NATSUME SŌSEKI AND THE CONFLICT OF GENRES, OR ON THE INVENTION OF A NEW LITERARY TRADITION – THE *HAIKU-PLAY*

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Abstract Considered by literary history to be the dominant figure of modern Japanese literature, Natsume Sōseki (1867-1916) is the most influential writer of the Meiji era, an era whose oscillation between tradition and modernity he reflects in his texts, imbued with moral scepticism and a lucid critical attitude toward the thought of his time. Starting from the novel *Wagahai wa neko de aru* 吾輩は猫である, as well as from Natsume Sōseki's theoretical writings on literature, I will analyse the ambiguous relationship between modernity and tradition as it is reflected in the discussions about literature in the novel. Thus, by using the logical method of argumentum ad absurdum (reductio ad absurdum), the writer shows, in an ironic key, why "haiku theatre," a hybrid genre created in the spirit of the so-called modernisation of literature, makes no poetic sense. In fact, Buddhist thought was also no stranger to the use of this method in demonstrating that theories of substance and essence, once the logic of their own principles is followed through, prove to be unfounded and absurd.
Keywords Modern Japanese literature, Natsume Sōseki, Meiji literature, *I Am a Cat*.

Natsume Sōseki (Natsume Kin'nosuke) was born in 1867, one year before the Meiji Restoration, making him five years younger than Mori Ōgai. The age difference is not large, but in the context of the social changes and transformations that marked the early Meiji era, this difference becomes perceptible in the distinctive nuances that formed each of their views on the country's modernization. Natsume Sōseki was also part of the remarkable generation of young people sent to Europe to complete their studies in order to then aid Japan's technological progress, thus narrowing the gap separating it from the Western countries. Upon their return, these young scholars would bring back not only the progressive spirit of late 19th-century Europe (enthusiasm

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for new technologies, scientific positivism, and a taste for politics), but also certain intellectual currents form the fields of art and literature. The initial enthusiasm for the Western world would gradually diminish over the decades that followed; thus, an analytical outlook, together with a deliberate refusal to continue importing new philosophical concepts, produced a balanced, critical distance toward the influx of Western ideas.

Literary history considers Natsume Sōseki to be the dominant figure of modern Japanese literature, the most influential writer of the Meiji era, an era whose ambiguity is reflected in his work, imbued with both moral scepticism and critical sharpness. He was a novelist, an author of essays, haiku (俳句), as well as poetry composed in Chinese (漢詩 *kanshi*).

As the youngest of eight children in a large family, little Kin'nosuke was given up for adoption – a rather common practice at that time. Yet, this did not bring more stability. Because of certain conflicts in the adoptive household, he was passed on to another family, only to return home at the age of nine and live with his grandparents. The worsening of his stomach illness in adulthood, which deepened his depression, together with the instability of his early childhood, led him (in the spirit of Western sociology) to consider the relationship between social environment and individual development. He regarded social observation as essential for describing the psychology of his characters (in line with the school of naturalism). Moreover, due to his sharp awareness of the transformations caused by the accelerating modernisation, Natsume Sōseki managed to understand his own circumstances and to approach the issue of the forces that determine a person's place and role in society. He transposed into his writing not only the possible answers to these questions, but also the human uncertainties and weaknesses when faced with societal pressure. It is certain that Professor Kushami from the later novel *I Am a Cat* (吾輩は猫である *Wagahai wa neko de aru*), and, to a certain extent, Sensei from *Kokoro* こころ, emerged from the creative laboratory that initially filtered these issues and skeptical reflections on the modern individual's inability to achieve harmony with the self and others.

Natsume Sōseki's literature cannot be fully integrated into any of the major movements of that time (Romanticism, realism, naturalism), movements that also took shape and gained prominence in Japan through various representatives. Nor does his work fit neatly within naturalism, despite being closer to its principles and acknowledging the validity of its reaction against the romantic tendency to idealise the past:

> "His idealism was not just a matter of being stubborn and not conforming, or of being different from the rest. There were a number of principles upon which naturalists based their movement that were congenial to his spirit-for example, breaking away from the 'romanticist morality' of the past, expressing oneself in straight-forward, unencumbered language, and freedom in content from the old literary customs and pattern."[1]

[1] Ward William Biddle, "The Authenticity of Natsume Sōseki," *Monumenta Nipponica* 28, No. 4 (Winter, 1973): 426.

Natsume Sōseki did not align himself with the main direction of modern Japanese literature, and his reputation, as Donald Keene also argues, rests precisely on the individuality of his writing style: "…but it is his individuality, his distinctiveness as a presence in modern Japanese literature, that has earned him his high reputation."[2]

The entire body of Natsume Sōseki's work can also be read as the trace of a continual oscillation between modernisation and tradition – an uncertainty that is also mirrored by the characters in *Wagahai wa neko de aru* (*I Am a Cat*), who thus shift the modernity-tradition dialogue into the literary sphere.

In 1906, while working on the novel *Wagahai wa neko de aru,* Natsume Sōseki also wrote a theoretical text on literature, titled *Theory of Literature* (文学論 *Bungakuron*). Already in the preface, fully aware of the novelty of his ideas, he admits to a certain pessimism about whether his contemporaries would be able to understand the work. He defines the *theory of literature* (*bungakuron*) as a flower blooming out of season, explaining that the intention of the treatise is to identify and clarify *the fundamental vital principle of literature through the lens of disciplines such as psychology and sociology*.[3] When illustrating the constituent elements of literature as he defines them, Natsume Sōseki draws his examples from English poets: Tennyson, Keats, Milton, Wordsworth, Shelley, Coleridge, Shakespeare etc. The aim for a scholarly approach, modelled on the positive sciences, is obvious – Sōseki even created a series of charts to map literary experience in relation to the wider field of scientific knowledge. The volume *Theory of Literature and Other Critical Writings. By Natsume Sōseki*, edited in 2006 by Michael K. Bourdaghs, Atsuko Ueda, and Joseph A. Murphy, clarifies Sōseki's understanding of literature, while also placing his ideas within the intellectual and social context to which they were originally addressed.[4]

In discussing the definition of literature, the Japanese author also reflects on its universality, which, in his view, is not *aprioristic*, but *historical*. The Japanese writer notes that the universality of Shakespeare's works, for instance, was imposed by the Romantic movement, which found within Shakespeare's plays a set of ideas that aligned with its own poetic agenda as it sought to redefine literature and establish a new conceptual paradigm. Moreover, the discussion on the universality of English literature must also be understood within the broader ideological context of the presumed superiority of European civilization, whose literature and culture long operated as the standard against which all other literary production was measured.

In attempting to define the term *literature* (*bungaku*), Sōseki cannot avoid addressing literature's relationship to *history*, particularly in the context in which, together with the establishment of the *kokubungaku* (*national literature*) departments at Japan's major universities, their graduates had begun to edit volumes of history of the Japanese literature, following the

[2] Donald Keene, *Dawn to the West. Japanese Literature of Modern Era. Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 306.

[3] Natsume Sōseki, *Theory of Literature and Other Critical Writings*, eds. Michael K. Bourdaghs, Atsuko Ueda, and Joseph A. Murphy (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 46.

[4] Michael K. Bourdaghs, Atsuko Ueda, and Joseph A. Murphy, "Natsume Sōseki and the Ten-Year Project," in Natsume Sōseki, *Theory of Literature and Other Critical Writings*, 1-7.

European model. The well-known three-volume history of Japanese literature, *Nihon bungakushi* (日本文学史), edited in 1890 by Mikami Sanji and Takatsu Kuwasaburō, is not a mere inventory of literature from its origins to the Meiji era. It is also, implicitly, an attempt to canonise the most important literary texts. In 1899, W. G. Aston's history of Japanese literature had just been published in London – a work with which Natsume Sōseki undoubtedly came into contact upon arriving in England in 1900.

As a number of literary critics also noted, another issue was of major importance to Natsume Sōseki, namely that of the self, of the individual:

> "The central problem of Sōseki's most famous novels is the Meiji problem of the nature of the individual: not only 'Who am I?', but 'What is *I*?' His insistent search for the meaning of the self is often framed either in the psycho-social terms of Meiji Japan's quest for a viable sense of its own identity in the face of the West..."[5]

However, for Natsume Sōseki, individualism is not only a philosophical issue, but one that is also political, ethical and, implicitly, moral. The issue of individualism is masterfully expressed in the novel *I Am a Cat* (*Wagahai wa Neko dearu* 吾輩は猫である). Initially, in January 1905, in the magazine *Hototogisu* ホトトギス (*Cuckoo*), Natsume Sōseki published a short story titled *Wagahai wa neko de aru.* However, its success and the readers' enthusiasm determined him to continue the story – until August of the following year, when the final chapter was published. In book form, the novel has its first volume published in October 1905, and the second novel in November 1906. Thus, the writing of the novel *Wagahai wa neko de aru* and that of the treatise *Bungakuron* coincided – it is therefore unsurprising that the nature of literature was explored in both texts, in different forms.

By perfectly mastering the realist and naturalist novel techniques of embedding the fictional world within social reality, Natsume Sōseki manages to create – through the cat as a *narrator* – the illusion of an authentic, entirely credible *character*, whose stream of consciousness unfolds freely. The fully invested reader follows the cat's actions and *thoughts*, thus a character onto whom the author unmistakably transfers his own perspective. As in the case of modern European authors, point of view matters more here than the plot itself. Even though the setting is less elaborate—limited to the places accessible to the cat, no further than the public bath or the Kaneda household—this setting, centred on Professor Kushami's home, is primarily ethical and moral rather than socially descriptive. Still, by using minimal means and avoiding the descriptive strategies of the realist novel except where necessary, Natsume Sōseki manages to offer a truthful picture of the era. The external observation of social realities, filtered through the cat's ironic perception, manages to be both entertaining, to the extent that it amuses the reader, and instructive.

However, beyond the flawless stylistic execution with which Natsume Sōseki shapes an original view on the society of his time, the subtlety with which he constructs a secondary layer of

[5] David Pollack, "Framing the Self. The Philosophical Dimensions of Human Nature in Kokoro," *Monumenta Nipponica* 43, No.4 (Winter, 1988): 419.

reflection on traditional literature, in contrast to emerging literary trends, is striking and must be noted. Ideas deemed sacred within the classical tradition, as well as newer trends, imposed by the modernisation of society, are seen through the eyes of a cat who presumptuously claims a privileged position of authority that he clearly does not possess, thereby casting doubt (in a modern spirit) on the validity of authority itself.

One remarkable scene in the novel features Professor Kushami, his old friend Meitei (who has a PhD in aesthetics), as well as the younger Kangetsu and Tofu, two of his disciples. Meitei, Kangetsu, and Tofu arrive one sweltering summer day, interrupting Kushami's pleasant afternoon siesta. Only the cat, delighted in advance by the promise of the sparkling conversations about to unfold among the members of this Socratic-like gathering, seems pleased by the visitors' arrival. The discussion quickly gains momentum, through a very wide variety of topics, and turns into a veritable oral version of the *zuihitsu* (随筆), literature, a classical genre that approaches different themes, giving voice, in the rhythm of the brush, to the author's reflections. Kangetsu 寒月, whose name can be translated as "Mr. Coldmoon," embodies the type of the pedantic researcher who never truly commits to anything, his interests ranging from the history of hanging to literary experimentation. He presents a new work written in a modern style, a piece blending *haiku* and theatre, which he calls *haiku-play* (排撃).[6] Like a true scholar, Kangetsu lays out the haiku-play principles and dismantles, by near-complete exclusion, the classical literary conventions of both genres. Dramatic tension evaporates, dialogue collapses into a kind of interior monologue, and the dramatic conflict, nearly absent from the play itself, is displaced onto the *audience*, who split into opposing camps, debating the play and the *new* literary genre created by Kanetsu's *cold* spirit.

Perceived not as anti-theatre, but as a modern substitute for classical theatre, a unique fusion between the new (European) theatre and haiku, the genre invented by Kangetsu is, in fact, an essentialised image of the literary *battles* of the time, centred on the conflict between tradition and westernisation. Taking as its point of departure a famous *haiku* by Bashō Matsuo, this scene depicting the gathering of literary scholars describes the modern theatrical innovations, but it also hints at several new ideas regarding the modernisation of the *haiku*. These ideas are actually also shared by Natsume Sōseki himself, due to the fact that he frequented the circle around the *Hototogisu* magazine and especially due to his friendship with Masaoka Shiki.

Kare eda ni/ karasu no tomari keri/ aki no kure.
枯れ枝に烏のとまりけり秋の暮

This haiku, written by Bashō in 1680, is considered an autumn poem. Employing the technique of comparison, Bashō draws on the traditional, conventional idea that the image of a crow perched on a tree branch symbolised an autumn dusk. This poem featuring the crow, together with the famous frog haiku (古池や *Furu ike ya*...) are regarded as true models of poetic creation within the classical

[6] 日本文学全集 8 夏目漱石（一）『吾輩は猫である・坊っちゃん・三四郎』、東京：河出書房、1967、99. *Complete Works of Japanese Literature* 8, Natsume Soseki (1), *I Am a Cat*, Botchan, Sanshiro (Tokyo: Kawade Shobo, 1967).

tradition. Concerning the former, Bashō used to say that a *haiku* is a scene of nature and that, in his case (unlike in other schools) the picture is rendered in black and white, like a black crow in the misty twilight of autumn, rather than in colour. However, in Natsume Sōseki's text, Bashō's *haiku* is paraphrased rather freely: *A crow / Is in love / With a woman in a bath*.

Kangetsu composes a play that is neither in the traditional style, nor in the modern one, but which refers intertextually to a classical poem by Bashō, the father of *haiku*, himself an innovator in his own time. From this we might infer the optimistic idea that, in relation to the conflict between modernity and tradition, a third way might exist: a middle path in which new literary genres emerge through the fusion of old and new, or through the reinterpretation of tradition in a modern key. The new hybrid genre, the *haiku-play* invented by Kangetsu, is an original form that combines *the principles of drama with those of haiku*,[7] and seems, in fact, to embody the younger generation's solution to the conflict between modernity and tradition.

However, Meitei has a different view. In order to construct a *reductio ad absurdum*-type argument, the aesthete Meitei first shows that the one-act *haiku-play* play is a *passive* genre. By introducing the opposition *passive/active*, Meitei shifts the discussion (for the sake of the demonstration) from the poetic to the philosophical plane, suggesting that Japanese, "Oriental" passivism stands in contrast to Western activism and that, unlike the Japanese philosophy of life, which privileges contemplation, Western activism could represent the path toward civilization – an idea shared, in fact, by many thinkers of the time. The oppositional pairing of Asian passivism and European activism – where Meitei quite deliberately reduces, for the sake of his argument, the vitality of two great cultures to two contrasting traits – serves only to highlight, while at the same time problematizing, the futility of staging the conflict between Japanese tradition and Westernization in such superficially understood terms.

Describing the stage set of the play, Kangetsu explains that beneath the tree where the crow is perched, a young woman is bathing. At that moment, the haiku poet Takahama Kyoshi appears. He is dressed like an army quartermaster: a kimono paired with Western shoes. In his hand he holds a walking stick, and on his head, he wears a miner's helmet fitted with a lamp. Takahama Kyoshi (高浜虚子, 1874–1959) was a disciple of Masaoka Shiki, a friend of Natsume Sōseki, and the editor of the magazine *Hototogisu* ホトトギス, founded in 1897 in Matsuyama to promote the haiku form. Natsume Sōseki himself published several haiku in this magazine. Without a doubt, the dialogue between Kushami and his friends in *Wagahai wa neko de aru* echoes the discussions within this literary circle on the modernization of the *haiku*. Although the members of *Hototogisu* agreed on modernizing the haiku in terms of expression and vocabulary, when it came to the formal elements that defined the genre – those tied to tradition, such as *kigo* 季語, or seasonal reference – Kyoshi Takahama, for instance, rejected their removal. This blend of modern and traditional elements is reflected in his appearance: Japanese clothing *matched* with Western-style shoes. The miner's lamp helmet, essential equipment underground, becomes a metaphor for Kyoshi's poetic explorations, while the walking stick evokes the travel culture of earlier poets, including Bashō, as well as the Buddhist notion of human life's ephemerality on earth. Meitei gets

[7] See Natsume Sōseki, *I Am a Cat*, trans. by Aiko Ito, Graeme Wilson (Tuttle Publishing, 2002).

exactly what he aimed for: starting from the assumption that such a form of theatre might exist and might even be considered modern, he pushes it to the point of contradiction, showing that the passivity of Kangetsu's invented genre cannot be modern at all, but that, in fact, it stands in stark opposition to the Western-style activism.

The cat himself, against the text's humoristic background, experiences a similar kind of drama. He belongs neither to his own species – from which he is estranged by his inability to cultivate the instincts of a feline never instilled in him by its parents, since he is an abandoned, orphaned kitten – nor to the human species, from which he is separated by the impenetrable boundaries of the laws of nature, even though he shares the Kushami household and seems to understand humans better than they understand themselves. In a sense, the cat's predicament is also that of the writer, who never knew the comfort and warmth of a stable childhood home, and therefore has an ambiguous position: neither fully rejecting familial bonds, nor fully integrated into them. The author seems to suggest that this conflict has no solution, other than death.

It is possible that the death suffered by the cat in *Wagahai wa neko de aru* (by drowning in a barrel of beer), though an expression of a complete lack of heroism, also carries something genuinely tragic. Despite the comic framing, the scene gives the impression of a mechanism working backwards, methodically and impersonally destroying precisely what had just been gained, namely individual freedom. In his final moments, the cat invokes Buddha, a detail that may seem surprising given the *character's agnosticism*, yet perfectly consistent with religious logic: namely that when confronted with the ultimate threshold – death – every person (in this case, the cat) turns, shaken, toward the religion that traditionally manages rites of passage and, implicitly, toward tradition. The cat's curiosity about the beer barrel is punished by the law of fate that brings about his death. The moral here is undoubtedly harsh: the new knowledge imported from the West can become harmful, even deadly, for someone not prepared to understand it. The backlash of traditionalism against Westernization (at any cost), which, in Sōseki's work, leads to the discovery of irony as a method, is ultimately ethical or moral rather than aesthetic, and not strictly linked to Western philosophy. For John Nathan, *Wagahai wa neko de aru* is *a scathing humorous evocation of Sōseki's pessimism about humanity*,[8] but a humanity from which the author is not detached and which he does not merely view from afar, but one that includes him. The irony, channelled through the cat, is directed at Sōseki as well.

Natsume Sōseki's ambiguous stance on the issues of his time is also present in the text titled *My Individualism* (私の個人主義*Watakushi no kojinshugi*), in which the writer does not resolve the conflict between tradition and modernity in the sense of an option – he is, in fact, aware that the very source of this conflict births the spirit of his time. *Watakushi no kojinshugi* was the topic of a lecture delivered at Gakushūin on 25 November 1914. For Natsume Sōseki, as for other undecided intellectuals of the period, a society's mentality does not change as quickly as a political regime. Even so, aligned with the desire for radical change, he was perfectly aware both of the social mobility sparked by Meiji reforms and of the major political interest in favour of modernization. Thus, in Sōseki's view, no matter how striking the contrast between traditional culture and modern,

[8] John Nathan, *Sōseki. Modern Japan's Greatest Novelist* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 91.

Western culture may be, cultural differences do not immediately produce deep transformations in mentality, even if they do alter people's perception of the world to some extent, reshaping it into new forms of behaviour and attitude. One such *reshaping* force, in a culture previously oriented toward social group morality, was the emergence of *individualism*.

Natsume Sōseki acknowledges the importance of asserting the individual in the new society, even if this contradicts the older Japanese mindset centred on protecting the group. Yet, he maintains that the affirmation of individualism requires a complex process of education that should take into account several key aspects:

> "First, that if you want to carry out the development of your individuality, you must respect the individuality of others. Second, that if you intend to utilize the power in your possession, you must be fully cognizant of the duty that accompanies it. Third, that if you wish to demonstrate your financial power, you must respect its concomitant responsibilities."[9]

The imposition of constant control over individualism can lead to positive outcomes, because once left unchecked, individualism exercised through power will inevitably result in abuses:

> "When a man is devoid of character, everything he does presents a threat. When he seeks to develop his individuality without restraints, he obstructs others; when he attempts to use power, he merely abuses it; when he tries to use money, he corrupts society."[10]

From this perspective, the cat also appears as an embodiment of an individualism that had not been cultivated through any moral or ethical discipline, and his death can be read as a punishment for a form of self-absorbed individualism that has spun out of control. Through the novel's ending, which adopts the cadence of a Zen meditation, might Natsume Sōseki be suggesting a return to tradition? Sōseki's anti-idealism, expressed as well in the final paragraph, defines itself deliberately both in relation to the tradition he unexpectedly, but ironically, circles back to, and to the modernity he approaches with critical clarity, not without an increasingly pronounced note of pessimism. The cat's final words echo the rhythm of the Buddhist litanies recited before death: 南無阿弥陀仏南無阿弥陀仏/。[*Namu Amida Butsu Namu Amida Butsu*].[11]

Equally remarkable is the novel's irony, sharpened into satire. The humorous, ironic tone is hardly surprising in the case of a Japanese author well-versed in the *haiku* tradition, whose ironic edge was cultivated by Matsuo Bashō, the master of the short poem. In a culture where belief in *kami* (deity) is deeply rooted, the introduction of a *talking*, *reflective* cat who *observes* the world around him with finesse is hardly surprising.

The novel's modernity and its break with the tradition of Japanese literature lie in the subtlety with which the author manages to render the rhythm of the cat's stream of consciousness,

[9] Natsume Sōseki, "My individualism" (ed. Jay Rubin), *Monumenta Nipponica* 34, no. 1 (Spring, 1979): 40.
[10] Ibid.
[11] 日本文学全集8夏目漱石（一）『吾輩は猫である・坊っちゃん・三四郎』、208.

creating an ambiguity that makes the reader wonder whether the cat's thoughts are not in fact those of its owner, Professor Kushami, who views the world through the mirror of the cat's eyes, reflecting ironically both on his own position as an object of analysis and, implicitly, on the subject doing the analysing. Natsume Sōseki undoubtedly managed, without assuming it programmatically, to demonstrate through this novel, the effectiveness of realist narrative techniques in depicting the social environment, showing that literature (like other *positivist sciences*), by choosing representative characters, can link psychological traits to the social categories they belong to, thereby delivering complex information about contemporary society. This explains, in part, the novel's considerable success. However, the novel's modern character is unmistakable at the level of narrativity itself, which asserts itself through an impressionistic, diffuse, and capricious sensibility that undermines the narrator's authority over his own world, since the narrator (the cat) can contemplate and reflect, but cannot speak. Equally remarkable is the cat's use of syllogistic reasoning to carry out (in matters such as love, war, religion, and family relations) an ironic *reductio ad absurdum* of familiar theses drawn from traditional thought or from deeply rooted prejudices pushed to their logical extremes. These theses, from the belief in human superiority over animals to the belief in the superiority of one civilization or religion over another, only highlight the relativity of supposedly privileged viewpoints rather than any claim to absoluteness. This ongoing attempt to dilute the impulse to absolutize a privileged perspective is present throughout the novel and manifests not only at the narratological level, through a game of crediting/discrediting the cat-narrator, but also at the level of the world-representation itself. Alongside the question of the novel's poetic nature, *Wagahai wa neko de aru* also addresses the contradictions generated by Japan's Westernization and its rupture with tradition. No aspect of these contradictions is overlooked by Sōseki, who also captures in his novel the broader social dimension of his time, reflected in its general historical context.

Within the social and family setting, the cat observes and analyses the relationship between Professor Kushami and his wife, as well as the couple's relationship with their children. Compared with the traditional Japanese family, the relationship between the professor and his wife is unquestionably modern. The two speak their minds openly, and the scene in which the professor's wife washes her hair and dries it in the sun is revealing in this regard. In that scene, the professor, dissatisfied, notices that his wife is balding and thus sees himself as the victim of the myth of women's long, black hair – a myth venerated throughout literary tradition since the Heian period (794-1185). The subtle irony with which the spouses discuss the matter has nothing of the poetic tone of classical literature and instead shifts into a comic, ironic register, thereby deflating the lyrical character imposed by classical tradition. If the relationship between Professor Kushami and his wife is largely modern, the same cannot be said of the Kaneda family, who, although they embody the liberal spirit of the new era, continue to follow an older social mentality. This is shown by their attempt to find a husband for their daughter through the custom of arranged marriage. And because the Kaneda family is wealthy – their surname literally meaning "gold field" (金田) – they nonetheless adopt a modern criterion and seek an educated suitor. From their perspective, the future *doctor of science* Kangetsu appears to be the ideal candidate. Since the young man often visits the professor's household, he eventually learns of the future being prepared for him.

On a historical level, Natsume Sōseki's irony (and, by extension, the modern character of the text) can be seen in the narrator's presentation of the major historical event in which Japan was then engaged, namely the Russo-Japanese War. In the cat's heart, who is usually rather indifferent, belligerent instincts suddenly stir and strong national feelings emerge. Wishing to keep pace with the unfolding war, the cat sets off on his own… mouse-hunting campaign. Contrary to his expectations, the battlefield represented by the house and its surroundings offers none of the anticipated satisfaction, and his military venture ends rather ingloriously. This, however, will not be the case for the Japanese army, which would secure a resounding victory against the Tsar's forces and would thus establish Japan as a new global power on the world stage of that time.

The novel *Wagahai wa neko de aru* describes, in an ironic manner and with considerable subtlety, the atmosphere of the epoch, marked by both tensions and ambiguity. The ironic yet ultimately optimistic tone of *Wagahai wa neko de aru* would later give way to a more bitter, even pessimistic irony in Sōseki's subsequent works – most notably, in *Kokoro* (こころ), a novel that revisits the earlier themes but, by shifting the narrative perspective, redirects them along a new trajectory.

Translated from Romanian by Anca Chiorean