

“Professor Koeber” by Natsume Soseki (translated from the Japanese)

Thomas John Hastings

High up between the leaves of the trees, I could see a window. Professor Koeber's head was visible in the corner of that window. Deep indigo smoke rose next to where he was sitting. I said to my friend Abe, “I bet the professor is smoking.”

Though I couldn't remember when I had last passed this place, today it occurred to me that the looks of the neighborhood had really changed in a very short time. There were many magnificent newly rebuilt houses lining the bluff which overlooked the Kobu Railroad Line. Those homes were surrounded by imposing walls, symbolic reminders of the power of Japan's newfound economic prosperity. Among them Professor Koeber's ancient, dilapidated house stood as the only reminder of a time gone by.

Whenever Professor Koeber entered the study of his dark, musty home, he rarely ventured out. It was from that very study where we could see the professor's head high up through the leaves of the trees.

The professor led Abe and me up the dimly lit, ladder-like uncarpeted wooden staircase which squeaked with every step we made. We entered the study which was off to the right at the top of the stairs. I sat down in the same chair where the Professor had been sitting just before we arrived. The chair was placed in the sunniest spot in the room and it was from here that Professor Koeber's head had been visible to us through the window. From outside, we had stared intently at his face which was bathed in the first rays of that day's twilight.

His face had not changed much from the old days. Professor Koeber himself had told us that he was sixty-three years old. I began attending his lectures the year I entered graduate school, and I'm almost certain that those were his first lectures in

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Japan. From that time until now, his face was unchanged. When I asked if he had been in Japan now for about twenty years, he answered, "No, not quite that long, eighteen years to be exact."

You would have to say that Professor Koeber's hair and beard had what in English would be called an "auburn" color, and even though some grey hairs had appeared upon the surface of his extremely light flaxen-like hair, which was fine and soft like other Europeans, they really weren't that noticeable. All told, his complexion was the same as it had always been. You wouldn't think that he was one who had endured living in Japan for these eighteen long years.

Compared to the professor's eternally young and fresh personal appearance, his study seemed to be wrapped in an air which smelled of antiquity. In contrast to the Chinese and Japanese books, the splendour of the decorative leather-bound European books almost seemed to speak of scholarship and art. There was nothing in that room which so completely attracted my attention as those books. There was a big desk and four faded chairs. There were some matches, Egyptian cigarettes and an ashtray. The professor offered me one of those cigarettes, and I smoked it as we spoke. Unfortunately, we were lead downstairs by Professor Koeber to be shown the dining room before I really had a chance to see what kind of books he had there and how he had arranged them. I didn't notice anything to be transfixed by, whether it was the gorgeous gold-lettered red and blue covered books or some pure white thing.

Even the standard western white tablecloth was missing from the professor's simple diningroom table. In its place, there was a piece of sober, chintz cloth covering the whole length of the table. That chintz material was the same as the futon cover which I had had made as a wedding present for the girl we had been boarding at my house until we recently got her married off.

Professor Koeber sat down at the table. On top of a shrinking shirt which exposed his chest muscles, he wore only a simply made light egg-colored suit with no collar or collar ornament. From the beginning I had been cautioned not to be too formal, yet not wanting to be rude, I had worn a white shirt with a white collar under a dark blue kimono. When the professor commented that he was wearing something plain while I had on such a formal suit, his words stung me with guilt, as I had to admit

that, by the looks of the collar and sleeves of my newly laundered clothes, I was dressed more formally than he.

When I asked the professor if he wasn't lonely living all alone, he answered, "No, not in the least bit." I also questioned if he didn't want to return to Europe, and he responded by saying that he didn't like Europe all that much. At the same time, he said that the only problem he had living in Japan was that he felt disappointed that there were no theatres, libraries, or art galleries. I tried to urge him to consider doing some travelling if he could get some time off, but he responded that, though getting the time would be no problem, he did not enjoy sightseeing.

He said, "If I leave Japan, I will leave forever and never return again". In this way, while Professor Koeber did not seem to long for his home, neither did he necessarily dislike Japan. The confusion, hollowness, and cheapness of the so-called "spirit of the modern age" was at odds with the professor's nature, yet Japan's newly-emerging westernness seemed to encompass him, and it couldn't help attempting to drag him down into the vortex of its powerful motion. While he witnessed this "progress" daily, it seemed to leave him unscathed like something occurring in a distant world. He had spent an unusually peaceful eighteen years in our country.

The professor's life was like an ancient Greek sculpture which, once abandoned in a dusty town, had suddenly come to life again. In the midst of the bustling madness, he moved about with true serenity. Even the rivets on the bottom of his shoes made no sound as he walked the pebbled streets of Tokyo. Like one of the ancient inhabitants of the Greek Peninsula who wore sandals made of the softest leather, Professor Koeber sauntered along the sidewalk of streets where noisy streetcars ran without making the slightest sound.

Professor Koeber had kept a pet raven for many years. I'm not sure where it came from, but the professor set out bait for it daily and it came and went freely. It seems that there was something strangely fateful about their relationship. I get an inexplicable feeling whenever I think about the professor and the raven. It was said that the professor liked Poe and Hoffmann*. This evening, since I was thinking about the professor's raven, I asked him what had happened to the bird. The professor said that it had died, in fact, it had frozen to death. "One cold night it had perched on

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a branch of a tree in the garden. The next morning, I found him dead in that same spot”, the professor answered.

While we were talking about the raven, the topic of bats came up. My friend Abe said that the bat is a skeptical bird, and when he was asked why he thought so, he said, “Because it flutters madly in the twilight.” His response sounded more like a conondrum than a proper answer. I mentioned that I liked the wings of the bat. The professor said, “Those are the wings of the devil.” I thought to myself, “Ah, so that’s why the devil is always portrayed with bat wings on his back in western art works.”

Just then, a sharply chirping cicada came close to the window sill as twilight fell, and the four of us sitting around the table paused for a moment to listen to its voice. I asked the professor if that cicada’s cry reminded him of Italy, because just a few moments before when he had said that the Japanese lizard was very beautiful, I had asked him if that lizard didn’t remind him of the clear blue Italian sky and he had said that it did. But, when I asked him about the insect, he turned his head a little, paused and said, “No, that’s not Italy, I don’t believe that I have ever heard that sound in Italy.”

We continued our quiet conversation in that conspicuously shabby old house, and it seemed to me that the lit gas lamp on the table was somehow out of place in that old rundown house in the middle of this bustling modern city. We went on to discuss Japanese chrysanthemums, camellias, and lilies of the valley. We also talked about fruit while we drank the delicious nectar of lemons which had been imported from some far away country. The juice of the lemon had been squeezed, then dropped into water. We also drank coffee, which we discovered was Professor Koeber’s favorite drink. At last, Abe and I went out into the middle of that quiet night.

It seems like a long time since Professor Koeber has stopped attending the elegant concerts which I attend. It is said that, since coming to Japan, the professor intended not to tell anyone that he plays the piano. He strongly dislikes such flippant boasting. Although he receives invitations to all of the concerts in Tokyo, he much prefers sitting in his room alone in front of his instrument, playing to his heart’s content for his ears only. Besides playing piano, the professor spends all of his time reading books.

If you go to the Tokyo University Department of Letters and ask which professor is a real man of character, ninety out of a hundred students will most likely answer “Von Koeber” before mentioning one of the many Japanese professors. For Professor Koeber to be so highly respected is surely a sign that he has consistently, from the first to the last, had a genuine interest in his Japanese students, and thus has been able to continue his philosophy lectures for these long eighteen years. He should have left this country which has so little to offer him long ago, but the fact that he has remained so long is a clear testimony to his love for his students.

The months and days have rolled by and it’s already been four years since Kyoto University Professor Fukada started staying with Professor Koeber on his visits to Tokyo. Whenever he has free time, Professor Koeber always invites Abe and me to join Professor Fukada and him for dinner. At last, when our evening was ended and Abe and I ventured out into the very dark night, I wondered about how many more years Professor Koeber will stay in Japan. When he told me that once he left Japan he would never again return, I recalled how he had quoted Poe’s words, “no more, never more.”

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Notes

*Hoffmann, Ernst Theodor Amadeus (1776-1822), German gothic novelist, composer, illustrator.