

# Thoughts at the Precipice

## *Fujimura Misao at Kegon Falls*

On May 22, 1903, Fujimura Misao (1886–1903), a sixteen-year-old student from the elite Tokyo Imperial University preparatory school, hiked to the top of Kegon Falls, etched a lengthy farewell poem titled “Gantō no kan” (巖頭之感, Thoughts at the precipice) into the trunk of a Mongolian oak tree, and leaped to his death. For forty-two days, his corpse remained undiscovered and unrecoverable in the swirling pools a hundred meters below the falls. In the absence of his body lay his poem.

The poem remained there etched into the tree until mid-June, when it disappeared overnight. According to a friend who made a pilgrimage to the falls on both June 18 and 19, it was there one day and gone the next. The local authorities had scraped the poem from the tree, “certain that the totally incomprehensible ‘Thoughts at the Precipice’ had such allure it would pull people in” (*nan demo kano imi no wakaranai* ‘Gantō no kan’ toka iu mono ni miriyoku ga atte, hito o hikiyoseru ni sōinai).<sup>1</sup>

In the aftermath of Fujimura’s suicide, the poem quickly became so well known as to make any efforts to censor it futile. Fellow student (and later famed philosopher) Watsuji Tetsurō claimed that its words were “soon burnt into our hearts,” its lines quoted by youths on city trains and even among country boys.<sup>2</sup> Two days after his death, Fujimura’s uncle traveled to the site, transcribed the poem, and then had it published alongside his obituary in the newspaper.<sup>3</sup> Family, friends, and even complete strangers made their own pilgrimages. Some sought to imitate his suicide, literally retracing his steps. Others went for his writing, bringing home a souvenir in the form of a rubbing of the poem they themselves made or a postcard being sold by an enterprising local who had snapped a photograph of the carving before it was deleted by authorities. One of these postcards featured a photo of young Fujimura



FIGURE 1. Postcards for sale at Kegon Falls: Fujimura and his poem etched onto the landscape. Courtesy Nikkō Shiritsu Nikkō Toshokan.

in kimono superimposed beside the waterfall and another of his poem etched into the tree (fig. 1).

Although the authorities attempted to scrub all signs of Fujimura's suicide and his poem from the scene, Kegon Falls remains associated with these to this day. Newer versions of the postcards, which were confiscated and banned after the incident, remain bestsellers at the Kegon Falls shops.<sup>4</sup> For many years, the Nikkō Tourist Association included a transcription of the entire poem on both their Japanese and English webpages "because there are so many inquiries." They no longer do so, however, presumably in an effort to align with more recent media guidelines. In the process of writing this book, the website was revamped, and all mention of Fujimura's suicide there, including the poem, have been removed.<sup>5</sup>

Over a century later, similar impulses surround the traces of the dead. If one side strains to recover and preserve any trace, the other seeks to erase them forevermore. Fujimura himself demonstrated the tension between these competing impulses of self-preservation and self-erasure with the decision to etch his "Thoughts at the Precipice" into the site in the moments before his suicide. Lamenting the death of his nephew, his uncle wrote:

A beloved youth of great promise has passed. Never to return, gone without a trace.  
Ohh, how lamentable it is.

Mirai tabō no kōshōnen wa satte kaerazu, kiete ato nashi. Aa kanashii kana.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, a plethora of traces remained. Most prominent of all was his poem captured in photographs, transcribed in newspapers, and preserved in hand-traced facsimiles, its words on the lips of Japanese youths across the nation. Even today, Fujimura's poem makes top lists of famed suicide notes, and he makes an occasional appearance in mystery novels, tourist guidebooks, and sensationalist photo collections that purport to have captured "ghosts at famous suicide spots."<sup>7</sup> In the immediate aftermath of his suicide, still other traces were discovered in the young man's library, in the texts that he had read and in those he left behind for friends and family. Those who survived him sifted through these traces, seeking him in the textual remains.

Afterward, many of his contemporaries turned to produce their own texts in response. These included obituaries, memoirs, and memorials; letters authored ostensibly by "the person of the precipice;" poems, prose fiction, and dramas by some of the era's most well-known writers; and tabloid accounts, strident op-eds, and satirical manga that appeared in mass media.

In large part, what ensured that the incident received such attention was the high-profile status of his family and friends, who make up something of a Who's Who list of Meiji era intellectuals. His uncle was Naka Michiyo, pioneer of the discipline of East Asian history and a teacher at the elite First Higher School where Fujimura was also enrolled alongside some of the most prominent intellectuals of the time, most notably his teachers, author Natsume Sōseki and philosopher Kuwaki Gen'yoku, and his fellow students Uozumi Setsuro, who became a famous literary critic, and the philosopher-educator Abe Yoshishige, who married Fujimura's sister. The public platforms for commenting on Fujimura's suicide were many, including a memorial service held by the family at the top of Kegon Falls on June 4 with over two hundred in attendance and eulogies by his uncle, his friend Uozumi, and his teachers, as well as a public lecture "On Fujimura Misao's Death" on June 13 delivered by Kuroiwa Ruikō, the president of *Yorozu chōhō* newspaper, who was popular among students as both the founder of Risōdan (Ideal Society) and as the recent author of *Tenjinron* (May 1903).<sup>8</sup>

Fujimura's suicide spurred fierce debates among medical professionals, philosophers, journalists, literati, and educators in both the popular press and specialized journals. The debates revolved around not just the ethics of his choice to die by suicide, but also around his choice to write. Whether condemning or condoning his decisions, commentators were forced to grapple with the responsibility of writers, both those who, like Fujimura, wrote in the face of suicide and those who, like themselves, were writing in its wake.

I turn now to a close reading of his final farewell poem in order to explore how a text that marks the disappearance of its author instead results in an enduring

and controversial presence. What about the poem, its author, and his acts of writing and suicide in situ enabled the endurance of a text that itself disappeared alongside its short-lived author in Kegon Falls over a century ago? What kept the poem alive for so long? How does it enliven the dead and, perhaps, also deaden the living?

“GANTÔ NO KAN” (巖頭之感, THOUGHTS AT THE PRECIPICE)

How vast are heaven and earth,  
how endless are ancient and modern times.  
Striving to measure this greatness with my meager five-foot body,  
the philosophy of Horatio, what authority does it hold in the end?  
All truth is encompassed in just one word:  
“Incomprehensible.”  
In anguish over this resentment, at last I have decided on death.  
Standing already on the precipice,  
without the slightest unease in my breast,  
knowing for the first time  
how to unite great disappointment with great hope.

悠々たる哉天壤、  
遼々たる哉古今、  
五尺の小軀を以て此大をはからむとす、  
ホレーショの哲學竟に何等のオーソリティーを價するものぞ、  
萬有の眞相は唯だ一言にして悉す、  
曰く「不可解」  
我この恨を懷いて煩悶終に死を決するに至る  
既に巖頭に立つに及んで  
胸中何等の不安あるなし、  
始めて知る  
大なる悲觀は大なる樂觀に一致するを<sup>9</sup>

Any reader of Fujimura's poem is sure to have their own individual reactions to this text from over a century ago. What I ask us to consider here is a twofold question: How does this poem work to present the now long-dead Fujimura to us now? And how might it have worked on and for Fujimura himself at the moment before his leap?

His poem emplaces the speaker on the precipice. It roots him there on a literal and metaphorical cliff. At the same time, the poem possesses an uneasy temporality. The speaker simultaneously “stands *already* at the precipice” (*sude ni gantô ni tatsu*) in a state of transcendence and narrates his struggle up to that point. It marks his arrival in two senses—a physical one at this spot where he *now* stands (*tatsu ni oyonde*) and a conceptual one charting his arrival at the decision to die *at last* (*tsui ni shi o kessuru ni itaru*).

This journey to the precipice is described using a symmetrical structure that neatly follows the narrative formula of problem, solution, and resolution. The

opening four lines paint a panoramic vision of the cosmos, past and present, in which the dwarfed and ill-equipped speaker struggles. The middle lines are the central kernel that is invariably quoted as a soundbite to explain Fujimura's suicide:

All truth is encompassed in just one word:  
 "Incomprehensible." (「不可解」, *fukakai*)

His epiphany about the incomprehensibility of life is both the solution and the problem. It offers an answer (of sorts) to the questions that plague the speaker in the first four lines and raises another irresolvable problem that leads to his resolve to die. As the next line indicates, this choice is "at last" (*tsui ni*) made "in anguish over *this* resentment" (*kono urami o idaite hanmon*). As if to solidify the causal link between these two things, Fujimura inserted the deictic marker "this" (*kono*) in the process of proofreading.

In the poem's final five lines, the turn inward deepens as the panorama yields to a first-person embodied perspective from the ledge. Standing there is what relieves the anxieties that had formerly tormented him and is also what yields self-knowledge of "how to unite great disappointment with great hope ... for the first time." These final lines insistently emplace Fujimura on the ledge, as does the poem's title, "Thoughts at the Precipice." The nominal marker (*no*) linking the thoughts to the precipice was another belated addition made during the proofreading stage, as was the verb *knowing* (*shiru*) that marks his triumphant arrival of self-knowledge in the penultimate line.

Even as the poem insistently locates Fujimura as proximate to the site of transcendence, there is, of course, a necessary gap. The speaker may have arrived at the ledge and the epiphanic moment, but the writer of the poem carves away at an adjacent site. The tactile nature of his medium only exacerbates this sense of a gap. Crafted and carved, the poem's own materiality cannot help but remind the reader of the torturous act of inscribing the poem into the tree. His edits even suggest a proofreader who is conscious of future readers and who is himself rereading his own text in these moments prior to dying.

They also suggest a writer who had scripted this text prior to arriving at the precipice. The poem's neat symmetrical structure, lofty neoclassical prose replete with Chinese parallelisms, and a Shakespearian reference certainly give the impression of a carefully drafted work, as did the foresight evident in the perfectly sized clearing (whose semicircular shape, perhaps not coincidentally, evokes a tombstone) carved out for the poem.<sup>10</sup> Inscribing the lengthy poem into the rough, deeply grooved bark of an oak tree was no mean feat, and many noted his careful preparations—the writing brush, ink, ink stone, and knife he had brought along were depicted in sketches of the spot.<sup>11</sup> No draft was recovered, but it is not hard to imagine that one may have accompanied its writer down into the falls.

Another note that Fujimura left behind suggests that he had composed, or at least conceived, the poem even before undertaking this journey there. He articulated the same resentful sentiments over his unresolvable existential dilemma in

an inscription that he left behind for his cousins on the inside cover of Chikamatsu Monzaemon's eighteenth-century plays. There, he wrote:

In vain, I leave behind my resentments over being unable to resolve the conundrum of life to the echoes of Kegon Falls.

Boku no jinsei mondai no kaiketsu o ezu shite urami o ada ni Kegon no hibiki ni nokosu.<sup>12</sup>

Fujimura anticipates here how the echoing falls would embody him long after his own self-willed bodily absence.

For his friends and family, his poem offered an embodiment of the dead. His good friend and classmate Abe Yoshishige reflected on its importance in his memoir, writing that: "It is not enough to say that the 143 characters that make up *Thoughts at the Precipice* are words of tears or blood. It is not blood nor bones, but the letters written upon there that carry the entirety of his being."<sup>13</sup> When his other friend discovered that the authorities had neglected to delete one single character from the tree, he carefully carved it from the bark and returned it to the family.<sup>14</sup> In a literal sense, this suggests how a textual body might substitute for the corporeal one.

For Abe, this substitution process was rudely disrupted when confronted with his friend's actual corpse that was recovered forty-two days later. In his memoirs, he recalled feeling torn between the romantic beauty of the locale and the gruesome reality of death when he accompanied Fujimura's uncle on his trip to retrieve the body: "I felt that Fujimura had chosen a good place to die, but when I smelled the rotted corpse, I just wanted to leave him there stored in the bottom of the pool forever."<sup>15</sup> Abe's impulse was to bury the dead at the site of his own choosing, one that was as aesthetically pleasing as the lofty philosophical poem etched there. As we will see below, this was an impulse shared by many of Fujimura's contemporaries. Some, like his uncle, would seek to inter his physical remains at the site alongside the grand poem and falls. Others sought a less literal mode of burial, instead enshrining him in literary prose that sometimes situated him in those very same aestheticized pools. Both acts were controversial for those who, like the censorious authorities, sought to sever any seductive associations between the locale and suicide. These parties would undertake their own competing acts of writing, rewriting, and unwriting in response to the many copycat suicides that ensued in the wake of Fujimura's suicide.

#### THE PULL OF THE POEM AND THE FALLS

In just the two months following Fujimura's death, nine youths died by suicide at Kegon Falls, and two others attempted. Before graduation, three students at First Higher School killed themselves at other locales. By the end of 1903, there were sixteen suicides at the falls and twenty-six attempts. Followers were reported to have imitated Fujimura by staying in the same inn, by wearing a school uniform, and/

or by etching their own death poems into the tree. One youth who had apparently traveled to the falls not to die but only to make a tracing of Fujimura's famous poem accidentally slipped and met the same fate. By August 1907, according to a sign posted by the nearby Buddhist temple, the tally reached 185 attempts with over forty dead. Such suicides were said to belong to the "Kegon Sect," a newly coined term that played on the derivation of the falls' name from a Mahayana Buddhist sutra.<sup>16</sup>

The poem was thought to embody both Fujimura's own anguish and that of his contemporaries, who belonged to what was dubbed the "cult of anguish" (*hanmon-shū*).<sup>17</sup> In a letter to friends, Uozumi explained, "I felt that no one other than Fujimura could know my recent pains and that no one other than I could know what lay in Fujimura's dying heart. ... I didn't know the details, but even now I feel that his anguish and mine were one and the same." His friend Abe remembered feeling as if "a voice was ceaselessly following him," one that articulated the existential doubts he shared with his fellow students and that "occupied our hearts and minds."<sup>18</sup> The falls themselves were personified as embodying both contemporary youths' angst and its solution, a siren beckoning them into its waters. As a *Hoji shinbun* headline on July 21 warned, the "sounds of Kegon Falls" were like "The voice of the devil" (*Akuma no koe* [*Kegon no takioto*]).<sup>19</sup>

Even those who did not follow Fujimura noted the strong pull that his death exerted on them. In his eulogy, Uozumi proclaimed that "death incessantly beckons to me, making me desire it deeply." Iwanami Shigeo, a graduate of the First Higher School and later publishing giant, believed that Fujimura's example "showed that death is the only means to peace and reason, but I regretted that my own lack of courage and sincerity prevent it in my case, although many thought I would commit suicide."<sup>20</sup>

Not all those who claimed to be affected and infected by Fujimura's suicide were intimates, however. The September 1903 issue of the *Japan Weekly Mail* noted disapprovingly that "There have been no less than 16 known cases of imitation of his act, and the imitators have by no means been all students—mechanics and servants have figured among the victims to this strange delusion."<sup>21</sup>

Two months after Fujimura's death, one young man named Kōda Minoru left behind a note before leaping into the falls in a clear echo of "Thoughts at the Precipice:"

Last dying thoughts. How calm the sounds of Kegon Falls. How it tumbles at the time of death. A second world-weary lone traveler.

臨終の感、悠なる哉華嚴の瀑声、磊なる哉臨終の時、第二厭世の孤客

Rinjū no kan, yūnaru kana Kegon no bakusei, rainaru kana rinjū no toki, daini ensei no kokaku.

Despite any claims of being a "lone traveler," by virtue of his choices, Kōda was, of course, claiming an affiliation with Fujimura, albeit an exaggerated one. He



was actually a post office worker from Nagano who had embezzled money with no known personal ties, and yet he left behind a Waseda school uniform atop the falls and in a suicide note to his brother explained that “ever since the suicidal jump of Fujimura Misao, out of extreme weariness with life, I’ve been grieving terribly and so decided on this action.” It was this stranger’s death that led to the recovery of Fujimura’s corpse, although he was derided in the press for “throwing away his life like rubble after being moved by a bit of feeling, despite his healthy young body and education. The height of foolishness and idiocy, not something to pity, but rather to laugh at.”<sup>22</sup> Three years later, an Okayama student and avid reader of philosophy cited Fujimura’s poem in her own note before committing suicide by poison and earned the sobriquet of “the female Fujimura Misao.”<sup>23</sup> Suicide may have meant extinguishing the self, but it also could signal a desire for membership in a community of fellow death seekers.

Even when that desire was not present, the link was often made by virtue of association. An Imperial University student (and alumni of First Higher School) scornfully noted that Fujimura’s “death couldn’t avoid being badmouthed for seeking fame” and declared that he “would show ’em by dying in the middle of some dirty lake where no one would even know.” By virtue of his pronouncements, this young man’s death on June 11th that year was, in fact, known. He was even misidentified by the press as a close friend of Fujimura’s who had chosen to die out of grief.<sup>24</sup>

Fujimura was not the first to commit suicide in such a spectacular location or to leave textual traces there. As evident from the little-known case of a lovelorn twenty-two year old who left behind a bundle of his unrequited love letters before leaping to his death there in September 1902, method and locale alone did not guarantee making one’s suicide noteworthy or praiseworthy.<sup>25</sup> Journalist Kuroiwa began his June 1903 speech touting the merits of Fujimura’s philosophical suicide by distinguishing it from “common suicides of passion or insanity [*chijō no jisatsu ya hakkyō no jisatsu*].”<sup>26</sup> Even the records kept by local Nikkō authorities opened with Fujimura at the head of the list and tersely attributed the cause of his suicide as being “for the sake of philosophical research” [*Genin: Tetsugaku kenkyū no tame*].<sup>27</sup> His position as the ostensible “first” at Kegan was unassailable.

Not all praised Fujimura, however. A writer for *Kokkei shinbun*, a consistently strident critic of Fujimura, blamed his uncle, Naka Michiyo, for publicizing his suicide and his poem and thereby luring them to “the place where fools die” (*bakamono no shinibasho*), as the article title put it. In this August 5, 1906, piece, the author demanded that his uncle be charged with the crime of aiding and abetting suicide:

First of all, Fujimura inscribes Thoughts at the Precipice and leaps, and then his uncle-by-marriage, the Doctor of Letters Naka (Michiyo), rushes to the scene and after reading the charming Thoughts at the Precipice once through to the end, he edits its lines, completely whitewashing the note. As if that were not enough, he then



informs a certain Tokyo newspaper that Misao had recorded a thing of elegance about his determination to die and Fujimura Misao's name immediately spreads to every city and town, and in the end weak-willed youths of both sexes are lured to Kego. And then, what's more, the ever-mischievous Dr. Naka then tries to install a memorial stone for Misao on the precipice at Kego.<sup>28</sup>

Whereas his uncle and friends sought to ensure that Fujimura's presence remained at the site—either by literally burying his remains there or by installing a memorial stone with his poem inscribed on it—the authorities sought to erase all traces. They so feared the power of its grand philosophical sentiments imprinted onto a natural site of such grandeur “to pull people in” that they had safety fences installed and eventually tore down the entire tree.

Nevertheless, the poem took on an afterlife of its own. As the most public and publicized trace remaining, it engendered a fierce debate among commentators at the time who found themselves divided on two questions: Did it suggest that Fujimura's act of suicide was praiseworthy? And was the act of writing itself a worthy undertaking in the face of death?

#### A HIGHFALUTIN' PHILOSOPHICAL SUICIDE

Most important for anyone trying to answer these questions was discerning Fujimura's motives. His poem certainly lent itself to a highbrow philosophical interpretation. For many, Fujimura's stance invited flattering comparisons with Empedocles, who leaped into the volcano at Etna, and with the Greek poet Sappho's lovelorn leap into the sea at Cape Lefkátas, “martyrs to their beliefs.”<sup>29</sup> There was a tinge of nationalistic satisfaction in these parallels. The founder of *Yorozu chōhō* newspaper, Kuroiwa Ruikō, heralded Fujimura as “the first true philosopher in our country. Actually, no, it's not that we have no philosophers, but no one in our country before has ever died for the sake of philosophy.”<sup>30</sup>

Others denigrated the act as cowardly and weak willed, no different than the fifty students annually “who hold the future of our country in their hands and have a moral duty ... but instead live in a dream world and take their own lives.” One critic advocated more vigorous physical education in schools, while the most severe of the bunch, literary critic Hasegawa Tenkei, complained that “it's one thing to look into the mysteries of life, but to go as far as dying because of life's incomprehensibility is too much.”<sup>31</sup>

The medical community diagnosed Fujimura and other suicidal youths, moving from biological and genetic explanations to a “biopsychiatry tinged with eugenics” that increasingly pathologized and criminalized the individual and the act.<sup>32</sup> The ever-critical *Kokkei shinbun* again skewered Fujimura while lampooning this tendency. An article titled “Jisatsu no ryūkō” (Suicide trends), published in September 1906, opened with the assertion that “those who commit suicide out of

the incomprehensibility of life, out of the agonies of a broken heart, from poverty, illness, or insanity” are “good-for-nothing weaklings” and advocated “a national policy of encouraging such thugs to commit suicide in the interest of elevating our reproductive powers and the flourishing of our race.”<sup>33</sup>

The fierce arguments over Fujimura’s suicide were embroiled with larger ongoing debates that pitted the development of individualism, subjectivity, and ego against citizens’ duties to the nation, especially with the advent of the Russo-Japanese War in February 1904. Some commentators credited Fujimura’s suicide and anguish as a natural and even welcome sign of modernization that proved the “successful infusion of awareness of the self from abroad” and that rejected the “idiocy of asserting that bodies belong to the nation.” His friend Uozumi published a defense of suicide titled “Jisatsu-ron” in May 1904. Elsewhere, he praised Fujimura for offering “us fellow students” an example of one who is “grounded in individualism” and “who wagered on death for the sake of human life.”<sup>34</sup> The *Dictionary of Modern Japanese Philosophers* identifies Fujimura’s suicide as marking “the transition among contemporary First Higher Students from blind and uncritical nationalism to individualism and liberalism.”<sup>35</sup>

Others worried about this trend among youths and especially its implications for national security. In the interest of dissuading would-be copycats, a nearby Shinto shrine erected a sign at the entry to Kegon Falls warning that “suicide is an act of pollution and filial impiety that threatens the retardation of culture and patriotism.”<sup>36</sup> In an echo of this tact, during the mid-1930s suicide boom at Mount Mihara (the subject of chapter 2), an elderly postal worker took it upon himself to travel from village to village with this sign on his back: “During this time of national crisis, your life is priceless. For the sake of the nation ‘please wait a bit’ and come take counsel.”<sup>37</sup> When deemed contrary to national interest, the act of suicide could prompt severe censure.

One curious example from 1931 depicts Fujimura’s suicide as entirely compatible with nationalist projects. In an *e-maki* illustrated chronicle of noteworthy historical incidents, Fujimura’s leap was juxtaposed with the signing of the Japanese-British alliance the previous year almost as if they were a single event (fig. 2).<sup>38</sup>

The presentation and pairing of the two events here equate acts of national and self-determination. If the aligned flags of the two nations demonstrated, as the caption indicates, the “degree to which Britain, a nation proud of its glorious isolation, entrusted our nation and markedly raised our international stature,” Fujimura’s athletic leap with furrowed brow and arms outstretched suggested his unwavering self-determination. The picture’s iconography willfully asserts its Japaneseness with incongruous and inaccurate pairings: sakura petals beside the flags (although the treaty was signed in January), Japanese maple leaves in autumn behind Fujimura (although he leaped in May), and his kimono and haori dress (although he wore his student uniform, as was widely reported). Perhaps it was not coincidental that this print appeared in the same year that Kegon became an



FIGURE 2. Fujimura's patriotic leap (1931). *Meiji Taishō Shōwa dai-emaki* (1931), Tokyo: Dainihon Yūbenkai Kōdansha.

official “government-designated scenic spot” (*koku-shitei meishō*, 國指定名勝). As this example suggests, Fujimura’s suicide offered a highly malleable incident that could be refashioned to suit a variety of contexts and agendas.

Before turning to consider other creative adaptations of the incident, I want to turn our attention back to the poem. Although the above commentators were implicitly judging Fujimura based on his own poetic articulation of his motives, their commentary was rarely explicitly engaged with the poem itself. Instead, they extracted its motive and encapsulated it in a single word: *philosophical* if they were a fan, *incomprehensible* if a critic.

### TO WRITE OR NOT TO WRITE

What about the poem he chose to inscribe and the act in principle—writing before suicide—invited such disparate reactions? It was the poem’s relationship to this dying, writing body on the precipice that seemed to attract and repel in equal measure. To Anezaki Chōfū, a scholar of comparative religion, the poem articulated a fundamental existential dilemma, “truly and splendidly expressing the skepticism that arose from this issue of To be or not to be.”<sup>39</sup> As the Shakespeare citation here (and in Fujimura’s poem, too) suggested, this philosophical question was entwined with a literary one. As much as this was an existential dilemma about voluntary death and self-will, it was also about the act of writing. To write or not to write, *that* was the question.

For some poets, Fujimura’s death and his death poem were the height of poetics. Keigetsu, for example, celebrated this “young philosophy student who flung his body into Kegon Falls at Nikkō. . . . That death, how marvelously poetic. The peerless words he left behind as a youth of only eighteen [sixteen by Western count], how exquisite. A person who leaves behind such exquisite prose and achieves such a marvelous death is rarely found in any age.”<sup>40</sup> The two acts—writing and dying—were perfectly complementary, parallel events that were extraordinary for being unparalleled in history.

For his critics, writing in the face of death, much less a philosophical poem in a lofty, neoclassical scholarly register, merited only scorn. One particularly harsh critic lashed out, “What the hell is that affected prose?” (*Ano kidotta bunshō wa nan da*). Miyatake Gaikotsu, a journalist and editor known for his antiestablishment politics and satirical wit, called Fujimura’s “big epiphany nothing more than a big self-advertisement” (*hajimete shiru, ōnaru hora wa ōnaru baimei*).<sup>41</sup> If for some, the poem suggested that Fujimura had transcended such mundane concerns, for others, the laborious act of writing itself offered de facto evidence of his hypocritical failure to shed attachments. In journalist Kuroiwa’s mind, what made his “death one to be respected, as beautiful as it was elevated” was Fujimura’s own quite literally elevated perch: “He stood at a spot with the clearest and grandest view in the world, hung up a sign marking his deep skepticism, and dared to take this



extraordinary and unprecedented step.” There, Fujimura “had already achieved ‘enlightenment’ [*satori*] and so his heart was at peace and surely enabled a peaceful good death [*daijō*].”<sup>42</sup> Literary giant Futabatei Shimei came to the exact opposite conclusion about Fujimura’s state of enlightenment. In a conversation with fellow writer Masamune Hakuchō, he declared, “If I were going to die, I wouldn’t write such a thing. I’d just die. Writing just means he still had attachments” (*Are o kaku uchi wa mada miren ga aru no da*). In response, Masamune chided, “Well, I publish in newspapers and journals. My works are my ‘Thoughts at the Precipice.’ The moment I can no longer write is the moment I die.”<sup>43</sup>

Literary critic and educator Tsubouchi Shōyō was less concerned about how Fujimura himself had scripted his suicide than with subsequent commentators who fell prey to the impulse to aestheticize such spectacular suicides. In an essay titled “Jisatsu zehi” (The rights and wrongs of suicide) that appeared in *Taiyō* as part of a series of nine articles responding to Fujimura’s suicide in summer 1903, Shōyō noted, “In all ages and nations, heroic suicides are considered beautiful, whether dying after seppuku by flinging one’s innards up at the ceiling or dying by dancing one’s way down a 60-meter giant waterfall.” He acknowledged that suicide is part and parcel of modern civilization, “a special by-product of the civilized world [*bunmei no tokusan*],” but denounced the impulse to praise it as “a crime of society” (*shakai no tsumi*).<sup>44</sup>

It is important to point out here the ways that Fujimura’s very same writings and actions generated entirely opposite conclusions among these writers. Although the literati are often accused of uncritically subscribing to and promoting what has been sometimes called “the romantic cultural discourse” on suicide, not all writers endorsed this position if there was ever a singular one to be had. As we will see below, a writer like Sōseki—as an educator who knew Fujimura personally—occupied an especially ambivalent position.<sup>45</sup>

To Fujimura’s critics, there was an irresolvable contradiction between extinguishing the self and leaving behind a text that would ensure its survival by proxy. The motives for dying and for writing were, in their minds, incompatible. As the lake-jumping youth had put it, it was Fujimura’s fame-seeking behaviors that “could not help but be badmouthed.” This youth had scorned Fujimura’s choice of locale, claiming that “rather than drowning myself in some place like Kegon Falls, I’d pick a noble death at Mount Asama where my body would burn up in the volcano flames.”<sup>46</sup> This is a somewhat paradoxical comment since Asama, another suicide hotspot in the early twentieth century (with over 250 attempts by summer 1933), seems as idealized a location as Kegon. But the crucial distinction drawn here is as much about romanticized versus mundane locales (a volcano or waterfall versus “some dirty lake”) as it is about critiquing the desire to leave traces of oneself behind, whether that trace was textual (prose) or bodily (corpse).

That one’s body of writings could, and would eventually, substitute for the body of any writer was at the crux of the debate. It was this point that Masamune

eventually convinced his fellow writer Futabatei to acknowledge when he got him to concede that “the desire to want to leave behind some kind of trace [*ato-ashi*] of having lived a worthwhile life in this world” is a natural one, little different from literary creation.<sup>47</sup> As we will see, the uneasy role that these traces occupy is an issue faced by writers who choose to write in its face, and by those left behind with only a text in its wake.

#### SŌSEKI ON WRITING, READING, AND VIEWING SUICIDE FROM THE SIDELINES

For Natsume Sōseki, one of Fujimura’s First Higher School teachers, the issue was not merely academic; it was also personal. Sōseki would tackle the incident afterward repeatedly in works of fiction and literary criticism alike only to offer different assessments each time, articulating both defenses and critiques of Fujimura while harshly censuring commentators who dared to judge this youth from the sidelines.

Rumors quickly circulated that Fujimura had committed suicide because of a recent scolding by Sōseki for his lackluster academic performance. In an oft-recounted anecdote in Japanese literary histories, when Sōseki asked a student why Fujimura had died a few days afterwards, the student responded reassuringly, “Sensei, you needn’t worry. It’s okay,” and Sōseki exploded, “Don’t worry about something like this? I mean he’s dead after all, isn’t he?!”<sup>48</sup> Although his role was likely overexaggerated as a contributing cause, Sōseki’s own literary responses to the incident only fueled the perceived connection. He referred to the suicide in four separate works that appeared within four years’ time: a poem, “*Minasoko no kan*” (Thoughts at the water’s depths) in February 1904; scattered references to Kegon and Fujimura in his *Wagahai wa neko de aru* (*I am a Cat*, 1905–6), in his novel *Kusamakura* (1906), and finally in his *Bungakuron* (*Theory of Literature*, 1907). Here, I first focus on the latter two examples that tackle the ethics of writing and reading about suicide.

In *Kusamakura* (1906), in one of his many lengthy monologues about the “purity of aesthetic principle,” the painter-protagonist recounts the incident as if a tale from long ago:

A long time ago, there was a youth who left behind a poem at the precipice before making his way down into the swift waters running just beneath the 500-foot tall falls. The way I see it, for the sake of a single word—Beauty—this youth threw away a life that should not have been thrown away. Such a death is extremely heroic, though the impulse that prompted it is difficult for us to comprehend. But how can those who fail to grasp the heroism of that death dare to deride the young Fujimura’s action? Such people, who can never taste the emotions of one who accomplishes such heroism, must surely forfeit all right to scoff, for they are inferior to this young man in being unable, even in circumstances that justify such an action, to achieve that heroic end. Therefore, I say they have no right whatsoever to scoff.<sup>49</sup>

Given the unabashed aestheticism of this narrator, this passage might be interpreted as an unqualified endorsement of a suicide for the sake of art. The bulk of this passage is a fierce condemnation of “the louts and riffraff” (*gesu-gerō*) who criticize Fujimura and fail to acknowledge the “extreme heroism” (*makoto ni sōretsu*) of his suicide. But an attack on attackers is not necessarily the same thing as a ringing endorsement. And this defense of Fujimura also contains some of its own criticism:

The way I see it, for the sake of a single word—Beauty—this youth threw away a life that should not have been thrown away.

Yo o miru tokoro ni te wa, kano seinen wa bi no ichiji no tame ni, sutsubekarazaru inochi o sutetarumono to omou.<sup>50</sup>

Is the suggestion here that producing beauty *is* worth disposing of a life? Or is it that no single or singular writing, no matter how beautiful, is worth a life?

Either reading is plausible. Elsewhere in the novel, a more strident critique of writing in the face of suicide is articulated by the beautiful Nami, a character who acts as a foil to the painter’s pompous aestheticism. When the two hear from an old local woman the legend of the Nagara maiden who drowned herself after composing a famous tanka poem, the painter marvels, “Little could I have dreamed that I would find myself in such a poetic place, hearing from such a poetic figure this elegant, time-worn tale, told in such elegant language!” In contrast, Nami finds herself untouched by the suicidal woman’s plight or her famed death poem. When the painter appraises the poem as “touching” (*aware*), she asks, “Hmm, is it touching?” and tells him, “If it were me, I wouldn’t compose any such poem. To begin with, what a cliché to drown oneself in the Fuchi River.”<sup>51</sup> Here, Nami rejects the Nagara maiden as a model, and, like the lake-jumping youth cited above, implicitly Fujimura too.

If there is no definitive statement made in *Kusamakura* about Fujimura’s act of writing a death poem, there is a spirited attack on the many misreadings by others in its wake. According to the painter, these stem from an inevitable gap between actor and audience, for “such people ... can never taste the emotions of one who accomplishes such supreme heroism.” In contrast with the riffraff, however, the artist declares himself uniquely positioned because he possesses perfect aesthetic detachment. As he emphatically declares in the passage immediately following this statement, “I am a painter [*Yo wa gakō de aru*]. And, as a painter, a man whose professionally cultivated sensibility would automatically put me above my more uncouth neighbors, even if I were to descend to dwelling in the common world of human emotions.”<sup>52</sup>

The question posed by this novel is what posture an artist *should* adopt toward the spectacle of self-death and its re-presentation in art. It grapples with the tricky ethical question of the appropriate distance for both artists and audiences when writing and reading about suicide. Two alternatives are offered,



one from the perspective of the male painter-subject and another from that of the female model-object. In much of the novel, as suggested by the above passages, there is an endorsement of the artist's detached viewpoint and a rejection of the overly invested identification of the *hoi polloi*. But in his work of literary theory the following year, Sōseki instead suggests that the reverse was true. He calls for a reading practice that brings readers into close proximity to the dead, even at our peril.

Revisiting Fujimura's suicide in his work of literary theory *Bungakuron*, Sōseki explicitly addressed the ethical quandaries involved in writing and reading about suicidal acts:

Mr. Fujimura Misao leaped and drowned himself in Kegon Falls just like long ago Empedocles jumped headlong into an erupting volcano crater. Despite the fact that hearing or reading about these actual facts produces a sense of extreme heroism [*sukoburu sōretsu*], if we had encountered them attempting to die when standing beside Kegon Falls or when seated on the peak of Mount Etna, should we stand by idly and regard that death in order to satisfy our heroic aesthetic [*waga sōretsu-bi*], or should it make us cry out wildly and propel us to save them?<sup>53</sup>

In a complete reversal of the earlier conclusions advanced by the narrator in *Kusamakura*, here Sōseki rejects any heroic interpretation. Instead, he stresses the ethical responsibility of readers to respond to representations in the same way we would in reality rather than succumb to our desire for what he pointedly calls “our heroic aesthetic.” Beauty is beside the point. Readers and listeners, he suggests, have as much access to and responsibility for an incident described in a text as they do to an event in real life. He calls for readers to imagine ourselves more proximate to the textual (or aural) event and to the dead. In other words, Sōseki demands that we emplace ourselves beside Fujimura on the precipice.

#### ALTERNATIVE READINGS: PHILOSOPHIC SUICIDE OR SORDID SHINJŪ?

Fujimura's “Thoughts at the Precipice” were not the only words cited and thoroughly dissected in the public arena. Material traces were sought everywhere to explain the act. Everything was fair game for interpretation and for republication, including numerous suicide notes to friends and family and his personal correspondence in the months leading up to his suicide.<sup>54</sup> His public poem may have directed an exclusively philosophical interpretation, but his other inscriptions encouraged the theory that he was dying for love.

Literary texts were at the center of that interpretation. Much was made of the fact that a day prior to setting off for Nikkō, Fujimura had given a young woman a copy of Takayama Chogyū's 1894 *Takiguchi nyūdō* (The monk from the top of the waterfall) with a passage underlined in red about a young suitor asking a father's

permission to marry his daughter. The recipient, Dairoku Tamiki, was daughter of the president of Tokyo Imperial University. After her death in 1982, the book was donated to the Museum of Modern Japanese Literature, and splashy tabloid headlines asserted that Fujimura's "incomprehensibility about life" was really "his one-sided love for an older girl."<sup>55</sup>

Such theories, in fact, had been bandied about back in 1903, when they were either dismissed as spurious and inconsequential by supporters or mocked by his detractors. *Kokkei shinbun* derided him mercilessly in its "Jisatsu annai" (Guide to suicide):

For those who are still attached to this world and are loathe to display their horrid corpses, the best method is to jump into the sulfur pools at Hakone and a good option for those young, pedantic greenhorns who suffer from one-sided lost love but feign philosophical incomprehensibility is to kick the bucket at a famous waterfall.<sup>56</sup>

Some theorized that Takayama's novel, which had just recently been republished, had even influenced Fujimura's chosen method, since one of its protagonists carves his final testament into a large pine tree before committing suicide.<sup>57</sup>

The books in his library and those he had left behind as keepsakes were probed as well. Especially telling was *Hamlet*, which he had referenced in his poem's brief mention of Horatio, a character whom Hamlet encourages to live on to tell of his suicide. For his cousins, Fujimura left behind a volume of Chikamatsu Monzaemon's works that included his famous love suicide play "Sonezaki shinjū" ("Love Suicides at Sonezaki") and inscribed a dedication on its inside cover "to call [their] attention to the arts and to encourage [them] to study life's truths."<sup>58</sup> (This volume was belatedly discovered in 1931 at a used bookstore after being mistakenly believed for decades to belong to author Shimazaki Tōson because of their homonymous names (藤村; Tōson/Fujimura). The buyer got a discount when he pointed out that the penmanship did not match Tōson's.)<sup>59</sup>

#### REVISITINGS, REWRITINGS, AND AFTERLIVES

What keeps Fujimura's death alive and well is the proliferation of traces in its wake. Some have resurfaced decades later to reignite age-old debates, while others have spurred tales that revive the dead in prose, plays, and in pictures for motives that are sometimes personal, sometimes commercial, and for tragicomic effects.

In many of these, Kego Falls becomes a protagonist in its own right, a character that lures foolish and bookish youths to their deaths. In Sōseki's *I am a Cat*, the cat-protagonist worries that a distressed pupil "could well compose one of those rock-top suicide poems and then fling himself from over the lip of Kego Falls," and another character warns, "Based on the way he looks, he's already on his way to Kego Falls."<sup>60</sup> Tayama Katai's 1909 *Inaka kyōshi* (*Country Teacher*) censoriously links jumping into Kego with obsessive book reading and the study of sublime

philosophy among pale-faced youths. The associations among Fujimura, philosophy, and suicide were so long-lived and deeply engrained that literary critic Kamei Katsuichirō recalls his parents' forbidding him from studying philosophy as a teenager living in Hokkaido in the early 1920s out of fear that he would commit suicide like Fujimura.<sup>61</sup>

Kegon became so marked as a suicide site that it came to offer a convenient shorthand that was synonymous with youth suicide. In June 1903, shortly after Fujimura's suicide, one young man used this shorthand to signal his suicidal intent, leaving a note on a postcard that indicated only that he was headed "to Kegon Falls" (*Kegon no taki ni*).<sup>62</sup> A comic strip published in *Tokyo Puck* in 1903 employs similar shorthand by depicting a Meiji student who progresses (or rather regresses) in each panel, from a promising, studious young man and avid reader to a dropout with a broken heart who drowns his sorrows in drink, and finally, in Kegon Falls.<sup>63</sup> In 1912, another example in *Osaka Puck* spoofed the literati's impulse for a poetic death by depicting a down-and-out "pessimistic man-of-letters" at Kegon asking a policeman where to leap in order to achieve a "poetic suicide" (*shi-teki jisatsu*; fig. 3).<sup>64</sup>

After Fujimura's death there, suicide was etched onto the landscape, making Kegon Falls into a place where it was natural to feel and purge, or to act on, suicidal thoughts. Two pieces set there written by Tayama Katai before and after the Fujimura incident demonstrate the power of this singular incident to transform the site. In a travel essay penned in July 1901, the top of the falls offers a scenic, jubilant setting for Katai and his fellow young author Kunikida Doppo to celebrate their inaugural poetry collection. When reworking this episode sixteen years later, the trip to Kegon Falls offers a site for the writers to contemplate their own suicidal impulses.

In his 1917 short story "K to T" (in English, "K and T," K standing for Kunikida and T for Tayama), the two aspiring writers are frequently assaulted by "gloomy thoughts ... when K had stared at his sword late at night and wondered whether he should choose life or death, or when T, plagued by terrible spiritual and physical torments, had also on occasion contemplated doing away with himself." It is worth recalling that "K and T's" actual trip to the falls occurred back in 1897, six years before Fujimura's suicide. The narrator of the 1917 story admits that "In those days, there was no safety-fence at the top of the waterfall. Countless youthful thoughts of incomprehensibility [*wakai fukakai no kokoro*] had yet to be poured into the pool at their base." Nonetheless, the locale is credited with siren powers, as if the "falls possessed some sort of mysterious power that was trying to lure K." After K notes what a quick death it would be from such heights, T replies, "It would just take resolve. This is *the* place to come to die." (*Hito omoi de ii na. Shinu toki wa koko ni kurun da na*).<sup>65</sup>

If these works imagined Kegon Falls as a site of certain death, especially for romantic literary youths, others were *Forest Gump*-like popular adaptations that imagine Fujimura actually living on to participate in key historical events, like the miner's strikes at Ashio or the colonization of Hokkaido. Izumi Kyōka's 1903-4



A pessimistic man-of-letters asking the policeman the way of dying a poetical death.

FIGURE 3. A poetic suicide, the inevitable trip to Kegon Falls for Meiji men of letters. "Shi-teki jisatsu," *Osaka Puck* no. 7 (1912): 14. Courtesy Kyoto Seika University International Manga Research Center/Kyoto International Manga Museum.

*Fūryūsen* (The elegant railway) advances the theory that a philosopher-robber named Muraoka Fujita was part of the railroad strikes group but faked his suicide and retreated to a hideout deep in the mountains. Alternatively, there are fantastical tales of him being saved by angels who fill him with drink and dance until he accepts the limits of human knowledge, or ones that describe his redemptive encounters with magical snakes and a wise old ascetic nun, who help him to live on in the forest depths.<sup>66</sup>

Many of these adaptations borrow the voice of Fujimura, listing "Misao" or "the person at the precipice" (*gantō no hito*) as their author, as if he is speaking from

beyond the grave. Three-quarters of a century later, these imaginings of Fujimura's life and death persist. The 1973 detective novel *Nihon no Hamuretto no himitsu* (The secret of Japan's Hamlet) depicts a novelist who finds in a used bookstore a book called *Kegon spiritualism*, mistakenly thought to belong to the library of Shimazaki Tōson. When the novelist publishes a newspaper essay linking the author with the Kegon sutra, Fujimura's granddaughter surfaces to correct his error and to tell the true story of Fujimura's life after the leap.<sup>67</sup>

#### MOURNING AND BURYING OUR DEAD IN THE LAND AND IN LITERATURE

These many reworkings attest to an enduring fascination with Fujimura. Incorporating his sensational suicide offered authors a means of injecting their works with topicality, and undeniably also with cultural capital. But, less cynically, they could also offer a collective or individual means of mourning the dead. In some cases, his close friends or teachers authored these texts that imagine a magical, peaceful reunion with their dead, including his friend Fujiwara Sei's 1905 tale that dreams of an encounter with Fujimura on the precipice where he decides against dying and now spends his time reading books under giant trees.

Before closing out this chapter, I offer two last moving examples in which Kegon Falls is figured as a site of haunting and mourning where the dead are laid to rest. The first example by Shimazaki Tōson, an author who as we have seen was often inadvertently mixed up with Fujimura over the years, is "Tsugaru kaikyō" ("Tsugaru Strait," 1904). It offers the perspective of a family grieving over their son's suicide in Kegon Falls. In this short story, the parents are at sea, quite literally. They mourn their son as they make their way by ferry to Hakodate under the threat of the retreating Russian fleet. In clear echoes of Fujimura's own poem, the father-narrator defends his son for "investigating the meaning of life" but "discovering that his learning made him ignorant." The parents especially mourn having lost his unrecoverable corpse to the waterfall. The father's desire for a reunion with his son even in some incorporeal form is palpable when he entertains some magical thinking: "If the dead body should float up from the basin of that waterfall, and be borne away by the current, where would it go? Nowhere but into this ocean! Yes, yes, this restless place of wind and wave; this must be the grave of my son."<sup>68</sup> The father's words strive and strain to mark a place of burial for his beloved, even if only in a vast watery grave. Apparent here is a natural desire to bury one's dead, to put the dead to rest in a literal sense.

Let us step back for a moment to ask, Why might literature matter to this process? How might written texts act as a repository for our dead, as a place to mourn and remember them from a distance?

In *The Dominion of the Dead*, Robert Pogue Harrison offers fascinating insights that suggestively link the enshrinement of dead bodies in the earth to their long



afterlives in less corporeal forms. In his examination of the cultural meanings of burial through far-ranging examples in Western literary and philosophical traditions—from Dante and Vico to Nietzsche and Joyce—he points out how crucial it is that the bodily corpse be recovered and buried so that they may be properly mourned and thereby live on. As he explains, “It is only because their bodies have a place to go that their souls or images or words may attain an afterlife of sorts among the living.” Their remains need to be put to rest so that they might remain among us “in the earth, in our memory, in our institutions, in our genes, in our words, in our books, in our dreams, in our hearts, in our prayers, or in our thoughts.”<sup>69</sup>

Central to this mourning process is burying the dead *in* the land (the return of the human to the humus) and marking that site (with a *sema*, the Greek word for both grave and sign). In contrast, it is the “uninscribable” nature of “gravestones on the sea” that cause “the loved ones of those who sink into its unfathomable grave ... [to] suffer a special form of anguish.” As Ishmael laments on behalf of widows of sailors lost at sea in *Moby Dick*, “Oh! ye whose dead lie buried beneath the green grass; who standing among flowers can say—here, *here* lies my beloved, ye know not the desolation that broods in hearts like these.”<sup>70</sup> In Tōson’s story, too, the words of the bereaved father strive to mark the spot even though, or perhaps especially because, it is unknown:

Yes, yes, *this* restless place of wind and wave; *this* must be the grave of my son! Here my son must be sleeping forever and ever ...

Sō da, sō da, kono namikaze no katatoki mo yasumanai tokoro, koko ga segare no hakaba de arō, koko ni [segare] ga itsumademo nemuru no de arō.<sup>71</sup>

This literary fictional text offers a means of effecting a metaphorical burial of the dead.

The absence of a corpse precludes proper burial and mourning rites. This lasted, in Fujimura’s case, for the forty-two days after his suicide. His friend Uozumi lamented in his eulogy that “without his bodily remains” (*ikotsu nashi*) to mourn, his family and friends could only gather together in grief to offer prayers at Kegon Falls. Fujimura was like the undead, subjected to dying over and over again, a “re-death replaying ceaselessly in our minds” (*ware saishi* [再死] *o kaite tomazu*).<sup>72</sup>

This impulse to bury the dead, to fix a burial place, even an imagined one, that might offer the dead and those mourning him respite is perhaps especially pressing in the case of a violent self-death. This desire is not merely an aestheticizing impulse intent on romanticizing suicide but part and parcel of a fundamental mourning process. For those left behind by Fujimura, where he had emplaced himself—both literally and in his literary inscriptions—guided their own placement. If some visions sought to restore him whole atop the precipice living on and thinking his deep philosophical thoughts, others sought refuge in visions of his body peacefully stored at the bottom of the pools forever.

In February 1904, his teacher Sōseki wrote a poem in response to his suicide that reimagines the site as a peaceful grave uniting Fujimura with his unrequited lover beneath the waters:

“MINASOKO NO KAN” (水底の感, THOUGHTS AT THE WATER’S DEPTHS)

In the water’s depths, the water’s depths.  
 To dwell in the water’s depths.  
 Vowing deeply, sinking deeply,  
 let us dwell there long, you and I.  
 Black hair, long and disheveled.  
 Drifts gently, alongside the seaweed.  
 In a dream life that is not a dream?  
 In a darkness that is not darkness.  
 Happy depths of the water.  
 For pure ones like us, slander is far off,  
 unhappiness does not penetrate.  
 With unsettled wavering hearts,  
 a shadow of love just faintly visible.

by Fujimura Misao’s girl<sup>73</sup>

Sōseki’s poem situates Fujimura’s death in the tradition of double love suicides, imagining the lovers blissfully reunited under the waters. Its poetics transform the site from a place of violent self-death into one of peaceful repose. If there is any critique here, it is lodged against those who might “slander” this “pure” couple. The couple themselves are far removed from any such mundane disturbances. This poem creates an intimate cordoned-off space for their own private dialogue.

One way to think of Sōseki’s poem is as an intimate dialogue with the dead. But this is not a straight communiqué. Curiously, he chose to sign the poem “Fujimura’s girl” and to send this on a postcard with no further explanation to his poet-disciple, Terada Torahiko, who called it a “weird poem” (*kawatta shi*). Although it later became part of Sōseki’s published works, at first it was a private communication between two men. In a fascinating article on this topic, Robert Tuck argues that in sending this to his disciple, Sōseki was attempting to reassert homosocial bonds that were threatened by heterosexual desires. In this reading, Sōseki counterintuitively evokes an image of conjugal bliss between Fujimura and “his girl” in the afterlife in order to restore male-male bonds in this one.<sup>74</sup>

The question remains as to what kind of bond Sōseki was asserting, or severing, with Fujimura in creating this poem. Adopting the voice of Fujimura’s female lover is a complex move through which he seems to have been renegotiating his own relations with his young pupil in the aftermath of his suicide. The poem suggests a doubled act of ventriloquism. As much as Sōseki is speaking in the voice of the dead female lover to Fujimura, he is also echoing both Fujimura’s voice and medium of choice. Sōseki is speaking both *to* and *through* Fujimura here.



In its rhetorical echoes of Fujimura's own last writing, there is a literary reckoning with the dead. Sōseki strategically echoes his pupil's poem by using a similar symmetrical structure. Its middle lines—"In a dream life that is not a dream? / In a darkness that is not darkness"—lean toward a similarly philosophical inquiry, while its title offers the clearest echo with its elevated "thoughts" (*kan*). But the intimate voice of Sōseki's poem is a far cry from Fujimura's lofty monologue. The echoes appear to be as deliberate as the differences.

The biggest difference is that Sōseki points to doomed love as the cause. Invoking the love thesis at all was something of a taboo among Fujimura's supporters, who instead clung to the notion of suicide for philosophy's sake. Sōseki's poem grounds the young man quite literally—bringing him down from his perch and situating him bodily beside his would-be lover in the pools. Rather than any lofty monologue, there is a cozy dialogue between "you and me," "we pure ones." Although this may seem like a put-down, no criticism is evident here and we should not take this too literally. Instead, I would suggest that it points to a metaphorical attempt to effect a burial.

In moving from the precipice to the watery depths, the poem reflects a desire to put Fujimura to rest. As discussed above, this requires the disposal of the body so that the dead might live on in some other register. The opening of Sōseki's poem evokes the physical bodies of the lovers, weighted by their vows and by their bodily heft, sunk to the bottom of the pools, long tangled locks of hair drifting this way and that along with the seaweed. The word Sōseki uses for seaweed—*mokuzu* (藻屑)—evokes not just sea algae but the metaphor of dying in a watery grave. In contrast with these active, visceral bodies that dwell, vow, sink, and even implicitly have erotic entanglements beneath the sea, in the latter half of the poem, any physicality is erased. Only the purest emotions remain, faint shadows of love glimpsed in the happy depths.

If Fujimura's own poem moved from vast metaphysical realms toward an embodied presence standing on the precipice, this one has an opposing movement. The bodies are invoked only to disappear. While Fujimura's poem suspends the speaker on the precipice at a moment of transcendence, Sōseki's releases him to dwell beside his lover in a happy watery grave forevermore.

#### DIALOGUING WITH THE DEAD IN GRAVEN WORDS AND IMAGES

In the wake of Fujimura's suicide, his family and friends, too, sought to put him to rest in his chosen site. In early June, before there was a body to bury, two hundred friends and family gathered at the precipice to conduct a memorial ritual to placate his restless spirit. *Yomiuri shinbun* announced the plan and explained that its impetus stemmed from their "inability, no matter how they searched, to discover the corpse of the world-weary youth Fujimura Misao that was either sunk

in the depth of the waterfall basin or stuck beneath the tumultuous currents.” The uncomfortable specter of his absent presence at the site required this “ritual to beckon the spirit” (*tamashii o manegi saiten*). Uozumi’s eulogy, delivered there atop the precipice, opened by addressing the dead directly: “Aah, out of feeling such sorrow that you have passed and without your bodily remains [*ikotsu nashi*], your family and old friends can only offer a memorial service to your spirit in the distant heavens above.”<sup>75</sup>

Once the body was recovered, his uncle pressed to have Fujimura buried near Kagon Falls, but his mother insisted his remains be interred in the family grave at Aoyama Cemetery in Tokyo. In lieu of his grave, a memorial stone was to be installed at the head of the falls that reads:

O, here stands the monument to Fujimura Misao.

From an early age, you bore resentment over life’s incomprehensibility, and on

May 22, 1903, you threw yourself into Nikkō Kagon Falls and ended your life.

At the final moment before casting yourself from the large tree beside the precipice, you handwrote a last note.

These words are carved on front of this stone.

At that time, you were eighteen years old, in your first year in the humanities at First Higher School.

Upon hearing of your death and unable to bear the pain, over 200 people gathered here working together to build this monument to express our grief.

The memorial stands as an expression of collective grief. The speaker cries out in pain, both his own and that of his fellow mourners, as well as Fujimura’s, but strives to put this anguish to rest with the words on the stone.

These graven words and images achieve a formidable rhetorical feat. They offer relief in relief. Rhetorically, this is accomplished by the use of a slippery and sliding narrative voice and perspective. Again, there is a near verbatim citation of Fujimura’s own final words. The eminently quotable soundbite from his poem explains the cause: “resentment over the incomprehensibility of life” (*jin-sei fukakai no urami o idaki*). But here, the words are speaking *for, about, and to* the dead, even slipping from third to second person address. Factual information about Fujimura—his age, school, date of suicide, and so on—is interspersed with raw emotion. The inscription asserts his loved ones’ physical and emotional proximity to the dead, who is addressed directly with the affectionate “kimi” or tagged with the familiar “-kun:” over two hundred people gather *here* in grief having heard of *your* death.

The intended audience for this memorial is both Fujimura himself and his immediate kith and kin, although it also encompasses the sightseers who will visit in years to come. In a July 1903 article, Fujimura’s friend Uozumi revealed its uneasy status as both memorial and tourist attraction quite plainly, writing, “We plan to build a memorial stone not far from this precipice with these words carved

in stone for the peaceful repose of your soul. Tourists who come to enjoy Nikkō in the future will have one additional thing they should see.”<sup>76</sup>

In fact, the memorial is not located at the falls. It instead resides at the Fujimura family plot at Aoyama Cemetery, where it was installed in January 1909 after the nearby Shinto shrine that owned the land near Kegon Falls denied permission.<sup>77</sup> The misleading wording that situates it atop the precipice appears to be the result of poor timing. Nonetheless, it is suggestive of the ways that memorials strive to link the dead to the site of their death, as well as to wed the living to those people and places. The dead remain a stubborn long-lived presence in our midst.

Today, most traces of Fujimura's suicide have been eliminated from Kegon Falls. Just two signs of his death remain, and they, too, reveal coexisting impulses to memorialize and to commercialize the dead. The first is a remake of the original postcard of Fujimura superimposed next to the falls and another of his poem “Thoughts at the Precipice.” The passage of time has necessitated the addition of a libretto and kana readings for today's less literate readers. A bilingual Nikkō guidebook sold at the falls explains in greater depth the story of Fujimura's leap and how it led to the waterfall's enduring fame as a suicide spot with over 100 attempts per year.<sup>78</sup>

The second remaining trace is a Buddhist statue dedicated to all those who died at Kegon Falls. After the collapse of the original teahouse from a landslide in the mid-1920s, another company installed an elevator that now takes tourists to outdoor concrete platforms located across the basin. There, a small shop sells the usual souvenirs alongside the postcards and tourist guides. In the tunnel that takes visitors to the falls stands a small Buddhist statue with an inscription that reads:

Here I dedicate this statue in prayer for the repose of the great many souls who have fallen as dew from the precipice of Kegon Falls.

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Visitors can no longer ascend to the precipice. Once they emerge from the tunnel, they are left to take refuge in the distant panoramic view and in comforting natural metaphors of falling dew. Gazing at the falls from the safety of distanced observation decks, we are a long way from Fujimura's own poem and perspective.