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Why I Write What I Write

Minae Mizumura

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Minae Mizumura

Why I Write What I Write:

Why I write what I write?

It would make more sense, or at least, make it easier for me to answer such a question, if I could give you some quick and, at the same time, essential idea of what I write. I tried, therefore, to think about my novels as a whole and tried to find out if they had anything in common. At first glance, they are quite different from one another.

I have written three novels in the past fifteen years. My first novel was an attempt to finish a novel left unfinished by another writer. My second novel, which mixes English and Japanese, is a work that would come under the rubric of autobiography. My third and the most recent novel is a retelling of Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* in postwar Japan.

Aside from the fact that none of them was a great commercial success, no common thread seemed to run through them. However, as I tried to step back and look at them from a distance, I began to think they have one thing that they share. They are all written with what I call an "unhappy knowledge." Let me explain what I mean by an "unhappy knowledge" by summing up the sad story of my life.

I was born in Tokyo, but moved to the States with my family when I was twelve years old, my father being stationed as a branch manager in New York. I did not get along either with the States or with its language, English. I turned my back to America and spent my entire girlhood reading old Japanese novels my parents brought for my sister and I to read. I read and read and dreamed of the day when I would finally go back to Japan and start living a full life – not a shadow of life as I did in the States. Naturally, the more I immersed myself in those old Japanese novels, the more I turned my back to the English language. My aversion to English was such that when the time came for me to go to college, I, a mediocre painter at best, chose to go to an art school. Life never turns out the way one expects it to, and my personal circumstances kept me from returning to Japan for a long time, but I did succeed in resisting the English language, marrying a Japanese man in the States and studying French literature after giving up painting.

I was not happy living in America, but was happy in the thought, which was growing stronger every day, that when I would finally go back to Japan, I would begin writing novels myself. Eventually the day came when I did go back to Japan and, several years later, I published my first novel. Thanks to my obstinate persistence in Japanese, my Japanese was so excellent that the readers, who learned of my background, were graciously surprised. However, by that time, what I call an "unhappy knowledge" had already taken root in me.

I don't know when and how the knowledge approached me at first. In the beginning, it came to me discreetly and vaguely, like a phantom in a dark dream. Sometimes, it came to me bit by bit, in small fragments. It is one of those ironies of life that it was just as I began seriously thinking about my first novel that the knowledge made itself known to me with full

force.

I realized then that, moving to the States as a twelve-year old girl, I was given that rare opportunity, the kind of opportunity only given to one in a million in Japan, of switching my first language from Japanese to English. Yet I remained totally blind to its significance until the opportunity was irrevocably lost. As everyone knows, a novelist, like a dancer, must acquire a physical nimbleness with language relatively early in her life. It turns out that I, who have happily persisted in Japanese, have unknowingly persisted in a local, singular language and I have thus lost the opportunity to become a writer in English, the one and the only universal language of today.

The people for whom the English is the mother language are often not fully aware of the true extent of their fortune. They sometimes even humbly assume that all languages are equally important – which only seems to me to be an arrogant assumption of the privileged. Just think of the advantage that the novelists who write in English have. There have been other international languages in the history of mankind – Latin, Chinese, Arabic, French, even Russian. But no other language has ever permeated the entire world as English has. No other language has ever become so completely and absolutely dominant. Already in the past decade, those who communicate in English as a foreign language have outnumbered those for whom English is the mother language. Moreover, language has its own law of propagation and the predominance of English can only continue for the centuries to come.

This reality is now clear as the daylight for me, leaving me with the “unhappy knowledge that my stupidity lies at the core of my becoming writer in the Japanese language. You have now heard the sad story of my life.

However, I am a novelist who does not like unhappy endings. I want my novels to end ambiguously, with a glimmer of hope. Accordingly, I do not like to give the story of my life an unhappy ending. Indeed, not all is lost. For, the “unhappy knowledge” insures another knowledge within me. When I write, because I always write with the “unhappy knowledge,” I always know that I am not just writing but that I am writing in Japanese. This knowledge is at the basis of why I write.

On the one hand, I have rather a megalomaniacal agenda. I write to prevent the world from succumbing to the tyranny of English. For, imagine a world in which the cream of all societies expresses itself exclusively in English. Not only would humanity be less rich, it would also be less subtle, less articulate, and less capable of checking the tyranny of one Logos.

On the other hand, I have a less megalomaniacal and more practical agenda. I write to see what I can do with the Japanese language. When I write, because I always know that I am writing in Japanese, I am freed from using the language as a means of self-expression – as something that comes out from my innermost soul, as something that belongs to me. I can only think of the language as belonging to no one but that which allows us to belong to it. Great writers all know this in one way or another and they all try to do what they can do

with the language, but *I* could not have known it without the long detour that I made.

This is most manifest, I think, in my first novel, titled, *Light and Darkness, Continued*. It is a novel that continued and completed an unfinished novel, *Light and Darkness*, written by Natsume Soseki who died nearly ninety years ago. After Japan opened its doors to the West in 1868, Western novels were introduced, and a great disjuncture occurred in the Japanese literary tradition, transforming the written language itself. Within what we call modern Japanese literature, Natsume Soseki, the author of *Light and Darkness*, is doubtless considered the greatest novelist. A remarkable intellectual who composed Chinese poems and who lectured on English literature, he is a national figure and also a spiritual hero for the Japanese people. His face is on the paper currency of 1000 yen, the most circulated bill in present day Japan. His brain is preserved in the University of Tokyo. His house is now a tourist attraction. There is even a journal devoted to studying his work and, certainly, what can be called a “Soseki industry” exists in the publishing business, with hundreds of writers, critics, and scholars writing about him every year. Moreover, *Light and Darkness* occupies an especially important place, even a sacred place, in people’s hearts because it was a novel Soseki was serializing when he met his sudden death at an early age of forty-nine, in 1917. How Soseki would have ended the story necessarily began to represent what would have been his last words, and there have been constant conjectures as to what those words might have been.

It would not have occurred to me to complete such a sanctified novel had Soseki’s words seemed to me to represent his innermost soul. I would not have dared. Instead, his words were for me, first and foremost, the Japanese language – something to which we, the users of the language, all belong. Soseki’s sentences, however idiosyncratic, belonged not to Soseki but to the Japanese language he helped to shape and enrich. How he would have finished the novel, no one can possibly tell – not even his brain. Yet where his words and sentences were heading was there for all the Japanese writers to make use of, had they been cursed and blessed with the “unhappy knowledge” as I have been.