

INTRODUCTION TO THE DIGITAL EDITION OF

REREADING SŌSEKI: THREE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY JAPANESE NOVELS

BY REIKO ABE AUESTAD

J. Keith Vincent

When Reiko Abe Auestad began the research for the book that would become *Rereading Sōseki* in the fall of 1990, most critics were still reading Natsume Sōseki in light of the mythos of modernization—as stories of lone individuals struggling to break free of “feudal” traditions and adapt to an alienating new world. If the drama of modernization—somehow both teleological and ahistorical at once—provided the master narrative for these readings, the preferred methodology was biographical. Critics tended to focus on what Sōseki’s texts revealed about the heroic author himself; and they discussed the characters in his novels in terms of their personalities, pathologies, and desires, almost as if they were real people.

The special brilliance, and sheer necessity, of *Rereading Sōseki* lies in its pellucid demonstration of just how mismatched these approaches were to an author like Sōseki. When the book appeared in 1998 it was the first, and it still remains the best, account in English of how Sōseki’s novels in fact demolish the reductive binary of “tradition” vs. “modernity,” and radically defamiliarize both. While he may indeed have been preoccupied with “individuality” as a problem, Sōseki was too sophisticated a writer either to champion it, as the modernizationists did, or to join the traditionalists in denigrating it. For Sōseki, the modern self was always a mixed affair. And as Abe Auestad reminds us, his characters are crucially embedded in webs of obligation and social constraint, their desires and personalities emerging not as expressions of some intrinsic self or private pathology, but out of structures of mediation and triangulation, and in response to the ideologies of the day.

Having grasped Sōseki’s inherently structuralist view, Abe Auestad makes quick work of those small-minded readings that focus on characters as mere individuals. She then pulls back, thrillingly, to the big picture, to read them as symptomatic of larger structures. Thus Onobu in *Meian* is not “selfish” in her desire to be both mistress and lover to her husband. She is an embodiment of the unresolved contradictions of the modern marriage system and the ideology of romantic love. In *Kōjin*, Ichirō’s isolation has nothing noble or metaphysical about it. It is the result of the blindness caused by his privileged position; as the eldest son in a patriarchal family he alone is able to say what he thinks, so no wonder he is frustrated when not even his wife Nao can be fully open with

him. The problem is that the “pseudo-egalitarianism” of modern ideology has blinded him to the hierarchy that surrounds him. In each case, both the characters in the novels, and many of their readers and critics, mistake a structural positioning for something more essential or intrinsic, a quirk of the private personality. What *Rereading Sōseki* shows is that it is only through a careful examination of these ideologies and structures that we can begin to understand these characters. Its approach, then, is eminently historicist, in a way that could not be better matched to its subject.

It is not only the characters, but also the object world in Sōseki’s novels in which, as Abe Auestad puts it, “certain features of Japanese modernity” are “concretized.” In *Meian*, the swing in the Okamoto’s back yard exemplifies their bourgeois status, and incites the envy of the Fujiis; the ring that glitters on Onobu’s finger is a galling symbol, to her sister-in-law Ohide, of Onobu’s “selfish” desire. Who has a telephone and who does not, whether letters are written with a brush or a pen, where people shop and what clothes they wear—in Abe Auestad’s hands, the details of Sōseki’s fictional worlds become so many doorways, putting the reader in intimate contact with the historical past in all its complexity. As she unpacks the meanings and emotions embedded in these objects, one meaning at least of her title becomes clear: the effect is to make any serious reader want to go back and reread Sōseki’s novels in order to savor these hidden meanings, and to look for other layers they may have missed. And yet, these details are not just encoded signs pointing to hidden structures. They also contribute on their own terms to what Abe Auestad calls the “magical dimension of reading novels.” Like a convincing stage set, they enhance our reading pleasure; Abe Auestad’s glosses intensify it further.

Of course Sōseki’s people and his object worlds come to life through narrative, and Abe Auestad is a masterful analyst of Sōseki’s constant tinkering with narrative strategies. Taking us through three of his major novels, she shows how each uses a different narrative technique, calibrated precisely both to simulate and to critique the “reality” each presents. In *Kōjin*, he uses a character narrator whose position as the younger brother in a sprawling hierarchical family keeps him from saying explicitly what he or anyone else is thinking. The effect of such a strangely

tongue-tied narrator is to force the reader to intuit the underlying tensions and to realize how they impact the very workings of language itself—not just in this family, but in the shifting forms of modern Japanese patriarchy. In the chapters on *Meian*, Abe Auestad shows the enormous lengths to which Sōseki went to produce an objective, heterodiegetic narrative voice, despite the tendency of Japanese grammar to allow the voices of character and narrator to merge. This technique makes possible an “even handed portrayal of interpersonal relationships,” while also showing how the novel’s characters, despite being many times more articulate than those in *Kōjin*, misunderstand each other in devastating ways. And finally, in *Botchan*, Sōseki uses a naive first-person narrator whose inability to understand the rhetoricity of language forces the reader to notice it all the more. Although often thought of as a book for children, in Abe Auestad’s account, *Botchan* serves as a kind of announcement on Sōseki’s part, at the outset of his career and in an ostensibly comic novel, of just how serious he is about novelistic language.

Another remarkable aspect of Abe Auestad’s book is its deft use of comparison, especially between *Kōjin* and *Meian*. She notes, for example, how in *Kōjin*, Ichirō and Nao simply accept their marriage as a *fait accompli*, whereas in *Meian*, Tsuda and Onobu both imagine that they made a choice. I refer the reader to Auestad’s fascinating explication of how this affects each of them differently, and say here only that the comparison beautifully encapsulates a major shift in the ideology of the family that has taken place between the two novels, from a relatively rigid hierarchy towards an economy of individual choice, however spurious. The dramatic nature of this historical transition is the reason why, as Abe Auestad notes, “A long period of change seems to separate *Meian* from *Kōjin*—longer than the three years that actually passed.” It is a change that has serious consequences for the way people are able to imagine their lives. It means, for one thing, as Abe Auestad puts it in a striking phrase, that “Nao dreams more than she desires, whereas Onobu desires more than she dreams.” And it relates seemingly also to the relative taciturnity of *Kōjin*’s characters—who retreat from the world to dream, compared to the hyperarticulate nature of *Meian*’s characters, who never hesitate to say what they want, sometimes at great length. Putting these two novels side-by-side in this way highlights not only the dizzying pace of change that people experienced in Sōseki’s day, but also Sōseki’s uncanny ability to translate that change into narrative form.

Dramatic changes also happened between the time Abe Auestad began *Rereading Sōseki* in 1990 and published it in 1998. Queer theory was born, for one

thing, and Abe Auestad clearly absorbed it, along with a great deal of the best theoretical work of the 1980s and 1990s. To read the book today is to be reminded of how thrilling the discoveries of those decades were. Especially crucial to her argument is the work of feminist sociologists like Ueno Chizuko, Kathleen Uno and others, demonstrating that patriarchy in Meiji Japan was not simply a stubborn remnant of feudal society, but a strategy of the modern capitalist state. René Girard’s notion of triangular desire, Bakhtin’s theories of language, Gayle Rubin’s “traffic in women,” and Gilbert and Gubar’s *Madwoman in the Attic* are all brought to bear on Sōseki, with illuminating results. Abe Auestad has a real knack for distilling this scholarship into pithy summaries and providing just the right amount of background information to illuminate Soseki’s works. The sections on the modern family, on the split roles of “Osan” and “Koharu” (wife and mistress), and on male homosociality in Chapter Three are models of precision and clarity and would be extremely useful for teaching.

Especially useful to Abe Auestad, no doubt, was Eve Sedgwick’s *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. Sedgwick’s book had appeared five years earlier in 1985, and made available the concept of “homosociality,” that “obdurate talisman,” as Wayne Koestenbaum calls it in his introduction to a recent re-issue of Sedgwick’s book, that “made it possible to be pruriently inquisitive about the business-as-usual arrangements of patriarchy.”¹ Abe Auestad uncovers in Sōseki an awareness both critical of and complicit with what Sedgwick made explicit in theoretical terms: how, in patriarchal societies, women are used as mediators of relations between men. When Ichirō asks his brother to test his wife Nao’s fidelity in *Kōjin*, it is “an attempt to test Jirō’s loyalty to him as much as it is to test Nao’s loyalty; it is principally an affair of honor between the two brothers. The bond between them is much more potent and intense than the bond between Ichirō and Nao. The entire transaction that is overtly concerned with Nao transpires without involving Nao at all” (62).

Rereading Soseki is, for my money, one of the most insightful and illuminating studies of a single Japanese author ever written in English. First published on the tail end of one “Soseki boom,” its re-issue now in the midst of another could not be more welcome. As I hope to have suggested here, the book’s careful attention to both historical and formal analysis could hardly be better suited to its subject. If it was in some ways a culmination of the best critical energies of the 1990s, it still stands today as a model of rigorous historical and formal literary analysis, exemplifying the kind of analyses that we could use more of now—

analyses that show, as one very recent critic has put it “the ways in which social forms bring their logics with them into the novel, working both with and against literary forms and producing unexpected political conclusions out of their encounters.”²

Since it was rather hard-to-find in its first paper edition, it is especially wonderful that this reprint edition of *Rereading Sōseki* is digital and freely accessible thanks to the Council on East Asian Studies at Yale

University. One hopes that this format will help the book get the wide reading it has always deserved, while helping English-language readers better appreciate why Natsume Sōseki continues to be worth re-reading even now, a full century after his death in 1916.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Wayne Koestenbaum, “The Eve Effect,” forward to *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. 13th ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), x.

² Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 2015), 42.