

Damian Flanagan: Why Read Sōseki?

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To the audience at the SWET Kansai gathering on June 16, 2007 in Nishinomiya, in his talk "Natsume Sōseki: Superstar of World Literature," Damian Flanagan presented compelling evidence that Sōseki is a worthwhile read. The audience was treated to a full and

detailed introduction to

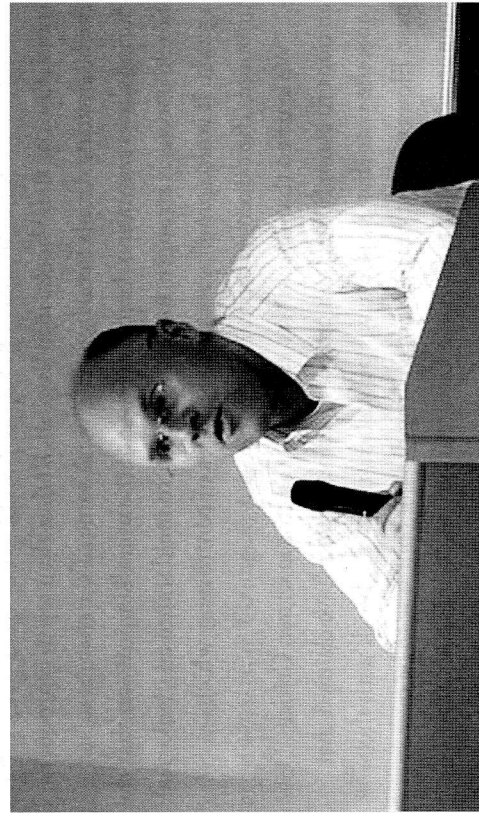
some of the central themes of this author's work, received printouts that were useful for considering translation issues, and viewed slides that garnished the topics under discussion.

Damian Flanagan is a man on a mission. He has seen the light and hopes to direct others to a source of spiritual energy that he has discovered, explored, and set in context. The source of enlightenment is the mind of Natsume Sōseki (1867–1916) as revealed in his novels, a canon that feeds thriving theologies. In his missionary zeal, I think Flanagan undervalues Sōseki by calling him a "Superstar of World Literature." The word "superstar" recalls the musings of a character in Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities*:

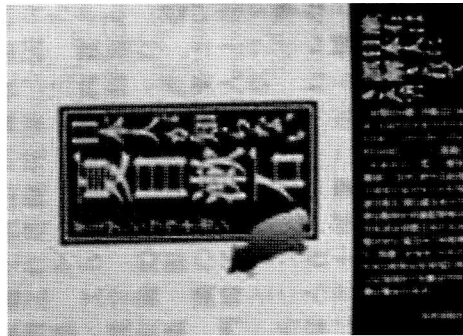
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while he can just about accept that football players may display a form of genius, Ulrich relinquishes his ambition to prove his mathematical prowess when he reads a sports page headline trumpeting "A Racehorse of Genius." What would Sōseki—who, we were told, rejected the government's award of a DPhil—make of the appellation "superstar"?

I also find the term "World Literature" problematic when it is used in a unitary and evaluative sense. Some of the issues are highlighted in the very comparison that Flanagan makes when he states that Sōseki is on a par with Murasaki Shikibu: non-readers of Japanese can scarcely comprehend such a comparison, and most modern readers of Japanese are only able to access *Genji monogatari* via modern translations. There may be some significant universal truths in Murasaki's eleventh-century tale, but the requirement to undertake dedicated study of language, even in your native tongue, to qualify yourself to evaluate a text is what too many people already associate with the literature that it is drummed into them at school. Perhaps Flanagan feels he needs a banner to attract recruits to his camp, but Sōseki is far more accessible than most other literary authors. It is an injustice to associate him with average winners of the Nobel Prize for Literature and other writers that that you cannot begin to understand without study. Sōseki's works are eminently readable, and the more you read them, the more they tell you.



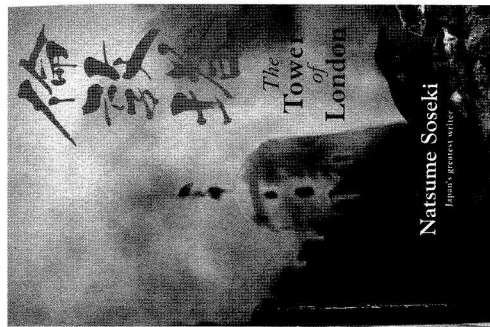
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The presentation began with a polemical introduction, which asserted that Sōseki is “quite as good as Shakespeare” and that his only “serious rival” among Japanese writers is Murasaki Shikibu. Even so, this “writer of inexhaustible richness” has remained little known in the West and has been misinterpreted in Japan. Part of the reason for this has been the attempted appropriation of his works to serve a nationalist agenda. The Japanese establishment has fostered the idea of “national literature” (*kokubungaku*), and has lauded Sōseki as a champion of Japanese virtues. Against this, Flanagan urges us to forget the “phony constructs, Japanese literature and Meiji period literature.” He contends that writing must have “something powerful to say to peoples around the world and speak of the universal human condition, or else it loses the right to be called literature,” and he defines locally superior writing as “literature written in Japanese.” Meanwhile, less highly regarded writing “might otherwise be . . . worthy of interest for historical or cultural research.”

The compelling part of the presentation covered three Sōseki novels: *Kokoro*, *The Gate*, and *Botchan*. He discussed the merits of each and mentioned the implications of some interesting issues concerning certain translations of these books into English. Rather than try to reproduce the fascinating details here, I will deal with some of the themes raised during the presentation. I came away with the overall impression that the Sōseki corpus is stronger than any attempt to mold it into an ideological agenda. It is also proof against that species of controversy which promotes the careers of critics.

We learned that Sōseki was essentially an ironic writer. Critics anxious to claim Sōseki as a properly serious writer have claimed that 1908, the year that *Sanshiro* was published, marked a break with the past. However, just because his writing did not continue to be overtly humorous in the vein of *I Am a Cat* and *Botchan*, it does not mean



that Sōseki ceased to write with “devastating irony.” Flanagan finds him a “writer of great subtlety,” a “superb satirist” and a “master of irony.” Here, I would add, while satire is the exposure of human folly, Sōseki does not reveal it in a sneering way. None of Sōseki’s writing that I have read seems driven by the kind of righteous, vengeful passion that brilliantly pours from the pages of the *Tin Drum* by Günter Grass. You sense that Sōseki cares for his characters. Even when, in *Sorekara*, Daisuke mentions how convenient it is to get rich, as his father did, serving the nation, the sarcasm is involuted, because his own idle life has been funded by this “service.”

Flanagan informed us that in the mid 1980s “a ferocious literary debate was triggered in Japan by the suggestion that Sōseki may have intended to convey, in *Kokoro*, some irony towards a character long held to epitomize ideal elements of the Japanese spirit. These disputes ensued from consideration of the first-person narrator’s explicit statement, in the first paragraph, that he cannot coldly refer to the character “Sensei” merely by using the initial alphabet letter of his name.¹ In the final third of the novel, however, Sensei writes of a deceased dear friend, “I shall here call my friend ‘K.’” Meanwhile, qualifications such as “at the time” and phrasing that suggests the narrator might have ended up living with Sensei’s widow, and even have had children with her, were also held to insinuate that the narrator harbored Oedipal resentment toward the older Sensei. Could it be that the appellation “Sensei” was both mocking and respectful? Many of these “intriguingly ambiguous” things are discussed in Flanagan’s introduction to the new edition of Edwin McClellan’s translation of *Kokoro*.

It was pointed out that in an early work, *The Inheritance of Taste*, Sōseki wrote, “There is in the world a thing called satire.² Satire always has two types of meaning, a surface meaning and a reverse meaning. Everyone knows that the word *sensei* can also be used to mean fool.”

Quoting from his own translation of *Tower of London*, Flanagan drew attention to Sōseki's awareness of irony:³ "There is in the world a thing called irony. One says 'White' and means 'Black.' One advocates 'Small' and suggests 'Big.' Amongst all ironies there is none as feared as the irony left unwittingly to posterity. Whether graves or monuments, medallions or cordons, these things are, so long as they exist, nothing more than means of making one recall, through a futile object, bygone days. The cold words remain on the walls of the Tower, but the writer has disappeared."

In *Kokoro*, this passage is echoed in an incident in which the narrator is unable to read inscriptions on gravestones during a visit with Sensei to K's memorial stone. Flanagan suggested that the longing to be remembered after death is a central theme of *Kokoro*, and that perhaps the best way to achieve this would be through a "carefully staged death."

Inspired by the knowledge that Sōseki spent a term studying *The Merchant of Venice* at Tokyo Imperial University, Flanagan proposed that, in the figure of one man desiring to lodge his heart in the breast of another man, *Kokoro* shows some thematic similarities with Shakespeare's play, in which Antonio seems almost eager to die, under Shylock's knife, for Bassanio. In his own vivid translation from *Kokoro*, Flanagan illustrates: "You wanted to cut open my heart and lap up the



warmly flowing blood. I was still alive then. I did not want to die. So, promising you another day, I turned down your request. Now, I myself am about to tear open my own heart and attempt to bathe your face in that blood. And I shall be satisfied if, when my pulse has stopped beating, a new life has lodged itself in your chest."

Flanagan pointed out that the characters in *Kokoro*, seldom referred to by name, tend to represent eternally recurring stages of life and death, and that other themes in the novel are also universal recurrences. In my own reading of *Kokoro*, I had come to regard this as part of the representation of the behavior of individuals in a Confucian milieu. In fact, in part 3, Sōseki explicitly hints at this (and much more): "Whether we were still under the influence of Confucian teachings, or whether we were only being shy, I shall leave you to decide for yourself." It might also be fruitful to set this desire to live on in the hearts of others in the context of a society in which families regularly revere personally known deceased relatives after enshrining them in the household *butsumatsu*. If you desire to remain as more than a routinely remembered Confucian cipher, it would be necessary to vividly live on in someone's memory, especially in the memory of a person who is outside the set of Confucian stereotypes.

These comments are not motivated by a desire to parochialise *Kokoro* to a time or place. I strongly agree that Sōseki is an immediately accessible author with something valuable to say to the world, and I concur with Flanagan's assessment that *Kokoro* "transcends nation and time." Even so, in repudiating any attempt to ideologically hijack the work, it seems deficient to ignore the Meiji period or Japanese context due to advocacy of some grand scheme of world literature.

Flanagan also wrote the introduction to the new edition of the English translation of *The Gate* [Mon], the next book discussed. Here, a translation issue offered an entry to appreciation of the novel. The problem in the translation of *The Gate* is the failure to render the significance of the emphasis given to the word "adventurer," which repeatedly appears in the original novel transliterated in spaced katakana,

bracketed, and accompanied by the English spelling. The translator seems unaware that the term is probably borrowed from Nietzsche's⁴ *Also sprach Zarathustra*, which Sōseki had been helping to translate. The very title, *The Gate*, is known to refer to Nietzsche's Gate of Eternal Return and, "adventurer" is almost certainly derived from Nietzsche, since Zarathustra will reveal his grand vision of the Gate of Eternal Return only to adventurers, "those capable of daring deeds and daring thoughts."

This is important to Sōseki's novel because the central character is incapable of daring deeds or daring thoughts, and can only see the negative aspects of adventure. The great irony is that when he runs away to avoid meeting a returning former friend turned adventurer, his destination is a Zen temple. For Sōseki, Flanagan tells us, Zen is "the greatest adventure of them all." Naturally, the protagonist returns from the temple chagrined at having made no spiritual progress. The irony, however, is hardly apparent and went unrecognized by Japanese critics because of the empathy with which Sōseki describes the life of the central character.

Flanagan holds that adventure is an important theme in Sōseki, and that it is hard for us in the current day—when adventure is an advertising buzzword and dangerous undertakings are glamorized in popular culture by people such as Virgin business empire head Richard Branson—to appreciate how negatively adventurers' used to be perceived. Flanagan doubts that adventure, as experienced by travel and activity enthusiasts, is really beneficial to the consumer. Rather, in an age continually confronting crisis and change, we are besotted with adventure but have been little prepared for it in our (Western) traditions of thought. Consequently, he believes, we can learn much from Sōseki about spiritual adventure.

One example mentioned was Daisuke's resolve, in *Sorekara*, to risk everything in life. According to Flanagan, however, Sōseki regards activities undertaken for the sake of the risk as less worthy. He sees more value in adventurous thought, such as that advocated in Zen, and

suggests that some forms of adventure are more worthwhile than others. The ultimate form of adventure starts when we begin to understand the actions and motivations of others for unselfish reasons. It is here that Flanagan accurately described my experience of reading Sōseki. I realized that Sōseki is an author who shares his adventure of understanding with the reader. His understanding seems true because it is not obviously motivated. His ironic detachment is all the more effective because he has no axe to grind or scores to settle.

The third novel that Flanagan discussed was *Botchan*. After a warm assessment of this "almost perfect work of fiction," he mentioned the near impossibility of completely doing it justice in translation. This stems mainly from the contrasting regional backgrounds of the Edokko protagonist and the Shikoku provincials among whom he has to work. In English, it is hard to convey the distinctiveness of the central character Botchan's speech. Naturally, the term *botchan* can be interpreted positively, as "our boy," and negatively, as "brat," and the character Botchan possesses both the positive and the negative traits.

Rather than reproduce here the plot points covered in the talk, I would, along with the presenter, encourage you to treat yourself to an absorbing story, whether in one of the recent translations or, as urged by Flanagan, in the original Japanese, if you can manage it. Briefly summarizing what the speaker said—Flanagan has actually written a full introduction to a new edition of a translation that did not make it to press because of copyright difficulties—the narrative concerns a person who is thrown into the adult world without the wherewithal to deal with it. We laugh, but feel warmly disposed towards the hero because he seems oblivious to the embarrassments that we all suffer during this difficult period of life. At the same time, *Botchan* is an elegiac novel concerned with how we are formed by places and people, and how the past becomes forever lost.

A question and answer session followed Flanagan's talk. Some interesting points were raised, but not much essential information was added to the presentation. Later most of the audience were joined by

the author and his projectionist for dinner at a nearby restaurant. Thus ended another stimulating and enjoyable event. It was a privilege to hear the considered opinions of someone who has been so deeply engaged in the study of one of my favourite authors. What I learned is sure to enhance my next reading of a Sōseki novel. I take this opportunity to thank both Damian Flanagan and his assistant for the all the care and preparation that went into the presentation, and the persons in the Kansai Chapter of SWET who organized the event.

Notes

- 1 In Edwin McClellan's well-received 1957 English translation, Flanagan showed that this was inadequately glossed as "I cannot bring myself to write of him in any other way," and the contrast with Sensei's later "cold" usage is thus lost.
- 2 The word used here is *fugo*. The first part of the kanji compound is used in *fujumon*, a word for eulogy. Perhaps this acceptance that something is hidden beneath what is revealed should come as no surprise in a culture of *honne* and *tatemae*, where diplomacy is a major aspect of social conditioning. In Japan, what callow Westerners would regard as hypocrisy is praised as "sincerity."
- 3 A check of the original shows "irony" is a translation of the rhetorical term *hangō* rather than the sardonic *hiniku*.
- 4 For more on Sōseki's engagement with Nietzschean ideas, see Damian Flanagan, *Nihonjin ga Shiranai Natsume Sōseki*, Sekai Sōzō-sha 2003.
- 5 In Random House *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*, Version 3, 1999, definitions of adventurer still lean towards the negative: "1. a person who has, enjoys, or seeks adventures; 2. a seeker of fortune in daring enterprises; soldier of fortune; 3. a person who undertakes great commercial risk; speculator; 4. a person who seeks power, wealth, or social rank by unscrupulous or questionable means: 'They thought John was an adventurer and after their daughter's money.' 'Avenues were open for Western adventurers to seek their fortunes overseas at the expense of colonized people, just as they were for the adventurer in *Mon*, who had returned from Manchuria.'

A list of publications by Damian Flanagan can be found at http://www.damianflanigan.com/DJFlan_EngHome.html. The Japanese text of works by Sōseki can be downloaded from http://www.aozora-gr.jp/index_pages/person48.html. Edwin McClellan's English translation of *Kokoro* (alas, without Flanagan's introduction) is available online for free from <http://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/ns/soseki.html>. Real Media files of readings, in Japanese, of Sōseki works are available from <http://www.koetaba.net/3book/natsume-soseki/index.html>. There are two versions of *Botchan*. The quality of the first file of the readings by Goldman Sachs volunteers is poor, but subsequent files are good.