most of the formal requirements of the whodunit firmly observed, as can be surmised from the fact that it was Kōga who was chosen by Mushitarō as the addressee of his manuscript. However, on closer scrutiny one cannot fail to notice how the author’s idiosyncrasies weaved into the fabric of the formal murder mystery create an original manifestation of tantei shōsetsu.

A closer look at the more remarkable traits of Norimizu’s fiction is therefore in order. Even though the whole of the Norimizu series contain noteworthy aspects, the one work from Oguri’s oeuvre that has always been the centre of attention of readers and academics alike is undoubtedly The Plague House Murder Case, the most ambitious and longest of Mushitarō’s novels, “the book that he lived to write” (Oguri 1987). However, as Matsuda (2015: 67) observes, a tendency to overlook the seemingly less significant writings in favour of The Plague House Murder Case22 can result in disturbing the unity of a body of work clearly meant to form an organic whole, as shown, for example, by the frequent referencing of past cases, especially in the opening of every story. The novels from the series are directly intertwined, no matter how long the shadow of the ominous titular mansion that looms over the rest. What follows is therefore a short overview of the Norimizu series, which, while concentrating on The Plague House Murder Case, does not neglect to mention the other, smaller works.

A “Difficult” Writer

One characteristic trait that unites most of the series and has shaped the reception of Mushitarō’s prose ever since his debut in Shinseinen is the dense and often esoteric turn of phrase. The author’s reputation as a “difficult” or simply “bad” (Gonda 1975: 190) writer stems from this idiosyncratic style, based on winding, often disorienting multiple clause
sentences. It is already evident in the introductory sentences of *The Halo Murder Case*, the first of the Norimizu adventures:

“On the day on which the invited spirits have to leave this world, the former chief of the Investigation Bureau, now a top-class criminal lawyer, Norimizu Rintarō had to find out why a new spirit had departed. That was because on the morning of July 16th he received a telephone call from prosecutor Hazekura, who informed him that the head priest of Fukenzan Kōraku temple, one Kōnosu Tairyū – or rather, to use his more popular name, the erstwhile famous painter Kenzan – had met with a mysterious and unnatural death.”

The same style is employed in the similarly composed opening passage of *The Plague House*:

“It was on the tenth day after the murder at St. Alexey church when – with Norimizu not announcing the solution, and rumours
about the case going unsolved beginning to spread – those in charge of the investigation were forced to drop the pursuit of Lazarev’s killer. That was because suddenly a murderous poisoner’s wanderings like a pitch black wind commenced at the house of the Furiyagi clan, whose complicated history reached four hundred years back and who had been known as a holy family since the days of the Usuki Jesuit seminary.”

The complex sentences are always adorned with seldom used kanji, often with irregular readings. It is obvious that the arrival of Mushitarō on the tantei shōsetsu scene could not pass unnoticed. His prose was a deliberate sidestepping of the matter-of-fact wording of his peers and as such transgressed the often stigmatizing tag of taishū bungaku (popular literature). Compare the previous fragments with the straightforward, journalistic styles of the openings in the works of Kōga and Ranpo.

「私は今でもあの夜のを思い出すとゾットする。それは東京に大地震があって間もない頃であった。」（甲賀三郎『琥珀のパイプ』）

“Even now I shudder when I recall the scene. It was not long after the great earthquake in Tōkyō.” (Kōga Saburō Kohaku no paipu [the amber pipe]) (Kōga 1987)

「それは九月初旬のある蒸し暑い晩のことであった。私は、D坂の大通りの中程にある、白梅軒（はくばいけん）という、行きつけのカフェで、冷しコーヒーをっていた。」（江戸川乱歩『D坂の殺人事件』）

“It happened on a sweltering evening at the beginning of September. I was sipping iced coffee at Hakubaiken, my usual café situated in the middle of the main street of D…zaka.” (Edogawa Ranpo D-zaka satsujin jiken [the D…zaka murder case]) (Ranpo 2004: 179)

In contrast, Oguri’s prose seemed to negate the unwritten law of popular literature as easy-to-digest entertainment. Ever since the novel was published, The Plague House has been mentioned in the context of failed attempts to read it in its entirety (e.g. Shinpo 2017)•. Indeed, just as in the case of Yumeno Kyūsaku’s Dogura Magura (1935), a similarly influential
and monumental *tantei shōsetsu*, the reputation of incomprehensibility of Mushitarō’s *chef-d’œuvre* has reached somewhat mythical proportions. Furthermore, running through the whole series are pedantic displays of encyclopaedic knowledge on a plethora of subjects on the part of the protagonist as well as of the narrator. In fact the word pedantry (*gengaku衒学*) has for years dominated the discussion of Mushitarō’s work. In the following fragment of *The St. Alexey Church Tragedy* Norimizu responds to one of the character’s claim that she has heard the footsteps of her deceased stepfather:

「成程。然し、ハインリッヒ・ゾイゼ（十三世紀独逸の有名な神学者）が屡（しばしば）見た耶穌（イエス）の幻像と云うのは、その源が親しく凝視（みつ）めていた聖画にあったと言いますかね。それに、誰やら斯う云う言葉を云ったじゃありませんか。――自分の心霊を一つの花園と考え、そこに主が歩み給うと想像するこそ楽しからずや——とね。」

“I see. But, you know, that vision of Christ that Henry Suso (famous 13th century German theologian) had seen repeatedly – they say its source was a sacred picture at which he would often gaze. What’s more, didn’t somebody say: *Consider your soul a flower garden, isn’t it pleasant to imagine the Lord strolling around it?*”

This is a typical Norimizu response – making a reference to an esoteric subject, adorning it with an obscure quote, here aided by the narrator’s further explanation in brackets. Already present in the first short stories, the tendency reaches its peak in *The Plague House*, where the brilliant sleuth can hardly make an utterance without starting a digression on the life of Gustavus Adolphus, the theories of Swedenborg, or the persecution of Jews. Is this strategy merely an ornamentation, or does it play part in a larger scheme? To answer this question we need to look into the role the act of reading plays in detective fiction.

**Reading the Crime**

From the point of view of readership such presentation of the narrative has twofold implications. First of all, on the most obvious level, it serves as a blatant challenge to the idea of detective fiction as armchair entertainment, an exercise in logic, while preserving the guise of a model mystery of the

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 honkaku type. Structurally speaking, the early Norimizu stories all adhere to the classical discovery-investigation-solution model that was already present in *The Murders at the Rue Morgue*. Furthermore, the characters that populate Mushitarō’s works are merely one-dimensional marionettes, chess pieces secondary to the grander scheme of the puzzle. The reader does not know what they think or feel, as such information is redundant in the context of the mystery. At the same time, interjected into this classical structure is the dense storytelling style that distorts the familiarity one would expect when approaching a typical whodunit.

On the other hand, Mushitarō’s characteristic style can paradoxically be interpreted as an ultimate fulfillment of Van Dine’s postulate of fair play as a necessary element of “true” detective fiction, i.e. that the reader should possess the same information as the detective in the story in order to be able to try and arrive at the correct solution of the mystery, which will enable him to participate in the puzzle-solving game. This is, however, fair play in a sense different from Van Dine’s interpretation.

Hühn, developing remarks made by Todorov (1977), shows that detective fiction is primarily concerned with the act of reading: the text on the exploits of the detective being read by the reader is in turn mirrored by the detective’s reading of the crime. Thus crime constitutes a “text” that the detective has to decipher from various clues such as those left at the scene by the culprit (Hühn 1987: 454). There is, however, a serious discrepancy: in a typical whodunit the text presented to the reader will never match – in terms of difficulty – the crime being solved by the detective. This final text is filtered through the point of view of the narrator (very often a Dr. Watson-type archivist) and is as such inserted into familiar frames, “ready-made” for the reader to be enjoyed as an entertaining puzzle. Any “fair-play” is therefore only illusory, as the sleuth analyzes traces “imprinted »on the world«” (ibid.), a spectrum that is much wider than the reader’s part of the puzzle. In the Norimizu series, due to the way in which the stories are presented, the difficulty of the problem faced by the detective is matched by the difficulty of the text presented to the reader. The text is often confusing, just as a complicated criminal case would be.

Mushitarō would adhere to this style until around 1935. In later parts of the series the writing becomes gradually less ornamental, more in line with orthodox detective fiction, as evidenced by the opening passage of *The “Habichstburg” Midget Submarine*:

「それは、夜明けまでに幾ばくもない頃であった。
既に雨は止み、波頭も低まって、そのひびきが幾分衰えた

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The gradual simplification of language is accompanied by a visible shift in genre and tone – by the time of the second Norimizu novel, *The Twentieth Century Man in the Iron Mask*, the murder mystery aspect was all but completely replaced by fast pacing and exoticism of an adventure yarn with Norimizu Rintarō transformed into an action hero. The opening of the first chapter suggests at once how different this work will be:

「その夜は、楽堂の灯をじっとりと包んで、細かい茶色の雨が降っていた。」 “That evening a brown coloured drizzle was falling, enveloping the lights of the hall” (Oguri 1997: 12)

It is not only the language and theme that changes. In the place of the strictly confined spaces of previous works (such as a Buddhist monastery in *Halo*, an intimidating mansion in *The Plague House*, or the claustrophobic “Habichtsburg”), from which the characters are hardly ever allowed to venture outside, we are now moved all over southeast Asia. The deliberate pacing is replaced by kaleidoscopic action. Mushitarō made the change deliberately, as evidenced by the remarks cited by Shinpo (2017: 470). It is necessary to remember that by 1936, when *The Twentieth Century Man in the Iron Mask* came out, a departure from *tantei* shōsetsu was a wider tendency, influenced by the strengthening of censorship, which made it increasingly difficult to create works in the “Western” and therefore unpatriotic genre. Furthermore, writing in the style he had been using until then proved too exhaustive, and the completion of *The Plague House*, a work for which “he burned up the flame of his life” (Oguri 1987: 7), marked the end of the early period of his career. It was the end of Oguri Mushitarō as a detective fiction writer. Krutch said that “Poe invented the detective story that he might not go mad” (Haycraft 1947: 164). Mushitarō stopped writing detective stories for the same reason.
A Mass of Texts
If detective fiction is centred upon the act of reading, then the Norimizu series can be considered a striking realisation of this phenomenon. In fact the series presents a world constructed from all manner of texts, one where intertextuality is pushed to the very front. Quotes from and references to other works are a vital element of Mushitarō’s style, but rather than being mere displays of pedantry, or, even worse, a cover-up for the lack of original ideas, they play important roles in the plots, as well as in the overall structure on both the diegetic and extra-diegetic levels.

The most obvious example, one often brought up by critics and researchers, is frequent references to the works of S.S. Van Dine. Since the second half of the 1920s and continuing into the next decade, Van Dine’s novels featuring the detective Philo Vance were among the most widely read mysteries in the world. The first of these works to appear in Japan was The Greene Murder Case, the third novel in the Vance series, originally published in 1928, serialized in “Shinseinen” as early as 1929, and translated by none other than Hirabayashi Hatsunosuke. The novel was received very warmly\(^24\), other translations followed in quick succession and soon Van Dine’s name became virtually synonymous with the formal detective novel, influencing the growth of the hitherto underrepresented honkaku tantei shōsetsu. Many writers not only professed their admiration for the American writer but also created works inspired by the Philo Vance series, one early example being Hamao Shirō’s Satsujinki [serial killer] (1931), the first long form novel in the honkaku style. Mushitarō’s fascination with the Philo Vance series went much further. In fact, cursorily read the Norimizu series may seem a thinly veiled homage to the work of Van Dine.

For example, the series’ three main characters: Norimizu, the prosecutor Hazekura and police detective Kumashiro are by and large copies of Van Dine’s protagonists: Vance, District Attorney Markham and police detective Heath. The same can be applied to the plot construction and dynamics between the characters. The brilliant but often snobbish and vain Vance (Norimizu\(^25\)), is asked by his friend District Attorney Markham (Hazekura) to help with the investigation of a murder that proves too difficult for the police, represented by the dynamic yet unimaginative Sgt.

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\(^24\) One notable exception was Edogawa Ranpo, who criticized Van Dine for predictability. Later, however, he changed his opinion and included The Bishop Murder Case in a list of his favourite detective novels.

\(^25\) It should also be noted that the detective’s last name is spelled 法水, which can be read as hōmizu. This is a pun on hōmizu the Japanese reading of Holme, making the character doubly referential.
Heath (Kumashiro), often scornful of the great detective’s eccentric psychoanalytical methods. The similarity of the titles is evident too: four of the works in the Norimizu series follow the pattern of “… satsujin jiken” (“… murder case”) which, while hardly a never before used word combination, evidently mirrors the iteration of Van Dine’s … Murder Case titles. Detailed maps of the crime scene, a constant in Van Dine’s novels, are likewise employed by Oguri in each of his works. The same goes for the use of footnotes giving explanations on topics brought about by the erudite detective. All these points of reference are quite clear to anyone familiar with the Vance series (and we have to remember that with the American author at the peak of his popularity at the time, this accounted for most of the readers of tantei shōsetsu in Japan), however, Mushitarō further acknowledges all the connections as his characters frequently mention Van Dine’s novels in their conversations, on some occasions giving away the murderer (Oguri 2017: 347).

Finally, the construction of plots also owes much to the creator of Philo Vance. On the most basic level, one can see similarities in certain details, such as the criminal using a record player as a means of gaining an alibi (Van Dine’s The Canary Murder Case 1927 and Mushitarō’s The Halo Murder Case) or an arrow as a murderous weapon (The Bishop Murder Case 1928 and The Plague House Murder Case). Furthermore, as Tsuge and Yokoi and later Matsuda have shown (Matsuda 2014), the plot of the monumental The Plague House Murder Case is deeply influenced by both The Bishop Murder Case – in both novels the murders are committed according to the words of poems – and especially The Greene Murder Case. In the latter work the members of the Greene family, forced to live together in a gloomy New York mansion due to the provisions of the late Mr. Greene’s will, are killed off one by one by Ada Greene, an adopted daughter whose real father, as it turns out, was a professional criminal and murderer. The basic plot of Mushitarō’s The Plague House concerns a series of murders committed on members of the Furiyagi family residing in the titular mansion, explicitly forbidden to ever leave by the late Mr. Furiyagi’s will. In what constitutes a mirror image of The Greene Murder Case the killer, Kamitani Nobuko, Furiyagi’s secretary, is in reality his real daughter, while all the other family members are adopted – all of them children of criminal parents. Another common point is that in both novels

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26 Sentō Arekisei jūin no sangeki is a notable exception from this rule among the early Norimizu works, however, it also repeats a Van Dine title, as Greene Murder Case was first published as Gūrin-ke no sangeki.
the murderess attempts to divert suspicions from herself by staging attempts on her life.

With *The Plague House Murder Case* clearly being a pastiche of Van Dine’s novel, and with other stories from the Norimizu series containing more or less obvious references to the works of the author of *The Bishop Murder Case*\(^{27}\), it would be tempting to view Oguri’s oeuvre in the context of the adaptation (*hon’an*) and its presence in the history of detective fiction in Japan. Whether Ruikō’s adaptations of Western novels in the early years of the genre, or Ranpo’s evident inspirations – for example one can see traces of E.A. Poe’s *The Gold-Bug* (1843) in *The Two Sen Copper Coin* or H.G. Wells’ *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) in *Kotō no oni* [the demon of the lonely island] (1929) – *tantei shōsetsu* relied on borrowing from foreign writers\(^{28}\), which of course was unavoidable considering the foreign origins of the genre. In Mushitarō’s case that is only partially true, however, because the Van Dine references need to be seen as a layer of the intertextual fabric that forms the Norimizu series.

The importance of the act of reading as an equivalent of investigating is further stressed by the fact that the plots of many of the Norimizu adventures are connected to those of various literary works. In case of *The Murder of Ophelia* it is *Hamlet*, the tragic events of *The Tongue of the Iron Mask* are an echo of the story of Siegfried from *The Song of the Nibelungs*, while *The Murder of Oiwa* is related to the famous ghost story *Yotsuya kaidan*. In *The Plague House* the killings are related to the spell of the four elements from Goethe’s *Faust*: “Salamander soll glühen, / Undine sich winden, / Sylphe verschwinden, / Kobold sich mühen.”\(^{29}\) After a piece of paper with the second line\(^{30}\) written on it is found around the time the first murder is committed, Norimizu deduces that it serves as a warning that three more people will be killed. The detective arrives at his conclusion through the literal act of reading. Moreover, his wide knowledge of literature allows him to read the intentions of the murderer.

The textual landscape of the Norimizu stories is not limited to fiction. In solving the cases Norimizu Rintarō makes use of his impressive knowledge of criminal science, which he always does by referencing a specialist work. This is yet another callback to Philo Vance who has a similar habit. In the Norimizu series, however, this idea is pushed to extreme lengths,

\(^{27}\) At one point Hazekura says to Norimizu “Dear oh dear, and when did you become Philo Vance?” (「オヤオヤ、君はいつファイロ・ヴァンスになったのだね。」).

\(^{28}\) It is worth noting that Ranpo also wrote modern retellings of some of Ruikō’s adaptations.

\(^{29}\) “Salamander, glow hot, / Undine, wind about, / Sylph, vanish quick, / Kobold, to work.” (Goethe, Greenberg 2014: 46).

\(^{30}\) The form is changed to “Undinus sich winden”.

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especially in *The Plague House*, where the detective constantly bases his reasoning on the findings of modern psychology, forensic medicine, or criminology. What is more, the whole novel can be viewed as a literary interpretation of the criminal anthropology of Cesare Lombroso, as one of the links in the chain of events that lead to the murders at the Plague House is a bizarre experiment started forty years earlier by Furyugai Santetsu (Murakami 2017). In order to debunk a theory of heredity of criminal character in people with a certain cranial deformity put forward by a Lombroso proponent Dr. Yagisawa, Santetsu – himself possessing the said abnormality of the skull – brings into his newly built mansion four children of similarly afflicted criminals from the New York Elmira prison. By raising them in a culturally refined atmosphere, separated from the outside world, he intends to prove that whether one becomes a criminal or not is merely circumstantial. This ends in ultimate failure as years later his own daughter becomes a murderer, killing also her father.

The texts in question are not necessarily referenced or quoted verbatim. They are often misquoted, changed intentionally to suit the plot, and, as the recent critical annotated edition of *The Plague House Murder Case* has shown, sometimes invented entirely. For example, when Norimizu explains his methods, he refers to the “fourth Viennese school” of psychoanalysis, when in reality there were only three existing at the time (that of Freud, Adler and Frankl) and, what is more, the classification applies rather to psychotherapy. Furthermore, all the texts are given the same weight, and as such a medieval treatise on alchemy has for Norimizu the same value in providing hints to the solution of the crime as a modern scientific work. Thus the encyclopedic pedantry is reduced to a hoax and one wonders if Mushitarō was aware that before finding success as a detective fiction writer, Van Dine gained the most popularity from a lengthy essay *Misinforming a Nation* (1917), attacking the inaccuracies found in the 11th edition of *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

**Norimizu Rintarō’s School of Detection**
Norimizu’s cross-examination methods are a combination of his penchant for literature and science. Just like Vance, he firmly believes in psychoanalysis. His approach is, however, highly unorthodox. In *The Plague House Murder Case* he has a tendency to recite a line of poetry containing an allusion to a development of the case and wait for the person he interviews to continue. By the subtle changes in the rhythm or wording of their response Norimizu can read their thoughts. In the following fragment the detective talks to Tagō Shinsai, the wheelchair-bound steward
of the mansion, about the relationship between Santetsu and his four adopted children.

“(...)とにかく、あの四人の方々が、一番親愛の情を感じていた人物と言えば、やはり算哲様でしょうかな。』
『そうですよ。まさに吾なんじを称えん（ジュ・タドール）——じゃ。』真斎は微かに動揺したが、劣らず対句で相槌を打った。
『然し、ある場合は、』と法水は鳥渡（ちょっと）思案気味な顔になり、「洒落者や阿謀者はひしめき合って（エ・ボー・エンド・ウイットリングペリシュト・イン・ゼ・スロング）——と云いかれたが、急にポープの「髪盗み（レーブ・オヴ・ゼ・ロック）」を止めて「ゴンザーゴ殺し（ハムレット中の劇中劇）の独白（セリフ）」を引き出した。
『結局（どのみち）、汝真夜中の暗きに摘みし茶の臭き夜よ（ザウ・ミクスチュア・ランクオヴ・ミドナイト・ウイーズ・コレクテッド）——でしょうからね』
『どうして』と真斎は頸を振って、「三たび魔神の呪咀に萎れ、毒気に染みぬる（ウィズ・ヒケイツ・バン・スライス・ブラステッド・スライス・インフェクテッド）——とは、決して、』と次句で答えたが、異様な抑揚で、殆ど韻律を失っていた。」

“(…) Anyway, If I were to name the person to whom the four of them felt the strongest affection, it would probably be Mr. Santetsu.”

»Really? The doctor…« For a moment Norimizu’s face took on a surprised look. He then blew out a ribbon of smoke and quoted Baudelaire.

»So, O mon cher Belzébuth, was it?«

»That’s right. Truly, je t’adore” 31 « Shinsai seemed slightly agitated, but he didn’t yield and appropriately finished the couplet.

31 The last line of Baudelaire’s Le Possédé.
»But there are cases where—« Norimizu’s countenance became a bit contemplative. »A Beau and Whitling perish’d in the Throng«32 He started to recite Pope’s Rape of the Lock, suddenly stopped and switched into The Murder of Gonzago (the play within a play in Hamlet). »In any case, thou mixture rank, of midnight weeds collected – right?«
»Why?« Shinsai shook his head. »Surely not with Hecate’s ban thrice blasted, thrice infected«33 He answered with the next line, but with an odd modulation and the rhythm all off.” (Oguri 2017: 154)

Later, after a short lecture on Shakespeare’s meter, Norimizu explains his chain of reasoning:

「(…)ですから、一語でもその朗誦法を誤ると、韻律が全部の節にわたって混乱してしまいます。然し貴方が三たび（スライス）で逼（つか）えて、それ以後の韻律を失ってしまったのは、決して偶然の事故ではないのですよ。その一語には、少なくとも七首（あいくち）位の心理的効果があるからなんです。ですから貴方は、それが僕を刺戟する事に気がついたので、すぐに周章（あわ）てふためいて云い直したのでしょう。けれども、その復讐には、今も云った韻律法を無視しなければなりませんでした。それが僕の思う壺だったので、却って収拾のつかない混乱を招いてしまったのです。と云うのは、 thrice （スライス）を避けて、前節の Ban（バン）と続けた Bantrice（バンスライス）が、Banshee（バンシイ）（ケルト伝説にある告死婆）が変死の門辺に立つとき化けると云う老人——即ち Banshrice（バンシュライス）のように響くからなんですよ。ねえ田郷さん、僕が持ち出した汝真夜中の（ザウ・ミクスチュア・ランク）……の一図には、斯う雲う具合に、二重にも三重にもの陥穽（かんせい）が設けられてあったのです。勿論僕は、貴方がこの事件で、告死老人（バンシュライス）の役割をとどめていたとは思いませんが、然しその、魔女（ヘカテ）が呪い毒に染（そ）んだという三たび（スライス）は、

32 Rape of the Lock, canto V, l. 55.
33 Hamlet, act III, sc. II, l. 272-274.
一体何事を意味しているでしょうか。ダンネベルグ夫人……易介……そうして三度目は？」

“That’s why, when you make a mistake in the rules of recitation even in just one word, the whole phrase becomes disorganized. However, it was no accident that you got stuck on the word »thrice« and lost the rhythm afterwards. That word possessed the psychological effect comparable to a dagger at least. When you noticed my reaction, you panicked and corrected yourself, but in your repetition you couldn’t ignore the rules of the meter that I have just mentioned. Thus, you fell into my trap, and you weren’t able to regain control of the resulting chaos. The reason for that was that, by avoiding »thrice«, the preceding »ban« and the following »ban thrice« – banshee (an old woman heralding death in the Celtic legends) being an old person said to appear when one is to meet with an accidental death – sounded like »Banshrice«. In this way, Mr. Tagō, the thou mixture rank line that I brought up contained a double or even a triple pitfall. Naturally, I don’t suspect you of playing the role of a banshee in this case, but I wonder whatever can this »thrice«, soaked in the cursed poison by Hecate, mean? Miss Dannenberg… Eki suke34 … and the third one?” (ibid.: 194)

As we see, Norimizu uses The Murder of Gonzago to recreate the effect that the play produced, when originally staged at Elsinore: the exposure of the murderer. Of course, the detective’s method hinges upon a vision of a world where it is taken for granted that every character knows the works of Shakespeare, Pope or Goethe by heart and can recite them at any given time.

In this manner Norimizu analyzes slips of the tongue and articulation mistakes of the other party. For him even the minutest gesture, the smallest movement out of the ordinary is a message containing hidden meanings. On one occasion – using Francis Galton’s theory of mental imagery – he deduces from the movements made by a character’s eyes that the person thought of the word “Kobold”, the last of the spirits from Faust’s spell. Here we reach the essence of Mushitarō’s style and his attitude to tantei shōsetsu. Norimizu is not a detective who looks for and reads material clues such as cigarette ash or traces of mud like Sherlock Holmes would. Instead, by basing his reasoning on a peculiar mixture of an idiosyncratic

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34 The names of the first two victims.
reading of a nonexistent school of psychoanalysis, often outdated 19th and early 20th century criminology and the knowledge of cryptology and symbolism, he creates his own school of detection unlike that of any literary sleuth before or after him. The uniqueness of this method can also be seen as its greatest failure, since it is often unable to produce evidence sustainable in a court of law – a complaint frequently voiced by Hazekura and Kumashiro. In most of the Norimizu series’ installments, however, the criminal conveniently commits suicide before any trial is even mentioned. If measured by the standards of any written or unwritten rules of detective fiction, Norimizu Rintarō has to be seen as a failed detective, and as Matsuda · · (2015) observes, it is not unusual for him to fail even in the context of the stories. In spite of his undeniable brilliance and frequent successes, he does sometimes pin the crime on the wrong person, doing so twice in *The Plague House Murder Case* (while at the same time believing in the innocence of Nobuko, who turns out to be the real killer). In fact, by formal detective fiction standards, Nobuko would surely be the prime suspect – with much of the evidence pointing against her, including the lack of alibi.

To paraphrase *Hamlet*’s Polonius: “Though this be method, yet there is madness in ‘t”, for truly Norimizu’s detection borders on madness. Many authors (e.g. Takayama 2002: 31) note the fascination of detective fiction with the detail, itself a mirror of the interior culture of the Victorian age and its inherent obsession to collect and catalogue and therefore possess the whole world. Thus, in classical detective fiction, every little detail can be a clue or a lead. Mushitarō sees this trait and explores it to the point of absurdity – the shape of a rainbow created by releasing water from a fountain in a certain sequence, the effect produced by light passing through a bubble of air in a glass chandelier35, or the mysterious overtone made by the mansion’s carillon: all these phenomena are for Norimizu clues of the utmost importance, the likes of which he notices everywhere. His method is obsession, madness itself and nowhere is it more visible than in the denouements. In classic detective fiction they usually serve as the catharsis of the work, the final reveal which leads to the restoration of the order disturbed by the crime. However, for Mushitarō they become the ultimate act of disrupting the form, as he makes Norimizu’s explanations concerning the identity of the criminal, their motive or modus operandi as complicated as possible. The reader is therefore virtually unable to grasp the details of the solution and is thus robbed of the expected satisfaction or

35 Mushitarō shares Ranpo’s fascination with optics.
the feeling of clarity. “No matter how many times you read you don’t understand – and yet it’s fascinating.” (in Shinpo 2017: 470) – popular fiction author Kuki Shirō’s summary of the reception of The Plague House Murder Case is also valid as far as other works in the series are concerned.

Conclusion

Oguri Mushitarō’s Norimizu series arrived at a time when the tantei shōsetsu scene was torn between the romantic attitude of the henkaku school, the dominating force, and the rationalist ideas of the honkaku group, smaller, but encouraged by the popularity of S.S. Van Dine, the strictest formalist of Western detective fiction. As can be glimpsed from the fact that both Edogawa Ranpo and Kōga Saburō, the most important representatives of each camp, wrote enthusiastic reviews of the first episode of The Plague House Murder Case in the same issue of “Shinseinen”, each side wanted to consider Oguri one of their own. On one hand, clear allusions to Van Dine, the characters, setting, plot construction, which recall the most formal version of the detective genre, all lead to the association of these works with the orthodox sensibility. Still, too many characteristics of Mushitarō’s prose speak against such affiliation. The dense style, as well as the absurd logic, disallow the classification of the Norimizu series as honkaku tantei shōsetsu. The skillful employment of the rules of the genre coupled with their deliberate subversion (the denial of reader participation, complicated explanations, the absurd abundance of meaningful detail) show that what Oguri was looking for was an unprecedented attempt to break away from the detective fiction form, while retaining the illusion of playing by the rules. Some, for example Sakaguchi Ango (Gonda 1975: 190), saw this as simple incompetence of the author of the series. Read as detective fiction in the strict sense, the works of Mushitarō may be considered failures. They are, however, something else entirely – a new kind of anti-mystery, a success of experimental prose, playing on the notions of genre and on established literary hierarchies. The mad logic of the universe of The Plague House was forgotten in the post war years of rebuilding Japan as a democratic state, when the rational, socially aware detective novels of Matsumoto Seichō seemed more fitting. Then, growing social unrest of the later decades contributed to the rediscovery of the pre-war tantei shōsetsu authors, with their esthetics of decadence, macabre and a sense of absurd. The esoteric textual labyrinth of the series is one of the best representatives of the age of curiosity hunters.

36 The term tantei shōsetsu fell out of use after the war replaced by suiri shōsetsu (detection fiction).
References


Andrzej Świrkowski


AUTHOR’S PROFILE

Andrzej Świrkowski
PhD candidate (dissertation title: *Japanese Crime Fiction from 1923 to 1937*, written under the supervision of Professor Estera Żeromska) and lecturer at the Faculty of Modern Languages and Literatures of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, which he graduated in 2014. In 2012-2013 on MEXT Government Scholarship at Waseda University. Current research field is modern Japanese literature with emphasis on popular fiction.