

---

# For Arakawa, Nine More Lives

Jean-Michel Rabaté,  
University of Pennsylvania

---

Each time, the whole world dies: each time it is the end of the world. This is how Derrida momentarily defined the experience of bereavement one experiences when a friend dies. I confess that I could find no better phrase when I heard of Arakawa's demise. I was indeed shattered and stymied, unable to write or speak, even to express to Madeline Gins what was more than a loss, what I felt as a personal wound.

In this case, beyond the personal trauma and the block, there was a further intellectual crux for me, and it was that which blocked me most at first in my endeavors to express something: how can one talk about the death of an artist who has decided not to die? Then I happened to reopen a book I had skimmed a few years ago, Sōseki Natsume's Japanese novel from 1905, *I am a cat*. In the middle of the novel narrated by a hilariously spunky and cynical cat, a cat who has never been named by his owner, a stray cat barely accepted in a household, I found these words: "I've decided not to die." [1] This is not the cat who speaks but his owner, a hypochondriac teacher of English literature who looks very much like the author.

The context is simple—the statement is reported by the cat owner's wife to a cousin, and it concerns an insurance salesman. In spite of all the entreaties and logical demonstrations of the salesman, the owner of the cat refuses to be insured. "The insurance man makes sense to me," the cousin says. "I certainly agree. But your uncle cannot see it. He swears he'll never die. 'I've made a vow,' he told that salesman with all the pride of a nincompoop, 'never, never to die'"

(Natsume 2001: 370). We need all the obliquity of the reported statement to make better sense of the statement “I have decided not to die”: in other words, it has to be quoted.

However, in the novel, quite surprisingly and shockingly, it is the cat who dies at the end—he drowns trapped in a jar after having drunk beer for the first time. But his death is a liberation, a coming to peace with the universe. Indeed, this was the only way for Sōseki Natsume to finish his endless novel, a sort of Japanese *Tristram Shandy*. But while in Sterne’s masterpiece, the hero can never bring back the narrative to the moment of his birth, here the death of the narrator as a cat ensures the immortality of the author. The novel is still today one of Japan’s best known and most loved narratives. This is not the place to discuss the novel, replete as it is with echoes of Zen Buddhism, full of hilarious parodies of a Western culture seen through the eyes of a Japanese cat. In all this, one perceives that death is nothing, and that personal illumination is all.

What I’d like to convey is that the discovery that Arakawa’s main statement – “I have decided not to die,” hence “We have decided not to die” – was a quote from a famous Japanese novel and has something liberating. It suddenly unlocked the store of my fond memories of him, vignettes of him as a witty speaker, images of him as a dreamily silent observer when Madeline Gins read her obituary for Jacques Derrida in New York, for instance. Arakawa was a wonderful artist who had turned militant for a change in human consciousness. We know that cats have nine lives, whereas their owners have only one—but when that one is so productive, so charged with multiple intensities, one can swallow one’s tears, forget one’s grief and find in this death that it is also a non-death, an immense source of courage for the future.

## Notes

[1] The novel’s title is *Wagahai wa neko de aru* (I am a cat). I am quoting the excellent translation by Aiko Ito and Graeme Wilson.

## **Bibliography**

Natsume, Sōseki. *I Am a Cat*. Trans. Aiko Ito and Graeme Wilson. Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2001.