

## Intellectual Conscience and Self-Cultivation (*shūyō*) as Imperatives in Japan's Modernization: Mori Ōgai, *Youth (Seinen)*, 1910-11)

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### Abstract

Modernity, with its three stages of industrialization, technological innovation and postmodernism, covered two hundred years in the West – in Japan it was compressed into one century. The “new man” (or “Meiji man”) as conceived by the Meiji period (1868-1912), the start of the modern era in Japan, also proved in a way to be an “experiment” under the sign of “modernization” and “westernization”, of “modernity” and “tradition”. Seemingly a symbol of all the changes imported from Europe, Mori Ōgai (1862-1922) raises the issue of modern education in his novel *Seinen*, proposing a reformulation of traditional Japanese values. By underlining the individual freedom promoted by an élite writer and ideologist of a Japan in course of modernization, the present study aims to discuss from the perspective of ideological aesthetics Mori Ōgai's attempt to redefine literature (*bungaku*) as an “institution” connecting the individual and culture seen as knowledge and power. “Individualism”, “universality” and “freedom” are, as Mori Ōgai states in *Seinen*, the most important “issues” in modern Japan. Posing, by means of a literary work, the question of which role Japan would play on the economic, political and cultural world stage, the Japanese writer raises the issue of the intellectual's status and that of “nationalism”, understood not in its political sense but rather as individual conscience and national identity.

**Keywords:** self-cultivation, intellectual conscience, modernity, tradition

*The jewel becomes a jewel through polishing. Man becomes really human through training. No jewel shines in its natural state. No novice is characterized by keenness from the very beginning. They must be polished and trained.*

Dōgen (1200-1253)

*Learn from the sages and you may become one.*

Zhu Xi (1130-1200)

Due to his promotion of Western literary, philosophical and scientific ideas, Mori Ōgai (1862-1922) is considered a romantic and idealist “flame” in Japan, a writer and scientist who raised through his work the issue of the intellectual's mission and that of the freedom of thought and expression in Japanese society. Seeing himself as an “eternal malcontent”, Mori Ōgai particularly revolutionized Japanese literature and thus became, along Natsume Sōseki (1867-1916), one of the intellectual giants of the Meiji period (1868-1912).

A child prodigy, Mori Rintarō, who remained in the memory of Japanese and world posterity as Mori Ōgai, he studies classical Chinese and reads Confucius at the age of five. He then studies Dutch and, at the age of ten, leaves for Tokyo, where he dedicates several years to learning German. A graduate of the Tokyo School of Medicine, he becomes a doctor at the age of nineteen and enlists in the Army Medical Corps. The same year, he is entrusted with the task of studying the Prussian medical administrative system and, three years later, he presents the Ministry of War with an impressive document in twelve volumes. Between 1884 and 1888, he studies medicine in Leipzig and Berlin, and visits France and England. After returning to Japan, he is appointed Professor at the Military Medicine College, where an ascending career takes him to the highest position in

Japanese medical hierarchy at the age of forty-three. He takes part in the military campaigns during the Sino-Japanese war (1894-1895) and the Russo-Japanese war (1904-1905). Between 1899 and 1902, he is exiled by his superiors to the south of Kyushu Island, as a punishment for his free ideas, but is recalled to Tokyo in 1902. In 1917, he is appointed director of the Imperial Museum and the Imperial Archives. He leads the Imperial Fine Arts Academy and acts as president of the Provisional Japanese Language Committee (see Rimer, 1991: 95-6; see Simu, 1994: 173).

The period in which Mori Ōgai is active begins with the promulgation of the Imperial Constitution of 1889, published on February 11, the day of the national *kigensetsu* celebration, which commemorates the mythical foundation of the nation in 600 BC, when the first Japanese Emperor is said to have descended from the heavens. The Constitution, a special “present” to the people from the emperor representing the “governing authority” and “military duty” (see Bellah, 2003: 170), proposes a social, technological and educational reform. Marking the end of the political system’s “renovation” initiated by the Meiji Restoration, the Constitution drafted by Itō Hirobumi (1841-1909) preserves the cultural heritage of the preceding period, the Tokugawa shogunate (1600-1868), finding itself in both “conflict” and “synthesis” with the modern Western culture with which Japan had begun to come into contact. Mori Ōgai experiences this tension himself and permanently attempts a “refined” combination of these two tendencies: the preservation of tradition and the assimilation of Western influences. Between his return from Europe, a year before the Constitution was adopted, and his death in 1922, over thirty years, Mori Ōgai is constantly preoccupied with all the great issues of Japanese culture, and comes to be considered “the personification of the age in which he lived” (Katō, 1998: 732).

An energetic, exuberant man with immense working capacity, Mori Ōgai had in fact a double career: as a doctor and a writer. The years he spent abroad meant for the Japanese scientist and humanist not only an encounter with the values of another culture and civilization, but also, astonishing in a way, the *rediscovery* of his own culture. In Munich, he reads in the June 29, 1886 issue of the *Allgemeine Zeitung* an article titled *Land und Leute der japanischen Inselkette* (‘Land and people of the Japanese archipelago’), signed by a German geologist called Edmund Naumann, who had spent ten years (1875-1886) in Japan. Mori Ōgai counteracts (*Die Wahrheit über Japan*, ‘The truth about Japan’) in the December 30 issue, but Naumann publishes another article, which causes Mori Ōgai to reply again (*Noch einmal die Wahrheit über Japan*, ‘Again the truth about Japan’) on February 1, 1887 (see Katō, 1998: 735). According to Naumann, Japan was a poor, dirty country lagging behind, full of contagious diseases and barbaric customs, which imported chaotically and undiscerningly Western customs and technology, forgetting its traditions. Mori Ōgai tries through his polemic to show another dimension of his motherland, but realizes that it is partly a futile attempt, all the more so because he had actually dedicated his time to the study of Western science and culture. He realizes then that it was necessary not only to evaluate Japanese tradition in the world context, but that he himself was not yet capable of taking this attempt upon himself, his unconvincing, unfocussed replies being unable to counteract the attacks Westerners formulated against the Japanese society of the age. He commits the arguments of his “opponent” to memory and becomes aware of his own weakness. Presenting Japan to the world did not merely imply “westernizing” the country, but also getting the Japanese themselves to understand their cultural heritage from the inside. For his part, Mori Ōgai would try to get to know and understand his tradition through literature, proposing a conciliation that would harmonize the method of study of the exact sciences with the spiritual and ideal dimension characteristic of literary creation:

“No matter how involved he become in the events around him, Ōgai preserved the ability to study them, and himself, with a certain detachment. As for the virtues of such a sense of detachment, he was to come to feel a certain poignant ambiguity [...] some of this ability to remove himself from emotional engagement in the affairs around him may have come from his early upbringing in the tradition of Confucian self-cultivation. Or perhaps these attitudes of mind were reinforced by the mental precision demanded of him through his medical training, a quality that can be observed in the work of another literary doctor, Anton Chekhov.” (Rimer, in Ōgai 1994: 4)

Mori Ōgai, a writer, aesthetician, linguist and translator, compared in Japan to Balzac, is primarily renowned as the creator of the “novel of the self” (*watakushi shōsetsu*), inspired from the European autobiographical novel of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He wrote over twenty novels, evolving from a literature of romantic inspiration, through idealism towards an objective realism that does not exclude either intellectualism or the ability to psychologically motivate the characters’ actions. Mori Ōgai’s attitude to the naturalist current that dominated the Japanese literary market of the age, similar to Natsume Sōseki’s, is the opposition to the subordination of reason and intelligence promoted by the determinist philosophy of naturalism. Consequently, his literary experiment begins with a romantic text titled *Maihime* (*The Dancing Girl*), published in 1890, an autobiographical novel that tells the love story between a Japanese student and a German dancer.

It has been stated (cf. Snyder, 1994: 356) that Mori Ōgai's work expresses the rhetoric lesson learned from European literature, while trying to develop for it a Japanese idiom of expression. Kamei Hideo and later Karatani Kōjin also consider that the birth of modern Japanese literature was not due to the *genbun itchi* movement, represented by Futabatei Shimei (1864-1909) with his novel *Ukigumo (Floating Clouds)*, but to Mori Ōgai's literature, in spite of its archaic expression. This is also supported by the identification in Mori Ōgai's first novel of what Kamei Hideo calls "the immanent self" (*naizaitekina jiko*) (in Snyder, 1994: 356-357), which would come very near to the Western understanding of the term:

"...perhaps because I had been exposed to the liberal ways of the university for some time, there grew within me a kind of uneasiness; it seemed as if my real self, which had been lying dormant deep down, was gradually appearing on the surface and threatening my former assumed self." (Ōgai, 1975:153)

Alternating between the first-person auctorial voice (*Vita sexualis*, 1911), third-person narrative (*Hannichi/ Half a Day*, 1909) and a combination of the two (*Seinen/ Youth*, 1910 or *Gan/ Wild Geese*, 1915), and thus using a variety of voices or focalizations inside a diegetic frame, the Japanese writer gives his stories the necessary narrative framework for a psychological novel. *Vita sexualis*, *Seinen* and *Gan* all evoke the atmosphere of the academic and intellectual milieu of the Meiji period without being part of a chronological succession that might render them into a trilogy (see Tschudin, 2006: 246). However, as they approach a common theme from different narrative angles, Japanese literary history has placed them all under the sign of *Bildungsroman* or the novel of self-discovery.

After a period of silence of almost twenty years after his literary debut in 1890 with the novel *Maihime*, Mori Ōgai begins to write fiction again in 1909. Published in instalments between March 1910 and August 1911 and again in one volume in 1913, the novel *Seinen (Youth)* reminds in title and content not only of Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre/ Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* published in 1796 and of Mori Ōgai's particular admiration for the German writer, but also of Natsume Sōseki's novel *Sanshirō* published in 1908, a year before Mori Ōgai began writing *Youth*.

*Seinen* deals with the coming of age, under different aspects, of young Koizumi Junichi (whose suggestive name would translate as 'little spring' + 'pure'), coming from the province to the capital in order to become a writer. Having left his homestead in the belief he would study under the guidance of Ōishi Kentarō, a fictional name of the naturalist writer Masamune Hakuchō (1879-1962), after several meetings with the latter, the young man, contemporary with the beginnings of modern Japan and a disguise for the author himself, sees his illusions destroyed and realizes he must assume not only his own literary destiny, but also his own intellectual development. Through his discovery of himself, Junichi arrives from passive narcissism to self-knowledge and self-control (cf. Rimer, in Ōgai, 1994: 376) and begins asking questions about the relationship between literary creation and personal experience. Preoccupied with the extent to which a literary text becomes or should become a testimony of the self and of self-cultivation, he searches for the appropriate expression of this entire inner world, for the language that would allow him to represent immediate experience of any kind, be it physical or intellectual. But his preoccupation with narrative form, his meditations on truth and lie in a literary creation or, in other words, on the relationship between the real and the imaginary, his reservations about the successful representation of reality through fiction, the difficulty of opting between action or detached observation (cf. Snyder, 1994: 355), they shall all eventually point Junichi back to the old legends of his birthplace, which, in his desire to reformulate national myths under the name of "history" (cf. Hopper, 1974: 409), he wants to bring back into contemporary actuality:

"What he wanted to write was something different from what was now popular. The subject he wanted to set down was a legend his grandmother had once told him when he was in his hometown. He had attempted to write about this legend several times. He had thought about setting it down in several modes, once in verse, once in prose, once even wanting to imitate Flaubert's narrative style in which the French author had written his *Trois Contes*. Once he had even thought of creating it as a play, using a short script of Maeterlinck's as a source. Shortly before he had left Tokyo, he had made his latest attempt, some twenty or thirty pages he had started, the manuscript at the bottom of the leather bag he had left at Yanaka." (Mori Ōgai, 1994: 513-514)

In time, *Seinen* has seen a variety of interpretations, from considerations of its failure due to excessive descriptions up to its re-evaluation as a success in the adaptation of a *Bildungsroman* in Japanese literature (see O'Neill 2006: 302). Junichi's discovery of the capital, a space of numerous internal contradictions originating in the combination of old and new, as well as his taking part in the debates of the literary clubs, reveal, behind extremely transparent masks, numerous personalities of the age: Natsume Sōseki, Masamune Hakuchō, Kinoshita Mokutarō, Itō Hirobumi, Okakura Tenshin and even Mori Ōgai himself. The novel's time setting

becomes thus apparent, the period written about covering the last three months of the year 1909. An extradiegetic narrator and a twenty-year-old character, Koizumi Junichi, lend each other their thoughts, creating an interesting temporal encounter. The omniscient narrative voice dissolves, from time to time, into the monologues of the main character, into his dialogues with other characters and into the diary fragments written in the first person (chapters 10 and 15), thus creating the necessary diegetic framework for telling a story within a story. *Seinen*'s narrative structure, a combination of third-person and first-person auctorial voices, thus consists of short passages in the first person – quotations from the main character's diary – interwoven with a narrative in the third person built on the model of 19<sup>th</sup> century European fiction. This impersonal voice describes events, relates discourses and connects the characters' intimate thoughts (see Snyder, 1994: 359), thus making the transition from personal to impersonal.

What particularly stands out in this novel is not so much the distant stand the narrator takes, the third-person auctorial voice, which turns the character into a contemporary of the novel being written but rather the variety of Junichi's readings, books read and mentioned in the original language, not in the Chinese translation (see White 1990: 3), as Japanese scholars had done before 1860. References to various foreign or Japanese texts fill *Seinen* with quotations, characters' comments and reflections on various writings, from the Buddhist sutras to St. Augustine, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Neither do the great French classics such as Corneille, Racine, Molière, Voltaire, Hugo go unmentioned, nor the representative names of the moment in universal and Japanese literature, to mention but a few: Zola, Flaubert, Maupassant, Paul Hesse, Ibsen, Verhaeren, Lemonnier, Maeterlinck, Tayama Katai, Morita Sōhei and Kosugi Tengai. It is not so much the physical presence in the places that gave Western literature these names that is important in the text but rather another type of encounter – the one mediated by books – that can undeniably influence an individual's intellectual development.

The Japanese word "seinen" could translate as both "young man" and "youth" – the two meanings come together in the final meaning of the text, which reveals in young Koizumi Junichi's portrait all the features of youth: beauty, oversensitivity, passion, but also indifference, lucidity and loneliness. The process of coming of age, of discovering himself opens up two roads to knowledge to the young protagonist: an emotional-sentimental one through the erotic experiences he makes, mediated by his encounters with the innocent girl Oyuki, with the *geisha* Ochara and with the mysterious widow Mrs Sakai, and an intellectual one through reading and meditation. If, in previous centuries, the most widely read books came from the fields of medicine, natural history, astronomy and physics (see Keene, 1969: 75), *Seinen* shows us the new direction young people take in terms of reading, oriented to Western or Japanese literature and philosophy. But the numerous intertextual references inevitable in the composition of such a text seem to subsidiarily submit to our attention a debate focusing on the question if one can become modern without rejecting traditional values. The use of intertextuality here shows both the question's limitations and its openness. It makes parts of a seemingly closed space open uninterruptedly under the reader's gaze, the fragments becoming then components of a whole whose center, not needing to choose between two alternatives (the new or the old, modernity or tradition) anymore, appears as a "vanishing point" (Karatani 1998: 150), an indirect reference to the apophantism of Zen Buddhism. Unlike the rational foundation of Western thinking, which promotes the violence of dualism (cf. Mazzotta, 1992:188), that is the Cartesian universe of discontinuity, this vanishing point of Zen Buddhism, also identifiable in the novel, seems to be the place where the main character will eventually find the strength to become free:

"...Nor had his resolution to go back to Tokyo and write faded. But merged with the purity of his single-minded resolve was a slight suspicion that had crept in, a whispering voice saying to him, 'Often you began writing on the spur of the moment only to find yourself suffering a discouraging setback, haven't you?' Fortunately, this whispering voice was not sufficiently powerful to paralyze his will. On the contrary, that whispering voice stimulated his desire to write, and he felt that it increased the power of resistance within him." (Mori Ōgai, 1994: 515-516)

Intertextuality also intervenes then as an important supporting point in defining the concepts of "freedom" and "individualism". The modernity of the country, at the crossroads between continuity and change, is still in its beginning. The literature of the time is also young and has its "literary youth" (see Kobayashi 1995: 46) – it cannot be easy for young artists and intellectuals to find their way to maturity in this new environment where not only the urban landscape is renewing itself with trams and cars, but also the entire value system is being reconsidered. Living in times governed by commandments such as "hard work and application" (*kokku benrei*) or "thrift, diligence and effort" (*kinken doryoku*) (see Hirakawa, 2009: 100), young people try to understand themselves within a young culture also looking for its identity. In an age when the meditative spirit seems to have been sacrificed to dreams about the future, ideas to action and true feelings to adventure, Junichi's attendance of a lecture by the scientist Hirata Fuseki, in fact a disguise for Natsume Sōseki, seems to become

motivated in the economy of the novel. On this occasion, speaking to the members of the Didaskalia organization, the “erudite” Hirata Fuseki raises the issue of “individualism”, and in his line of argumentation Ibsen becomes the model that can exemplify the “new man” in search for ideals adapted to the age:

“Zola’s Claude searched for Art. Ibsen’s Brand searched for an ideal. In order to obtain what they were looking for, they did not mind sacrificing even their wives and children. And even they ceased to exist. Some have even said Ibsen was viewing the world cynically, even satirizing Brand. But the truth is that Ibsen was not being cynical but quite serious. He was seriously searching for a way to improve the world. All or nothing – this was the ideal which Brand, the protagonist, was seeking, but what Ibsen was searching for was limited to the idea that this ideal world would come from one’s self, would come from one’s own free will. In other words, one has to blaze one’s own trail in order to walk along it. In order to obey the ethics of this self, one has to create one’s own ethics. In order to believe in religion, one has to establish one’s own religion. In a word, one has to seek autonomy. Even for Ibsen, the formulation of autonomy was probably an impossibility. At any rate, it was Ibsen himself doing the seeking. He was a modern. He was a man of the new age.” (Mori Ōgai, 1994: 408)

Junichi knows about Hirata Fuseki that, although “outdated”, he enjoyed in the literary world the reputation of “the most scientific of writers” – by inserting his lecture into the narrative, Mori Ōgai turns in fact an extremely important page in Japanese literary history in terms of the “Meiji man”. In Natsume Sōseki/ Hirata Fuseki’s view, the latter appears alienated, having broken with both his past and his future. Unlike the “Western new man” exemplified through Ibsen, for Hirata Fuseki (or Natsume Sōseki) this “new Meiji man” has lost not only his innocence but also the moral integrity that connected him to the Japanese traditional neo-Confucianism, by being attracted to Western materialism. Under these conditions, for Natsume Sōseki, the role of the artist in this new age becomes that which “loneliness” and “individualism” can play (see Brodey, in Sōseki, 2004: 11). And literature, to the extent it sees the self as the essential ingredient (cf. Sōseki, 2004: 40), can propose a meditation not only on the self but also on national identity, as long as there seems to be no difference in measure between the consciousness of the age and that of the individual: “period consciousness is of neither greater magnitude nor lesser significance than self-consciousness” (Kobayashi, 1995: 25). Indirectly suggesting a psychological and an ideological design through this dialogue with his contemporary, Mori Ōgai underlines the fact that young modern literature shall have to start addressing both the personal self and city culture, both lost and reinvented tradition, both the issues of aesthetics and those of ideology, becoming the “institution” (*kokubungaku*) (cf. Karatani, 1998: 22) that connects the individual to culture interpreted as knowledge and power.

Natsume Sōseki had published the study “The Philosophical Foundations of Literature” in 1907, the year he resigned his professorship at the Tokyo Imperial University, a gesture also mentioned in *Seinen* by one of the participants in Fuseki’s lecture, as an argument in favour of the relationship between the creator and the work transposed into reality. The lecture mentioned in the novel could not be identified by Japanese literary historians but is a clear intertextual reference to Natsume Sōseki’s lectures, later published as studies in literary theory, and “The Philosophical Foundations of Literature” seems to be one of Mori Ōgai’s theoretical cornerstones for *Seinen*. Searching for that particular “something” that turns a piece of writing into “literature” himself, Mori Ōgai reminds us through his novel of the artistic ideals invoked by Natsume Sōseki in the aforementioned study, ideals which can also be found in literature: *truth, beauty, goodness* and *sublimity*. The four ideals veiled or outspoken in a literary work become the basic notions that Mori Ōgai tries to illustrate in *Seinen*. The novel’s subsidiary message gives a glimpse of the idea that it is not the reproduction of naked reality what literature means, but the way of perceiving this reality, of reflecting upon it, following one or more of the ideals mentioned by his contemporary.

In his study, Natsume Sōseki goes on to show that history can be defined in its various moments by a dominant ideal. In his opinion, the Meiji period is searching for the “dominant direction” given by the ideal of beauty, because naturalism, for example, exceedingly devoted to the truth, had impoverished literature of the other ideals and one cannot speak of literary creation without “Beauty” (cf. Sōseki, 2004: 100). Thus, according to Natsume Sōseki, young Meiji literature needs an infusion of “beauty”, “goodness” and “sublimity”, and freedom from the tyranny of “truth”, from the dependence on Western trends and servitude to materialism:

“...if we have made a small contribution to the enhancement of Truth, Good, Beauty and Sublime, which will illuminate the essence of our work like flashes of lightning, we will leave traces difficult to efface. If, progressing even further, we are able to attain the ecstasy that produces the reducing influence – because the spiritual power of arts and letters can exercise a great and intangible influence on society – we will have fulfilled our mission by obtaining eternal life in the human story” (Sōseki, 2004: 141).

Seeing literary art “as a special world of beauty” (Anderer, in Kobayashi 1995: 4), Mori Ōgai seems to share his colleague’s belief and writes a novel that attempts to illustrate it, although later, as he gives up fiction and starts writing historical novels, the ideal of sublimity shall eventually replace that of beauty: “... Ōgai, without adopting the positivism and linear sense of history dominant in his own time, took up an extremely one-dimensional idealism.” (Karatani, 1998: 150)

In his attempt to change the attitude toward the “civilization cultural movement” (*bunmei kaika*), the new government’s policy (see Watanabe 2012: 376) of promoting the fast modernization and westernization of the Nippon archipelago, Natsume Sōseki wished to point out the fact that servilely, undiscerning copying Western values could only have unpleasant consequences and eventually lead to “anxiety” (Sōseki, 2004: 39) and insecurity. Mori Ōgai takes up this idea but presents it somehow nuanced in *Seinen*. The numerous intertextual references in the novel seem to suggest that self-cultivation, not only through local but also Western cultural acquisitions, is essential in the process of intellectual development and gaining freedom of thinking. To Mori Ōgai, the “new man” is the one who establishes a new “species”, that of the intellectual who builds his personality by rediscovering his cultural background, onto which he then projects the values of modern society. It is interesting that the issues raised by the two “greats” of modern Japanese literature of the Meiji period would be taken up again and considered in more detail several decades later by Kobayashi Hideo in “The Anxiety of Modern Literature”. The study was published in 1932, when it seemed that Japanese literature had not yet overcome the moment of impasse, also pointed out by Mori Ōgai in *Seinen*, of its young age at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

“By my estimate, nine of ten of our ‘new writers’ are ungrounded in the literature of this country. Older writers criticize them for their glorification of foreign writing, but they are also ignorant of much of the best European work of the past 100 years. Least of all do they reveal any scrutiny or knowledge of themselves. No one undertakes a serious self-questioning (Kobayashi, 1995: 41).

The strategy through which *Seinen* proposes the mixture of a “list” of ideas into fictional writing is extremely ingenious. The characters discuss extensively, they carry out intellectually very profound dialogues trying, among other things, to define and examine issues emblematic for the age, such as “nation” and “Japanese”. This reminds us not only of a commandment of the time asking writers to fulfill their “political mission” (cf. Etō 1965: 603) of creating a new civilization which would close the gap between the Orient and the Occident while keeping Japan in a central position but also of a trend that would reach its apogee in the 1970s and ‘80s (see Waswo 1996: 99), known as *Nihonjinron* or “the debate on Japaneseness”:

“According to this idea, we Japanese can’t sacrifice ourselves to the principle of individualism since individualism is a Western idea. So in the Orient individualism is transformed into family-ism, which in turn becomes nationalism. The writer goes on to say, therefore, that one can forsake the self for the benefit of one’s master or father. Since his theory equates individualism with egoism, it’s completely different from your concept of altruistic individualism, isn’t it? Furthermore, since his theory says that individualism develops into family-ism and then into nationalism and that it’s un-Western, don’t you think it rather odd in Japan, funny even (Mori Ōgai, 1994: 482)?

After Hirata Fuseki’s lecture, Junichi and Ōmura [modelled on the doctor and writer Kinoshita Mokutarō (1885-1945)] (see Rimer, in Ōgai, 1994: 375), a medical student Junichi meets on this occasion and later becomes friends with, take up the issue of the “new man” again, as an extension of Professor Fuseki’s conclusion. If individualism has two branches: selfishness and altruism, the former is the path that Fuseki suggests, following Ibsen, but that Ōmura finds lifeless, even cowardly, which makes him opt for the latter. Among the arguments that Ōmura raises against selfishness is the impossibility of reaching inner peace, as happened to the individual in search of the essence of the blue bird of happiness in Maeterlinck’s play, and the belief that without altruism only anarchy is achieved. Ōmura believes that a selfless individual whose nature is at the same time, in Nietzsche’s terms, Apollonian and Dionysian lives life to the fullest every day, giving meaning to everything:

“In the long run, you have to confront your own daily life directly and immediately. This direct confrontation of life is Dionysian. And if while doing so and while immersing yourself in that daily life, you can also defend spiritual freedom without letting your resolve budge even an inch, that’s Apollonian. Somehow, if life is comprehended in this way, you can’t help becoming individualistic. That attitude is definitely individualistic, but there’s a dividing line between what we call egoism and altruism. Nietzsche’s egoism represents its dark side, that is, the will to power. Its basic idea is to become great by defeating others. If men fight other in the search for power, that leads to anarchism. And if this is individualism, it goes without saying that individualism is bad. But

altruistic individualism doesn't work that way. Even as you stoutly defend the cast of your ego without budging an inch from that principle, you try to find significance in every aspect of life." (Mori Ōgai 1994: 481-482)

However, Ōmura concludes, "individualism" and "freedom" must remain, at least in Japan, superimposed on the meaning of "loyalty" and "self-sacrifice" rather than turn into the selfish utilitarianism promoted by Nietzsche and Ibsen:

"...we Japanese can't sacrifice ourselves to the principle of individualism since individualism is a Western idea. So in the Orient individualism is transformed into family-ism, which in turn becomes nationalism. The writer goes on to say, therefore, that one can forsake the self for the benefit of one's master or father. Since his theory equates individualism with egoism, it's completely different from your concept of altruistic individualism, isn't it? Furthermore, since his theory says that individualism develops into family-ism and then into nationalism and that it's un-Western, don't you think it rather odd in Japan, funny even?" (Mori Ōgai, 1994: 482)

In Japan however, "loyalty" and "self-sacrifice" are terms that touch directly upon the issue of "nationalism", a concept in search of both an ethical and an ideological definition at the time. Natsume Sōseki shall also attempt to define it in a lecture published in 1914, called "My Individualism", in which, while showing that "individualism" means individual freedom, he states that this is by no means a threat to the state, just as it cannot be seen as opposed to nationalism, as it may seem on first glance. The "national" issue, as Natsume Sōseki admits, has always implied two possibilities of interpretation: one for what it is, as nationalism is tightly connected to the building of the state, and the other for what it might replace, such as independence for example:

"Some people spread the rumour that modern Japan will not survive if it does not embrace the theories of nationalism and firmly believe in those ideas. In addition, there are many who support the view that nationalism will perish if we do not attack individualism. These arguments are completely unfounded. In fact, we are at the same time nationalist, cosmopolitan and individualist" (Sōseki, 2004: 53-54).

Similar to other modern revolutions that overtook old regimes by proving their incompetence, the Meiji Restoration of 1868, also called "aristocratic revolution" (Duus, 1998: 80), aimed to create a new Japan and to completely transform the country into a modern nation. While "nation" generally means a politically organized community of people who share one language and one culture (see Waswo, 1996: 24), in this period the term receives subtle nuances. In order to create and preserve the new state it was necessary to have a particular strategy which, according to an imperial decree of 1868, supposed the concentration of governmental power in one centre, the Emperor, and one national identity: "The rapid march of civilization demands the concentration of the governing power in a single center and identity of feeling in the national mind ... " (in Duus, 1998: 81). And if at the beginning of the Restoration "modernization" had meant "westernization" while "modernity" was seen as diametrically opposed to "tradition" (see Waswo, 1996: 24), the attempt to reconcile tradition and modernity also becomes manifest in Japan in this period just like in all nationalist and independence movements at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thus appears the idea of the "uniqueness" of the Japanese nation and the Japanese people (see Duus, 1998: 128), the specificity of the nation being primarily given by the continuous line of imperial rule. Determined to restore "imperial honour" by means of "national self-strengthening" (cf. Duus 1998: 85) and aware of the fact that "civilized countries" (*bunmeikoku*) are not only economically but also morally superior (see Duus, 1998: 99), the Japanese élite sets the trend of promoting a code in which morality supposes not only personal progress, but also the attachment to the generally recognized values of society as they had established themselves in time:

"The Japanese tried to set aside the past with the minimum disruption, transform their society in the mold of those who had coerced Japan into transforming itself, and forge relatively smooth relationships between Japan and the external environment, while simultaneously stabilizing their national identity even as they also attempted to redefine it" (Umegaki, 1990: 251).

Two decades after the new beginning, the reconsideration and re-evaluation of the past reflects the wish of modern Japan's leaders to slow down change in order to avoid the possible unfortunate consequences of forced progress (cf. Waswo, 1996: 28). Becoming one of the "axes" of nationalism, *The Imperial Prescript on Education* of 1890 would thus encourage a revision of society's way of thinking, promoting the "beauty" of traditional virtues, which it would see as transcendental:

"Be filial to your parents, affectionate to your brothers and sisters; as husbands and wives be harmonious, as friends true; bear yourselves in modesty and moderation; extend your benevolence to all; pursue learning and cultivate arts, and thereby develop intellectual faculties and perfect moral powers; furthermore, advance public good and promote common interests; always respect the Constitution and observe the laws; should emergency

arise, offer yourselves courageously to the State; and thus guard and maintain the prosperity of Our Imperial Throne coeval with heaven and earth” (in Hirakawa, 2009: 123).

Moreover, because national independence has always needed national pride, the Meiji élite cultivates it by using the educational system. Copies of this imperial decree are thus sent to each school along with a portrait of the Emperor, who upon death would be called *taitei* (the Great) like Tsar Peter the Great (see Keene, 2002: 723), to be used in annual patriotic ceremonies (see Waswo, 1996: 30), a fact also mentioned in *Seinen*:

“On opening his eyes on the morning of the Emperor’s Birthday, Junichi found the orange-colored sunlight streaming onto his pillow through a small opening in the door facing east in his four-and-a-half-mat room. Particles of dust seemed to be dancing energetically in the air.

Remembering how he had gone to school in his hometown to worship the emperor’s portrait on this holiday, Junichi suddenly thought of going to the Aoyama Military Drill Grounds. But on second thought he decided against it, for he felt it would be tedious to see soldiers on parade.” (Mori Ōgai, 1994: 394)

While the policy of the Tokugawa *bafuku* government had been based on the *sonnō jōi* (“revere the Emperor, expel the barbarians”) slogan (cf. Hirakawa, 2009: 85), leading to over two centuries of isolation, the Meiji government promoted the immediate opening of Japan in all possible senses in its ambition to consolidate the strength of the new state by using Western technology and adopting Western institutions. In order to fulfill the wish of the Meiji Restoration to have the new state internationally recognized, the same nationalism that had insisted on the expulsion of foreigners now manifested itself as a search for “civilization and enlightenment”. While in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Sakuma Shōzan (1811-64), an intellectual of both Confucian and Western formation, had proposed “Eastern morality, Western science” as a slogan of the period (cf. Hirakawa 2009: 57), the Meiji government reformulates the idea turning it into a goal to be achieved: “Adopt what is best in the culture of Europe to compensate for shortcomings in that of Japan” (in Hirakawa, 2009: 59). Under the pretext of creating a state on the model of and as an equal to European states, in order to build “an ideal nation” (see Watanabe 2012: 354) the new leaders propose several behaviour directives succinctly expressed in the slogans: *fukoku kyōhei* (‘enrich the country, strengthen the army’), *bunmei kaika* (‘civilization’) and *jōyaku kaisei* (‘revise the (unequal) treaties’) (cf. Hirakawa, 2009: 85). Although it would later come to ultranationalism and imperialism, the origins of this attitude seem to be related rather to the ancient history of the archipelago in terms of national integration under the leadership of an emperor than to modern nationalism (cf. Bellah, 2003: 190). Dengyō (767-822), who had studied in China, had in fact already mentioned *Dai Nippon* (‘Great Japan’) in the 8<sup>th</sup> century (see Nakamura 1968: 434) and one thousand years later, Honda Toshiaki (1744-1821) also shared the belief that Japan must become one of the greatest nations in the world (see Keene, 1969: vi).

In the unique Japanese relationship between Emperor and people promoted by “a special national polity” (*kokutai*) – a term imposed by the Meiji period – the family-state ideology is founded on the constellation of meanings the idea of “nationalism” already had, both national unity and national morality being tied to the historical roots of the Japanese people. However, wishing to preserve the sense of their tradition in order to define their own cultural identity, the Meiji government insisted on preserving the unity of the “house” (*ie*) as a “structural unit” (Hirakawa, 2009: 92), the emotions that come with it being intrinsic to the traditional Japanese value system. *Ie* has in fact three meanings in Japanese: ‘building’, ‘home, family’ and ‘lineal family system’ (Takeda, in Finkelstein 1991: 66), the latter being in fact the most important in Japanese traditional society.

As the system of family relations seemed suited to the spirit of the budding modern nation, it became the guarantee of preserving Japanese society as it had been built on the foundation of Confucian and neo-Confucian laws in the preceding historical period. According to these, the rules and regulations governing family order, as well as self-cultivation, were essential to order and peace: “ordering the realm and bringing peace to all under Heaven” (cf. Hirakawa, 2009: 113).

But Confucius’ doctrine (552-479 BCE), perhaps one of the most powerful political ideologies, promoting the belief that human beings are able to live socially, ethically and culturally, had been the nucleus of political thinking in the Tokugawa period and would also play a crucial role in the Meiji period. Of all Confucian lessons, it is especially those referring to the notion of “state” (*kokutai*) that are retained, as the Tokugawa ruling class looks for a system of ethical, ideological and political principles it can rely on in governing the country. In the Meiji period, as the feudal system succumbs and the central authority is established in the figure of the divine Emperor as a symbol of Japanese national unity, particular attention is given to the “ethics of nationalism” (cf. Nakamura 1968: 444). The Confucian ethical values of “loyalty” (*chū*) and “filial piety” (*kō*), to which obedience to the Constitution and authority would be added, as well as respect for the law and patriotism understood as the wish to sacrifice oneself for the nation, become the political guarantee for the Meiji



government in restoring social stability and spiritually shaping the country. The historical development of Confucianism in the Tokugawa period was also based on the Neo-Confucian school founded by Zhu Xi (1130-1200) which then became the orthodox tradition of Confucian thinking. With teachings in the shape of comments on the classical texts of the doctrine, the Neo-Confucian school re-establishes the idea that progress has both an intellectual and a moral component (see Watanabe, 2012: 425). A common belief in the Meiji period, this can also be found in *Seinen*:

“Generally speaking, the happiness in *L’oiseau Bleu* boils down to this: finding spiritual peace and enlightenment in oneself and exerting a strong influence on others. Nowadays, there are those who try to explain happiness by means of Chinese morality. If possible, everything can be resolved at once by behaving oneself, supporting one’s family, governing one’s country, and pacifying the world. If you add a further transcendental aspect, the results are no more than something similar to the thoughts of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu or Chu-tzu and Yang-ming introduced into Japan after the coming of Buddhism.” (Mori Ōgai, 1994: 480)

Confucianism was in fact assimilated in Japan in such a way as to fit onto the ancient model of ancestor worship (cf. Nakamura, 1968: 418), filial piety being central to the Tokugawa period, as Confucianism was held in highest regard. Confucian moral education, promoting the Five Virtues of humanity, righteousness, rites, wisdom, and faithfulness in the typology of the Five Relationships identifiable between parent and child, ruler and ruled, husband and wife, old and young, as well as between friends (see Watanabe, 2012: 14), seemed at the time closer to European Western civilization than to Anglo-American liberalism. Based on the concept of nature itself, without reverting to a transcendental or anthropomorphised divinity, through the construction of an ethical and philosophical system, Confucianism is very close to European Enlightenment (cf. Watanabe, 2012: 11). By promoting benevolence, correctness, wisdom, sincerity and the notion of life’s precariousness (see Keene 1969: 80), Confucian morality associated with Buddhist faith could offer the Meiji elite “alternative ideas” (Duus 1998: 115) in its attempt to restore social discipline and the order of old Japan. Filial piety had become the paradigm for loyalty to the monarch, the state, superiors in general, political loyalty being in fact reaffirmed through respect for the head of the family (see Duus, 1998: 129). Thus, the writer Kinoshita Mokutarō (1885-1945), who lent Ōmura his features in *Seinen*, showed in the volume of memories published in 1936 *Mori sensei no hito to waza to (Mori sensei – the man and the work)* that, although sometimes contradictory, Mori Ōgai himself showed through his behaviour greater appreciation to Confucian filial piety than to the Western notion individual freedom (cf. Hirakawa, 2009: 448). Another great intellectual of the time, Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901) opted for instance for Confucian terminology in the translation of a book on political economy from English into Japanese (cf. Watanabe, 2012: 375), where he used the word *reigi* (‘courtesy, civility, propriety’) to render the notion of “higher moral qualities”.

In the context of great moral principles, an idea circulated at one point in this period had managed to draw the contemporaries’ attention to “the unity of all teachings and religions” in which “Buddha taught compassion, Confucius human heartedness, and Christ love” (Nishi, in Watanabe, 2012: 382). Losing confidence in everything Japanese, the Meiji government initially promoted a policy of undiscerningly taking over Western material and spiritual values, placing the national ambitions of the period under the slogan “Exit Asia, Enter the West” (*Datsu-A nyu-O*) (cf. Umegaki, 1990: 257). Slowly, however, a change of attitude takes place in a society that increasingly wishes to be at the same time “Japanese” and “Western”. However, this “dialectic development” (Umegaki, 1990: 253) of self-confidence as a modern state was strangely accompanied in Japan by a growing feeling of insecurity, although different to the xenophobia of the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, and ended in the military campaigns in China and Russia also alluded to in *Seinen*. This explains the great mobilization during the Sino-Japanese war (1894-5) and the Russo-Japanese war (1904-5) as well as the general enthusiasm that accompanied it, Japan’s military victory undoubtedly feeding national pride. The unanimous idea that found a favourable context of expression was that Japan was now in line with the “civilized” nations, that Japan had received a “national mission” and that its national “destiny” had been fulfilled through this step onto the international stage. From “Japan for itself alone”, the Land of the Rising Sun had become “Japan for the world” (cf. Duus, 1998: 148).

Many of the ideas circulated in the period, among them also Natsume Sōseki’s on literary theory, would later be considered “eccentric” (cf. Karatani, 1998: 12) and compared to “a flower that bloomed out of season and therefore left no seed” (Karatani, 1998: 11). At the time however, they must have expressed many different attitudes with varied nuances, pointing out, as Mori Ōgai also did in *Seinen*, the fact that even the mere attempt to define such notions as “freedom” and “individualism” proves to be an unexpectedly difficult task in the complex context of contemporary Japanese society. A supporter of moderate westernization and modernization, Natsume Sōseki, under the guise of Hirata Fuseki in Mori Ōgai’s novel, uses an example from the Western art

world while speaking to his young audience about individual and national freedom, in order to make clear to them what a chasm separated Japan from the other “civilized” nations:

“...Why had Ibsen tried to discard and destroy the rotten bonds of convention? He did not want to yield the freedom he had gained and find himself mired in the mud of social convention. He broke through those powerful bonds with his own strong wings and tried to fly high and far.” (Sōseki, 1994: 407)

But “freedom”, as Hirata Fuseki points out subsidiarily, does not necessarily mean doing what one likes or following the path one wants – it supposes, among other things, self-education and self-responsibility, reason and justice, effort and competition, and modern Japan had to learn the lesson imposed by the times it was living.

Mori Ōgai, who had also studied metaphysics, literature and philosophy during his “German period”, had come to share Natsume Sōseki’s view of the “perception of freedom and beauty” as the most important *truth* that Japan had to learn from the West (cf. Hopper, 1974: 383), believing that the undiscerning “westernization” of the archipelago was just as “irrational” as giving up any development and binding oneself, in the most restricted sense, to tradition. Thus, preserving traditional values along with reconsidering Western ones such as the notions of “liberty” and “beauty”, with a long and flourishing tradition in Western culture, was an essential attitude to Mori Ōgai. As he points out, as long as Japan does not understand the “philosophical roots” of Western progress, its “development” would only be “form without substance”. “Individualism”, “universality” and “recognizing freedom” become the great “issues” of modern Japan, as Mori Ōgai admits through his main character in *Seinen*.

Although the term had more than one meaning, “freedom” proved to be of significant general interest for the Japanese society as early as the beginning of the Meiji period: “There is no question but that there was a genuine wide-spread enthusiasm for ‘freedom’ in the early Meiji period.” (Bellah, 2003: 167-8). The publications of Fukuzawa Yukichi – a representative name for the period, who, in his 1872 work *An Encouragement of Learning (Gakumon no susume)*, has a chapter titled “National Independence Through Personal Independence” – as well as the translations of liberal works such as the “Declaration of Independence” or Rousseau’s and Mill’s works [the 1872 translation of John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty* being the second complete translation into Japanese of a book written in English after the 1871 translation of Samuel Smiles’ *Self-Help* (see Hirakawa, 2009: 102-103)] had had a major contribution to formulating the political expression of the Popular Rights Movement (*Jiyū Minken Undō*), which called for a “representative constitutional government”. Junichi and Ōmura’s free dialogues on Japan’s uniqueness also offer a glimpse of the possibility that this country’s redefinition of “freedom” and “individualism” on its own territory essentially depends on its becoming aware of the Western definitions of freedom and on reformulating them on a foundation of traditional values adapted to the modern present (cf. Hopper, 1974: 391).

These conversations and Junichi’s monologues turn, by means of a complementary movement, the man aspiring to be a writer (to be read ‘creator’) into something that would be called a ‘critic’. Both critics and writers have a sense of the word, and the narrator paints Junichi’s portrait in both hypostases, as they are both related to “speaking”. It is said that reality is that which we speak of (cf. Heimonet, 1992:151), but the end of the novel, where Junichi decides to turn to the past in his literary creation, as eternity can only be remembered, shall paint a definitive portrait of him as a writer, the one who, unlike the critic, conjugates the verb “to write” as a natural derivative of “to speak” and “to be”. In order to do this, the writer draws on inner experience, where the ultimate truth of the word is examined again. The crisis of faith imperiously demands a serious debate on the topic of the relationship between speaking and being. Junichi, a partisan of Western thinking, is eventually attracted to the classical traditional Japanese interpretation of “to be”, becoming aware of the fact that the attempt to understand the world means first of all understanding oneself. With a mixture of irony and humour, in a melancholic tone of voice and a deliberate attitude of *nihil admirari*, Junichi tries to assimilate, in his own understanding of them, the notions of “ethics” and “freedom”, as well as the category of the “religious”, in order to reach his transcendental ego. He attempts self-criticism and self-knowledge in order to attain true humility:

“When I read works of the new men in Japan who write only about passive subjects, I do admire the way they undo the ropes that bind them, but I can’t find anything in them which really attracts me, really overwhelms me. As for Verhaeren’s poems, they too contain a unique view of life. And even though his view doesn’t agree with mine, I’m drawn to a pious quality I find unique. I heard Rodin was Verhaeren’s friend, and I found this same religious quality in Rodin’s sculptures. When I look at these men in this way, it seems to me what Europeans call the ‘new men’ are quite different from Japan’s ‘new men’ in that those in Europe have something in them full of life, really active and humane. The same is true of the Ibsen that Mr. Fuseki talked about. As Fuseki said about the Japanese new men, they seem to be men of small calibre.” (Mori Ōgai, 1994: 411)

However, the fact that the portrait of the young Japanese of the Meiji period is painted, with romantic and idealist brushstrokes, by an adult narrator of forty makes the latter deliberately let contour lines fade here and there, making room for subtle suggestions for interpretation. The omniscient narrator already knows that keeping the balance Junichi aims for is by no means an easy endeavour and that, beyond role models, the harmony he is looking for eventually lies in the power of personal example.

Due to the initiation he goes through in the process of becoming mature as an artist, Junichi understands that it is not feverishly copying the latest imported values that is important, but the encounter with oneself, which becomes essential in the process of creation, where the personal understanding of contemporary reality must have its roots in a cultural past (cf. Rimer, in Ōgai, 1994: 377). The “experience of the conscience” or “coming of age” implies a transition from romantic subjectivity to objectivity, as the conscience of the age can be found in personal conscience: “the structure period consciousness will resemble the structure of self-consciousness” (Kobayashi, 1995: 25). The portrait of the main character in *Seinen* thus becomes the emblem of an ambivalent society that on the one hand creates a modern nationalism and an international status for itself, but is on the other hand gnawed at by hesitation, contradictions, dissent. Asking himself what role Japan would play on the world’s economical, political and cultural map, Junichi raises the issue of the condition of the intellectual and of “nationalism” understood not in its political meaning, but rather as individual conscience and national identity.

Mori Ōgai also tried throughout his life to reconcile his Confucian *bushi* (samurai) education with the Western values he had come to know in Europe, a visible effort in all the professions he practised: as a doctor, novelist, playwright, essayist, army officer, civil servant, historian and archivist:

“...his whole upbringing, background, and, in particular, his scientific training gave him a deep conviction of the need for patient understanding and rational inquiry concerning any new set of ideas” (Rimer, in Ōgai, 1994: 213).

In search of the “dominant” ideal, the Japanese scientist and humanist was many years in a precarious position, aware of the imminent confrontation between the two opponents on the Japanese ideological front: tradition and modernization. He was initially in favour of solving the conflict by taking into consideration an attempt to harmonize the two apparently rival cultures:

“The new Japan is a country in which Eastern culture and Western culture swirl about in a whirlpool together. And some scholars are rooted in Eastern and some in Western culture. But all stand only on one leg. The present era especially requires two-legged scholars. It requires the cultures of both the East and West and scholars who stand with one leg in each culture. Sincere quiet discussion can be established only if such people come into being. They are the necessary harmonizing elements in the present time.” (Ōgai, in Hopper, 1974: 382).

He later reconsidered this solution – it seems that for him, the question as to where tradition could find a supporting point in this “race” to modernization had not yet found an answer. Letting himself get carried along by the “return to Japan” or “return to being Japanese” trend (see Hirakawa, 2009: 117), towards the end of his life, after a literary career of twenty years, between *Maihime* [1890] and *Gan* [1911-1915], comprising several dozen volumes of different sizes, Mori Ōgai renounces fiction, now seeing it as “a lie” (*uso*) (see Snyder, 1994: 353), and turns to historical narratives and biographies. His 1912 historical novel *Okitsu Yagoemon no Isho* (*Okitsu Yagoemon’s Testament*) represents the beginning of a new period in his literary career.

Through his literary work, be it fictional or historical, Mori Ōgai expressed, clearly or veiled, his view on the challenges of the time, trying to understand himself in a world at the crossroads between continuity and change. He constantly followed the Confucian teaching according to which one can perfect the imperfect character he is born with through “the effort of study” (*benkyō*) and “self-cultivation” (*shūshin*). He thus also became a supporter of the doctrine promoted by Zhu Xi’s neo-Confucian school, that sees man carrying in himself the “aspiration” (cf. Watanabe, 2012: 21) to live in the most human way possible through the sustained practice of “cultivation” (*shūyō*) and “learning” (*gakumon*): *Shōnen oiyasuku, gaku narigatashi; issun no kōin karonzu bekarazu* (‘ Youth passes swiftly, and learning is difficult to attain; not a moment’s light should be wasted ’) (Zhu Xi, in Watanabe, 2012:119). Aware of the beauty and ephemerality of the passing moment, just like the main character in his *Seinen*, Mori Ōgai spared no effort in order to transpose his ideals into reality, to understand, without either pessimism or optimism, the splendour and misery of “real life” in the service of searching for the artistic truth:

“I really do wonder if the Japanese actually know what it means to live. After they enter primary school, they try with all their might to finish, hurrying up and finishing. They think there is a life ahead of them. Once they leave school and get a job, they try to perform and complete that job. And again they think there’s a life out there ahead of them. But there isn’t.

The present is a single line dividing past and future. If you can't find your life on this line, you can't find your life anywhere." (Mori Ōgai, 1994: 420)

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