
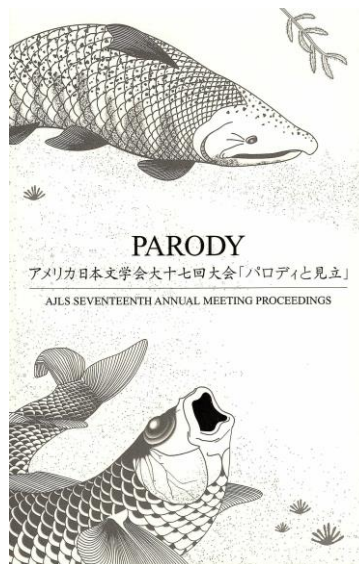


“The Discourse of Noses in Natsume Sōseki’s *I am a Cat*”

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**THE DISCOURSE OF NOSES IN NATSUME SŌSEKI'S
*I AM A CAT***

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Much of the discourse on discourse in Natsume Sōseki's *I am a Cat* has vacillated between the primacy of speech and writing, from James Fujii's claims in *Complicit Fictions* that the eponymous cat "intones" the text to Konno Kensuke's *Shomotsu no kindai* and other scholarly works which emphasize more fundamentally inscriptive and graphic aspects of the narrative. What has been overlooked in the binary opposition between orality and écriture, however, is the middle ground of the nose. This paper explores the parodic function of the nose as an illocutionary organ that lies between the centers of modern vision ("eye" am a Cat) and speech ("I am a cat"), yet belongs to neither. Contrary to the noble functions of eyes and mouth in establishing meaning and sense, the nose is portrayed as a comical mess, the leaky faucet that effectively spoofs oratorical and literary pretensions. Indeed, it exposes the very limits of literariness, be it in the unvarnished realism of literary sketching (*shaseibun*)—the very genre from which this text emerged when it was first published in Masaoka Shiki's literary journal *Hototogisu*—to the haikai and epigrammatic flights of fancy indulged in by the appropriately surnamed Kushami-sensei (Master Sneeze) who adopts the cat.

The starting point for my critical reading of *I am a Cat* is the positionality of the modern subject against, or through, standardized national linguistic and ethnic identity, a stance explored by James Fujii in *Complicit Fictions* (1993). While in principle I am sympathetic to Fujii's project of demonstrating Sōseki's resistance in *I am a Cat* to an increasingly compulsory Japanese citizenship and subjecthood, I disagree with his understanding of that narrative position and its referents. For Fujii *I am a Cat* derives its punch from the quintessentially oral genres that preceded genbun itchi, as he argues: "Sōseki's inclination to resist a single, standardized language in his early prose explains his foregrounding of spoken language, which, in *Neko*, appears not only as the cat's direct discourse but as *rakugo*, popular songs, epigrams and a host of other forms with strong traces of orality."¹ Fujii elaborates on this presumption of primary orality and its impact on the narrative voice of the text:

¹ James Fujii, *Complicit Fictions*, 112.

The monologic (single-voiced) tendencies characterizing the new expression of subjectivity (through *genbun itchi*) clearly troubled Sōseki, and it is no accident that his earliest major prose narrative *Kusa makura* and *Neko* implicitly challenged the standardization of such narratives. Years later when *genbun itchi* has become common practice, Sōseki's tale served to defamiliarize it by employing an orational style—a hybrid language inscribed with conventions of orality and scripted form—intoned by a household cat.²

Hybrid though it may be, the language is not intoned as the cat's meow, but taken in by the cat's scan, taken down by the cat's paw. Moreover, while *I am a Cat* is parodic, it is no less consistent with the principles of the classic readerly novel defined by Roland Barthes in *S/Z*, namely that the novel and its literary language hold the master key that unlock all the codes of representation in the arts and sciences. Accordingly it is not only the foibles of humans that come under scrutiny in *I am a Cat*, but the humanities, the production of all humanistic knowledge. In this deceptively complex and polyphonic text, we can see how the artifice of a new literary language and other codes of representation were themselves objectified by a narrator who is also by turns a scribe and author in his own right.

The fact that the cat is not an orator in no sense negates the oratorical and aural precision he mobilizes as a quasi-*amanuensis*. Indeed his transcriptive work powerfully recalls the many shorthand reporters at the turn of the century who literary helped bring *genbun itchi* to life.³ Along with his many asides and digressions that effectively disrupt the illusion of immediacy, the artifice of an omniscient and omnipresent narrator, the cat employs several strategies for representing speech: spelling out words such as difficult foreign names with dashes between the letters, i.e., A-n-d-r-e-a d-e-l S-a-r-t-o; instances of s-s-stammering; dialectical variations the neighborhood cats share with their humans, and so on. I should hasten to add that some of the less scrupulous reproductions of the text simply eliminate these dots, dashes and orthographic irregularities as so many oddities. It is all the more reason we must return to the “original,” or at least first editions of Meiji texts, as they were produced

² *Ibid.*, 111.

³ We might recall here Naoki Sakai's thesis on the “stillbirth” of Japanese language and ethnos in the Tokugawa period; by contrast, *genbun itchi* and the literary forms of “sketching from life” (*shasei*) which it occasioned suggest a radical re-nascence in the Meiji era.

during that period of intense intellectual and material fermentation. I would maintain these dots and dashes are not merely technical effects, but telegraph Sōseki's very deliberate project of deconstructing the monologic narrative tendencies of genbun itchi prose.

We see from the outset numerous instances that do not merely allude to, but in fact explicitly spell out in words and image that the cat is a scribe or writing machine. The frontispiece to the first edition of the text, i.e., the version commissioned by Sōseki himself, is an ink drawing of a cat-headed Egyptian god holding in its hand a writing brush and an open book—a vision of the cat as both god and scribe. This Art Nouveau-style illustration is made to resemble a hieroglyphic inscription with iconic representations of fish providing sustenance in the afterlife, and the title of the novel inscribed in a faux woodcut style above the cat's head, consistent with the popularity in the late nineteenth century Japan (as elsewhere in the Western world) for Egyptology and for construing Chinese characters as a kind of East Asian hieroglyphy. Writing provides an immortality that is preservation beyond the grave; if it is not already, as Kittler contends,⁴ the language of the dead. Regardless of whether Sōseki intended to draw a parallel to the ancient Egyptian belief that the cat was a repository for the soul, it lends further credence to Sōseki's designs upon the cat as the agent of writing. Indeed, as Konno points out in *Shomotsu no kindai*, the first edition of the text also features a giant cat-headed figure holding a long brush and puppet or chess-piece figures, presumably representing the characters in the novel.⁵ Here, too, the feline narrator becomes the godlike Creator, or puppet-master, of all that he surveys and chooses to writes down.

Further exemplifying the trope of cat-as-writer in the narrative proper is a picture-postcard delivered to Kushami Sensei, or Master Sneeze,⁶ on New Year's Day. The postcard depicts a half-dozen or so cats engaged in lively acts of reading, writing and dancing:

⁴ See Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone Film Typewriter*, 8.

⁵ Konno Kensuke, *Shomotsu no kindai*, 104.

⁶ Given the centrality of Kushami's name to the disquisition of noses, mouths and what comes out of them, I break with the usual convention of keeping proper names intact, and translate it as Sneeze throughout my analysis. Aiko Ito and Graeme Wilson's translation, presents names according to their literal meanings: Meitei is rendered as Waverhouse, Kangatsu as Coldmoon, and Kanehara as Goldfield. I have maintained use of the original names here, but provide their equivalents in parenthesis.

It is a printed picture of a line of four or five European cats all engaged in study, holding pens or reading books. One has broken away from the line to perform a Western dance singing “*it’s a cat, it’s a cat*” at the corner of their common desk. Above this picture, “I am a cat” is written thickly in Japanese black ink. And down the right side there is even a haiku stating, “on spring days cats read books and dance.”⁷

The postcard itself attests to the rise of a new postal medium that appeared after the Russo-Japanese War (1894–95), when the privately made postcard became both a popular art form and a tiny space for literary expression.⁸ It is also worth noting in this scene that at least one cat is described as holding a pen, marking it as a writer. Indeed, the statement “I am a cat,” is not only given in the *de aru copula* of the genbun itchi style, but is multiplied visually, verbally and aurally in this tightly condensed missive.

It is impossible to sustain an argument that the cat is merely an orator when he constantly foregrounds his activities as a writer, complaining about how tiresome and difficult it is to keep track of everything for the reader. This noise is not just a lament about the inadequacies of writing in general (once again, of language representing the world), but of the physical and psychological pressures imposed by literary sketching only one step removed from shorthand reportage. The amanuensis (literally [*servus*] *a manu*) becomes a slave to handwriting:

To write down non-stop every event that takes place during a period of twenty-four hours, and then to read that record would, I think, occupy at least another twenty-four hours. *Even for a cat inspired by literary sketching (ikura shaseibun wo kosui suru wagahai demo* いくら写生文を鼓吹する吾輩でも), I must

⁷ Natsume Sōseki, *I am a Cat*, 25. *NSZ*, vol.1, 24. I’ve modified the English translation to reflect Andō and Takamori’s notes in the *zenshū* that the song “neko jya, neko jya” was a popular song in Edo since around the turn of the nineteenth century that prevailed into Meiji. The word “cat” was slang for a geisha, and the words to song went something like “It’s a cat, it’s a cat, but can it be she’s wearing geta, swaying along and wearing a plain-dyed robe?” (*neko jya, neko jya, neko ga geta haite, tsue tsuite, shibori no yukata de kuru mono ka* 猫じゃ猫が下駄はいて杖ついてしぼりの浴衣で来るものか).

⁸ For instance, the journal *Hagaki bungaku* was devoted to the postcard as a poetic genre, its use of haiku dovetailing with Edo-period practices of *surimono*, whose production and exchange would have circulated under somewhat similar circumstances.

confess that to make a literal record of all that happened in a day and a night would be a *tour de force* quite beyond the capacities of a cat. Therefore, however much my master's paradoxical words and eccentric acts may merit being sketched at length and in exhaustive detail, I regret that I have neither the talent nor the energy to report them [*hōchi* 報知] to my readers. Regrettable as it is, it simply can't be helped. Even a cat needs rest (my emphasis).⁹

The pivot in his argument is a word play onto the genesis of the text itself. On the one hand, the cat is claiming that he is a practitioner of literary sketching who has simply reached his productive limit. On the other, Sōseki debuted the first portion of *I am a Cat* as a public reading (*rōdoku* 朗読) at the Sankai, a group associated with Shiki's journal *Hototogisu*. The piece was then later published as a literary sketch in that journal and continued as a serial novel. Hence the "cat" weaves in and out of the text as fiction or reality, and reflects on the conditions of its discursive production.

Embedded in this business of "scratching records" is a running commentary on the senses, from the eyes that enable vision and the mouth that permits speech to what lies in-between; in effect, a discourse of scratching, or picking, noses. It begins in the opening lines of the text with the cat's first encounter with a human being is the species called a student (*shosei*), satirically transmuting evolutionary and racial theory into a question of intellectual development. Seen from the eyes of a cat, the defamiliarized humans have strange, bald faces with tiny slits from which small puffs of smoke occasionally emanate.¹⁰ The cat's first memory of his life begins with a cry in the dark, and the next thing he

⁹ *I am a Cat*, 205. NSZ, vol.1, 183. I have modified Ito and Wilson's translation of the phrase from "Although I am all in favor of realistically descriptive literature" to "even for a cat inspired by literary sketching." In keeping with the original language, I have also changed their somewhat misleading translation of *dokusha ni hōchi suru* 読者に報知する from "set them all down for my readers" to the more straightforward "report them to my readers."

¹⁰ The cat's defamiliarization of human beings has long been recognized as following in the tradition of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), another text which introduces faux taxonomies and cartographies (including an imagined Japan). Much like the fear of cannibals that pervades eighteenth century European travel narratives, the feline narrator horrifically relays to the reader that the barbaric students are reputed to boil and eat cats. Adding to the humor, of course, was the fact that this was a time of dietary reform and meat-eating regimens.

remembers he is resting in the palm of a student's hand, not unlike a pen or brush.

Several episodes later the cat finds himself literally brought into the picture of Master Sneeze's literary and artistic productions. Part of the original literary sketch published in *Hototogisu*, it takes several good-natured jabs at the practices of artistic and literary sketching. When the impressionable Sneeze is told in almost the exact words of shorthand and sketching that the sixteenth century Italian master draftsman and painter Andrea del Sarto once remarked, "if you want to paint a picture, always depict nature as it is (*shizen sono mono wo utsuse* 自然そのものを写せ),"¹¹ he decides to try his hand at watercolors to sketch the cat. The result is predictably more than a trifle ambiguous. The cat peevishly observes,

I confess that, considering cats as works of art, I'm far from a collector's item . . . But however ugly I may be, there's no conceivable resemblance between myself and that queer thing which my master is creating. . . Furthermore, and very oddly, my face lacks eyes. The lack might be excused on the grounds that the sketch (*shasei* 写生) is of a sleeping cat but, all the same, it is not at all clear whether the sketch is of a sleeping cat or a blind cat.¹²

In other words, Sneeze's drippy attempts land in the grey area between the blind objectivity of sketching and mere blindness.

The eyes are not the only organs to be speared by the cat's keen wit. Above the elocutionary organ of the mouth and below the visual organs of the eyes is the illocutionary organ of the nose. The comic disquisition on the nose, which Sōseki picked up from Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*,¹³ begins in the opening lines of the text (the cat's observation of smoke billowing from the nostrils of the student), and then spreads out between sprawling digressions into the workings of eyes and mouths. The name "Sneeze" reflects the bumbling nose and moustache which find their way into a scene of writing. Even Sneeze's love of imported jam is included in the nasal humor.

The feline narrator continues his critique of human perspective owing to the literal narrowness of their vision: "Consider the human

¹¹ *I Am a Cat*, 10. *NSZ*, vol. 1, 10.

¹² *Ibid.*, 10–11. *NSZ*, vol. 1, 10–11.

¹³ In *Tristram Shandy*, the nose is a signifier of sexual proportions, betokening intercourse, not the stickiness of what falls between oral and visual discourse.

eyes. They are embedded in pairs within a flat surface and their owners, therefore, cannot simultaneously see to both their left and their right. It is regrettable, but only one side of any object can, at any one time, enter their field of vision.”¹⁴ The consequence of this blinkering, the cat avers, is that human beings are incapable of seeing both sides of an issue.

As these and other episodes reveal, the text is not composed as a linear narrative, but as a record intermittently scratched and respun by its narrator, the cat. Sōseki also makes ample use of electricity as another signifying process, another medium of communication. Eyes like electric flashing signals, akin to railroad semaphores, electric beams that enable mental telepathy, and even Kangatsu’s quip to name his dissertation “The Effects of Ultraviolet Rays on the Galvanic Action in the Eyeball of the Frog,” round out the proliferation of writing technology beyond ink on paper. Responding to readers’ nitpicking questions toward the conclusion of the second volume about how Master Sneeze’s thoughts and feelings could possibly be divined by the cat, Sōseki did not turn to spirit mediums, but modern media:

I am a cat. Some of you may wonder how a mere cat can analyze his master’s thoughts with the detailed acumen which I have just displayed. Such a feat is a mere nothing for a cat. Quite apart from the precision of my hearing and the complexity of my mind, I can also read thoughts. Don’t ask me how I learned that skill. My methods are none of your business. The plain fact remains that when, apparently sleeping on a human lap, I gently rub my fur against his tummy, a beam of electricity is thereby generated, and down that beam into my mind’s eye every detail of his innermost reflections is reflected.¹⁵

Reiterating the opening phrase of the novel with the force of a declaration, the passage provides coverage for discrepancies no doubt brought up by excessively literal readers capable of suspending disbelief about a cat who can write and talk, but who drew the line at mind-reading. This play upon telepathic communication via electric or radio waves resurfaces in a rambling conversation that brings Soseki’s dearly departed friend Masaoka Shiki into the picture. Meitei makes an offhand comment that his haiku are so excellent that they even left the late Masaoka Shiki speechless. When pressed if he actually knew Shiki, he

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 215. *NSZ*, vol. 1, 191.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 474. *NSZ*, vol. 1, 406–407.

coolly replies “While we never actually met, we always communed by radio waves” (*nani awanakutte mo shijū musen denshin de kantan aiterashite ita mon da* なに合わなくっても始終無線電信で肝胆相照らしていたもんだ).¹⁶ The wireless telegraph, or radiotelegraphy, is effectively recast as a mode of radio—not spiritualist—telepathy.¹⁷ Shiki is not the foil in this operation, but the reflecting dish for Meitei’s egotism. More salient is the figure of modern media once again enabling invisible or disembodied communication.

By way of conclusion, I want to turn to a pivotal scene involving orality, écriture and nasal passages that appears fairly early in the text, a scene of writing in a novel that sets out to decenter writing itself. It beings as one of the many times the cat observes Sneeze trying in his usual half-boiled fashion to create something profound. Sneeze sets out to write an epitaph for Sorosaki, an(other) alter ego for Sōseki who is described as having died of peritonitis while undertaking a postgraduate study of the theory of infinity. Sneeze’s attempts at philosophical poetry sets the scene for the entanglements of writing. His undisciplined mind is exhausted by the effort, he shifts from creative inspiration to critical exasperation and crosses out his own words. Words that begin with the wetting of a brush from the lips beget writing that soon digress into a drawing of a mouth, and returns the brush to the mouth. Even his whiskers are roped into the act of writing. Yet no sooner does Sneeze try setting down his ideas on paper then they dissolve into mere scribbling:

My master, brush in hand, racks his brains, but no bright notions seem to emerge for now he starts licking the head of his brush. I watched his lips acquire a curious inkiness. Then, underneath what he had just written, he drew a circle, put in two dots as eyes, added a nostrilled nose in the center, and finally drew a single sideways line for a mouth. One could not call such creations either *haiku* or prose.¹⁸

This smiley face with a runny nose is arguably the culmination of the disquisition on the nose as the leaky organ that lies between the eyes and mouth: the nose is the center of the face, and the center should be the

¹⁶ *NSZ*, vol. 1, 513. Translation is my own. See also the word play on 477.

¹⁷ Wilson and Ito translate “wireless telegraph” as “a kind of spiritual telepathy” (579).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 95. *NSZ*, vol. 1, 88.

most important place. Instead it is a running joke. But the scene continues:

After further moonings, he suddenly started writing briskly in the colloquial style (*genbun itchi-tai*). “Mr. the-late-and-sainted-Natural Man (*tennen koji* 天然居士) is one studies infinity, reads the *Analects of Confucius*, eats baked yams, and has a runny nose.” A somewhat muddled phrase. He thereupon reads the phrase aloud in a declamatory manner and, quite unlike his usual self, laughed. “Ha-ha-ha. Interesting! But that ‘runny nose’ is a shade cruel, so I’ll cross it out,” and he proceeds to draw lines across that phrase. Though a single line would clearly have sufficed, he draws two lines and then three lines. He goes on drawing more and more lines regardless of their crowding into the neighboring line of writing. When he has drawn eight such obliterations, he seems unable to think of anything to add to his opening outburst. So he takes to twirling his moustache, determined to wring some telling sentence from his whiskers.¹⁹

James Fujii cogently expresses some of the multiple layerings of the generative act and scene of writing demonstrated in this episode:

Here, where language production is event, we witness Kushami’s writing degenerate into doodling. Kushami begins with an affected poetic conceit, but the resistance encountered in the act of writing redirects his efforts to an epitaph for the natural saint; mid-sentence his writing takes a comic turn. The lines striking out the comic description of the runny nose exceed their simple copy-editing function to become graphic artifacts in their own right—the eight parallel lines that stretch beyond the boundaries of the writing lines. Words here are not merely referential; they are themselves productive, participating in and altering events.²⁰

Of course words are never merely referential. Omnipresent in this scene of writing are excesses and offshoots of a signifying process that has gone off the rails—a smoke-billowing *differance* engine. And the scene just keeps chugging along. After repeatedly crossing out his nonsensical

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 95. *NSZ*, vol. 1, 88–89.

²⁰ James Fujii, *Complicit Fictions*, 119.

ruminations, Sneeze is interrupted by his wife, who complains about his excessive consumption of imported jam (another sticky substitute of sorts). Only half-listening, Sneeze plucks several hairs from his nose and sets them down on the writing pad. Upon discovering among them a pure white bristle, he proudly displays it to his wife. This latest bit of nasal inspiration leads him to further edit his composition, blotting out all but the first sentence and changing the rest into a clumsy *bunjinga*-style study of an orchid. Turning over the by-now ruined page, Sneeze at last completes a nonsensical epitaph for his friend Sorosaki, sagaciously summing it up thusly: “Born into infinity, studied infinity, and died into infinity. Mr. the-late-and-sainted Natural Man. Infinity.”²¹

Sorosaki would appear to be a thinly veiled, self-deprecating reference to Sōseki, who suffered from stomach trouble (not to mention his supposed “nervous breakdown”) and died from complications arising from [a] stomach ulcer about a decade later in 1916. These inside jokes, too, play upon the endless digression of knowledge that slides across different registers of meaning, but cannot be easily digested. Even Sneeze’s final word that this epitaph is worthy of inscription on a tomb—the most stable and lasting document-turned-monument—is turned on its head. Meitei quips to Sneeze it would be more appropriate to have these words “engraved on a weight-stone for pickles and then leave it at the back of main hall of some temple for the practice-benefit of passing weight lifters.”²² Simply put, the words are of no value whatsoever, at best weighty in a physical rather than poetic sense.

In the end, words mean nothing unless they are read and appreciated. The parodic re-invention of the cat in the illustration as both god and scribe makes its return in the third volume of the novel, where the feline narrator evinces a distinctly premodern sensibility that defends the plenary significance of his writing to lazy and disinterested serial readers. He ostensibly pays lip service to classical Chinese learning in response to the perceived iniquities of Meiji print culture, but his apologia is, in fact, the last ditch appeal for the Romantic conceit of the author as the omnipotent Creator, whose compositions manifests and reveals the truth of the world.

Every single letter, every single word that I set down implies and reflects a cosmic philosophy and, as these letters and words cohere into sentences and paragraphs, they become a

²¹ *I am a Cat*, 98. *NSZ*, vol. 1, 91.

²² *Ibid.*, 99. *NSZ*, vol. 1, 92.

coordinated whole, clear and consistent, with beginnings and ends skillfully designed to correspond and, by that correspondence, to provide an overall world-view of the condition of all creation. Thus, these close-written pages, which the more superficial minds amongst you have seen as nothing better than a tiresome spate of trivial chit-chat, shall suddenly reveal themselves as containing weighty wisdom, edifying homilies, guidance for you all. I would therefore be obliged if you would have the courtesy to sit up straight, stop lolling about like so many sloppy sacks, and, instead of skimming (*tsūdoku* 通読) through my text, study it with close attention (*seidoku* 精読)... As I indicated at the beginning of this well-constructed paragraph, I am about to describe an aftermath. If you think an aftermath could not possibly be interesting and consequently propose to skip reading it, you will most bitterly regret your decision. You simply must read on to the end.²³

The call to readers to sit up and act right invokes the specialized, but mutually opposing, styles of reading that came with the proliferation of new techniques and technologies of writing: skimming and close reading. The downside of scratching and scribbling was a corresponding loss of attention to the record as a carefully constructed totality.

²³ Natsume Soseki, *I Am a Cat*, 400-01. *NSZ*, vol.1, 340–341.