"*Wagahai wa neko dearu satsujin jiken* as a Postmodern Sequel"

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WAGAHAI WA NEKO DEARU SATSUJIN JIKEN AS A POSTMODERN SEQUEL

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As one of the central and most charismatic comic texts in modern Japanese literature, Natsume Sōseki's *Wagahai wa neko dearu* ('I am a cat', 1905–1906, hereafter abbreviated as *Neko)* has been the subject of numerous parodies and imitations. Okuizumi Hikaru (1956–), the author of *Wagahai wa dearu satsujin jiken* ("The 'I Am a Cat' murder mystery", 1996, hereafter *Neko satsujin jiken)*, a work which presents itself as a sequel to *Neko*, claims that according to his research, there exist over forty parodies of Sōseki's classical text.[1] The idea of writing a sequel to *Neko* will probably seem not so outlandish if we remember that the whole of Sōseki's text after the first chapter is actually already a sequel. It is known that the first chapter was intended as a one-off complete piece published in *Hototogisu*, Takahama Kyōshi's *haiku* journal in January 1905. The piece was received enthusiastically, much beyond Sōseki's expectations, and he decided to continue writing the comical musings of his nameless cat.[2] *Neko* is a loosely structured, episodic work which does not take ideas of teleological plot and proper closure too seriously. Although it finishes with the death of the cat, this structural openness of Sōseki's text, together with its enduring charisma, in a certain sense make the idea of a sequel seem believable, and even natural.

The style of Okuizumi's *Neko satsujin jiken* is an accomplished pastiche of the style of its precursor, achieved with a painstaking attention to the texture of Sōseki's language. The sequel's engagement with Sōseki's work, however, is much more complex and ambiguous than a simple gesture of imitation and homage to one of the great comic texts of Japanese modernity. This paper will attempt to examine the strategies which Okuizumi's work employs in order to achieve the radical complication and revision of the original. Because of its dense intertextuality and self-consciously metafictional structure, *Neko satsujin jiken* can easily be seen as a postmodern work *par excellence*; however, Okuizumi's text is preoccupied not only with textual surfaces, but also

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[1] Karatani Kōjin and Okuizumi Hikaru, 2.
[2] Miyoshi Yukio, 25.

with the broad historico-political realities behind Sōseki's *Neko*. I will consider the sequel's engagement with history against a theoretical framework which insists on the weakened historicity and the depthlessness of postmodernism.

THE SEQUEL

The sequel as a genre and a mode of narrative stands out as a prominent feature in the contemporary cultural landscape. It has become one of the signatures of popular bestsellers and Hollywood cinema. This association with highly commercialised forms, with the cynical logic of the cultural marketplace, is probably the main reason why it has not fared very well with some literary theorists. Gerard Genette insists on distinguishing between a continuation and a sequel, stressing that the latter 'continues a work not to bring it to a close but, on the contrary, to take it beyond what was initially considered to be an ending. The motive is generally a desire to capitalise on a first or even a second success.'[3] Terry Castle also sees in the sequel 'an attempt to profit from a previous work that has had exceptional commercial success: only charismatic texts, those with an unusually powerful effect on a large reading public, typically generate sequels.'[4] For Castle, on a deeper cultural level the sequel is the always frustrating answer to a desire for *the same which should also be different*. Castle gestures towards a psychoanalytical interpretation which might bring some fascinating theoretical and conceptual insights about the sequel as a cultural mode. After all, it was psychoanalysis that did so much to complicate and revise our notions of narrative causality, origins and closure. In psychic activity, causation can work backward as well as forward; events (which might as well be fictions) may gain significance by retroaction, action working in reverse to create a meaning that did not previously exist. Closure is never final and cosmic, but always provisional. Origin, that central theme of 19th century narrative, might not be a founding event and a point of fixity, but simply a fantasy, one fiction among many, as Freud's classic case history of the Wolf Man shows.[5] (Psychoanalysis, as we shall see later, is one of the central strategies which Okuizumi's text uses to produce its meanings and radically revise its precursor text.)

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[3] Quoted in Garber, 3.
[4] Castle, 133.
[5] See Peter Brooks' discussion of the Wolf Man case in his *Reading for the Plot: Desire and Intention in Narrative*, 264–285.

The sequel, then, although always present in literary landscape, maybe owes its current visibility to our modern scepticism about classical narratives and absolute closures. It can be a deeply conservative genre playing on popular nostalgia and profiting from the charisma of the original, as Castle asserts. However, in its refusal of endings and its radical re-opening of the precursor text, it can also be a subversive gesture. Some sequels display these tendencies more prominently than others and it is those which Michael Zeitlin defines as postmodern sequels:

> A postmodern sequel, in this sense, would be any narrative which extends, revises or redoubles the already-written, doing so, however, as much to complicate and undermine as to reaffirm and reify the principles of narrative continuity, causality and tradition. Postmodern sequels tend less to follow, serve and continue, than to select, incorporate and transform their precursor texts, subjecting them in the process to more or less radical programmes of fragmentation, distortion and rearrangement.[6]

Although the designation postmodern can be misleading—postmodernism can be radical and subversive, as well as unabashedly commercial and nostalgic, as postmodernist architecture shows—I believe Zeitlin's definition provides some useful vectors of analysis which will help us elucidate the complex stance Okuizumi's text takes vis-à-vis Sōseki's *Neko*.

CONTINUITY, REPETITION, REAFFIRMATION

The continuity which is expected of *Neko satsujin jiken* is first visible on the simple level of plot chronology: the events in it take place after the nameless cat almost drowned at the end of *Neko*. The cat in fact regains consciousness to find himself on board a Japanese ship bound for Shanghai. After arriving in Shanghai, he gradually makes his way to the Public Garden in the International Settlement, home of a thriving cosmopolitan feline colony, as dogs and Chinese are not allowed in. He meets cats from various nationalities: the Count (French), the General (German), Tora (Chinese), Holmes (English) and others. His carefree existence is shattered by the news that his master Kushami has been murdered. The cats begin an investigation and some of them offer their

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[6] Zeitlin, 161.

own versions of the murder. From the circumstances of the crime it becomes clear that the murderer is someone close to Kushami and the plot thickens when some of Kushami's friends mysteriously appear in Shanghai. The investigation of the cats culminates in a scientific experiment in which the nameless narrator confronts the enigma of his own identity and travels back in time to the scene of Kushami's murder.

The desire to continue and extend is also discernible on the level of language. *Neko satsujin jiken* strives to achieve the same thick verbal texture as the original, the same extreme self-consciousness towards language. From the very beginning the reader is confronted with a visually dense textuality which employs not only old-style *kana* and *kanji*, but also phrases typical of the *kanbungaku* style of the original. The first paragraph reads as follows:

我輩は猫である。名前はまだ無い。我輩はいま上海に居る。征露戦役の二年目にあたる作秋の或る暮れ方、麦酒の酔ひに足を捉られて水甕の底に溺死すると云ふ、天性の茶人的猫たるにふさはしい仕方であの世へと旅立つた筈の我輩が、故国を遠く離るること数百里、千尋の蒼海を隔てたユウラシアの一劃に何故斯くあらねばならぬのか。読者諸賢の不審は至極尤もである。

[I am a cat. As yet I have no name. I am in Shanghai now. That autumn evening in the second year of the war against Russia, gloriously drunk, my legs wobbly from the beer, I supposedly drowned in the rainwater barrel and departed to the netherworld in a manner most befitting a genuinely eccentric cat like myself. Why should I appear in this part of Eurasia, beyond unfathomable blue seas, far and away from my homeland? Ladies and gentlemen, dear readers, your disbelief is quite understandable.] [7]

Okuizumi himself admits that he had to re-read the old *kanbun* classics such as *Zenrin kushū* in order to be able to somehow approximate Sōseki's' impressive command of the phraseology and rhetoric of

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[7] Okuizumi Hikaru, 9, my translation.

kanbungaku[8]. The sequel manages to achieve the excessively garrulous style of the cat's narration, a style laden with a variety of quotations and allusions. Like its precursor, the language of *Neko satsujin jiken* plays with literal and figural meanings in order to problematise the ideology of literary representation and the utopian pretence of language to mirror reality. Written before Japanese Naturalism emerged as the dominant mode of modern fiction, Sōseki's *Neko* displays a self-conscious resistance vis-à-vis the idea of a transparent and perfectly mimetic *genbun itchi* language. Okuizumi himself states that he was aiming for a certain alienation effect which would expose the historicity of the *genbun itchi* style.[9]

The sequel also achieves the characteristic narrative form of *Neko*, in which the linear progression of the narrative is constantly challenged by digressions, musings and essay-like passages. Unlike its loosely structured, episodic precursor, the sequel does follow a linear plot. The first part is more digressive, but as the plot gradually takes the shape of a detective story, the narration becomes more straightforward. Okuizumi says that it was the conventions of the genre—the primacy of the enigma and the importance of narrative—and partly the pressure from his publishers that made him abandon the garrulous style in the second half of the work.[10]

TRANSFORMATION, REARRANGEMENT, RADICAL REVISION

Neko satsujin jiken does not only extend and follow its precursor, but also subjects it to a radical questioning and revision. It struggles to achieve a certain critical distance from the original, to stand at a meta-level vis-à-vis Sōseki's text. In fact, the sequel virtually cannibalises its precursor: when the nameless cat learns about the death of his master, he tells the other cat-detectives in Shanghai's Public Garden the story of his life in the Kushami household. His narrative begins: '*Wagahai wa neko dearu. Namae wa mada nai*.', the famous beginning of Sōseki's text. Thus, the original is included in the sequel as an embedded narrative.

The sequel's most radical departure from its original can be seen in the striking transformation which the characters undergo. The main characters in Sōseki's text are *taihei no itsumin*, peaceful eccentrics living in the mundane realm of the everyday. Their obsession with learned wit and their endless pedantic discussions and anecdotes can be

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[8] Karatani Kōjin and Okuizumi Hikaru, 6.
[9] See Okuizumi's discussion with Ogino Anna and Tsuge Teruhiko, 7.
[10] Okuizumi Hikaru and Watanabe Naomi, 171.

read as forms of pure escapism from the tedium of everyday reality. There are no burning passions or mysteries in their world. In the sequel those same characters are transformed into murder suspects harbouring terrible secrets. Under the trivial surface of their everyday existence the sequel discovers truly mysterious characters. As the investigation of the cats progresses, it is revealed that the verbose aesthete Meitei and the Zen devotee Dokusen smuggle opium from China to Japan; Ochi Tōfū, the young poet with the neatly greased hair, is a leftist extremist, and even the nameless narrator is not the cool, rather cynical misanthrope of Sōseki's work – he is more positive and truly loyal to his master. Apart from the overwhelmingly comic effect these dizzying transformations produce, they can also be a read as sly metafictional comments about the identity of novelistic characters in general. *Neko satsujin jiken* positions itself as a sequel to Sōseki's text and it is only natural to see the identity of its characters confirmed and extended. However, these expectations are flamboyantly flaunted. One of the basic assumptions on which the genre of the novel is predicated is the identity and continuity of the self in time and space. The radical, almost absurd transformation the characters of Okuizumi's text undergo remind us that the identity of a fictional character is merely a convention of the 19th century realist novel, and characters, after all, are nothing more than bundles of linguistic signs.

The dynamic of questioning and revising the text of the original is evident in the way episodes from *Neko* are given a new and completely different interpretation in the sequel. The detectives from Shanghai's Public Garden try to solve the riddle of Kushami's murder, but they have access neither to the crime scene, nor to any material evidence. They can rely only on the narrative of Kushami's cat to construct their version of the murder. The Baron attributes Kushami's notorious unpleasantness and irritability to the fact that his wife was unfaithful. Tora reads a message of revenge in the vague imagery of the *shintaishi* poems of Ochi Tōfū. The cats' versions of the murder are essentially attempts to re-plot the shapeless text of *Neko* into a straightforward narrative.

The detectives not only offer different interpretations, they also question the inconsistencies, the absences and fissures of the original text: Holmes problematises the narration of the nameless cat, its occasional lapses into omniscience from a point of view narration; Tora challenges the narrative because of its almost complete silence about the Russo-Japanese war.

The sequel is structured as a detective story, but it freely crosses and recrosses the boundaries of the genre and never hesitates to foreground

its conventions. The only other 'evidence' the detectives can rely on apart from the story of the nameless cat is its dream, a comic medley of almost all episodes of Sōseki's *Yume jūya* ('Ten nights of dream', 1908). Thus *Neko satsujin jiken* takes to an extreme the tension inherent in the detective genre in general: although in a certain sense it is the embodiment of the positivistic and empiricist spirit of modernity, it is nonetheless dependent on a purely hermeneutic exercise—the detective treats all evidence as a text which has to be interpreted correctly. This reliance on a dream foregrounds the structural similarity of detective work to psychoanalysis: psychoanalysis also treats the distorted and fragmented text of dreams, fragments and free associations as a hieroglyph under which is concealed the proper narrative of the patient's trauma.

Interpretation, then, becomes the master trope of *Neko satsujin jiken.* The different interpretations which the detectives offer call attention to the mechanism of the interpretative manoeuvre in general: the selectivity, the violent dismembering of the original text, the privileging of certain elements and the suppression of others. The sequel dramatises the hidden power agenda of every supposedly neutral interpretive act and it foregrounds the interpreting subject and the context of enunciation. Not surprisingly, none of the interpretations of the detectives is privileged as the correct one.

It is tempting to say that what Sōseki's *Neko* does for narrative, the sequel does for interpretation. Sōseki's text is preoccupied with the processes of narrative production and consumption. Its characters spend their lives telling stories and yet often these stories are curiously anti-climactic and somehow lack point: ghost stories which unravel into parodies of the genre, anecdotes with pseudo-punchlines. Sōseki was conscious of the highly artificial nature of narrative and the non-stories of his characters speak about the inescapable linearity of narrative form; about the processes of exclusion and marginalisation involved when translating the multiplicity and sensuality of non-verbal experience into the verbal.

CONFRONTING HISTORY

Neko satsujin jiken challenges the authority of its famous precursor in its will to retrieve the history which is somehow absent in Sōseki's text and to engage with the politico-historical context behind it. Okuizumi himself states his intention to 'bring into existence history'

(*rekishi o arashimeru*) in his writing.[11] This desire to genuinely engage with history is somehow unusual for a text preoccupied with verbal surfaces and bursting with postmodern irony, a text which parodically recycles not only Sōseki's works, but almost the entire history of the detective novel. Prominent theorists of postmodernism such as Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton and David Harvey point out its depthlessness and the waning of historical consciousness in postmodern art, cinema and literature. [12] Can a self-reflexive text which flaunts its artifice authentically confront history?[13]

What is most striking about the metamorphoses of the *Neko* characters in the sequel is the fact that from (pseudo) intellectuals obsessed with pedantic learning they all become people deeply implicated in history: opium smugglers, arms dealers, repentant socialists and unrepentant anarchists. The sequel openly questions *Neko*'s silence about the Russo-Japanese war:

斯様に考へて来ると、戦争に対して責任があると云ふ虎君の指
摘は措くにしても、日本と云ふ国が其全財産を投じ、存亡を賭
けた博打を打つてゐる時に、一臣民たる苦沙弥先生が当の戦争
について殆ど無関心の様子であつたのはいかにも奇妙である。
苦沙弥先生許りではない。迷亭寒月をはじめとする諸先生方も
亦、口角泡を飛ばし、敷島の烟を鼻から吹き散らして、天下国
家の行く末を嘆じ人類文明の未来を論じながら、当面火急の問
題である戦争についての論評は片言隻句すら漏らしたのを聞い

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[11] See Okuizumi's *taidan* talk with Ogino Anna and Tsuge Teruhiko, 20. Okuizumi's concept of history as it emerges in this discussion and in his conversation with Watanabe Naomi, strikes one as somehow essentialised and oddly weighted towards a Judeo-Christian model. For Okuizumi, history as narrativised in the Old Testament is true history: it has a transcendent overarching plot (humanity's accumulation of sins); the past is perceived as irreversible and is always shaping the present. Japanese culture, on the other hand, perceives anything that happens as natural and therefore good. According to Okuizumi, in Japan things constantly change, but that is not history.
[12] See Eagleton, Jameson and Harvey.
[13] Okuizumi appears to be conscious of the tension between textuality and history: 'Sometimes when you choose to use a diversity of techniques, authenticity might escape you.'(discussion with Akiyama Shun, 137)

た記憶がない。（…）いづれにせよ人が街で行き交へば戦況の
推移が挨拶代りに口にされる時世にあつて、諸先生方の頑^{かた}くな
迄の沈黙は甚だ奇怪であると云わねばならん。

[Thinking along these lines, even if we disregard Tora's remark that my master and his learned friends are responsible for the war, at a time when Japan had thrown all its resources in the campaign and was gambling with life and death, it is really strange that the Japanese subject Mr Kushami seemed almost indifferent to that war. And not only Mr Kushami. Beginning with Meitei and Kangetsu, all learned men around Mr Kushami were deploring the way Japan and the world were going and discoursing passionately on the future of human civilisation, foaming at the mouth and blowing tobacco smoke from their noses, but I do not have any recollection of them uttering a single comment about the burning issue of the day. (…) In any case, at a time when people passing each other on the street would exchange instead of greetings reports about the progress of the war, it has to be admitted that the almost perverse silence of the learned men was extremely mysterious.][14]

Tora openly states that intellectuals like Kushami and his friends belong to the ruling class and should be held responsible for plunging Japan into war. Tora is highly conscious of the imperialist intentions of the great powers and Japan. In an episode in which the nameless cat admires the British for being such animal lovers, Tora wryly remarks that it will be good if the English treated the Chinese and Indians as good as they treat their pets. *Neko satsujin jiken* displays a heightened sensitivity towards otherness and lays bare the power structures behind seemingly natural assumptions and attitudes. Andreas Huyssens sees this concern for various forms of otherness as characteristic of the postmodernisms of resistance: 'In political terms, the erosion of the triple dogma modernism/modernity/avantgardism can be contextually related to the emergence of the problematic of 'otherness', which has asserted itself in the socio-political sphere as much as in the cultural sphere.' [15] The Shanghai setting contributes to this engagement with otherness and with hidden power agendas: Shanghai is the theatre where the imperialist

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[14] Okuizumi, 95–96, my translation.
[15] Huyssens, 147.

ambitions of the Western powers and Japan are played out. It also helps the work achieve a certain exteriority, an outsider's perspective vis-à-vis Japan.

The politics of Neko *satsujin jiken*, however, seems to be constantly undermined by playful self-parody.

The characters are a pastiche of stereotypes. Each of the cats embodies a particular political philosophy, rather like a comical version of Yokomitsu Riichi's *Shanghai*. These various political positions—liberalism, conservatism, anticolonialism, nationalism, Asianism—are very much simplified and each of them is somehow neutralised and made to look absurd by the comical figure of the cat who espouses it. Obviously, Okuizumi had the ambition to create an ideological microcosm, but it is a neutralised, comical one. The cats also personify some of the most clichéd stereotypes of national character: the Germans as militaristic, disciplined and conservative, the French as incurable womanisers and political liberals, and so on. *Neko satsujin jiken* fails in its ambition to stage an authentic encounter with otherness.

There is an interesting similarity between the structure of the work and its Shanghai setting. In the beginning of the 20th century Shanghai was a place where radically different temporalities co-existed and interpenetrated: the premodern world of the Chinese quarters, the modernity of the International Settlement and the world of Shanghai's financial markets—an uncannily postmodern realm *avant la lettre*, where money is no longer the stable referent and guarantor of value and meaning, but a floating signifier, a lubricant for financial speculation. Unlike the other great Chinese cities, Shanghai is a place without history, a muddy flatland risen to prominence only because of capitalism. As Nozawa Toshitaka points out, Shanghai was not as strictly ghettoised as other western colonial settlements: the boundaries between the spaces of the colonisers and the colonised were quite fluid. [16] It was a truly cosmopolitan place of excess and hybridisation, a typically uncanny urban space where races and nationalities mixed in a very postmodern way.

Just like Shanghai, Okuizumi's text defies a single and homogenous temporality. The device of the time machine can be read as literalising the retroactive dynamics which is fundamental to the whole detective genre. D. Porter succinctly defines it as 'the movement of closing the logico-temporal trap that separates the present of the discovery of the

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[16] Nozawa Toshitaka, 216.

crime from the past that has created it.'[17] This collapse of time horizons is accompanied by a transgression of narrative and ontological levels typical for metafiction: fictional characters and historical personages appear on the same plain, dreams are analysed while being dreamed. These playful transgressions undermine the notion of a single and unified reality behind the text. We are confronted with the plural fictional worlds of postmodernism in which 'radically different realities may co-exist, collide and interpenetrate.'[18] The dense intertextuality of the work points reflexively to its own status as a purely discursive object. Unlike a classic realist text, which demands from the reader a suspension of disbelief, here we have a work which can be perceived as nothing but fiction. Can a text which flaunts its artifice and persistently exposes its fictionality narrativise the traumatic history of war, of colonialism and imperialism? Speaking about the Freudian *unheimlich*, Julia Kristeva refers to fairy tales in which 'the generalised artifice spares us any possible comparison between sign, imagination, and material reality. As a consequence, artifice neutralises uncanniness and makes all returns of the repressed plausible, acceptable and pleasurable.'[19] In its attempt to retrieve a really traumatic history, Murakami Haruki's *Nejimaki tori kuronikuru* is similar to Okuizumi's sequel of *Neko*. The narrative of war trauma and torture is just one of the many parallel worlds and narratives the protagonist moves freely between. Fiction, artifice and irony make the attempt to engage with history seem highly problematic.

CONCLUSION

Neko satsujin jiken inhabits a site of contradictions typical for a postmodernist work: its desire to be political is somehow betrayed by the self-irony of the gesture. It does succeed in its ambition to expose the historicity of *genbun itchi* writing and Japanese Naturalism. Okuizumi is fully conscious of the part *genbun itchi* language played in the consolidation of Japanese nationalism and the formation of new subject positions in the Meiji state. However, one can discern a tinge of nostalgia in the sequel's obsession with textuality, a certain fetishization of language which subverts its attempts to engage with history.

What is radical about the work is not its attempt to recover a history absent in its precursor text, but its contesting engagement with tradition and the literary canon. The sequel in general is a mode which raises

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[17] Porter, 329.
[18] See Harvey, p.41.
[19] Kristeva, 187.

questions about originality, authorship and ownership, notions fundamental for the canon and the literary establishment. Dragging Sōseki's classic work out of its safe place in the canon right into the maelstrom of the present, it violently re-opens, revises and transforms it in order to actualise its possibilities. This is how this narrative of playful surfaces and metafictional pranks realises its full critical potential.

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