

## Review Essay:

**Michael K. Bourdaghs, Atsuko Ueda & Joseph A. Murphy, eds. *Theory of Literature and Other Critical Writings: Natsume Sōseki* (Columbia University Press, 2009)**

**Christine Runnel**

Natsume Sōseki is a writer of great national significance with a text-book reputation as a moraliser and author of ‘improving’ literature. The editors of *Theory of Literature and Other Critical Writings: Natsume Sōseki* argue that there are two camps of scholarship, those who claim interrelation and continuity between Sōseki’s theory and his fictional writing, and those who advocate little connection. There is enough contextual framing and primary source material in this book to argue both cases. But first he was an academic and theorist of literature.

The editors insist that the writer’s theory brackets his fiction, informs his writing, was conceived and executed in a systematic fashion in line with the original idea, and that it derives its strength from its interdisciplinary focus, particularly with the empirical and social sciences. Sōseki’s aim was to bring the study of literature into line with the open discourse and cosmopolitan trends in scientific research at the end of the nineteenth century. The editors argue that even after he switched careers from academic to newspaperman and published his scientific treatise in 1907 he did not abandon his project but continued to develop his ideas into an architectonic system of rhetoric which supported his literary practices. From 1911 to 1914 he published a series of lectures through his newspaper *Asahi Shimbun* under the rubric of literature, philosophy and the nature of civilisation. Sōseki’s theme was personal freedom, a topic given special urgency in light of the repressive and reactionary regime of the times.

Sōseki was born in 1867, one year before Edo was renamed Tokyo and became the Imperial capital. He had a traditional education, specialising in Japanese arts and Chinese classics, but he majored in English literature and became a high school teacher. In 1900 he was forced by the Japanese government to go to England as an exchange student and came close to a nervous breakdown. His limited financial means and sense of physical and linguistic dislocation produced an anomie which had an effect on his study program; Sōseki conceived a loathing for most things English which transferred into a dislike for his subject, English literature. He gave up trying to research what he called ‘spectral literature’ and switched his energies to a more meaningful topic. Sōseki wrote home that he was ‘seized by a new project’, one that was not ‘going to look like table scraps from the Europeans’, it would ‘take two to three years’ and would be ‘a step-by-step triangulation of a number of disciplines to situate literature in a comprehensive theory of human experience’ (10).

The editors suggest that English studies generally focus on Sōseki’s fiction and do not credit Japanese writers as ‘theorising subjects’. Michael Bourdaghs holds the opinion that ‘this is partly a result of orientalist tendencies that still govern our scholarship’ (34) and which validate Western theory at the expense of non-Western practices. Sōseki in his time sought to redress the balance. He insisted ‘that literary

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taste is socially and historically determined' but nonetheless 'the process changes over time and over cultures' (2). He wanted to challenge the hegemony of a Western canon with counterclaims from the Japanese point-of-view, supported by universal arguments. This book then is designed to provide a timely intervention, a well-conceived and neatly constructed project to reclaim Sōseki's theorising as 'a crucial and unique work in the history of literary theory worldwide' (35).

*Theory of Literature and Other Critical Writings* is divided into three sections: an Introduction compiled by the editors; Part One which is an abridged version of *Theory*; Part Two which contains five of the writer's later critical essays. The Introduction places Sōseki's work into historical and social context – the editors argue that his *oeuvre* cannot be separated out from the zeitgeist – and also justifies the parameters of their own project which is to introduce Sōseki as a theorist rather than a novelist. The subdivisions present biographical details, an outline of the project and context with comment on the rigour of the writer's methodology, an overview of nineteenth-century social theory and its interplay with the natural sciences, and an attempt to place *Theory* in relation to early twentieth-century literary theory. The Introduction concludes with a brief review of the previous scholarship on Sōseki's work – Japanese and English. The groundwork is extensive, interesting, pertinent – broadly educative – and leaves enough room for a self-motivated scholar to ferret for more.

Parts One (Excerpts) and Two (Other Writings) are neatly balanced with five 'books' in the first instance and an equivalent number of essays in the second. Each piece is prefaced by a useful commentary which positions the work within the intertextual layers of Sōseki's writing: biographical detail; synopses of the chapters; discipline or field of research; focal scientific or literary concepts; main arguments; interdisciplinary links; explanation for cuts to the original. The editors suggest that while *Theory* 'is an important and fascinating text, it also contains much repetition and involves a fairly mechanical unfolding of different elements of its structure' (34). Omissions are justified on the grounds that they leave room to include Sōseki's later writings, 'which, when read in conjunction with the passages from the earlier book, provide a better and more comprehensive portrait of the scope of Sōseki's ten-year project' (34). The two parts, however, are distinct entities.

The editors write that *Theory* is couched in formal language, a scientific treatise, quite different from the vernacular used in Sōseki's fiction, while 'Other Writings' is based on lectures or articles prepared and serialised for *Asahi Shimbun*. Sōseki's authorial presence is central to the narrative of his personal essays. His 'speaking voice' comes across as frank but leavened with humour, sometimes tongue-in-cheek or even sarcastic, but his delivery was the gloss on his knack for picking up on the pertinent issues of the moment as the core of serious debate. Jay Rubin suggests elsewhere that the writer's words could sometimes be interpreted as 'ungracious' but to do so would be 'missing the charm and humour' of a podium delivery which allowed the writer's sharp critique to slip under social guards.<sup>1</sup> Sōseki had the power to capture an audience.

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<sup>1</sup> Jay Rubin, 'Sōseki as Lecturer: Autonomy and Coercion' in Natsume Sōseki, *Kokoro: A Novel and Selected Essays* (Lanham; New York; London: Madison Books, 1992) 240.

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Sōseki founded his *Theory* in a study of rhetoric. The editors write that at the end of the nineteenth-century Alexander Bain's *English Composition and Rhetoric* (1866) 'had tremendous impact both in the West and Japan' (26). At the time rhetoric demanded a philosophical and psychological awareness of the human mind and 'mental nature', powerful persuasion through an appeal to the emotions and the realisation of the laws of association which were used to categorise figures of speech as influential sign system. Sōseki also incorporated the tenets of belletristic rhetoric which insisted that 'taste' was the discriminator of aesthetic judgement. Everyone had taste but it followed that taste could also be cultivated. The aim was to educate lower ranks towards higher ideals and ethical conduct within a cultural framework – canalisation. Edinburgh University had pioneered a curriculum which intersected belletristic rhetoric with literary criticism in order to acculturate the Scottish middle classes to 'cultivated English tastes'. Character studies were selected from literature – mostly English works – as 'improving' role models (26).

Due credit must go to the translators – Rubin among them – whom I intuitively trust remain faithful to Sōseki's original pieces but with adroitness capture some sense of the author's tone and style and whose work in mediation I credit because the experience of reading the work is such a pleasure. The language is accessible and engaging, operating as a bridge between the Japanese text and my native English.

The first essay, 'Statement on Joining the *Asahi*', is an ebullient exposé of the torments of a penurious academic career in a prestigious Tokyo university, presented in juxtaposition with the delights of an advantageous contract as a 'vulgar' newspaperman. Sōseki's technique employs 'seriousness through mocking'. The writer's relief at having found congenial employment in line with his obsession to write is palpable. His debut column for *Asahi* must have captured the sympathy vote against the expostulations of a shocked and stuffy Establishment. The editors comment that Sōseki heralded a new generation of writers who turned their backs on intellectual snobbery, were aware of their popularity as writers and savvy about their own interests, in all capable of negotiating 'the new practices of intellectual property and royalty systems' (5). Sōseki certainly recognised the traumatic kernel at the centre of his own psychic organisation; it is possible to suffer a nervous breakdown when not acculturated to the dominant cultural aesthetic or the consensus mode of production or when 'beset by incessantly howling dogs' – a rueful reference to the noisy and inconsiderate staff next to the reading room in the library who refused to appreciate the pressure of the work to be done in lecture preparation (157) – or as he was, worked to the bone. The writer longed for a better way to earn his living. Sōseki confessed that 'the very next day after I did quit, a weight was suddenly lifted from my shoulders and an unprecedented amount of air filled my lungs'. He concluded his essay:

There is a saying that goes: 'Heart is won by heart.' For the sake of the *Asahi* newspaper, which placed this eccentric in an environment perfectly suited to eccentrics, it is now my happy duty to work to the best of my eccentric ability. (158)

The book under review is not primarily about Sōseki's fiction. But the content of his fiction is informed by contemporary issues and imbued with the social consciousness-raising agenda of the times. Sōseki saw himself as crippled by the intensity of modern living and wanted to explore how and why he was struck. The writer's themes included economic hardship, the consequences of rapid industrialisation, the conflict between desire and duty, loyalty to group identity, the price of individual freedom in loneliness and alienation – traditional Japanese literary preoccupations. The editors suggest, however, that not only was Sōseki struggling to create a new 'tragic form in the life and problems of the middle class' (9) but also to use his novels as experimental models for his ideas. In 1904-5, his scientifically based theories were the subject of his lectures; however, the editors write that Sōseki had trouble with disaffected students who preferred the 'Impressionistic humanism' of their previous lecturer, Lafcadio Hearn, to Sōseki's attempts to 'kill' the object with dry scientific methodologies. Fortunately the writer preserved his sense of humour and found an outlet in his fiction which is both self-reflective and speculative.

*Tower of London* – Sōseki's first collection of stories, published in 1905 – presented a London estranged, seen through the eyes of a foreigner who is hypersensitive to the phenomenology of historical sites and interested in excavating the resonances of the city's past. Joseph Murphy postulates that *Tower* explored the notion of waveform consciousness, the seismographic intensity of affect on an idea as it is transmitted through time and space. The editors suggest that as his project developed he used quantification theories and thermodynamics to postulate an economy that prolongs the life of its systems and staves off inevitable demise by the use of labour-saving devices and efficiency practices. Apparently he anticipated that the human population would be driven to frenzy by the telecommunications revolution – emails, faxes and suchlike – which divide time into every decreasing units of unnatural work intensity, for more efficient exploitation. Moreover, the editors claim that Sōseki's knowledge of the sciences was not superficial. He consulted experts like his 'protégé Terada Torahiko, who became a world-class physicist in the 1910s' (21). Entropy and 'eventual heat death' was to be the pessimistic 'judgement on the Victorian work ethic' (23). The editors claim that Sōseki 'could not have foreseen the details, but he grasped the technical mechanism precisely' (25).

Sōseki's fictional characters 'embody' and 'talk' the latest in scientific knowledge; Tsudo in the unfinished novel, *Light and Darkness*, imagines the details of a terminal illness running through his body but the knowledge is only there embedded in the narrative because the character's writer already 'knows' the likely course of the disease. In lighter vein the writer had sent up scientific curiosity, intellectual jargon and pretension in *I Am a Cat*, which was serialised in 1905. Sōseki's *modus operandi* was dialogic between his thoughts and the exterior worlds. *Cat* also experimented with elements of what is now called narratology, such as the distance between the writer/narrator and the characters. Book 4 of *Theory* is devoted to an analysis of literary techniques and the attributes of codified aesthetics. *Poppy* was Sōseki's first newspaper novel after he joined *Asahi* and was so popular that it was launched with poppy merchandising – value-added. *Sanshirō*, published in 1908, was based upon Sōseki's unfortunate experiences as a university lecturer. The

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author's satirical bent is made plain through his comments on the novel and its protagonist in later articles.

But can a feel for humour and an intuitive grasp of the craft of writing be systematised and taught like Constantin Stanislavsky's method acting or Rudolf Laban's movement analysis and notation in dance, or structured in accordance with Sergei Eisenstein's Russian formalism? Sōseki's mindset and methodologies were not out of step with the era and its emphases on professional work-place systems analysis and production goals. The editors suggest that Sōseki always meant to identify and interpret the 'signs' in his fiction, track and align the work with his theory to make the project complete, but apparently *Theory* lost impetus and he never got around to it:

*My Theory of Literature* is thus not so much a memorial to my projected 'lifework' as its corpse – and a deformed corpse at that. It lies like the ruins of a city street that has been destroyed by an earthquake in the midst of its construction. (252)

*Theory* attempted to systematise the elements of literary construction that would provide a universal basis for literary interpretation and exchange. A few decades later Vladimir Propp would be working on the morphology of the folktale across cultures, Joseph Campbell would make a study of comparative mythology and archetypes and Northrop Frye attempt to theorise a synoptic view of the scope, principles and literary techniques in the field of literary criticism, seeking to establish literature as a science as well as an artistic form. But the puzzle still remains: what is there in a unifying matrix that has application across cultural and historical boundaries? However much Sōseki loathed 'spectral literature', he drew upon the European canon to explain his perceptions of types and genre when comparing the characteristics of for instance realism and romanticism. And, although Sōseki insisted that 'taste' was historically and socially determined and that 'proper taste' was acquired through acculturation, he was adamant that people had the right to differ in opinion from centralised authority without their views being condemned as shallow or worthless. This tension in his work put him at odds with the increasingly nationalistic fervour in Japan as the country measured up to Russia, China and the West. The editors, though, are clear in that Sōseki was not anti-nationalist but determined on an equal playing field. In Book 4, the writer comments upon grades of intensity (affect) in literature from 'dull tasteless' to 'freakish extravagance' and declares: 'as to which of these two orientations to expression and thematic will captivate you, it is a matter of the times, your age, your gender, and ultimately your innate preference' (119).

Sōseki, then, is on the side of the unique, the individual and the idiosyncratic. In 'The Merits and Flaws of -isms', published in 1910, he takes a crack at the school of Naturalism which dominated the literary fiction of the time, advocating a 'fluid view of literary value' rather than a totalitarian appropriation and imposition of aesthetic taste. He condemns the wholesale adoption of an imported fad. The brief opinion piece is a gem of counterculture and must have stirred debate in literary circles. He suggests that those who tout 'their doctrine as an eternal truth and attempt forcefully to apply it to every aspect of our lives ... [are] accelerating their own demise'. Naturalism, he declares, only means something when we are congruent with the

contours of the model. He asserts that ‘the general public detests Naturalism’ (241).

‘My Individualism’ is perhaps the most well-known of the Sōseki’s nonfiction pieces and is the last essay in the book. The work is emotional and balances serious self-reflection with avuncular guidance on personal fulfilment. It is possible to consult the excellent ‘Notes’ and find that the lecture was delivered just after ‘Sōseki’s fourth serious bout with stomach ulcers, the illness that finally killed him on December 9, 1916’ (278). Sōseki speaks from the heart, easing his way in and building his thrust with care. He aims his advice at the elite students of Gakushūin University who were fair-set to be the future leaders of the country. He talks about personal unhappiness, then ‘self-centeredness’ as opposed to ‘other-centeredness’ and its place in the quest for human survival. Then he moves on to the abuses of wealth and privilege and the responsibility to respect the rights of others. He talks about autonomy and peer pressure. He speaks about nationalism and war. And he speaks about peace as the condition for individualism to flourish. He is of the opinion that nationalist ideals are a ‘pretty cheap grade of morality ... when you conceive of the nation as an indivisible monolith’ (263). He concludes that individualism is the highest form of morality.

Perversely, perhaps, I relish certain quaint phrases and anachronistic figures of speech left gloriously neutral by the translators. In ‘Philosophical Foundations of the Literary Arts’ Sōseki compares the lies we tell ourselves in order to prolong the convenient illusions of a meaningful existence to ‘a prostitute’s tears on New Year’s Eve’ (172). In ‘My Individualism’ the author castigates the suffragettes in London for stepping out of line, forgetting duty and embarrassing the government. Is he secretly pleased that he can pretend to cite a model democracy and at the same time expose the exception to the rule? Is he tongue-in-cheek when he suggests that the radical protesters are a blot on the British copybook of tolerance and individual liberty: ‘perhaps they can’t find husbands or they can’t find jobs; maybe they are taking advantage of the long-ingrained ethos of respect for women’ (258)? His rhetoric betrays the misogyny of the age but the tropes still speak in eloquent terms – high theory to popular and stereotypical images. The translators and editors make it their brief to avoid the dangers of misrepresentation: ‘there is, of course, no way to dissociate Sōseki’s work from the place he conceptualised it and the dominant discourses that governed it. However, the danger inherent in such discussion must be noted’ (34). The reader must avoid the pitfalls of misinterpretation; it is possible to conjecture, infer even, but from this day and age we cannot ‘know’ the ‘whole’ for certain.

The editors suggest that what makes *Theory* both ‘intriguing’ and ‘frustrating’ is ‘in part because Sōseki was struggling to express ideas and concepts for which no vocabulary existed’ (2). The historical context estranges the language and rhetorical figures but the core ideas can still provide grist for the mill to creative artists seeking to understand and clarify their practices. The writer may not be an enlightened feminist yet the editors may still claim that his work foreshadows ‘later developments in literary theory’ such as ‘formalism, structuralism, reader-response theory, cognitive science, and postcolonialism’ (2).

The editors write that it is hard to gauge the quality of, and interest in, *Theory of Literature* outside specialist circles, even as the work testifies to Sōseki’s

intellectual power and his capacity to plan and present an ambitious project. The editors refer to Karatani Kōjin who suggests the enormity of the task was to align the convergence of a historically distinct sense of literature with the context of modern civilisation and yet find the universal application to transcend historical specificity.

Sōseki concluded quite simply that ‘the focal point F of our collective consciousness towards literature’ shifts ‘due to the discomfort caused by boredom or stress that arises when any given focal point stays in place for too long’ (16). The passage of literature down the ages, diachronically and synchronically, had little then to do with developmental models of enlightenment or higher civilisation. The editors observe that Sōseki was unable to explain satisfactorily how the moment-by-moment appreciation of individual literary consciousness extended into longer timeframes and societal aggregates, beyond ‘clumping’ into simple notions of zeitgeist. But the writer recognised the significance of the novel and the new to popular culture. He also declared that writing was not literature without an affective charge. The last chapter of Book 5 of *Theory* ‘explores the principle of suggestion as a force of transmission’ but it is tantalisingly omitted here. Sōseki’s theory then is left deliberately open. A century after Sōseki’s moment the editors float his work into the public domain, convinced that it has something to say of relevance to contemporary writers – progressive text. Are theories important to the practices of literature?

Sōseki’s work was an ambitious experiment in interdisciplinary study which refused to divide education through the arts and humanities from progress through the sciences:

the contemporary climate of suspicion in the humanities regarding the instrumental sciences was foreign to Sōseki and his generation of literary scholars, for whom science was neither an object of excessive admiration nor compensatory fear but merely another field in the production of knowledge, to be evaluated like any other in terms of its rigor, persuasiveness, and ability to constitute and grasp its object. (12)

But the writer found working for a newspaper far more congenial and supportive than a university environment. Fortunately he experienced nine fat years to set against the lean. He suffered from nervous stress – what he called ‘neurasthenia and madness’ – and died relatively early from stomach ulcers. But he always said that he would not alter his sensitivities or trade his symptoms: ‘so long as they persist, I have hopes of publishing any number of *Cats*, *Driftings in Space*, and *Quail Cages*, and so I pray that my neurasthenia and madness never abandon me’ (49). The author dealt in the phenomenology of emotional intensities and the hypothetical speculations of cause and effect. But he lived his work.