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ARTICLE

Male Friendship in Modern Japanese Novel: Natsume Sôseki's *Kokoro* (1914)

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Abstract
This article seeks to re-read and reassess the significance of the famous novel *Kokoro* by Natsume Sôseki (1867-1916), one of the main figures of Japanese modern literature. The novel is about two consecutive stories of friendship. A young student establishes friendship with an older man, the Master, who himself experienced a very strong friendship with a young man from the same village in his youth, until a love affair tragically separated them. We consider the ambiguous links, contrasts, and parallels between the different bonds in the novel, issues of generation gaps, relationships with the family, philosophical loneliness, and the belittling of women in the portrayal of friendship in the novel.

Keywords: Japanese modern literature; Natsume Söseki; Kokoro (1914); friendship; gender

Preamble: The lack of friendship themes in modern Japanese women's novel

When Frédéric Wang and Stéphane Feuillas invited me to contribute to an issue of *Diogenes* devoted to friendship in East Asia, I enthusiastically considered the prospect of giving an account of Japan through this warmly human dimension, and immediately agreed. I knew, however, intuitively and before any forethought, that I could hardly pursue this topic from the standpoint of my area of expertise, i.e., literature (novels and poetry) written by women from Meiji Japan (1868) to World War II.

Modern women's novels on friendship are indeed too few to constitute a fairly representative body; on the contrary, it is rather their absence that is significant and deserves some emphasis. Until the 1920s, female characters were invariably portrayed through their family ties: they were daughters, young women looking for a husband, wives discontented in their marriage, divorce, illness, or polygamy. The prevalence of women's social dependence translated into merely one possibility open to them in novels, however powerful and heartbreaking this might be: writing of their misfortune. For the roughly 20 women novelists who were active between 1868 and 1930,

there was hardly any room in their stories for radiant friendships (even betrayed ones), for unfaltering support, for a female alter ego, for building up one's self-respect and love through friendly admiration and affection, for confiding in someone else, for feeling comforted in one's humanity and intimacy, for reinforcing one's autonomy and identity, or for gaining one's own freedom.

It is by no chance, then, that when in September 1911 Hiratsuka Raichô created the feminist magazine *Seitô* (青鞜), edited, written, and published exclusively by women, a huge scandal broke out in the country. Those young women writers and feminist intellectuals were soon denounced in the press for their supposed deviance (Lévy 2014). In the roles assigned to women in modern Japan, those of 'good wives and wise mothers' (良妻賢母, *ryôsai kenbo*), no significant time would be left to be wasted in activities or emotional spaces that would not serve parents, husband, and children, hence the family and the state. This is my first and foremost remark.

In the 1910s, however, we observe a flourishing genre of novels targeting young women readers. It portrays stories of romantic friendship between young girls, where the boundary between friendship and sensuality is peculiarly blurred. Tomomi Ôta, in an essay devoted to this literary genre, clarified nonetheless that these stories were not really about friendship or homosexual relationships between teenage girls, but were rather intended to ease young girls into being acquainted with delicate love and feminine beauty without any risks, before they move on to heterosexual encounters (Ôta 2016). Yet two authors, Yoshiya Nobuko and Tamura Toshiko, who depicted caresses unambiguously in their works, portrayed attraction between women in terms of rupture and provocation, if not resistance to patriarchy.

The history of friendship has mostly been written in a masculine voice in various areas of the world, including Japan. As Virginia Woolf observed in *A Room of One's Own* in 1929, literature made it difficult to find stories of female friendship. 'The absence of female intimacy in literature is, partially, the result of the masculine point of view', claims Louise Bernikow (1980: 5). Are men able to perceive women in their absence and in a space and time in which men are not the center?

It is from this double angle of male friendship and women's place that I will examine a famous novel of modern Japan, *Kokoro* (1914), by Natsume Sôseki (1867-1916).

Introduction

Kokoro was the first Japanese novel that I thought of when I was invited to contribute to *Diogenes*. It addresses friendship from two different standpoints: one story first, then a second, foreshadowed by the first; I will return to this later. As I am supposed to give an account of the notion of friendship in Japan, the choice of Natsume Sôseki, one of the most popular Japanese novelists of the 20th century, seemed most appropriate. In an essay on Natsume's enduring fame and the publishing tools behind this success, Dan Fujiwara asserts that his works 'are among the foremost long-sellers in the history of Japanese publishing' (Fujiwara 2011: 2). Excerpts from his most acclaimed novels (including *Kokoro*) have long been included in Japanese textbooks for middle and high schools; they are a critical constituent of general culture in Japan, they play a role in the education of the ruling elite, and remain widely published and read. Fujiwara explains that the exaltation of Natsume's moral values by his disciples, then by secondary school, has largely contributed to his status as a national writer. The abundance

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of scholarship on his work, both in Japan and abroad, strengthens on the other hand his preeminent position in modern Japanese literature.

Natsume Sôseki studied English language and literature at the Imperial University of Tokyo; he taught for a few years in a provincial junior high school before spending two years in London (1900-1902) on a government scholarship. His short-lived career as a novelist started with the publication of the serial satirical novel *I am a cat* (吾輩は猫である, *Wagahai wa neko de aru,* ca. 1905-1907), in which a cat, whose owner is a teacher, observes the human comedy that takes place before its eyes with great insight and seriousness. It happens to also be a helpless witness to the poor consideration it receives as a different living being. The irresistible humor of this text lies in the animal's refined language, the subtlety of its thinking, and the feigned objectivity of its observations. Following the success of his first satirical novels, Natsume Sôseki resigned from his professorship at the Imperial University of Tokyo in 1907 to devote himself entirely to his literary endeavor. A first trilogy revealed his taste for social satire, while a second in the early 1910s blossomed in a tone of gravity and exploration of the movements of consciousness. The stomach ulcer that he was suffering from since 1910 took his life six years later, while he was composing a lengthy novel, *Light and Darkness* (明暗, *Meian*, 1916). An avid reader since childhood, he had, as Jean-Jacques Origas states in his *Dictionary of Japanese Literature*, 'along with Mori Ôgai (1862-1922), the broadest, most insightful understanding of the Western world' (Origas 1994: 207). In addition to numerous poems and essays, the fifteen stories that form his body of work have several points in common: the fictions take place against backgrounds of little account, while a vivid tension supplements the triviality of the plot; particular attention is paid to the psychology of the characters as well as to social transformations; autobiographical elements are consistently used; finally, there is profound reflection on the individual in relation to their time, social milieu, and emotional bonds.

Kokoro (1914) is one of Natsume's most famous novels. It is also among the most present stories in high-school textbooks of Japanese literature from the end of World War II era to the 1990s (Fujiwara 2011: 10). It tells and meticulously explains two consecutive stories of friendship. This double focus, at the same time thematic and historical, explains why we have chosen to explore this 'classic' of modern Japanese literature.

Kokoro, *a novel at the crossroads of several fates marked by friendship*

The title of the novel, so simple, invites us to explore the complexity of the human mind[1]. The novel was first serialized between April 20 and August 11, 1914, under the title *Kokoro – The Master's Testament* (心 先生の遺書, *Kokoro – Sensei no isho*). When the novel was published in a volume by Iwanami Shogen, the title was shortened to *Kokoro:* originally written in kanji (心), it swiftly became exclusively rendered in kana script (こゝろ).

The story comprises three parts. In the first part, a young student meets an older man, whom he will refer to by the respectful, solemn yet warm and common Japanese term 'Master' (先生, sensei); in the second part, the young man, freshly graduated,

[1]On the semantic spectrum of the term *kokoro,* see Sasaki (2010).

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returns to his family home, where his father is dying; during his rest, he reveals part of his inner life and mystery. Finally, in the last part, he receives a letter from the Master, who unfolds to him some essential facts of his life before committing suicide for reasons that are explained in his long letter/testament. For the love of a woman, the Master once betrayed his childhood friend, who then killed himself; guilt gnawed at him ever since. For the same reason, for years he has paid monthly visits to the cemetery to pay respect to his friend's grave. The frequency of his visits also seems to pay tribute to the feeling of friendship.

A three-station road to friendship

The meeting: 'The Master and I'

The two main characters meet at the beginning of the novel on Kamakura beach. The young man, still a high-school student, is taking a few days off before school starts. In the text, friendship is often linked to boredom, or to a void which it helps to fill. 'I was at loose ends and needing to amuse myself' (Natsume 2010: 6), writes the narrator. The Master comes to swim every day; the student, intrigued by the stranger, decides one day to prompt an encounter by helping the older man pick up his glasses; the next day, he follows him into the water. The Master talked to him while he was swimming: 'We two were the only beings afloat on that blue expanse of water for a considerable distance. As far as the eye could see, strong sunlight blazed down upon sea and mountains. As I danced wildly in place there in the water, I felt my muscles flood with a sensation of freedom and delight' (ibid.: 7). Following this encounter in harmony with the elements – the sea and the sun – and the pleasure of merging with them, they spend some time surfing together. They meet more frequently over the months, yet from time to time the Master is absent when the student visits him, as he is 'visiting' the cemetery; the student then becomes reserved, as he explains: either he shares conversations with the Master's wife, whom he gradually gets to know and appreciate, or he joins the Master at the cemetery.

They meet very regularly, in an obvious relationship of friendship and despite their different ages. The text does not deem it necessary to elaborate on the nature of this bond. The student frequently shares the couple's meals, enjoys the quality of their relationship, but he is also taken into the confidence of the Master's wife, who does not really feel loved by her husband and suffers from not understanding the reason for his pessimism and distrust of humanity, hence of her. The student reassures her as the Master has confided in him that he madly loves her. As he will explain later in the story, the Master had been disappointed by humanity in his youth and has come to hate the entire human race rather than individuals (Natsume 2010: 63-64). They then discuss what a true relationship is, and the student blames the Master for never talking about his past: 'Your ideas are important to me precisely because they are a prodict of your past. If the two things are separated, they become virtually worthless as far as I can see. I cannot be satisfied with being offered some lifeless doll that has no breath of soul in it' (ibid.: 66). In a dramatic escalation in the narrative, the Master then abruptly asks him whether he should disclose his past: 'Are you truly in earnest? Sensei asked. My past experiences have made me suspicious of people, so I must admit I mistrust you too. But you are the sole exception; I have no desire to suspect you. You seem too straightforward and open for that. I want to have trusted even just one person before

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I die, you know. Can you be that person? Would you do that for me? Are you sincerely in earnest, from your heart?' (ibid.). As the student replies positively that he is fully sincere and in earnest, the Master promises he would one day tell him the story of his life.

'My Parents and I': Coming home

The student has now obtained his Bachelor's degree and wishes to celebrate with the couple. At the dinner table, the Master's wife mentions how his parents must be proud of him. Her remarks prompts the student to visit them, especially as his father is suffering from an upsurge in a chronic illness. During a brief visit the previous year, he was already able to contrast his vibrant life in Tokyo with the one at home. This first visit had engendered passionate remarks not only about the obviousness of family life, but also about his feeling as an individual dissolving into the flow of habits and obligations of the homeland. On the second visit, after his graduation, he is warmly welcomed by his parents; he even feels that his father congratulates him a bit too enthusiastically, compared to the solemnness and reserve shown by the Master and his wife in Tokyo. Serious thoughts are now running through his mind: what will become of his mother if his father dies? While a small graduation party is being prepared at the house, the newspapers disclose the illness of Emperor Meiji, who had graced the graduation ceremony in Tokyo with his presence. Plans for a festive dinner are suddenly abandoned. Every day, his father hastens to read the newspaper and give reports of 'our emperor's' health to the household. A fortnight after the student's arrival, on July 30, 1912, Emperor Meiji dies: national mourning is displayed at every door of every house.

Having turned down a teaching position at a faraway school, the young man is blamed by his parents for his reluctance to find a job. They do not understand why the Master neither works nor offers to help the young man find work. The estrangement in the family is slowly manifesting: 'the great cosmopolitan world of Tokyo made me seem to my parents as bizarre as someone who walked upside down. Even I found myself on occasion considering myself this way. My parents were so many light-years from my own position that I could not begin to confess what I really thought, so I held my tongue' (ibid.: 90). As his father's health worsens, a telegram from the Master urges the narrator to return to Tokyo. He replies that this is impossible, despite the strong desire to abide the request. Shortly after, while he is by his father's deathbed, a weighty letter is delivered to the student; the Master's name and address are carefully written on the back. He leaves the room to read the letter and find out its purpose, which is articulated at the close of the letter: 'When this letter reaches your hands, I will no longer be in this world. I will be long dead'. Split between the imminent death of his own father and the unexpected death of the Master, the young man is seized with panic in his dilemma. He sends a word to his mother and brother – he will be back in a few days – and takes a train back to Tokyo; during the long journey, he pored over the lengthy letter he received (ibid.: 117). So, at the peak of his anxiety, he chooses to leave his dying father to go check on his friend.

'The Master and his will'

The gap between the unchosen feeling for the family and the chosen feeling of friendship occasions a dramatic narrative. The Master writes that he wishes for the young

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man to be his confidant and learn from the Master's past. He tells of how, when his parents passed away, his aunt and uncle defrauded him of his inheritance, only to squander it while he was sent off to study in Tokyo. In addition, they took up residence in the family home and were now urging him to marry their daughter – his own cousin, in whom he had not the slightest interest. Money transforms people, repeats the Master. Deeply disappointed and hurt, he decided to sell all of his belongings and leave for Tokyo for good. He moved into a place that would eventually become his boarding house, a large mansion in the still green Hongô district, where a widow was living with her daughter and a maid. Wearing the prestigious uniform of the University of Tokyo, he had no difficulty being accepted as a tenant.

Different relationships ensued between different characters: the young man quickly fell in love with the young woman, although he could not help wondering about her mother's honesty, discouraged as he was by his uncle's trickery. His qualms were cast aside when his childhood friend K came on the scene at the house. He had warmly introduced K to both women, extolling his intellectual and moral qualities while explaining his family difficulties. K was the son of a monk but was adopted by a wealthy family of doctors who cut him off when K chose literary rather than scientific studies. Through his friend, who was studying at the same university, K found lodging in the same boarding house. The Master asked the two women to take good care of his friend, to engage in conversations with him regularly, and to help him live a fully human life not exclusively driven by dedication, study, and firmness of purpose. So K gradually came to rediscover a certain *joie de vivre*. The Master frequently caught him in lively conversations with the young girl the Master himself was attracted to – an important information he failed to reveal to K during a short trip they took in the summer. To justify his timidity, he remarked that in his younger days, it was not common to talk about women or love. Fearing that the girl might prefer K, the following autumn the Master asks her mother for her hand in marriage, and the widow accepts. As the engagement was announced, K remained silent and extraordinarily composed despite his heavy heart and anguish. A few days later, he committed suicide. He left a note in which he blamed no one but himself for being so weak. The Master graduated from university two months later. To assuage his feeling of guilt, he buried himself in study, then in sake; he eventually realized that he simply could survey the world 'from a distance, arms folded' (ibid.: 225), hence his idleness that unsettled both him and his wife. Remorse would never abandon him. When he was young, he was distressed by his uncle's behavior; then, he became hatefully disheartened by himself. He lived in seclusion, feeling not only unfit for happiness but also undeserving of others and himself. The Master now wondered whether K 'killed himself because of a broken heart' or whether his motive was 'not so simple and straightforward', and possibly 'resulted from a fatal collision between reality and ideals', or from 'the same unbearable loneliness that I now felt that had brought K to his decision' (ibid.: 227). And wasn't he, the Master, following the same path? His decision to commit suicide comes, the novel tells us, two or three days after Emperor Meiji passed away (July 30, 1912) along with the spirit of the Meiji era (ibid.: 232). 'I guess that my reasons will be as hard for you to fully grasp', writes the Master to the student: if so, it must simply be put down to the different eras we belong to, I think. Or perhaps, after all, our differences spring from the individual natures we were born with' (ibid.: 233). He sadly leaves his wife behind; he hopes she would believe that he has died instantaneously, and demands that she never

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know about K's suicide, so that the memory of his life 'be preserved as untarnished as possible', and he begs the student, as a last resort, to respect this wish: 'keep all this to yourself, a secret intended for your eyes alone' (ibid.: 234).

Friendship's mise en abyme *in* Kokoro

A double friendship

The novel therefore tells the story of a double friendship. On the one hand, we have the friendship between a student and an older man, whom he calls *Sensei*, Master, out of respect and attachment. In fact, though, he is not the Master's disciple nor does he follow his teaching: this affectionate title refers rather to a social status and is still largely used in Japan. On the other hand, we learn of the friendship between the Master and his childhood friend, who was born in the same village and appears in the last third of the novel, in somewhat of a flashback story framed by the main narrative.

The two stories of friendship have the Master as their common character; yet they relate to different generations. Following a reverse chronology, the first friendship is likely to take place around 1890, during the early youth of the main character, who at the beginning of the novel is portrayed as a grown man around the year 1910. The first two parts are narrated by the student; the third, written in the first person as well, consists of the Master's long confession.

Tricky bonds

The skill and talent of the novelist needs to be underscored. Natsume, in an extraordinarily complex and intense novel, portrays a variety of emotional situations as if people would only understand the nature of their bonds by comparing them. The two main characters in the novel are familiar with family bonds, with the sentiment of friendship, and with love; and they elaborate on these different feelings. Back to his native province, when the student compares the relationship with his father to the one with the Master – in fact, a spiritual father – he realizes that he shares his father's enjoyments, but that the Master has influenced his mind 'far more deeply than would any idle entertainment' (ibid.: 48). By contrast, when he runs into a casual university friend and they go to a bar together, the friend's chatter sounds to him 'frothy as the beer we drank' (ibid.: 74). True friendship seems to require depth and esteem.

Love and friendship recurrently compete throughout the novel and well before K's suicide, such as when the Master realizes that the young girl may also be attracted to K. Within a few pages, the two young men are pitted against each other.

Generational gaps and homecomings

The generational gap between the characters can be observed, among others, in the different ways the Master and the student view and relate to their parents, especially when they return to their hometown (ふるさと, *furusato*). The student looks at his father's good nature and his mother's naiveness with love, but also with some detachment; family life becomes a burden within a few days. For the Master, family was a safe haven that broke the monotony and harshness of the year-long study in Tokyo, at least as long as his parents were alive. On the other hand, when the student receives the Master's letter while his father is dying, he drops everything and goes to read his

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friend's missive by himself in another room; later, he swiftly hops on a train to Tokyo. Throughout the novel, returning home provides the characters with the opportunity to appraise their freedom, future, and fundamental desires.

How work and time are perceived reveals yet another gap between generations. The fathers of both the Master and the student are portrayed as idle men, although in ways that do not undermine their personae. The novel points out, as Natsume did in *I am a cat*, how older men tried to follow 'the modern fashion to appear busy' (ibid.: 135, about the student's uncle). The student, in no particular hurry to enter professional life, seems inclined to stand by his elder's values – and one wonders whether he would not end up on the same path.

Philosophical loneliness and friendship

The Master consistently assumes that others, including his wife and the student, are inherently sad because they are inherently lonely. Friendship would thus appear as a form of leisure, a meaningful part of existence that helps us forget that we are born and live alone. At several points, we witness the two friends discuss the books they are reading, without ever knowing which books they are talking about. These descriptions are meant to portray their gradual understanding of each other's psychology, of its mystery and reasons for pessimism. Likewise, the content of the student's dissertation remain unknown, even though the narration lingers on it at various points (ibid.: 52).

In contrast with the resignation and loneliness of the Master, portrayed as a taciturn yet charming sage, the student's enthusiasm is a source of comfort. He presents dried mushrooms to the Master and his wife, despite feeling embarrassed as the food he offers smells and is much too tangible and trivial for the respect that the Master and his wife inspire. The triangle formed by the three characters does not hide the wife's lone position in the household, and hence in society. The Master explains that she lives confined, with 'not a soul except me to turn to' (ibid.: 21) – a remark that says much about the conditions of women's existence in Meiji Japan.

Belittling women

One can charitably dismiss the violent misogyny in the text as a generational problem. The fact remains, however, that it affects the way we read it today. The student shares his thoughts on women by observing the Master's wife, whom he finds quite modern for a Japanese woman of her generation: 'She was not one of those modern women who takes a certain pride in calling attention to the fact that she is intelligent. She seemed to value far more the heart that lies deep within us' (Natsume 1957: 34). He further adds: 'I was not even aware of the usual differences between the way men and women think. In fact, I forgot she was a woman' (ibid.: 37). Although the Master's bond with his wife is solid and grounded in his quest for betterment, this female character remains at the margin of the Master's existence as well as of his powerful friendship with the narrator. The student becomes a literary executor, while the wife is left unaware of the Master's past and of the tragedy that has dimmed his character forever. The student's mother receives no better judgment, as we read when they prepare a small celebration for his recently obtained degree: 'Woman that she was, my mother's reasoning grew rather incoherent at such times, though when it came to talking, she could easily outdo

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my father and me combined' (ibid.: 84). Thus, this intense novel (available in French through an admirable translation), loses much of its credibility and flavor due to its sexism and ready-made formulas that make it terribly outdated.

Conclusion

Does the depiction of friendship in *Kokoro* appear as outdated as the relationship between men and women? This *Bildungsroman* certainly hints at a form of classicism as characters would expect the worse when entering the adult world – the student, and the Master before him later in the novel. Yet the drama has a universal reach as it deals with human guilt and misery. The moral implications of the relationships between the characters are reminiscent of Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* (1929); Rilke's letters were focused on creation and learning, whereas Natsume's story is about friendship and betrayal. Nonetheless, both texts seem to share the same moral tension and rigor, along with a similar attention to learning. Subtly, the plot of the novel frames the second story of friendship within the first, with both sharing common elements such as suicide and guilt.

Friendship in *Kokoro* is also a means to reappraise blood ties and the critical duty of filial piety in Meiji Japan. The relationships to the Master and to the father are recurrently paralleled. The importance of filial piety is recalled in the final pages of the novel, where we learn that General Nogi loyally followed Emperor Meiji in death by committing suicide – an act that mirrors the Master's decision to put an end to his days. At the tragic peak of the novel, the main character suffers from a triple loss: he loses his father, whom he left to check on his friend who has apparently committed suicide, and, like all Japanese, he loses Emperor Meiji, the symbolic father of the nation.

Natsume Sôseki is also known for his close friendship with the poet Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902)[2]. The two writers, both with strongs temperaments, met in 1889 as freshmen; we may imagine that their friendship partly inspired the novel, particularly as regards the Master's relationship with K, expressed in the story as a bond of intimacy and mutual affection.

As a novel of friendship and loss, *Kokoro* can be read in diverse ways. The writer captures the irregularity of its concise yet polysemic title, involving mind *(kokoro)* in the waves, clouds, emotional rises and fallings – the different forms that the wavering of the human mind and soul can take, including in friendship.

Competing interests. None.

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[2]See 'Masaoka Shiki, poète et prosateur', in Origas (2008: 149-169).

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