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A Narrative Game of Cat and Mouse: Parody, Deception, and Fictional *Whodunit* in Natsume Sōseki's *Wagahai wa neko dearu*

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Building upon Pierre Bayard's analysis of the deceptive first-person narrator in Who Killed Roger Ackroyd? (1998), this article deploys the conventions and expectations of detective fiction as critical tools in re-examining Natsume Sōseki's Wagahai wa neko de aru (1905). By casting the feline protagonist as a parodic incarnation of the classic literary detective and as an untrustworthy first-person narrator, we can question the supposed "honesty" of the cat's narrative—especially in describing his own death—and challenge the view that the cat died accidentally. Interpreting this story through such a critical lens not only helps us reconsider the question of "whodunit," but also allows us to re-evaluate notions of genre convention, narrative reliability and authorial intention.

Keywords: Natsume Sōseki / narrative / detective fiction / genre

WHO KILLED THE CAT?

Natsume Sōseki's (1867–1916) novel *Wagahai wa neko de aru* (*I Am a Cat*, 1905; henceforth *Wagahai*) ends with the untimely demise of one of the most beloved felines in modern Japanese literature: the nameless cat who refers to himself as *wagahai* (an antiquated and somewhat pompous-sounding first-person pronoun). On the evening of a banquet held at the Kushami household, where the cat resides, the feline narrator falls into a jar filled with water after taking a few sips of leftover beer:

When I came again to myself I found I was floating in water. Because I was also in pain I clawed at what seemed its cause, but scratching water had no effect except to result in my immediate submersion. I struck out desperately for the surface by kicking with my hind-legs and scrabbling with my fore-paws. This action eventually produced a sort of scraping sound and, as I managed to thrust my head just clear of

the water, I saw that I'd fallen into a big clay jar against whose side my claws had scraped. . . . Gradually I begin to feel at ease. I can no longer tell whether I'm suffering or feeling grateful. It isn't even clear whether I'm drowning in water or lolling in some comfy room. . . . Only by dying can this divine quiescence be attained. May one rest in peace! I am thankful. Thankful, thankful, thankful. (636–38)¹

Many of those who mourned the cat's death resurrected him and wrote sequels featuring this quick-witted narrator: he went to America in Hosaka Kiichi's *Wagabai no mitaru Amerika* (The America the Cat Saw, 1918), and became a socialist in Endo Musui's *Shakaishugi ni natta Sōseki no neko* (Sōseki's Cat Becomes a Socialist, 1919). Most famously, the cat continued his observation of and commentary on human behavior in Uchida Hyakken's *Gansaku wagabai wa neko de aru* (Counterfeit: I am a Cat, 1949); while more recently, the cat became a detective in Okuizumi Hikaru's *Wagabai wa nekodearu satsujinjiken* (The Murder Mystery of "I am a Cat") in 1999 (Nagayama 212).²

If there had been a direct postscript to Sōseki's original scenario of the cat drowning in the jar, it might have described something like this: the morning after the banquet, the strident shriek of Osan, the family servant, echoes throughout the house. The cat is dead, she screams. Everybody gathers around the jar, and wonders how the poor cat ended up there. The family patriarch's doctor is called in to examine the body. The doctor tells the family that the cat's lungs are filled with water, indicating that the cause of death was most definitely drowning. Two empty glasses are found lying on the floor near the jar. Osan testifies that there was some beer left in them the night before, when she placed them in the kitchen. The floor around the glasses smells like beer. They surmise that the cat must have spilt some and lapped it up. They investigate the scene further. The superficial scratches found inside the jar suggest that the cat tried to get out, but to no avail. (The subsequent autopsy might reveal that his blood alcohol level at the time of death was unusually high.) All the pieces of circumstantial evidence point to the conclusion that it was an accident: he wished to taste beer, as he had seen the humans around him consume it and have a good time. A little drunk, he probably lost his footing and fell into the jar. Nothing to be alarmed about—and he even died with a smile on his face. After all, the cat was truly one of a kind: it is only fitting that he die a little differently from other cats. It seems like an open-and-shut case.

Or is it? Most readers find little reason to approach *Wagabai* as anything other than a "regular novel"—a linear narrative devoid of trickery and deception. However, the clues and inconsistencies sprinkled throughout the text point to a different reading: the cat was murdered.

He is not the only of Sōseki's characters to be unexpectedly written off. Two years after *Wagabai*, Sōseki serialized another novel *Gubijinsō* (The Poppy, 1907), in which the author "killed" the heroine his readers loved but he came to hate. While *Gubijinsō* was serialized in the *Asahi shinbun*, many readers including Sōseki's close friends expressed their fascination with the beautiful and outspoken

heroine Fujio, whose favorite pastimes included reading Shakespeare. Komiya Toyotaka, Sōseki's protege, was one such fan, and wrote to Sōseki that he "was madly excited" about Fujio (qtd. in Hirakawa 380). However, Sōseki wrote back and reprimanded his young follower: "Don't have such sympathy for Fujio. She's a horrible woman. She is poetic but unlikable. She lacks a virtuous mind. I intend to kill her off in the end [*aitsu wo shimai ni korosu*]. . . . So don't you ever find her attractive" (Natsume Sōseki to Komiya Toyotaka, 19 July 1907. *Natsume Sōseki zenshū* 884). Fujio was thus murdered by Sōseki, in the somewhat absurd and inconsistent guise of death by heartbreak.

However, in the case of *Wagabai*, the suggestion of the title character's murder does not simply mean that he was killed by Sōseki the author in the sense that Sōseki the author decided to make him die at the end of the story. Rather, it proposes that readers can find within the textual narrative certain evidence pointing to the death of this most beloved cat in modern Japanese literature not as an accident but as a case of felicide carried out at the hands of someone familiar to him—a character within the story.

Despite the relative celebrity of the text, the circumstances of the cat's death have not been raised as part of the critical discourse on the novel. In the history of modern Japanese literary criticism, *Wagabai* has occupied a singular position: this unconventional text has been deemed "canonical," largely thanks to Sōseki's established status as one of the most important titans of modern Japanese literature. However, despite this exalted stature, *Wagabai* has received relatively little scholarly attention compared to Sōseki's later, supposedly more serious works such as the Sanshiro trilogy—*Sanshirō* (1908), *Sorekara* (And Then, 1909), and *Mon* (The Gate, 1910)—and *Kokoro* (1914). Leading scholars have certainly discussed *Wagabai*, but most often as a digression from or even a footnote to their coverage of the more "important" titles in Sōseki's oeuvre. Etō Jun touches only briefly on the work in his seminal study *Sōseki to sono jidai* (Sōseki and His Period), while Komori Yoichi focuses on the content of *Wagabai* rather than the form.³ Other critics who have cared to discuss the work agree that the story—largely the exposé of the superficiality of the pseudo-intellectual, middle-class family in late Meiji observed through the eyes of the anonymous family cat—is witty, enjoyable and stylistically innovative, but still seem unwilling to go beyond such façade because the text appears to lack the intellectual rigor and philosophical depth for which Sōseki's other works are commonly praised. In consequence, they fail to dissect the deeper, more complex issues hidden behind seemingly jovial, light-hearted humor in *Wagabai*.

A notable exception to this scholarly disinterest is James Fujii's discussion of *Wagabai* in *Complicit Fictions*. Fujii breaks from the critical orthodoxy in arguing that Sōseki's feline narrator functions not as a mere comic device but as a voice of resistance against the increasingly prescriptive and confining dictates—particularly those of spoken and written language—in the articulation of a modern Japanese subjectivity. By drawing attention to the rhetorical strategies and structural idiosyncrasies of *Wagabai*, Fujii reclaims the work as a story about the importance

of narrative: “The self-referential first-person delivery effectively foregrounds the role of narration, but the use of a cat that lacks filial connections and social position disrupts expectations of ‘reliability’ the reader seeks in a participating narrator-character” (Fujii 113). Since the narrator is a cat, the focus falls more on the act of narrating than on the reliability of the narrator. *Wagabai*’s challenge to literary convention came at a time when Japanese authors were wrestling with the question of how to convey the interiority of the modern subject through realistic language. Sōseki’s use of a cat throws the problem into even sharper relief: what is the reader to make of a narrator whose motivations are unclear and whose mastery of human language is implausible and suspect?

It seems fruitful to take Fujii’s observation on the importance of narration a step further and suggest that Sōseki actually tries to emphasize the cat’s narrative reliability by couching the story in realistic language that most contemporary readers would consider to be in accordance with their expectations—based on their ideas of a typical cat’s behavior—for a feline observer of Japanese society. This emphasis on linguistic form encourages the reader to accept the cat’s account as true. As semiotician Michael Riffaterre has argued, narrative truth in any literary text is “an exclusively linguistic phenomenon” and for readers, the “only reference against which they need to test the narrative’s truth is language” (7–8). By this token, an argument discussing the reliability of any narrator (feline or otherwise) needs to scrutinize the narrative’s linguistic and textual elements without subsuming them to historical, biographical or other external interpretative perspectives.

What allows the unconventional and perhaps “ridiculous” claim of a cat’s murder is the willingness to accord the spirit of parody not only in literary texts but also in literary criticism. As such, the novel can be considered a parody of all other works with a proper, human narrator. My current examination “parodizes” the conventions and techniques of detective fiction in order to read more deeply into what has been passing as merely a satirical novel. The cat’s brutally candid descriptions of the lives of the Kushami family convince readers that his observations on human behavior are trustworthy, and by extension, that his account of his own accidental death should not be questioned. However, the circumstances of this supposed “accident” beg further literary as well as criminal investigation. Did “curiosity” really kill the cat, as in the proverbial saying? The passage quoted at the beginning of this article is the cat’s own account of his death: the cat is the narrator of the entire novel, and he performs the task to his last breath. But sometimes this format clouds rather than reveals the truth. Readers of conventional novels may presume a first-person narrative to be if not entirely true at least honest and forthcoming; however, readers of detective fiction—particularly those who have read Edogawa Ranpo’s *Nisen dōka* (Two-Sen Copper Coin, 1923) and Agatha Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926)—may not be so ready to make this assumption. These tales of narrative deceit argue that in the world of detective fiction, the supposed sincerity of the narrator can function as a deceptive, misleading clue that is designed to baffle the readers and prevent them from solving the mystery at hand.

Furthermore, the French critic Pierre Bayard suggests in *Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?*, his study of the aforementioned book by Christie, that a character's or a narrator's admission of guilt should not be taken at face value but needs to be called into question.⁴ Bayard also questions the dominance of one particular reading in detective fiction: namely the one offered by the detective at the end of the story, in which the detective provides the authoritative account of what transpired so as to eradicate the possibility that there is another account equally plausible and verifiable. When Hercule Poirot or any other literary detective gathers all of the suspects into a room and lays out his solution to "whodunit," his reading is privileged above all others as the "true" account of what happened. In the case of *Wagabai*, the cat plays Poirot's role throughout the text to investigate the "mysteries" surrounding various subplots—for instance, who will marry Kaneda's daughter—and the reader continues to rely on him until the end, when he reports on the circumstances of his own death. The cat has always been described as cynical and humorous, but never untruthful. But what if there is evidence in other parts of the text—or in other relevant sources—that suggest that he was being misleading in the last scene, and that something else was taking place behind his seemingly straightforward narrative? If this is the case, then readers can revisit the text upon subsequent readings, treating it as an incomplete mystery.

Building upon Fujii's argument that *Wagabai* is a story about the complexity and importance of narrative, this murderous reading of *Wagabai* extends beyond the conventional notion of textual closure and allows even a slip of the tongue—a moment when the narrator loses control over the unity of his own narrative—to construct a different story behind the official story. By drawing textual evidence from *Wagabai*, from works of modern Japanese detective fiction that appeared during the following two decades, as well as from biographical sources about Sōseki, I argue that while the cat describes the circumstances of his own death as an accident, his account actually obscures the foul play that caused his death. If curiosity did not kill the cat, what—or who—did? In addition to borrowing the freedom conventionally accorded to parody, my approach might be best described by borrowing the words of Carlo Ginzburg, "forecast[ing] retrospectively" (117), and Suzuki Tomoyuki, "predicting the past" (Suzuki 348), since this article seeks to reconstruct what took place in the past using what came both before and after that event.

As an attempt to reread as a murder mystery a text that has for nearly a century been considered a regular novel, this analysis risks being called delusional, reading too much into something that is not in the text. But there is evidence to do so: namely, the cat's narration of events, as localized within the last scene, in which there are compelling reasons to doubt the cat's credibility. Christie and Ranpo taught detective fiction readers the danger of placing blind faith in the first-person narrator. Bayard took this admonishment a step further and proved that the reader cannot trust the narrator even when he admits his guilt. It proves fruitful to build on Bayard's work and apply this critical stance from detective fiction—that is, suspecting everyone and everything until their "alibis" are substantiated—to

works that are not conventionally classified as detective fiction. The goal here is to cast new light on a text that has fascinated readers for decades and has inspired many creative imitations. By taking a comparative approach that travels across both geographical and temporal boundaries, this article aims to destabilize not just the inviolability of this feline narrator but also question the assumptions of conventional narrative form.

NARRATORS WHO LIE: THE MURDER OF ROGER ACKROYD, NISEN DŌKA, AND WAGAHAI

In the story, the cat also touches upon the key events of his own life, starting from the time he becomes self-aware: “I am a cat. As yet I have no name. I’ve no idea where I was born. All I remember is that I was miaowing in a dampish dark place when, for the first time, I saw a human being” (3). Despite some initial resistance from the house servant Osan, the cat comes to live at the Kushami household, when the master of the house Kushami gives the cat permission to stay. Neurotic and dyspepsia-stricken, Kushami, a reclusive teacher (with a name that means “sneeze”), is deliberately designed to appear as the author’s literary double: Sōseki’s poor health was no secret to his contemporaries. By adopting the style of first-person narrative and injecting into the text a character who bears a striking resemblance to the author, *Wagabai* encourages the reader to regard the cat’s account as fantastic, satirical and tongue-in-cheek, but also plausible and trustworthy. The cat’s unflinching honesty in describing this half-real personage is also the key ingredient that makes the narrator believable and the novel humorous.

The publication of *Wagabai* coincides with the rise of the *shishōsetsu*, commonly translated as “I-novel,” a form that emphasized the explicit association between the author and the narrator, thus reinforcing the latter’s sincerity as an arbiter of truth.⁵ Although in 1904 the *shishōsetsu* was still in its infancy, the stage for its ascendancy had already been set in the previous decade by such writers as Kunikida Doppo (1871–1906) and Shimazaki Tōson (1872–1943). As this new literary mode began to gain currency among authors and critics, its central figures also started to concretize the tenets and techniques of *shizen shugi* (Japanese Naturalism). The year before Sōseki’s *Wagabai*, Tayama Katai (1871–1930) published the essay “Rokotsunaru byōsha” (Candid Expression), an early manifestation of Japanese Naturalists articulating their preference for sincerity and realism over stylistic mastery and artifice. The writers affiliated with this school of literature held sway over the contemporary literary scene during the first decade of the twentieth century and took pride in offering their audiences nothing but the unvarnished “truth” of human existence—as they experienced it. By the time of *Wagabai*’s publication, both Japanese Naturalism and *shishōsetsu* were gaining momentum.

Sōseki consciously distanced himself from these literary approaches, and it is hard to find in *Wagabai* an intention to write a serious *shishōsetsu* or Naturalist work. Rather, *Wagabai* pokes fun at the project of authorial sincerity

and authenticity by featuring the candid narrative of a non-human protagonist. However, the timing of the work's publication and the subsequent dominance of Naturalism may have encouraged his contemporary and later readers to erase the distance between Sōseki and his satirical mirror image in Kushami, and also take for granted the reliability of the cat as Sōseki's self-satirizing narrative voice.⁶

What readers should remember is that the cat's narrative can be accepted as valid only when the reader accepts that interpretation over others. Once the reader suspends his or her belief in the cat's total trustworthiness, however, the story takes on a different face. In much the same way, skepticism toward the narrator is also a valuable stance in detective fiction. In 1923, Edogawa Ranpo's short detective story *Nisen dōka* (Two-Sen Copper Coin) was published in *Shinseinen* (New Youth, 1920–50), the flagship magazine of Hakubunkan that regularly featured both foreign and domestic detective fiction. Though Ranpo was a relative newcomer to the arena of literature, his story was heralded for its original narrative style and the skillful incorporation of this style into the plot. In the story, the narrator, one of two impoverished students at their wits' end, plays a cruel prank on the other by using a coded message and an elaborate disguise. The entire story is narrated from the point of view of the "criminal," or the prankster, the only one who knows the truth behind his narrative façade. As he slowly discloses his plot to his friend, he gently reprimands his friend's active imagination: "Do you really believe that reality is that romantic?" (23). This comment is also directed at the readers who fell for his trick: though the narrator speaks in the first person and is not dishonest, his narrative is incomplete, and his friend who placed blind trust in him learns of this deception the hard way, along with all the readers who fall into the same trap.

Another famous case of a deceitful narrator appears in the person of Dr. Sheppard in Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926). Though Sheppard functions as the narrator while working beside the famed detective Hercule Poirot throughout the story, he is named the murderer by Poirot at the conclusion of the case. This plot stirred much controversy, as many felt that Christie deviated from the unspoken convention of fairness in detective fiction. S. S. Van Dine later articulated this tenet: "The reader must have equal opportunity with the detective for solving the mystery. All clues must be plainly stated and described" ("Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Story" 189). In his mind, to betray the faith of the readers was "as insidious as offering someone a bright penny for a five dollar gold piece" (190). Although subsequent authors attempted to restore the integrity of the narrator in Western detective fiction, they could not make readers forget the lesson of *Ackroyd*: that one should not put one's faith blindly in both Sheppard's account and Poirot's solution.

The readers of *Wagabai* are encouraged to recognize in the cat a similar sincerity, reliability and fairness that the readers of *Ackroyd* once identified in Sheppard. In a way, neither Ranpo nor Christie uncovered a revolutionary way of structuring a narrative, but only reminded readers that any account — as long as it is narrated from a particular point of view — is bound to be fragmentary, incomplete and

unfinished. The cat could tell the reader whatever he wishes in whatever way he pleases; after all, he is not a faceless reporter of affairs in the Kushami household, but an opinionated correspondent full of “personality” and inside dirt.

To question the cat’s sincerity in depicting the last scene is to reconsider the nature of the work altogether. In his analysis of *Ackroyd*, Pierre Bayard switches the question from whether Christie was fair to whether Sheppard was honest when he admitted his guilt: “Curiously, admirers and detractors of the book agree on the crucial point: No one dreams of doubting Dr. Sheppard’s guilt” (vii). Bayard’s goal is simple yet unique: to find who really killed Roger Ackroyd. In the case of *Wagabai*, readers previously believed that the cat’s death was an accident only because he himself says so. However, questioning the truthfulness of that statement in the manner of Bayard, it becomes necessary to question the possibility that there is something else taking place: that a killer is present at the scene who sets him up to get drunk though the cat is not aware, or that there is a killer and the cat is aware, but decides not to name his killer. In Bayard’s reading of *Ackroyd*, Sheppard misleads Poirot and the readers to think that he is the murderer in order to protect the real killer, his sister Caroline. Is the cat in *Wagabai* attempting to do the same for his killer? In order to see if this reading is viable, it becomes necessary to examine the state of affairs in the Kushami household leading up to the cat’s drowning. The information about other characters all comes from the cat. This means that the narrative is his subjective account, but the reader could be willing to take it at face value here because he has very little or no reason to distort the account in this part of the story.

ROUNDING UP THE SUSPECTS

Who among the Kushami household and circle of friends wished the harmless cat, this lovable furry creature, dead? Several instances within the text give reason to suspect that the cat’s death was the result of foul play. Even though the reader cannot help liking the cat, the members of the Kushami household do not particularly welcome the animal into their home. Osan, the crude family maid, makes numerous attempts to chase out the cat when it tries to find food and shelter in the Kushami residence. The cat recalls:

The first one I met was Osan, the servant-woman, one of the species yet more savage than the *shosei* [student who kept and abandoned the cat prior to this]. No sooner had she seen me than she grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and flung me out of the house. . . . I crawled up once again to flop into the kitchen. I was soon flung out again. I crawled up yet again, only to be flung out again. I remember that the process was several times repeated. (5)

This passage describes the kind of territorial war between Osan and the cat that transpired in their initial encounter. It is only with the permission of Kushami, the master of the house, that the cat is allowed to stay inside. Though Osan cannot reverse her employer’s decision, she never grows accustomed to the presence

of the cat. The cat is not fond of her either: it is only after he manages to steal her dinner of mackerel pie that he concedes that they are even and relinquishes his ill will toward her (5).

But does Osan feel that they are “even” after the cat steals her fish? Readers catch a glimpse of Osan’s feelings for the cat when it experiences a brush with death as the entire household watches. Kushami returns from an evening out with Kangetsu, one of his friends. He eats a bowl of *zōni* soup, and finishes all but one piece of *mochi*, a sticky rice cake. The leftover *mochi* sits in Kushami’s bowl in the kitchen as Osan takes a break from her work. The cat is tempted to taste it, for he has never had it before: “I try once again to bite my way free, but find I’m stuck. Too late I realize that the rice-cake is a fiend. . . . [T]he harder I clamp my jaws, the more my mouth grows heavy and my teeth immobilized” (39). The cat’s struggle soon attracts the attention of the family. However, rather than rescuing him from imminent danger, they choose to enjoy the spectacle for a while. The children shout: “Why look! The cat’s been eating rice-cakes and is dancing!” Kushami’s wife remarks: “What a naughty cat.” Kushami shouts: “You fool!” The entire household, in one way or another, decides not to save the cat from suffering but rather to prolong the comical scene. Kushami finally orders Osan to help the cat get rid of the rice cake. But she is less than willing to comply:

Osan looks at the mistress as if to say, “Why not make him go on dancing?” The mistress would gladly see my minuet continued, but since she would not go so far as wanting me to dance myself to death, says nothing. My master turned somewhat sharply to the servant and ordered, “Hurry it up, if you don’t help quickly the cat will be dead.” Osan, with a vacant look on her face, as though she had been roughly wakened from some peculiarly delicious dream, took a firm grip on the rice-cake and yanked it out of my mouth. (41)

This choking incident seems to prefigure the cat’s later ordeal in the jar. As Osan neglects to clean up Kushami’s leftovers right away while knowing that the cat has a tendency to munch on things left out in the kitchen (as in the case of her mackerel pie), it could be said that Osan plants the *mochi* within easy reach so that he is likely to be tempted by it. If he dies because of this greedy curiosity, it will all seem like an accident.

The account of the rice cake incident also suggests that the entire Kushami household was fond of seeing the cat make a fool of himself, even if it means endangering the cat’s life. Because of this precedent, one could speculate that at the end of the story someone may have been keenly watching the cat writhe in the jar without the cat’s knowing, realizing too late the danger that he was in. The suspicion about members of the Kushami household, particularly Osan, grows stronger as the cat reports that she “mistakenly” closed the lid when he was warming himself up in a tub meant for keeping half-used charcoal (90).

But the Kushami family are not the only ones who take pleasure in witnessing violent spectacles involving the cat’s suffering. The numerous houseguests, mostly Kushami’s friends and acquaintances, overtly show violent tendencies toward cats

in general. One of the cat's friends, Shiro, tearfully tells him the story of how her four kittens were abandoned by her heartless owner (5–6). But perhaps the cats find their worst nemesis in Tataru, a former live-in student (*shosei*) at the Kushami household, who regularly eats cats. He visits the family the day after a burglar breaks into the house and steals some food and clothes. Upon hearing of this misfortune Tataru suggests that they get a dog, and eat the cat:

(Tataru) "If only this thing here were a dog, not just an idle cat. . . . What a difference that might have made. Honestly you ought to keep a dog, a big sturdy dog. Cats are practically useless. . . . You must get rid of it [the cat] at once. Shall I take it along with me? Boiled, you know, they're really quite good eating."

(Mrs. Kushami) "Don't tell me you eat cats!"

"Yes, indeed, every now and again. They taste delicious." (230–31)

Tataru then goes on to further disgust Kushami:

(Tataru to Kushami) "Anyway, one thing's clear. That this cat's totally useless. Really, one can't imagine what it thinks it's for. It catches no rats. It sits calmly by while a burglar breaks in. It serves no purpose whatsoever. How about letting me take it."

(Kushami) "Well, . . . maybe I will. What would you do with it?"

(Tataru) "Cook it and eat it." (232)

Tataru does not even flinch as he makes this suggestion. The cat is spared this fate only by the relative good taste of Kushami: "On hearing that ferocious proposition, my master gave vent to a minister [*sic*] wail to dyspeptic laughter, but he answered neither yes nor no. This, to my mingled surprise and glad relief, seemed to satisfy Tataru for he pressed no further with his disgusting proposal" (232). Though Tataru's proposal is met with opposition and disgust in this scene, the idea of a cat as meat becomes familiar to the Kushami household after Tataru's visit. Kushami and his wife hear the suggestion directly, but Osan may have overheard the conversation; or, alternatively, either Kushami or his wife could have leaked it to Osan and/or the children, who do not seem particularly interested in the ethical treatment of animals. Whether for the sake of a personal grudge, an entertaining diversion or a gourmet dinner, the members of the Kushami household and their visitors have reason to wish the cat's suffering and even death.

CRIME OF PROBABILITY: TANIZAKI JUN'ICHIRO'S "TOJŌ"

In a conventional detective story, there has to be an agent of crime who makes sure that his criminal design comes true by delivering the fatal blow to the victim in one way or another. Similarly in order to declare that the cat in *Wagahai* was "murdered" one has to show that someone was directly responsible for its death. An actual act of murder often involves little more than shooting a gun or striking a fatal blow with a knife. However, if the killer is afraid of being discovered, he or she is required to take extra precautions in carrying out the crime, and this sometimes means leaving a great deal to chance. Such is the premise of "Tojō" (On

the Street), a 1920 story by Tanizaki Jun'ichirō (1886–1965), which deals with the question of culpability when the suspect's crime is not to strike the victim's final blow but to set up her surroundings so as to accelerate her demise.

In the story, Yukawa Katsutarō, an office worker on his way home from work, is stopped by a private investigator named Andō. Yukawa suspects that Andō has been hired by his live-in fiancée's family, as he knows that they have some reservations about their daughter's groom-to-be. Judging that agreeing to the interview will expedite his marriage, Yukawa talks with the investigator while he walks home. Andō seems to know quite a lot about Yukawa's life, as he brings up the details of his previous marriage, which ended in the death of his first wife from typhus. While Yukawa insists that he met his present fiancée Kumako after the death of Fudeko, Andō is aware that their liaison had overlapped with Yukawa's previous marriage. By tracing Yukawa's actions during the few years leading up to Fudeko's death, Andō presses Yukawa hard for an admission of guilt in contributing to her premature death.

Andō hypothesizes about what happened with Yukawa's first marriage as follows: Yukawa becomes more and more enamored by his new love, decides to kill his wife. He knows that she has a congenital heart condition, so he encourages her to take up habits that would endanger her health, such as drinking and smoking. Seeing that they are slow to take effect, he then recommends bathing in cold water. Then he urges her to drink unboiled water, hoping that she would contract a disease that is likely to cause high fever. Knowing that raw oysters and *tokoroten* (gelidium jelly) are often infested with typhoid bacilli, he offers them to her frequently. Having suffered from typhoid fever in the past himself, he knows that he has sufficient immunity to fight the disease. Eventually, as expected, she contracts paratyphoid fever but recovers after a week. Frustrated with his wife's unexpected resilience, he sends relatives with influenza to see her when an outbreak of virus plagues the city. He also tries to hasten her accidental death by causing a gas leak and making her sit on the more dangerous side of an automobile. In the end, the wife contracts typhoid from a friend and dies. He does not deliver the fatal blow but succeeds in bringing about her death.

By pointing out the evil intentions of Yukawa's actions, Andō accuses him of having committed what Edogawa Ranpo later called “a murder by probability” (*purobabirichī no satsujin*), in which “if one plan works, great; if not, there is little chance that anyone would suspect the killer. No matter how many times one fails, one just has to try again and again until one gets one's wish” (*Henshin ganbō* 329).⁷ Ranpo was so impressed with Tanizaki's plot that he adopted it in his own work *Akai heya* (The Red Chamber) in 1925. In this story, the killer, a bored urbanite, indirectly causes the deaths of innocent people as their lives fall into his hands through chance encounters (Edogawa Ranpo, “Akai heya” 161–76). In Ranpo's version, the killer gets away with murdering dozens of people in this manner, though the entire narrative is labeled a fabrication at the end of the story.

Since the killer in *Wagabai* leaves much to chance in killing the cat—the plot depends on being able to arouse the cat's curiosity in beer—it is possible to

speculate that the killer too wished to carry out a “crime of probability.” If so, it would have to be someone who knew the cat’s inclination for exploring the unknown and also had the chance to plant the *mochi* and beer within the cat’s reach. This scenario limits the suspects to the members of Kushami household, as no visitors have the opportunity to work on this plan over the long term. Since Kushami’s wife has very little interaction with the cat, it is reasonable to assume that she would not be familiar with the cat and his habits in detail. Moreover, the tense tone of her interactions with Kushami indicates that she would rather kill her misogynist husband—who blatantly calls her “Otanchin Paleologus,” which she understands as “bald head”—before she kills anyone or anything else (229). The children certainly could know the cat’s natural inclination for adventure and may have decided to entice it to satisfy their cruel whims. However, the narrative confirms that they are busy singing songs in the back lounge during the initial stages of the *mochi* incident and that they are already in bed on the fatal night. On the other hand, Osan may have known of the cat’s curiosity and greediness when it comes to food. She is also the one who left the dishes out on the night the cat choked on the *mochi*. However, the quick temper and easy roughness she demonstrates in her initial encounters with the cat contradict the profile of the killer as someone who can patiently set up a victim to die even after a series of failures. Moreover, just before the cat drowns, he states explicitly that Osan is away at the public bath. Physical absence from the scene of crime is a strong alibi in this case, as the wish to see the cat suffer would have been one of the strongest motives, if not the central one. Moreover, if it was Osan whom the cat sees just before he dies, it does not explain his unwillingness to name her, as he has had no fondness for her throughout the story. Hence, the killer is someone who could have tampered with the *mochi* and beer and could secretly watch the cat suffer. It also has to be someone the cat feels compelled to protect for one reason or another and whose whereabouts are unclear at the time of the cat’s death. The process of elimination leaves none other than the cat’s master, Kushami.

KUSHAMI’S MOTIVE

On the fateful evening, beer is made available to celebrate the engagement of Tatara to Kaneda’s daughter. Since Kushami is not known to drink, he can leave some beer in his glass without arousing suspicion. But what motive would Kushami have to lure his pet into taking the fatal sip? The answer may lie in Kushami’s strong scorn toward detectives (*tantei*), for the audacity with which they invade people’s lives. Sōseki himself is famous for upholding the same opinion, and critics have often cited the following passage from *Wagabai*, in which Kushami expresses his disgust with those who dig up dirt on others, as evidence of the author’s beliefs. But it is important to remember that it is first and foremost Kushami, a fictional character, who is saying this:

Persons who snatch property from the unwary in the streets are called pickpockets; those who snitch the thoughts of the unwary are called detectives. Those who jimmy open your doors and windows are called thieves; those who use leading questions to lever out one's private thoughts are called detectives. Those who threateningly jab their swords into one's floor matting as a way of forcing surrender of money are called armed burglars; those who by the jabbing menace of their words force one into admissions against one's will are called detectives. To my way of thinking, it inexorably follows that pickpockets, thieves, armed burglars, and detectives are all spawn of the same subhuman origin, things unfit to be treated even as men. Their every endeavor should be thwarted and they themselves quite mercilessly put down. (595–96)

Kushami's explicit dislike of detectives, or those who behave like them, would give him reason to loathe the cat; everything that his cat does in the story—snooping around, observing people without their knowing, reading Kushami's diary and sneaking into another household in order to verify a rumor—resembles the actions of the very detectives that Kushami describes with such contempt. Kushami does not appear to be aware of the cat's snooping around—but here it is crucial to remember the specific method of the transmission of knowledge in this narrative. The reader learns everything from the cat, who can comment only on things within the sphere of his knowledge. The reader cannot know anything the cat does not know.

Furthermore, if Kushami has plotted to kill the cat long before the ultimate drowning, it makes sense that Kushami publicly expressed concern for the cat's life during the *mochi* incident, since the masquerade can later allow him to dispel suspicion of him. Detective fiction abounds with examples of killers who play the role of the innocent and concerned bystander before and after they enact their deed; some even go as far as to inflict injury on themselves to avoid suspicion.⁸

Only the most paranoid mind could make a house pet's curiosity an object of hatred strong enough to become a motive for murder. Evidence from *Wagabai* and Sōseki's other works suggests that Kushami, and Sōseki, may have possessed just that. As discussed above, the character of Kushami shares some obvious commonalities with Sōseki himself both in appearance and personality, and readers were invited to enjoy these overlaps. While the automatic conflation of the author and his supposed literary double is often problematic, *Wagabai* is an instance in which the transparency between them constitutes part of the plot and the intended pleasure of the text. Just like Kushami, Sōseki suffered from a pock-marked face, and was equally troubled by it. Those close to Sōseki testify that the Kushamis' occasional marital strife in the story mirrors that between Sōseki and his own wife Kyōko. Both Kushami and Sōseki are teachers with misanthropic tendencies. Their similarity also extends to the realm of physical health. Just as Kushami is afflicted, Sōseki too suffered from chronic stomach ailments triggered by stress—and ultimately died of an ulcer. In addition, according to Sōseki's wife

Kyōko, Sōseki exhibited behavior consistent with acute paranoia around the time of the serialization of *Wagahai*:

What is strange is how he treated the student who lived on the second floor of the students' house across the street. . . . The structure of the house was such that one could look into Sōseki's study from the student's room. The student would read aloud every night, with the light on, in his room. I guess it was his habit to read aloud at his desk by the window. Sometimes his friends would come, and they would talk loudly in his room. To Sōseki's abnormal ears, it sounded like they were talking behind his back. In addition, the student would spend so much time watching him that Sōseki became preoccupied with it. Moreover, as most schools start around the same hour, when Sōseki leaves home for work [he was a university professor around this time], the student would too and follow him. Sōseki would think: he is supposed to be a student, but he must in fact be a detective who tails me. There was nothing to convince him otherwise. . . . So he would get up, wash his face, stand in front of his study, and turn to the student's room next door and scream: "Hey Mr. Detective, what time are you going to school this morning?" or "Mr. Detective, I leave today at—." (Natsume Kyōko 121–22)

It is also known that Sōseki took up the project of writing *Wagahai* upon the recommendation of Takahama Kyoshi, his poet friend, who was concerned with the deplorable state of Sōseki's mental health (Nagayama 138).

Writing *Wagahai* was thus supposed to be therapeutic for Sōseki. As detective fiction is often accused of potentially putting the wrong ideas into the wrong heads by being overly morbid and violent, theorists of the genre are often asked to elaborate the relationship between mental health and the practice of reading detective fiction. In the early twentieth century, some theorists argued that the reading and writing of a certain kind of literature, and detective fiction in particular, could be beneficial to people's mental well-being. Dorothy L. Sayers (1893–1957) makes a case in "Aristotle on Detective Fiction" (1935) that reading detective fiction can induce a cathartic effect on its readers similar to the one Aristotle argues that tragedy can create in its audience. Quoting Aristotle, Sayers proposes that "we delight to view the most realistic representations of them [the gruesome] in art, the forms, for examples, of the most lowest animals and of dead bodies" and that, contrary to the objections of those detractors of detective fiction, "in a nerve-ridden age the study of crime stories provides a safety valve for the bloodthirsty passions that might otherwise lead us to murder our spouses." To the simplistic view that greater consumption of detective fiction leads to an increase in crime, she counters: "few people can have been inspired to murder their uncles by the literary merits of *Hamlet*" (25–27). In a similar vein, for ailing minds like Sōseki—and by extension Kushami—the sight of the imaginary dead body of a lowly animal could have been equally delightful and doubly cathartic.

Edogawa Ranpo builds onto Sayers' argument in his 1933 essay "Tantei shosetsu to katarushisu" (Detective Fiction and Catharsis).⁹ Incorporating psychoanalysis—one of the fashionable branches of knowledge in interwar Japan—and

specifically the theory of sublimation, Ranpo recognizes a certain healing quality in writing detective fiction as well as reading it:

As far as authors are concerned, the writing of detective fiction or crime fiction can induce similar effects of catharsis. But if we look for better expressions in psychoanalysis, we suppress our murderous instincts by transferring them to the act of writing. It can be said that we perform what psychoanalysis calls “sublimation.” In short, the more the author refuses to commit real crimes, as he suppresses his desire for anti-social acts, the more he craves sublimation through creative literary endeavor, or catharsis. This explains why many detective fiction writers are often actually innocuous individuals. (117)

Ranpo makes this statement partially to exonerate himself from various accusations, some serious, made against him. By the early 1930s, Ranpo had established himself as one of the most popular, if not the most popular, writers of detective fiction in Japan. Gruesome killings and dismemberings of young female victims had become something of a *modus operandi* for his deranged killers. The year before the publication of Ranpo’s essay, a dismembered male corpse was found in a sewer pipe in Tamanoi, an area in Tokyo known for unlicensed prostitution. As the capital went into a frenzy over this grisly murder, a reader of detective fiction who could no longer separate reality from fiction wrote to the *Asabi shinbun*. The letter, which later made it into the paper, warned: “The killer is Edogawa Ranpo. It is extremely suspicious that he has gone into temporary retirement around the time of this incident. The authorities should detain him immediately” (qtd. in Edogawa, “Nikaiime” 260). Though no one took the letter seriously, Ranpo, an upstanding citizen and a married man with children, was both shocked and disgusted at the accusation. The encouragement to travel freely between reality and fiction came from many directions, and even Ranpo had a habit of doing so by inserting himself as a character in his fiction.¹⁰

Emphasizing the cathartic effect of detective fiction helps Ranpo to reinforce this crumbling line, and the act of writing gives a paranoid writer like Sōseki a means with which to annihilate the cat, who has grown to embody the very attitude that both Sōseki and his literary double, as overly self-conscious modern subjects, so abhor. Sōseki, however, does not have to kill the cat in person; he can have Kushami work as his hit man. As mentioned earlier, the holes in the cat’s narrative give the killer room to be physically present at the scene. Sōseki is not simply writing off a character he grew to dislike, but actually creating a narrative vacuum in which his fictional accomplice Kushami can operate in secret and carry out the author’s covert desires. Kushami’s criminality comes out only as the cat loses consciousness—and hence the tight grip on his narrative—as he dies. Ironically, the entire murder (if it is that) is triggered precisely because Sōseki and Kushami are such excessively self-conscious modern beings: the readers know from the cat that Kushami worries about his own pockmarked face as well as his wife’s short stature and the bald spot on her head (176–77). Kushami is overanxious about appearance, and his neurotic

tendencies already cause him somatic problems. The cat is aware of the gloomy outlook of Kushami's future:

My master, sooner or later, will die of his dyspepsia. Old man Kaneda is doomed by his greed. The autumn leaves have mostly fallen. All that has life must lose it. Since there seems so little point in living, perhaps those who die young are the only creatures wise. If one heeds the sages who assembled here today, mankind has already sentenced itself to extinction by suicide. If we don't watch out, even cats may find their individualities developing along the lethal crushing pattern forecast for these two-legged loons. It's an appalling prospect. Depression weighs upon me. Perhaps a sip of Sampei's beer would cheer me up. (634)

The first sentence in the passage quoted above shows that the cat predicts a short future for his master Kushami. Dyspepsia is not the only illness from which Kushami suffers. The cat states that Kushami's eyes are often red and muddy, complications from his intestinal problems (431–33). To draw a pathological parallel between Kushami and Sōseki himself, these can be considered the symptoms of trachoma, an eye disease. Kushami also suffers from nervous prostration (*shinkei suiaku*), and has unhealthy eating habits such as eating an excessive amount of jam every day. He also tries various health enhancing remedies—e.g. drinking milk, skipping breakfast, receiving massages to realign the stomach and avoiding solid food altogether (33–35)—and medical treatments—e.g. taking taka-diastrase, a kind of medicine for dyspepsia (6)—but he sticks with none of them, probably because none of them can cure him quickly and easily.

That the cat senses Kushami does not have long to live is particularly significant when considering the cat's willingness to hide the identity of his killer. In the second to last passage, he describes the experience of drowning as follows:

Accordingly, since it's blindingly clear that I can't get out, it's equally clear that it's senseless to persist in my efforts to do so. Only my own senseless persistence is causing my ghastly suffering. How very stupid. How very, very stupid deliberately to prolong the agonies of this torture. "I'd better stop. I just don't care what happens next. I've had quite enough, thank you, of this clutching, clawing, scratching, scraping, scabbling, senseless struggle against nature." The decision made, I give up and relax: first my fore-paws, then my hind-legs, then my head and tail. (638)

At a first glance, the cat here seems to simply articulate the process by which he comes to terms with his impending death. He realizes that he suffers only because he tries to escape from it, so the wise thing to do is to not resist it. The passage seems to confirm the theory that the cat's death is initially an accident but then turns into a suicide as soon as he accepts his impending demise. What is curious, however, is that the cat employs quotation marks within the passage, denoting words spoken aloud. As the entire novel is narrated in the cat's voice, he has no pressing need to put this particular sentence in quotation marks. While the sudden insertion of quotation marks may be intended to denote a rhetorical question, another possible explanation for the cat's usage of this unexpected punctuation is

that he is addressing someone present at the scene, most likely the unnamed killer who is watching the cat die. In the original text, the sentence in question reads: “Mō yosō. Katte ni suru ga ii. Garigari wa koregiri gomen kōmuru yo” (515). Though it is omitted in the English translation, in the original Japanese text the middle sentence “katte ni suruga ii” implies a subject who will “do as [the person] pleases.” The two quotation marks may be the best piece of evidence—probably a slip of tongue on the cat’s part—attesting to the presence of Kushami at the drowning of his pet. Perhaps this line, curiously written in the form of a fragment from a conversation, was the cat’s last message for both Kushami and Sōseki, his one-time savior and creator, that he agrees to be eradicated. After all, Kushami first saves the cat’s life by allowing it to stay at his home, when the cat is still full of desire to live. The cat’s refusal to disclose Kushami’s “criminal” act may be a reflection of the cat’s hidden love for and fidelity to his master, on whose lap he once enjoyed dozing off, although such an emotional affinity remains restrained in other parts of the text.

Just a few days prior to depicting the death of Fujio in *Gubijinsō*, Sōseki wrote to Takahama Kyoshi: “I’m fed up with *Gubijinsō*. I want to kill off the woman as soon as possible (hayaku onna wo koroshite shimaitai)” (Natsume Sōseki to Takahama Kyoshi. 16 July 1907. *Natsume Sōseki zenshū* 603). Sōseki carried out his plan of murdering her without fail, in this case without a mediator. By the end of the story, Fujio is jilted by her fiancé, and dies suddenly in a fit of rage. Sōseki “kills” her without revealing the cause of her death, only implying that she was poisoned by her own excessive hubris and vanity. It is possible that Sōseki felt the same sort of frustration and dislike toward the cat. However, in *Wagabai*’s case, Sōseki avoids getting his hands dirty, as he gets Kushami to do the job.

DELUSION OF INTERPRETATION OR INTERPRETATION OF DELUSIONS

To read a canonical novel as detective fiction and treat a satirical text with parodic criticism allow the reader to approach the text with a healthy suspicion toward all the characters, including the narrator and even the author. In the case of *Wagabai*, doing so allows readers and critics to dismantle the conventional assumptions of narrative integrity and uncover a murder. Overconfidence in the narrator and the desire for narrative closure always tempt the reader to gloss over various caveats, irregularities and inconsistencies that are bound to be present in most, if not all, literary texts. Some of them are mere inconsequential errors on the part of authors. However, other are not—and placing these narrative anomalies at the center of analysis can raise new questions and yield innovative interpretations. Bayard’s reading of *Ackroyd* turns a tale of narrative deception and “a sordid story of money” into a “story of love” between two closely-knit siblings (Bayard 135). In a similar vein, reading *Wagabai* as detective fiction reveals a narrative vacuum in which the cat hides a criminal for whom it has maintained unprofessed gratitude and fidelity. Such a reading helps move critical focus beyond the illusion of textual

closure and absolute authorial control, and establish readings that are radically different from the apparent one.

Sōseki's works offer particularly fertile ground for this: the omnipresent narrator of *Botchan* (1906) famously reports to the reader at the beginning of the story that: “[botchan] has been suffering from the recklessness that he inherited from his parents [oyayuzuri no mutepō de kodomono koro kara son bakarishiteiru].” (1) But in other parts of the story, those who are called his “parents” (*ryōshin*) are anything but reckless (if anything, they are described as strict bourgeoisie who like to keep up appearances). Who really are the people who are referred to as *oya* here?

The narrative of *sensei* in *Kokoro* (1914) can be subjected to similar scrutiny. Can the reader comfortably conclude that K killed himself as *sensei* attests, when in fact the only source of information to rely upon is the account of a man who developed a neurosis because of his friendship with (and betrayal of) K when no other character in the story refers to K's death as “suicide”? Are the other characters simply being polite by using euphemisms, or are they being vague because the circumstances of K's death were actually more inconclusive than the reader is led to believe by *sensei*'s narrative? Most importantly, why doesn't *sensei* cite K's suicide note word for word, even though he repeatedly mentions how short it was?

Any reading that questions the credibility of the narrator may create an anarchy of interpretation, where any reading, irresponsible as well as informed, can exist. But such criticisms can be countered by arguing that placing limits on possible readings “ends by losing [their] critical or polemical justification” (Bayard 110) and betrays the supposed democracy of literary interpretation in which the prevailing majority does not always erase the defensible minorities. As long as the interpretation in question is based on solid textual evidence, it should be accorded legitimacy by the implicit pact of such a democracy. Interpreting this story through this parodic lens not only allows reconsideration of the question of “whodunit,” but also allows reevaluation of such notions as genre convention, narrative reliability and authorial intention. Overtly open-ended works like Sōseki's own *Yume jūya* (Ten Night's Dream, 1908) remind readers and critics alike of the existence of such interpretive possibilities, lest we all become ensnared in the author's narrative game of cat-and-mouse.

Notes

1. Since I have some reservations about the translators Ito and Wilson's decision to translate the names of certain characters, I have used original names to refer to them in this article.
2. Okuizumi's story starts with the assumption that the cat did not die at the end of the original novel. He supposedly lost consciousness only to find that he has been transported to Shanghai and hear that his owner Kushami was murdered. The story revolves around the cat's quest to find his killer.
3. See, for example, Etō 61–75. Another source is Komori Yōichi, one of the most well-known critics of Sōseki's works, who discusses his first impression of *Wagabai* in the postscript of *Sōseki o yominaosu*. Having just come back to Japan after a five-year sojourn in Prague, he reads the novel

as it was recommended by his homeroom teacher as a “humorous novel” [*yūmoa shōsetsu*]. However, Komori could read it only as a tragedy: “I only read it as a novel about misery, because I identified with the cat. He understands humans, but he can’t talk. Everything about human society seems odd to him. His desperate struggle only seems funny to the humans. And he has nobody in whom to confide his feelings” (253–54).

4. Bayard’s study was first published in French in France in 1998.
5. This generalization, while not untrue, is nonetheless simplistic. Edward Fowler, in *The Rhetoric of Confession*, provides a more complex view of the negotiation between form and content of *shishōsetsu*.
6. Irmela Hijiya-Kirschner discusses the general fixation of Japanese readership on the “mimetic correspondence between non-literary and literary reality,” often expressed in the overlapping of the author with the protagonist or one of the secondary characters within the text (288–90).
7. Originally published in *Hanzaigaku zasshi* in 1954.
8. Perhaps the most famous example of such a murderer in the Golden Age of detective fiction of the Anglo-American tradition is Ada Greene, S. S. Van Dine’s notorious juvenile killer, who fakes an attack by a stranger in order to exonerate herself from later murders. See Van Dine, *The Greene Murder Case*.
9. I have not been able to determine the specific writing by Sayers that Ranpo refers to in this essay. As Ranpo’s essay (1933) predates the official date of Sayers’s lecture (1935), and Ranpo credits Sayers as the person who initially put forth the cathartic function of detective fiction, I assume that Ranpo had access to Sayers’s other writings in their original form or in Japanese translation.
10. Perhaps the best example of this is in the story *Injū* (1928), in which Ranpo injects a character, the mysterious detective fiction writer Ōe Shundeī, with facts about his own life.

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