

Natsume Sōseki's "Insane Fragments": A Partial Interpretation and the Background of English Fragments 16 and 17

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Abstract

The goal of these research notes is to collect materials about Natsume Sōseki's (1867-1916) English "fragments" 16 and 17. In these research notes an attempt is made to interpret these "fragments", based on the found materials and estimate the time that it was written. American translator and Japanologist John Nathan (1940-) refers to them in his biography *Sōseki: Modern Japan's Greatest Novelist* as "insane 'fragments'"¹. In these "fragments" Sōseki expressed very intimate and somber feelings in English during an important period of his life. This is why it is important to research them in detail.

In Sōseki's *Collected Works (Sōseki Zenshū)* it is indicated that he wrote those "fragments" around 1904 and 1905 (Meiji 37, 38), but according to the found materials and background information, it seems more likely that he wrote both "fragments" in the year 1903. The possibility is high that he wrote "Fragment 16" at the end of May or during June or July and "Fragment 17" in July, August, or September. These "fragments" provide a glimpse into Sōseki's state of mind during the period after he returned to Japan in 1903. Even though he was suffering from a serious mental condition, he seems to have been determined to create notable literary works in the future. His first successful satirical novel *I Am a Cat*, published in 1905, was a breakthrough in this endeavor.

Sōseki seems to have let his unstable mental condition dissolve entirely into creative literary work in the days and years that followed his return from London. His grief and suffering were in that sense also an impetus for his great literary work.

¹ John Nathan, *Sōseki: Modern Japan's Greatest Novelist* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018) 234.

I. Introduction

The goal of these research notes is to describe materials relevant to Natsume Sōseki's (1867-1916) English "fragments" 16² and 17³. In his *Collected Works (Sōseki Zenshū)* it is indicated that he wrote them around 1904 and 1905 (Meiji 37, 38). There is no specific date recorded by Sōseki on the "fragments", which makes it difficult to interpret them. In these research notes, an attempt is made to interpret these "fragments", based on the found materials and to estimate around when during these two years they were written. American translator and Japanologist John Nathan (1940-) quotes parts of them in his biography *Sōseki* and even calls them "insane 'fragments'": "Certainly, the insane 'fragments' in his notebook at the time are untroubled by an awareness that his feelings and the behavior they inspired were aberrant."⁴

Because these "fragments" show a glimpse of Sōseki's state of mind, it is all the more important to research them in detail.

II. Fragment 16

There are indications in "Fragment 16" that Sōseki intensely dealt with themes such as his own mental health and the people in academic circles, including himself, on a personal level. He expressed his concerns and thoughts about himself, his neighbours, professors and statesmen as follows:

Merry laughter attacks my ears. Is it a mere sound devoid of life or is it full of meaning, meaning that reminds me of the pleasure and gaiety? Pleasure! a fine word man has ever created and love which they call sacred. Sacred in what, where or when? Man is busy in creating names which they wear as ornaments as excuse for indulging in his otherwise unexcusable passions and taste. Their gray beards are the sure sign that they are more childish than their grandchildren.

² *Danpen 16*. On three papers.

³ *Danpen 17*. On three papers.

⁴ Nathan, 234.

Fond conceits! to think you are infinitely better than the beasts of the field. I see in myself, in our neighbours, in professors and statesmen nothing but beasts, — bestiality incarnate, with superadded structures so as to meet with the twentieth century society. By laughing them to scorn I laugh myself to scorn and my laughter has a bitter ring in it. It is a cruel mockery for my hypocritical attire.

Do I love them? — those people who are separated from dogs by a hair's breadth? Perhaps I do not deserve to love them, for I cannot bring myself to the same level of mental equipment they pretend to be in possession of.⁵

Sōseki returned to Japan in January 1903. In April of the same year, he became a part-time English teacher at the First Higher School (*Daichikōtōgakkō*) and a lecturer at Tokyo Imperial University College of Literature.

At Tokyo Imperial University, Sōseki was assigned two courses, English Reading and Survey of (English) Literature, both two-hour classes. He and two other teachers were replacing Lafcadio Hearn (also known as Koizumi Yakumo, 1850-1904).⁶ Sōseki's rigorous, theoretical, and detailed classes on literature seemed strange to his students, who were familiar with the passionate classes of his predecessor, Lafcadio Hearn.

At the First Higher School, on May 22, 1903, an incident occurred in which Misao Fujimura (1886-1903), a 16-year-old student of Sōseki, committed suicide by throwing himself into the Kegon Falls near the city of Nikkō. Sōseki had severely scolded Fujimura a few days before the incident for not doing his homework. This is why he seemed to consider that his scolding may have been the cause of Fujimura's suicide.⁷

Not only Sōseki's new work situation but also Fujimura's death seemed to have a great impact on him. He finally suffered from a nervous breakdown in summer 1903.⁸ He began to frequently lose his temper and become violent

⁵ Natsume Sōseki, "Nikki, Danpen jō" (Diary and Fragments, Part I) in *Sōseki Zenshū* (*Sōseki's Collected Works*) Vol. 19 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2018), 133-134.

⁶ Nathan, 84.

⁷ See <https://www.library.tohoku.ac.jp/en/collections/soseki/life.html> Retrieved: 27.9.2023

⁸ See Natsume Kyōko, *Sōseki no omoide* (*Memories of Sōseki*) (Tokyo: Bungei shunjū, 1994), 446.

at home. In addition to this he lived apart from his wife Kyōko Natsume (1877-1963) for about two months.⁹ "In July, fearing for the children's safety and deciding that the family's continued presence was likely to aggravate her husband's condition, Kyōko allowed him to bully her into moving out of their new residence in Sendagi and returning with the children to her father's house in Yarai. They lived apart for two months, until in September".¹⁰

In 1904 (Meiji 37), he regained his composure to a certain extent and served as a lecturer at Meiji University.¹¹

It is most likely that it was the incident of his student's suicide and his situation at work that led Sōseki to write these words in "Fragment 16": "I see in myself, in our neighbours, in professors and statesmen nothing but beasts, -- bestiality incarnate, with superadded structures so as to meet with the twentieth century society."¹² In these "superadded structures" as he called them that he found himself in, he was in that sense himself a product of reincarnation and 'a beast in a suit'. It may have been the behavior of the people mentioned in this citation that he disliked. It may be that he found himself to be a beast because of his own behavior as a teacher, one that had made his own student commit suicide.

Three years after the incident, Sōseki mentions Fujimura in Chapter 12 of his novel *Three Cornered World* (*Kusamakura*, 1906). This chapter contains a memory of the death of Fujimura when he calls his death heroic. The narrator asserts:

As I see it, that youth gave his life — the life which should not be surrendered — for all that is implicit in the one word 'poetry'. Death itself is truly heroic. It is the motive which prompts it that is difficult to comprehend. What right, however, have those who are not even able to see the heroism of death to ridicule Fujimura's behaviour? It is my contention that they have no right at all, for being confined by their inability to sympathize with the concept of bringing life to a heroic conclusion, however much such a step may be justified by circumstances,

⁹ See Natsume Kyōko, 446.

¹⁰ Nathan, 76.

¹¹ See Natsume Kyōko, 446.

¹² Natsume Sōseki, "Nikki, Danpen jō" ("Diary und Fragments, Part I"), 134.

they are inferior to him in character.¹³

It is of course very questionable to describe a suicide as heroic, as in this passage. The danger of describing the suicide of a desperate youth as heroic lies in the risk that it may lead others may to do the same. In fact, the incident did lead to a series of suicide attempts at the same spot.¹⁴

Furthermore, Fujimura's suicide and the rumors that followed at work contributed to the worsening of Sōseki's health condition, which was already critical after his return from London. In "Fragment 16" he expresses himself as follows:

Oh! Sorrow, ever failing yet ever present, — the feeling of something lost, yet one does not know what that something is. — Sombre darkness envelopes me in which I vainly strain my eyes to see what I see and to know where I am. This visible Nature denies me the reality of her own existence and mocks the efforts of a man whose mortal malady is the most sensitive apathy and anaesthetic susceptibility. (...)

Doctors will tell you too rich diet is often the cause of untimely wreck of constitution; so those portions of social delicacies to which they are so officious to help you might sometimes interfere with the normal state of your mental health. Now and then I am overwhelmed with the sense of sorrow — virtuous sorrow as you would have it — for your moral safety.¹⁵

Here Sōseki uses the word "sorrow" to express concern and despair over his own health condition and state of mind. "From Kyōko's hair-raising descriptions of Sōseki in the years 1903 to 1905, corroborated at the time by his students and friends, we know that he was subject to deep depression and to fits of rage triggered by paranoid delusions."¹⁶

¹³ Natsume Sōseki, *Three Cornered World*. Translated by Alan Turney (Washington, DC: A Gateway edition, 1965), 162-163.

¹⁴ See Person, John, *Arbiters of Patriotism: Right-Wing Scholars in Imperial Japan*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2020), 24.

¹⁵ Natsume Sōseki, "Nikki, Danpen jō" ("Diary und Fragments, Part I"), 133, 135.

¹⁶ Nathan, 233.

Sōseki seems to refer to and describe himself in "Fragment 16" with the words "a man whose mortal malady is the most sensitive apathy and anaesthetic susceptibility," and "Merry laughter attacks my ears." To a certain degree he was aware of his unstable mental condition. "Bewildered by her husband's rages, a side of him she [Kyōko] had not seen before he left for England, she asked her own doctor to examine him if he would agree. An occasion presented itself, and the doctor concluded that his illness was not a simple matter of neurasthenia¹⁷ and urged Kyōko to consult a psychiatrist, Kure Shūzō¹⁸, a man Sōseki had met once in England and respected. Completing his examination, Kure told Kyōko, 'The illness is incurable. When it appears to be cured, it's merely dormant and will recur throughout his life.' There is no record of what Sōseki was told directly, but in view of the rules of engagement that obtained in Japan until recently—according to which a terminal or serious diagnosis is disclosed to relatives but not the patient—it is likely that Dr. Kure's prognosis was not disclosed to him."¹⁹

III. Fragment 17

In "Fragment 17" Sōseki starts with writing about Japan being "a country of earthquakes", where "thousands of lives are lost and other thousands of faces are seen, pale, haggard, and drawn as long as ponies". He writes: "So it is with earthquakes, seismic waves, fires and fearful outbreaks of stern father's wrath. We dance Death's dance on the edge of dormant craters and call it jolly life. Death's dance! A favourite theme for artists from Holbein²⁰ down to Rowlandson²¹, with its grim bony case in hundred postures,

¹⁷ "Neurasthenia" (*shinkei-suijaku*) was a catchall term used broadly at the time to describe any form of emotional disturbance that included irritability. It might be translated "nervous prostration." (Explanation in the footnote of this quote.)

¹⁸ (1865-1932), a Japanese psychiatrist.

¹⁹ Nathan, 75-76.

²⁰ Hans Holbein the Younger (1497-1543), a German-Swiss people painter and printmaker. He became a King's painter to Henry VIII of England. He painted many excellent portraits. *Dance of Death* was one of his representative woodcut designs.

²¹ Thomas Rowlandson (1756-1827), an English artist and caricaturist. In collaboration with William Combe (1742-1823), who wrote the illustrative verses, they published the *English Dance of Death*, issued in 1814-16.

always complacent with itself.”²² Sōseki was reflecting about the destructive power of earthquakes and their causes. He goes as far as to say: “Nature is fond of fight. Death of independence! Nature countenances revenge. (...) It is Nature’s law who is our Goddess.” In this kind of chaotic discourse about earthquakes he brings up the topic to the behavior of wives and parents in general as follows:

So wives are losing day by day the affections of their husbands, by using them with unnecessary contrivances and silly affectations: worse still they don’t know what mischief they are brewing till it is too late. Parents are estranging their children, never dreaming that they are human beings after all and therefore apt to assert their rights as such in spite of the natural and conventional relations.

Even though, he mentions “wives”, “husbands” and “parents” in plural form, it seems that he is referring to his situation with his own family and his own feelings as a husband. In the same “fragment” he then describes his personal feelings and thoughts towards his wife and children more concretely as follows:

I have lost my wife in teaching her a lesson; I am losing my children in teaching a lesson to my wife and her family. I am resolved to lose everything ere I teach them a severe lesson, except my will. It is my will that I assert and before it they shall bow. They shall bow before me as they find in me a heartless husband and a cruel father and an obdurate relative. They shall bow before me when they see their own cowardly behaviour reflected in their own minds. They will hold me as responsible for it. Silly things!²³

In this passage, Sōseki uses the past tense, to describe that he has already lost his wife Kyōko and his children Fudeko and Tsuneko. For him, it has already happened. The only time in Sōseki’s life, when he could have felt like

²² Natsume Sōseki, “Nikki, Danpen jō” (“Diary und Fragments, Part I”), 139.

²³ Ibid.

this, is during summer/autumn 1903.

After returning to Japan in January 1903, Sōseki lived together with his wife and their two daughters and remained mentally unstable. However, in their home some incidents occurred that made it difficult to continue living together as a family. For example Sōseki was slapping his daughter Fudeko, out of paranoia caused by an experience he had abroad.²⁴

According to Kyōko, these anxious days lasted from around June 1903 to around May 1904. She recalls the summer of 1903 as follows:

From the rainy season he rapidly became crazy, and since July he has become all the more so. At night, though I could not see any reason for it, he suddenly lost his temper and threw his pillow or anything his hand touched at random. Saying that children cried, he got angry. And sometimes, not knowing what he was doing, he got mad and took his frustration out on anything around himself. We really do not know how to do with him.²⁵

Sōseki's uncontrolled behavior was the reason why in the summer/autumn of 1903 he had to live apart from his wife and his children for about two months. "In July, fearing for the children's safety and deciding that the family's continued presence was likely to aggravate her husband's condition, Kyōko allowed him to bully her into moving out of their new residence in Sendagi and returning with the children to her father's house in Yarai. They lived apart for two months, until in September".²⁶

The possibility is high that he wrote "Fragment 17" during these two months apart from his family. After Kyōko left with their children to live at her father's house, Sōseki may have thought that they had betrayed him and had left him for good. He may have also reflected to a certain point about his own bad behavior towards them, but, in his eyes, he was teaching them a "severe lesson". There is no real expression of remorse or apology from his side. He seemed to think, that he was in the right and his behavior was and will be justified.

²⁴ See Nathan, 74-75.

²⁵ Kyōko Sōseki, 125-126. English translation from
<https://www.library.tohoku.ac.jp/en/collections/soseki/life.html> Retrieved, 27.9.2023

²⁶ Nathan, 76.

He continues in “Fragment 17” as follows:

Think of the cause and causality. If you were as obedient and dutiful as the most dutiful and obedient of all wives, I would not forgive thee. Wait and you will see; wait and you will see. Try everything; try every art till you are satisfied, till you are dissatisfied, till you are baulked of your scheme which will be all thrown away on me.²⁷

It seems as if Kyōko knew about the content of “Fragment 17”, because eventually she returned with the children in September. She determined selflessly that, no matter what happened, she would be loyal to her husband.

“For two months, things seemed better. Then, at the end of October, Kyōko gave birth to their third daughter, Eiko, and as if inflamed by the birth, Sōseki’s condition flared up again. Kyōko painted a picture of a man in the grips of severe paranoid delusions, accusing his wife and the maids of plotting to irritate him, convinced that the student in the boardinghouse across the street was a private investigator following him, sitting just outside the screen in the room where she was lying following the birth, and whispering that he knew what she was up to and was going to send her back to her father for good as soon as she was well enough to leave. Kyōko’s mother, miserable to think that her daughter and grandchildren were living with a madman, tried to persuade her to come home for good. Kyōko sent her away angrily. ‘He can despise me or beat me as he will,’ she remembered telling her mother. ‘When the time comes, I’ll be in a position to help him and the children. When I think of the distress I’d cause everyone else by seeking safety and comfort for myself, I know that I mustn’t move from here.’”²⁸

In “Fragment 17” he continues, now addressing “ladies and gentlemen”, as follows:

You know me too well, ladies and gentlemen, you try every experiment upon me to satisfy your curiosity and seem to be anxious to know what will become of me. Well, wait and see. I will satisfy you or rather

27 Natsume Sōseki, “Nikki, Danpen jō” (“Diary und Fragments, Part I”), 139.

28 Nathan, 76.

dissatisfy you for I will turn out anything other than what you expect. You presume too much, ladies and gentlemen, to make a man by artificial evolution. Nowadays people speak of atomic evolutions. Atoms may be generated by evolution. But you ought to know that I am not an atom. I am more elementary than atoms; I am not susceptible of the process of your artificial evolution.²⁹

Sōseki feels watched by the people in his surroundings and says that he will prove to them in the future that he is or better will be everything other than they think. "Well, wait and see. I will satisfy you or rather dissatisfy you for I will turn out anything other than what you expect."

In February 1904 Sōseki published a Japanese translation of *The Songs of Selma* (*Seruma no uta*) and *Carric-thura: A Poem* (*Karikkusuura no shi*) for the book *English Literature Series 1* (*Eibungaku Sōshi 1*). The original is in *The Poems of Ossian*³⁰ (1773) written by James Macpherson (1736-1796). Sōseki purchased this book on February 11, 1901, while in London³¹. In fact, Sōseki's translation *Seruma no uta* is a heavily shortened version of the original poem *The Songs of Selma*³². His translation corresponds to the songs of Ossian "Colma", "Ryno" and "Alpin" quoted by Werther in the third part of *The Editor to the Reader of The Sorrows of Young Werther*.³³

That Sōseki read *The Poems of Ossian* and translated *The Songs of Selma* and *Carric-thura: A Poem* into Japanese amid various personal sufferings and difficulties shows that he may have looked for comfort in reading and translating this work.

During these restless days, Sōseki not only translated *The Songs of Selma*, but also began writing *I Am a Cat*. The first edition of *I Am a Cat* was published in January 1905 in the journal *Hototogisu*, Vol. 8, No. 4. Sōseki

²⁹ Natsume Sōseki, "Nikki, Danpen jō" ("Diary und Fragments, Part I"), 139.

³⁰ James Macpherson, *The poems of Ossian* (London: W. Strahan & T. Becket, 1773).

³¹ See Kenmochi, Takehiko, "Sōseki Kokoro to Wakaki Weruteru no Nayami" ("Sōseki's 'Kokoro' and Goethes 'The Sorrows of Young Werther'") *Jōji Daigaku Kokubungakka Kiyo* (*Sophia University Academic Journal of Japanese Literature*) (Tokyo: Jōchidaigaku bungakubu kokubungaku-ka, 1986), 87.

³² See Natsume Sōseki: "Shokan Chū" ("Letter Part II"). In: *Sōseki Zenshū* (*Collected Works*), Vol. 13 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2019), 158-161, 665.

³³ See Kenmochi, 88.

intended to finish his story there. However, it met with a great response and its sequel was published in chapters up to the tenth in the same journal until August 1906. As a result, the satirical novel was eventually published in three volumes from October 1906 to May 1907.³⁴

Furthermore, Sōseki wrote from 1905 to 1906, works such as *The Tower of London*, *Kārairu Hakubutsukan* (*Carlyle Museum*), *Maboroshi no Tate* (*Phantom Shield*), *Koto no Soraoto* (*The Sound of the Koto*), *Ichiya* (*One Night*), *Kairo-kō: A Dirge*, *Botchan* and *Kusamakura*. His literary career continued until the end of his life in 1916.

IV. Conclusion

It speaks for itself that Sōseki expressed in those two “fragments” such intimate and somber feelings in English. It may be that he felt that he could freely express his thoughts better in English or he did not want his wife and family to be able to read and immediately understand those words.

In his *Collected Works* (*Sōseki Zenshū*) it is indicated that he wrote those “fragments” around 1904 and 1905 (Meiji 37, 38), but according to the found materials and background information, it seems more likely that he wrote both “fragments” in the year of 1903. More precisely the possibility is high that he wrote “Fragment 16” at the end of May or during June or July and “Fragment 17” in July, August, or September.

These “fragments” provide a glimpse into Sōseki’s state of mind during the period after he had returned to Japan. While he was suffering from a serious mental condition, he seemed to be determined to create notable works in the future and made his breakthrough with his first successful satirical novel *I Am a Cat* in 1905.

By writing many literary works, Sōseki seemed to let his mentally unstable condition dissolve entirely into creative work in the days and years after his return from London. His grief and suffering were in that sense also an impetus for his great literary work.

³⁴ See <https://www.library.tohoku.ac.jp/collection/collection/soseki/syogai-05.html> (Retrieved: 22.9.2023).

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Links

- Tōhokudaigaku fuzoku toshokan natsume sōseki raiburari (Tohoku University Library, Natsume Soseki Library). "Shōsetsu shippitsu jidai I" ("Time of Novel Writing I").
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