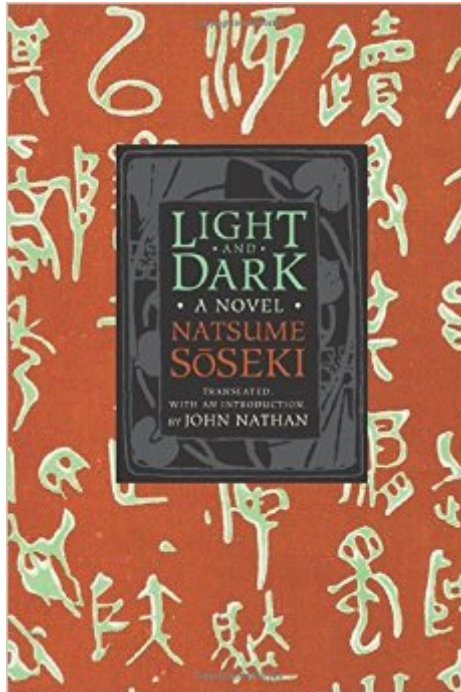


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Light And Dark: A Novel (Weatherhead Books On Asia)



Synopsis

Light and Dark, Natsume Soseki's longest novel and masterpiece, although unfinished, is a minutely observed study of haute-bourgeois manners on the eve of World War I. It is also a psychological portrait of a new marriage that achieves a depth and exactitude of character revelation that had no precedent in Japan at the time of its publication and has not been equaled since. With Light and Dark, Soseki invented the modern Japanese novel. Recovering in a clinic following surgery, thirty-year-old Tsuda Yoshio receives visits from a procession of intimates: his coquettish young wife, O-Nobu; his unsparing younger sister, O-Hide, who blames O-Nobu's extravagance for her brother's financial difficulties; his self-deprecating friend, Kobayashi, a ne'er-do-well and troublemaker who might have stepped from the pages of a Dostoevsky novel; and his employer's wife, Madam Yoshikawa, a conniving meddler with a connection to Tsuda that is unknown to the others. Divergent interests create friction among this closely interrelated cast of characters that explodes into scenes of jealousy, rancor, and recrimination that will astonish Western readers conditioned to expect Japanese reticence. Released from the clinic, Tsuda leaves Tokyo to continue his convalescence at a hot-springs resort. For reasons of her own, Madam Yoshikawa informs him that a woman who inhabits his dreams, Kiyoko, is staying alone at the same inn, recovering from a miscarriage. Dissuading O-Nobu from accompanying him, Tsuda travels to the spa, a lengthy journey fraught with real and symbolic obstacles that feels like a passage from one world to another. He encounters Kiyoko, who attempts to avoid him, but finally manages a meeting alone with her in her room. Soseki's final scene is a sublime exercise in indirection that leaves Tsuda to "explain the meaning of her smile."

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Customer Reviews

Very few English translations of Japanese literature receive this kind of luxe treatment: John Nathan's new translation of Meian is in hardcover with attractive book jacket (incorporating Soseki's own psychedelic design for Kokoro), even a handsomely designed hardcover without the book jacket; deckle edge, (sometimes used in paperbacks, but when was the last time you saw it used in books on Japanese literature? Dawn to the West?); each of the 188 sections illustrated with an uma-heta drawing by Natori Shunsen, just as they appeared in the daily newspaper installments of the Asahi Shinbun in 1916); set in large, easy-to-read font, with a fine Introduction and A Note on the Translation. Nathan could have used this opportunity to reformat the text from the short 188 sections into long chapters, but he wisely retained the 188 sections. Little is gained, for example, by reading Kokoro in 110 short chapters instead of in its familiar tripartite structure. Conversely, Meian, one imagines, would benefit little from reformatting into lengthy chapters. Nathan acknowledges: "The tyranny of the daily installment is perceptible in the text" (n6, page 16), referring to cliffhangers and recapitulations, but says editors were reluctant to modify the master's manuscript. That old chestnut about contrived cliffhangers and redundant recapitulation goes back to Donald Keene's dreary assessment of the novel, which he confessed bored him from beginning to end. For many years, Viglielmo was the lone voice in the wilderness extolling the virtues of Meian: "generally considered to be the greatest novel of modern Japan." But few were those (American academics) who agreed with him. In fact, it was despised and rejected: "One of the most tedious exercises in the Japanese language," said Jay Rubin. "There is not a line in Meian that touches one|and because of the detachment, or the indifference, the technical virtuosity that he displays often has the effect of pedantry," said McClellan. "I think it is boring." "I prefer Sanshiro to Meian," said Seidensticker. "My favorite is Sanshiro" because it's open-ended, said Murakami Haruki. Now, in the fullness of time, both Viglielmo and Nathan recognize Meian as Soseki's masterpiece, the culmination of his craft. And, if this is true, Meian's position in the Soseki canon must therefore displace Kokoro "heretofore always the heart of the Soseki canon and Soseki curriculum" and assume its rightful place. Especially buttressed as it is with the cachet and prestige of the new Meian translation by Nathan, a self-identified Soseki-ist, and the impact of the Soseki's Diversity

Conference to bolster it even more. But of course the new is built on the old. In his Harvard lecture, Nathan calls Viglielmo's translation too literal, always striving for equivalency. This dismissal might be seen as the ritual slaughtering of the elders to make way for the new "were it not for the fact that Nathan is only thirteen years younger than Viglielmo. Translators must consult with previous editions, if only to confirm that theirs is indeed different. In his Note on the Translation, Nathan compares his translation with Viglielmo's "overarticulated" style. JN's literal rendering in English: But his critique could not proceed beyond that point. Dishonoring himself vis-à-vis another person. If ever he should perpetrate such a thing how terrible that would be! This alone lay at the base of his ethical view. On closer inspection one had no choice but to reduce this to scandal. Astonishingly, the bad guy was Kobayashi alone. VHV: And yet his assessment of such a hypothetical scene could not go beyond that point. If ever he should lose face in front of others, it would be dreadful. This was all there was at root of all his ethical views. If one tried to express this more simply, one could reduce it to the simple fact that he feared scandal. Therefore the only person in the wrong would be Kobayashi. JN: But he was unable to develop his critique beyond this. To disgrace himself in the eyes of others was more than he could contemplate. Saving face was the fundament of his ethics. His only thought was that appearances must be preserved, scandal above all avoided. By that token, the villain of the piece was Kobayashi. JN explains: "I am confident that this is what S...seki intended, but inasmuch as it offers no resistance to interpretation it represents compromise. Not that I always acquiesced to the pressure to domesticate the translation. On the contrary, I labored to preserve in my English the varieties of difficulty in S...seki's Japanese. In comparison, VHV's translation indeed does appear overarticulated next to the idiomatic (at times "highly idiomatic") prose of JN. The work of translation for JN is "creation and creative writing," as he says (which explains the beautiful prose of his translations of *A Personal Matter* and *The Sailor Who Fell From Grace with the Sea*). Avoiding overarticulation in translation is difficult, especially when S...seki's prose itself at times takes on a distinctive and pointed precision: "Percussing the patient in hopes of stimulating an echo of her genuine feelings" (JN translation). This passage was also quoted by Siever in the *Japan Times* as an example of Nathan's translation sometimes "overly stilted." As JN and others have observed, S...seki's narrative in *Meian* moves between the overarticulated (precise) and the obscure/ambiguous in a chiaroscuro method of contrasting light and dark. The literal translation (if that's what VHV practices) will always strongly bear the mark of this distinction over the idiomatic rendering. Something is lost in Nathan's "updated idiom" into

American English; it is like transposing Downton Abbey into American English. Gone too is that Mid-Atlantic accent of Keene, Seidentstick, et al.). To my ears, Soseki's prose, especially dialogue, always sounds British (his famous two-year stay in London cannot account for this, but his major literary influences "mostly British" could). It was a shame, I felt, to cut the British spelling and Briticisms from VHV's 1971 Meian translation but that is exactly what we did. In VHV's new translation, typos and other errata have been corrected, lacunae filled in, some obscure passages clarified. But it remains a literal translation. It is the sort of literal and "literariness" of Soseki captured by VHV that sometimes shows the "strangeness" of the text, which, for example, is exactly what the newly acclaimed translators of Dostoevsky "Pevear and Volokhonsky" were lauded for: succeeding in reproducing idiosyncrasies of content and style. Nathan says he wants "to provide the reader in English with an experience equivalent to what the native reader experiences in Japanese." But that is impossible because there is no monolithic Japanese reader. All he can offer is his idiomatic, beautiful "Nathanized" prose "without the strangeness. Worse still, the reader in English will find no consummation, no transcendence, no transport, no redemption "because there is none in S...seki's novels. VHV's new translation [Full Disclosure: I am the editor of *Light and Darkness: Natsume S...seki's Meian* "A New Translation By V. H. Viglielmo (2011)] is also rendered in American English but retains something of a Jamesian aura. Indeed, Frederick Jameson thought so too on reading the first English translation: "Analyzing translations can lead one into the comical situation in which it is the translator (in this case V.H. Viglielmo) who one is, in reality, comparing to Henry James, all the while imagining oneself to be thinking about S...seki." *Light and Dark* is meticulously edited (which can't be said for many books these days, even those from university presses), the only erratum I noticed right away was *Natsume S...seki Meian no Dabi* instead of *Natsume S...seki Meian Dabi no sh...* (page 18). It must also be pointed out, however, that Tsugiko is not O-Nobu's younger niece, but her cousin (p. 7), and 1916 is not on the eve of, but the middle of, WWI. "Latitude" is a clever rendering of *yoy...* (used consistently through out), an important word for S...seki, and a school associated with his name, but "Latitude School" for *yoy...-ha* would sound odd. Referring to Mrs. Yoshikawa as Madam (even without the "ee" on the end) is an interesting, if not jarring, Gallicism to introduce amid the Anglo-American vocabulary. Perhaps the age of Meian is now upon us, thanks to these two new English translations. Also translated into Chinese, Korean, French, and Spanish (less than half the number of foreign language translations of *Kokoro*), Meian in Japanese and in

translation can inspire more research and scholarship, conferences and symposia, that is commensurate with its "new" status as Saseki's masterpiece and maybe even as the greatest novel of modern Japan. All readers, Japanese literature students and teachers: read both translations. Compare and discuss!

A Synchrony of Two New Translations of Meian

To wrest control of the copyright for *Light and Darkness* that VHV had surrendered to Peter Owen forty years ago "for a pittance," WNR decided to help VHV self-publish a new translation (inspired, in part, by Jay Rubin's retranslation of *Sanshirō* for Penguin). March 2011 *Light and Darkness: Natsume Saseki's Meian. A New Translation* By V.H. Viglielmo published (CreateSpace, An Independent Publishing Platform). April 2011 WNR visits Columbia U Press/Weatherhead booth at AAS conference in Hawaii to propose VHV's new Meian translation for Weatherhead Books on Asia series. April 2011 WNR sends complete new Meian translation PDF to DR, Weatherhead. June 2011 DR emails "After a review of your PDF file of Meian, the publications committee at the Institute has decided it's not the right project for us at this time." August 2012 Dreux Richards, Japan Times contributor visits Honolulu, interviews VHV for his life story, one in a series of articles to include Norma Field and Ian Hideo Levy. Sept 2012 JN gives "Contending with Meian" lecture at International House Japan: "finishing translation of Meian" "first public announcement of JN's new translation." April 2013 Discovering that a new translation of *Botchan* was published in Penguin Classics, WNR contacts Penguin and proposes VHV's new translation of Meian, Saseki's true masterpiece, as a Penguin Classics. Senior Editor JS confirms in email that Meian is not being considered for publishing with Penguin Classics: "It's an interesting suggestion, but I know of another translation forthcoming from a university press, and I can't quite justify saying yes to this one having said no to that one. Thanks again for thinking of Penguin Classics." Nov 2013 JN translation *Light and Dark* published by Weatherhead Books, Columbia University Press. Jan 2014 *Kyoto Journal* No. 78, Special: "Translating Saseki's Last Novel, Meian (*Light and Dark*)" by Dreux Richard. Instead of Japan Times article exclusively on VHV, Dreux Richard publishes article on both JN and VHV, on each translator's life and his translation of Meian. Meian, the life of the book, and the book in the life of the translators.

This wonderful novel was written in 1916 by the great Japanese novelist, Saseki. Although it was left unfinished at the time of Saseki's death, it is just as completely absorbing and satisfying, in the end, as any finished novel that I'm aware of. This is a novel of character that recalls the English

novelists most admired by Soseki, Jane Austen and Henry James. So, it is a literary novel, but it is also a page-turner. *Light and Dark* maintains a very high level of dramatic tension in the complex interactions among the characters. The action moves at a leisurely pace on the surface, but Soseki shows us what lies beneath the surface in the inner lives of the main characters. These are primarily a young married couple, Tsuda and O-Nobu. These two and their attached surrogate families are people of privilege, like their English analogues. Although Tsuda and O-Nobu have been married only a year, certain submerged tensions are developing in their marriage. These are displayed through Tsuda's disheveled friend, Kobayashi, who is not privileged, but who maintains a steady stream of accurate criticism of his snobbish, handsome friend, Tsuda. Kobayashi first stirs up trouble when he visits O-Nobu while Tsuda is in a hospital recovering from minor surgery. Kobayashi senses O-Nobu's nervousness about her husband and plays to it by hinting at something in Tsuda's past that O-Nobu knows nothing about. Another troublemaker is Madame Yoshikawa, one of Tsuda's patrons and the wife of Tsuda's employer. She is also very sharp in her relentless criticism of Tsuda and his narcissistic, yet somehow passive personality. This novel does have a heroine, O-Nobu, Tsuda's very perceptive young wife, who is determined to love her husband in as complete a way as possible, and, thus to earn his complete love. She is frustrated in this aim by her sister-in-law, O-Hide, Tsuda's beautiful but impulsive sister, among others. O-Nobu lacks O-Hide's great beauty, but she makes up for it by being impressively intelligent and observant. These are only some of the character elements that make up this complex story, which moves along briskly. This is partly due to the fact that it was written in daily installments, which correspond to the short chapters, many of which end in a "cliff-hanger," in the words of the distinguished translator, John Nathan. This translator has also produced much admired translations of Kenzaburo Oe (winner of the 1994 Nobel Prize in literature) and Yukio Mishima. His English prose style is as swift and luminous as that of Soseki's masters, Jane Austen and Henry James.

It is good to see Soseki's great novel, virtually unknown in this country, made available in a fresh translation. In his introduction, Nathan describes the translation of his predecessor, V.H. Viglielmo, as "overarticulated," and that is a reasonably good description of it. Nathan's is more readable, fluid, and conversational, and, one imagines, closer to Soseki's Japanese than the previous version; but in either version, this book is a masterpiece. I was amused to see some of the speculations (mentioned in the introduction) about how the novel might have ended had Soseki lived to complete it. If his other novels are anything to go by, it would have been ambiguous and depressing. Perhaps Nathan is right in saying that the present ending is as conclusive as those to Soseki's other

novels. Reading it again, I was struck this time by how impervious Tsuda remains to any revelation of his own egotism; so is O-Nobu. There is a kind of progress in the novel, but it does not seem to entail any progress in self-insight on the protagonists' part. I gather that there are commentators who would disagree, but this is the strongest impression the book leaves on this reading. In any case, this is one of the greatest novels ever written, now available in a fresh, engaging translation.

One of the great pillars of world literature translated by John Nathan a master of the art. To fully appreciate Soseki's novel one also needs to read John Nathan's autobiography "Living Carelessly in Tokyo and Elsewhere".

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