

Finishing the Unfinished Soseki

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A prominent Japanese critic, Karatani Kojin, whom you may know through the work of Bret, once remarked to me in a private conversation and without any intention of offending me:

作家はいいよなあ。たいてい勉強しないでいいし - 大体余り頭も良くななくていいんだよな。

How lucky the novelists are. They don't have to study hard. They don't even have to be all that smart.

Today, I am here as a novelist and not as a critic and would like to take full advantage of the situation. My talk will remain unabashedly on a pre-critical level so you must bear with me.

There will basically be two parts to my talk.

The first part centers around the question: Why did I decide to write the continuation of *Meian*, Soseki's last and unfinished work? The second part centers around the question: Why haven't others before me tried to do it?

I would like to answer the first question from a perspective that is more or less personal; the second question, from a perspective that is more or less theoretical.

I always wanted to write novels – in Japanese.

I basically only wanted to become a writer even when I went on to graduate school in the United States, in New Haven.

I don't want to bore you by going into the possible psychological or psycho-pathological reasons why I had always wanted to become a writer and never wrote anything for a long time. Pure laziness plays a large part in this, of course. That I was brought to the United States, not on my own will, but because of my father's work, must have played some part in it, as well. I was not at all prepared when I was suddenly deracinated from an environment where everyone spoke my native tongue and transplanted to a foreign soil. Ever since then, my

relationship with the Japanese language lost the original innocence and became helplessly ambivalent. The desire and the fear to deal with the Japanese language must have contributed to the persistence of my ambition and hesitation.

Anyway, my wanting to become a writer grew stronger as I studied, in graduate school, what is usually called literary theory – which seemed, at that time, to have little relevance to Japanese literature and which, naturally, was beyond my intellectual resources.

A graduate student is already a miserable thing to be; to be a graduate student in New Haven is even worse. To be a graduate student studying literary theory in New Haven seemed to me to be the worst possible existence.

So it was with a great relief (mixed with a certain anxiety) that I finally went back to Japan after finishing all the necessary school work, officially to write a thesis, but, in truth, seeking to become a writer.

That was a few years ago.

Of course, I did not start writing.

I felt like someone who had just come out of a nunnery and could not help just having a good time in Tokyo, watching people, riding the subway and visiting department stores. It was of course not the first time I went back to Japan, but it was the first time I really lived there.

Yet I could not officially be just having a good time, for I was on a Japan Foundation Grant. Thus, whenever people asked me what I was doing, I would tell them either that I was writing my thesis or that I was writing a novel, depending upon who my grand inquisitor was. I was lying either way, but I felt better when I said I was writing a novel, because that came closer to my original intent.

A sequence of interesting events followed from my petty lie, which throws light on how Japanese publishing business functions, which, in turn, may explain how I came to write the continuation of *Meian*.

Word got around among my Japanese acquaintances that I was writing a novel. One of my acquaintances was an influential figure in Japanese literary scene who knew people in the publishing business. One day, he asked me out of the blue if I had anything to show to a head editor of a certain prestigious literary magazine. I remembered being introduced to this head editor in one of the Tokyo literary bars, but I hardly knew him. He hardly knew me.

The magazine editors had just finished reading all the short stories submitted to them for that year's literary prize they feature for the upcoming writers – what is called *shinjinsho* (新人賞) in Japanese. They had selected a few stories – the finalists – to be read by the judging committee, composed of established writers and critics. Apparently, the people in the magazine did not find anyone among the finalists who they thought would make a good sale.

The implication was that if I submitted a piece, it would automatically be presented to the final committee among other finalists - that is, without going through the initial process of elimination and, if the piece was good enough, possibly with a special recommendation from the head editor.

I was very much surprised. I was also tempted. But then the due date seemed too close and I hadn't written anything. Moreover, I instinctively understood one thing. That this kind of opportunity will continue to present itself for a couple more years – that is, as long as people thought I was a marketable commodity – not young anymore, but luckily "youngish," "woman" and "different," with my American background. It is true that I had, by that time, written some very short articles in Japanese. It is also very probable that my acquaintance had spoken well of me. But these things alone could not possibly have provoked such kind solicitation from the editor.

I was, to him, a marketable commodity.

It is at this point that I replied, without much thought, that what I really want to do is to write something like the continuation of *Meian*.

I don't know why I said it – I have always been a great admirer of Soseki, to be sure. I had even just finished reading *Meian* quite recently for the third or the fourth time. When I re-read it, I was seized, just as before, with a sort of rage in not being able to know what happens at the end. I cursed Soseki for having died without finishing it, I cursed other Japanese writers for not having finished it for the benefit of all Soseki readers. I was again tempted, just as before and just as everyone else who reads the work, to finish the work myself. But I had not seriously considered the possibility then. I, therefore, do not know why I said to him that I wanted to write the continuation of *Meian* – perhaps I was already beginning to grasp how the Japanese literary industry actually worked in recent years.

The proposition ended there.

A year passed and I was still having good time. Then the same head editor called me up at home. He asked me if I had something to show him. He can give me two months. I was really surprised. I was

tempted, too. But again, I declined the offer. Remembering what I had said to my acquaintance the year before, I told him I was just starting to work on the continuation of *Meian* and that it would take a long time. He kindly wished me good luck and hung up.

From that moment, I began thinking seriously about the whole project. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed like something I should do. Eventually, I came to the conclusion that this may be the only way for me to become a writer in Japan. Let me explain why this is so.

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When I went back to Japan, all I wanted to do was to become a writer. I was not concerned with the question of how. I had the vague knowledge that I would have to submit my writing to one of those competitions for the upcoming writers and win a literary award for new authors. Yet I also wondered how anyone could pull through the initial processes of elimination. From a purely statistical point of view, which seemed to be the only point that actually mattered, the chance seemed discouragingly low. You had to become one of five or six finalists out of more than a thousand applicants. Most people naturally stop sending in their stories unable to surmount this initial barrier. In fact, winning the first prize at the final stage seemed much easier. You only needed to be singled out out of the several finalists. The ratio was more realistic.

But then here I was, repeatedly given the chance not to go through the initial processes of elimination. And here I was repeatedly declining the very opportunity. My repeated refusals were the testimonies to my burgeoning cognizance of where the real difficulty lain.

The real difficulty does not lie, after all, in the process of getting the literary award for new authors. The real difficulty begins after one has gotten the prize. For one might end up again on the same starting line, but this time, without the possibility of winning the prize because you have already won it.

Traditionally, you were a writer once you won the Akutagawa Prize, a prestigious literary prize for new writers which was established way back in 1935, or Showa 10.

The winning of the Akutagawa Prize, of course, was not easy.

You first went through a period of apprenticeship, had your stories published in a poorly printed amateur literary magazine, or *dojin zasshi* (同人雑誌), and then, if you are lucky, moved up to a professional literary magazine, or *bungeishi* (文芸誌), possibly through a personal connection

with an editor who finally came to know your work after you had repeatedly submitted the stories despite the repeated rejections. You usually had to have several short stories published before the great day came when you were selected as one of the finalists for the Akutagawa Prize. Then, perhaps after being selected finalist for two or more consecutive years, even a greater day came when you finally received the Akutagawa Prize itself. It marked such a triumphant moment in one's life that writers often went often back to the moment to write stories about it.

The winning the prize required, not the statistical chance, but a sustained endeavor.

Yet you were confident that if you wrote something good one day, you will win the prize. Once you won the prize, moreover, you were sure that you were already half way into establishing yourself as a writer. You could dream of the ultimate day when your work would be included in the altar of the collected works of Modern Literature (近代文学全集) – something which the publishers repeatedly published and which continued, amazingly, to sell simply because there were readers who read literature.

Those were the golden ages of modern Japanese literature.

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Those days are gone.

The cultural scene of Japan had undergone a transformation while I was away from the country. Sometime in the mid-seventies, a phenomenon which is taking place on a world-wide scale took place in Japan in a most conspicuous manner. One often uses such expression as turning away from literature, or *bungaku banare* (文学離れ), to describe the phenomenon. But since the Japanese did not turn away from all things written – all literature, it might be more accurate to describe this phenomenon as turning away from modern literature, or *kindaibungaku banare* (近代文学離れ). Hence the talk about the end of modern literature, or *kindaibungaku no shuen* (近代文学の終焉). People, even the young, stopped reading what had normally been considered literature – modern literature, or *kindai bungaku* (近代文学).

At the same time, however, the award for the best new writer of the year (新人賞), began inundating the same cultural scene. These awards belong to a different category from the Akutagawa Prize in that they are awarded to the works which have never been published before. The initial reason for creating the new author awards was to make the competition

fairer for the upcoming writers. No personal connection with the editor was required. All you needed to do is to submit a work to one of those competitions before the deadline. These new author literary awards invented somewhere in the mid-sixties, began proliferating the Japanese literary industry in the seventies. You may have heard of the Gunzo New Author Award, Bungei Award, Chuo Koron New Author Award, Woman Author Award, Femina Award, Bungakukai New Author Award, Kaien New Author Award, Subaru New Author Award, Shincho New Author Award (群像新人賞, 文芸賞, 中央公論新人賞, 女流文学賞, フェミナ賞, 文学会新人賞, 海淵新人賞, すばる新人賞, 新潮新人賞), just to name the prestigious ones. Recently, there was in fact an article which claimed that currently well over two hundred literary prizes exist in Japan. And the people who send in their works are also numerous. Over a thousand people apply for each prestigious competition.

This apparent contradiction between the turning away from literature, or *bungaku banare*, and the flood of new author awards, however, is no contradiction, at all.

And this, for two reasons: superficial and fundamental.

On the superficial level, there is the economic logic. Whatever the original intent may have been, the new author awards assumed a more and more commercial role as people stopped being interested in literature and bought less and less literature as well as less and less monthly literary magazines.

In the past decade, the circulation of the literary magazines went down from tens of thousands to just a few thousands. Naturally, those magazines experienced financial difficulties. Some went out of circulation like *Umi* (海), others, like *Bungei* (文芸) or *Subaru* (すばる), were interrupted for a while. The publishers that published these magazines – Kodansha, Kawade Shobo, Chuokoron sha, Bungei Shunjusha, Fukutake Shoten, Shueisha, Shinchosha (講談社, 河出書房, 中央公論社, 文芸春秋社, 福武書店, 集英社, 新潮社) – did not want to abolish them, however, because not having a literary magazine was, to them, unthinkably unprestigious – like the Ivy League not having graduate schools. The awarding of the New Author Awards is a major means to alleviate the red – the deficit – which results from efforts to keep the literary magazines. A book with a prestigious name of a literary prize attached to it still sells to the general public and brings profit. If lucky, it could even be made into a relatively big hit.

From the point of view of the applicants, these new author awards provide the opportunity for a quick media exposure – and some quick

money – without having to go through a long apprenticeship period – without having to write much – without having to read much.

The proliferation of the new author awards, however, is related to the phenomenon of turning away from literature (文学離れ) on a more fundamental level. Hundreds of yearly literary prizes flourish precisely because, now, no literature is any different from another. I am not saying this in a realistic sense, though it is likely that, in present day Japan where everything has become so homogeneous, no literature is in fact different from one another. The more radical disappearance of difference is founded, however, in the disappearance of the criterion for judging literature – the disappearance, furthermore, of the *raison d'être* of literature itself. People no longer know what literature is better than others – because people ultimately no longer know whether there should exist such a thing as literature at all. (Let me add in passing that I am far from lamenting this phenomenon because any critical moment – crisis – is pregnant with the possibility of a new birth.)

What sells must have value and value is only possible where there is difference. Since it has become impossible to tell whether one work is actually different from another, the Japanese have come up with a solution of creating the difference. You give some work a prize and, in that way, you distinguish it from the rest. The only difference between a work which has received the prize and another work which has not received the prize is that the work which has received the prize has received the prize. The yearly prizes, hence, are there to keep creating the difference which otherwise does not exist.

No wonder that the head editor didn't even have to have read my writing in order to become interested in me. Since it didn't matter which work won the prize, it would be wiser to choose an author (or an authoress) who would have a greater market value when competing against other prize winners of the same year.

That the editors are interested in me as a marketable commodity does not bother me, of course. I am rather flattered. What I revolt against is the very ephemeralness of my market value. Let us say that I received the prize, then the media all present me as being “youngish” – that was already a few years ago – and “woman” and having an “American background.” These attributes may be what make me different from other prize winners of the same year. These attributes are what the head editor wishes would contribute to a greater sale. But these attributes are, after all, quite ineffectual when it comes to guaranteeing the longevity of my market value. For what, in fact, distinguishes me from the prize-winners of the previous

year, or of the year before, or of three years ago, who are already on their way to a total oblivion?

The essential difference I will have vis-a-vis those previous prize-winners is that I am even newer. I will appear in the media for the first time. And this attribute, I will be sharing with all other prize-winner of the same year. We will all have a news value simply because we are new and not because people really perceive something different about our works that they can put into news. The prize winners of the past also made news when they first appeared. Surely they had their own little differences that distinguished them from one another. But what made them essentially different from the prize-winners who preceded them and who are already forgotten was simply the fact that they, like us, were new. That we, too, will be quickly forgotten is a sure fate.

There is, of course, a way out of this rapid fall-out from the market: You keep producing work after work or news after news so that people will not have the time to forget your name.

This option did not suit my taste.

I needed to be more cost effective.

I needed to write something which would place me outside this whole system and which would guarantee the survival of the market value of my work in a more economical manner.

I needed to write something that people would continue to read regardless of my being new or old in the literary scene.

In one word, I needed to write a Classic – and since that was impossible, attach myself to a Classic, like a parasite, forcing people who read the Classic to read my work as well.

The writing of *Meian* seemed to provide the very opportunity.

Soseki is practically the only Classic the general reader still reads.

Moreover, my inexperience and anonymity were my asset. Established writers already have their own style. They also have their reputation to risk by the sheer objective of the task, that is, to write like Soseki. I have no style of my own. I have no reputation to risk. Any comparison with Soseki can only do me great honor.

Being a woman was also my asset for I will not be implicated in the Oedipal structure – that is, if one can speak of Oedipal structure within the Japanese context.

How the publishing business functions in Japan is still a wonder to me. Soon the word got around that I was writing *Meian* and a publisher approached me asking if I wanted to publish it through them. I said yes,

and finally started to write albeit in a too leisurely a way. The next push came when the teaching job at Princeton came up. I had to come up with a good reason for not finishing my dissertation immediately. I promised Princeton the book will be forthcoming in a year or two and started to work on it in a slightly less leisurely manner. The real push came when a newly founded magazine – a quarterly magazine - proposed to serialize it. The due dates did the job. I am currently working on my seventh installment and find it difficult to believe that I am indeed about to finish it.

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Now that was the story of why I decided to write *Meian*.

Let me then go on quickly to the second question of why others before me never tried to do it.

Light and Darkness, or *Meian* (明暗), is Soseki's last novel. It was serialized in the *Asahi Newspaper* from May 1916 and was left unfinished at the time of his death in December, 1916, the same year. It is not only his last work but also his longest work. By the time he left it unfinished, it was already twice as long as his usual works, and we know from his letters that he was planning to make it even longer.

Some have very low opinion of *Meian*. Tanizaki is one. Donald Keene is another. Keene for example says: “Obviously it is difficult to arrive at a definitive evaluation of *Meian* but I confess that it bores me from beginning to end. Yet, most people think it is a great work. There are even some who rank *Meian* as the greatest work of the greatest novelist.

Seventy years have passed since this highly acclaimed work was left unfinished and nobody sought to finish it before. This unanimous consensus is all the more striking because this particular novel indeed begs for an end.

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Meian is structured by two stories of betrayal.

The first story of betrayal concerns the past of the protagonist and reads like a *roman-a-clef*, a novel in which one is supposed to look for a final clue.

There is a question which haunts the protagonist from the very beginning of the novel: why did a woman he loved and still loves suddenly betray him by marrying someone else?

The novel stops just at a point where the protagonist is finally led, by a too solicitous go between, to go see the woman to in order ask her the very question, face to face.

This is the *roman-a-clef* side of *Meian*, which already calls for an ending to be written.

Meian, however, also presents an on going story of betrayal. On this level, we have another protagonist – a woman protagonist – the first and the only woman protagonist in Soseki – the wife of the man.

Of all Soseki's important young women, she is the only one who is not terribly beautiful. But she is intelligent and proud – someone with whom the reader can fully sympathize. When the story stops, she does not know yet that she has been betrayed. The reader knows, however, that she will soon know it and that something terrible will happen. The reader, dreading her fate, cannot help imagining all sorts of possible ending for the story.

Would she go mad? Would she kill herself?

Meian, in short, necessarily invites conjectures, and many theories have indeed been advanced as to how Soseki intended to complete the novel. Most recently, last year and the year before, both Ōoka Shōhei and Ōe Kenzaburō have come up with their own versions of how the story might have ended.

Why was there no attempt in the past, then, to finish what Soseki has left unfinished? What hindered the writers in the past to just continue where Soseki had left off? Or to put it slightly more differently, what are the conditions necessary for someone like me to think it possible to put her own end to a Soseki story?

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The answer to this question lies in a change which took place in the past twenty years or so regarding our basic assumption about the relationship between a text and an author.

For those of you who are in literature, the whole thing must already be obvious. But since not all of you are in literature, I will explain, perhaps in offensively simplistic terms, the change that took place in our understanding of literature, which made possible what was impossible before.

If recent literary theories have anything in common, it is their decision not to give the figure of author a privileged status.

In America, where the tradition of new criticism and hence of close reading were strong, the authorial figure never attained the kind of status it had attained in Europe. In Europe – and especially in France, however, the

tendency to give the privileged status to the author had been predominant in the past, through the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century. That the literary theory had taken off in France (that is, after Russian Formalism) can indeed be seen as a reaction against this deep rooted tradition.

To give an author a privileged status in an interpretive process simply means this: When one reads a text – a novel, let us say, one tries to figure out what the author wanted to say through the novel. The reader's role is to decipher the intended meaning of the author. Hence this kind of approach to literature can be called hermeneutics as opposed to poetics – the word hermeneutics not only meaning interpretation, but carrying a special connotation, needless to say, of the interpretation of Scripture, in the Bible. The figure of the author, who holds authority over the true meaning of his creation, the text, is likened to the figure of God. The text, or the language of the text, is hence conceived as a representation of the thoughts of the author. The figure of the author becomes the original locus of interpretation. The text is delegated to a secondary place.

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When pushed to the extreme, this kind of approach to literature can become quite perverse. One of the Duchesse in Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* is portrayed satirically as a strong partisan of such an approach. She firmly believes that as far as understanding the quintessence of Stendhal is concerned, her personal knowledge of Stendhal (he was one of her father's dinner guests) placed her in a transcendently superior position to those who only have a vicarious knowledge of the author through *le Rouge et le Noir* or *la Chartreuse de Parme*. Much of the effort of literature professors at Sorbonne is said to have been spent – I don't know if this is all true – in collecting trivial biographical data, including laundry bills, which might give some clue as to the true state of the soul in which the author lived when he was writing a particular piece of work.

When Roland Barthes, a French essayist and a literary critic who was an elegant popularizer of basic structuralist tenet, came up with his book on Racine in the 1950's, its objective was a flagrant critique of such "positivistic" approach a la Sorbonne. Thus on the cover of the book was a caption: *Faut-il bruler Roland Barthes?* (Shall we burn Roland Barthes at the stake?) so sacrilegious an act his critique seemed at that time.

Japanese literary scene after Meiji, more under French influence than English or German, was also dominated by the same tendency.

The Japanese literary scholars tried to apply the same approach even with the pre-modern authors for whom virtually no biographical data exist.

With the modern authors, where the biographical data abound, this tendency of course was stronger.

In the case of Soseki, the tendency indeed reached its apogee.

Not only did he become the national writer of Japan. Not only did he leave voluminous letters and diaries for scholars to devour. Worse still, he was surrounded by the disciples who worshipped him, even long after his death.

Whole hermeneutical industry was developed around the figure of Soseki. One does not talk about Ogai Scholars or Tanizaki Scholars – no such nouns exist.

But one talks about Soseki scholars just as one talks about Genji scholars or Shakespearian scholars. And *Meian* assumed a special place within such hermeneutical industry, precisely because it was Soseki's last work. What Soseki supposed to have tried to convey through this unfinished work had come to symbolize his last word – his last will.

If one could talk about a work of a scholar exercising a monopoly of interpretation, one of Soseki's disciples, Komiya Toyotaka (小宮豊隆) certainly did an outstanding job. Komiya came to exercise this monopoly over Soseki's interpretation, mainly through the *kaisetsu* he wrote for the authoritative complete works of Soseki, published by the Iwanami Publishers.

Kaisetsu literally means explanations.

It is the Japanese version of preface which is placed at the the end of the work instead of the beginning.

Whatever work one reads from the collection, be it *Sanshiro*, *Kokoro*, *Mon* or *Kusamakura*, one always ended up reading Komiya's *kaisetsu*, unless one avoided the practice of reading *kaisetsu* all together. He would say things like, “I asked Soseki what he meant by this, but he did not give me a clear answer” or “I always meant to ask Soseki what he meant by this, but he died before I got the chance to ask him so I never found out what was really intended,” etc.

Here is a quotation from the *kaisetsu* of *Meian*:

月日のことは正確に記憶していないが、たしか大正5年7月のことだったという気がする。私は漱石に、「先生、明暗というのは夫婦生活の明暗を書くという意味での明暗なのですか」と質問したことがあった。そのとき漱石はウムと生返事をしたきりで、そうだとも、そうでないとも、はっきりした意志表示をしなかった。私は妙に恐縮してしまつたらしく、そ

れじゃ、どういう意味で明暗なのですか、と改めて質問する
気になれなかった。

I don't remember the dates exactly, but I have a feeling it was in July, 1916 I asked Soseki "Does the title *Light and Darkness* (*Meian*) mean that you will write about the light and darkness of a married life? Soseki vaguely said humm, and did not clearly say yes or no. I must have felt intimidated for I did not have the nerve to ask: "If not, what does *Light and Darkness* mean?"

And Komiya, of course, was the one who came up with the notion of Living in the Laws of Heaven, Forsaking the Ego of I, or *Soku-Ten-Kyo-Shi* (則天去私), being the ultimate motto of Soseki, connecting this notion with *Meian*, making it the last message of Soseki, his last will. The story Komiya Toyotaka came up with was a story of a man who, after a long spiritual suffering, had sought to attain in his last years a peace of mind, free from the problem of egoism which so haunted him earlier. Hence the notion of *Soku-Ten-Kyo-Shi* which became the key word to understanding the state of mind of Soseki immediately before his death. The notion of *Soku-Ten-Kyo-Shi*, coupled with Komiya's tone of veneration made Soseki into a figure resembling an oriental Sage. Soseki was not only respectable but also unapproachable - not only god-like, but god himself.

Eto Jun (江藤淳)'s *Natsume Soseki*, published in 1957, was a reaction against such an interpretation. Eto's gesture was certainly an iconoclastic one, seeking to bring Soseki down from the pedestal, built by the disciples. Yet when we look at it now, we see that whatever new perspective Eto brought into the picture, the fundamental assumption about the relationship between the author and the text remained the same. The text was still conceived as the representation of the inner voice of the author. All that has changed is the image of Soseki. Soseki was no longer this image of an oriental Sage. He has become the emblem of the suffering modern intellectual, who was far from attaining the kind of enlightenment, or *satori* implied in the notion of *Soku-Ten-Kyo-Shi*. The locus of interpretation still resides in Soseki as a man.

As long as the intended meaning of the author occupied the central concern, it would have been sacrilegious to touch *Meian*.

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My touching *Meian*, however, had nothing sacrilegious to it. By the time I was suffering as a graduate student in New Haven, the whole

assumption about what literature is had already undergone a transformation, as a correlative to a new way of understanding how language functions. Language was no longer understood as belonging to the enunciating Subject. The text, consequently, was no longer understood as belonging to the author. In terms of reading, the author, who used to be the privileged reader of his text because he was the one who understood its intended meaning, was no longer the privileged reader. Soseki is, in certain respect, just as outside his own text as I am – which allows me ultimately to assume that Soseki is no more privileged reader than I am when it comes to understanding where *Meian*, as a text, was heading.

The proliferation of the new author awards, the so-called turning away from literature, and this new way of understanding literature – everything which led to my finishing the unfinished Soseki – and my finishing the Soseki itself – of course, are all part of what is now called post-modernism.

But since the analyses of such complicated phenomenon as post-modernism certainly exceeds the capacity of a novelist, I leave the task to Bret and Naoki and other critics and end my talk here.