

## Japanese Modernization As Described by Soseki Natsume

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# Japanese Modernization As Described by Sôseki Natsume

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## 1. Identifying the issues

The same author repeatedly pursuing the same theme in his or her writing is commonly seen in literature. The thoughts of Sôseki Natsume on the modernization of Japan were expressed in a variety of different forms through characters that appeared in his novels. An analysis of such parts reveals that Sôseki was resigned to observing the unnatural frenzy of a Japan that was a long way off from the composure of the West, which had been following a more natural course of development, and was clearly aware of the distortions that arose from impatient efforts to adopt the achievements of the West, and the cumulative burdens of continuously engaging in imitative behavior.

Sôseki was born in the third and final year of the Keio era [1867], as a result of which his age happened to coincide with the year of the Meiji era (which began in 1868), and he was an author whose life was intertwined with the Meiji era. For example, the character referred to as Sensei in *Kokoro* recalls his deep emotions upon the demise of the Meiji Emperor: "I felt as though the spirit of the Meiji era had begun with the Emperor and had ended with him. I was overcome with the feeling that I and the others, who had been brought up in that era, were now left behind to live as anachronisms." (245) This passage appears to be a reflection of what Sôseki himself thought and felt at the time.

This article will survey the manner in which issues pertaining to modernization were depicted in each work and refer to particular aspects of interest in relation thereto.

## 2. An impatient civilization

In *Nowaki*, which was released in 1907 (Meiji 40), Sôseki Natsume has Doya Shirai, a man of letters giving a speech at Seikikan, declare that "(T)hese past four decades of the Meiji reign are four decades without precedence in history"(428). When this is considered in conjunction with the statement in *Sanshiro* that "Meiji thought had been reliving three hundred years of Western history in the space of forty"(18), it is possible to claim that Sôseki regarded the fundamental issues concerning Japanese modernization with a sense of

anxiety as to the progress being achieved at an abnormally high rate of change and of bewilderment as to the inability to accommodate the demands of westernization. The depth of Sôseki's interest in this issue is even apparent on encountering expressions in works of his that were not novels. For example, in a book review of *A History of Japan*, which was written by his teacher James Murdock, he states:

That the Japanese—who had until the Restoration only managed, for the most part, to reach the level of culture associated with fourteenth century Europe—have succeeded over these past fifty years in rapidly advancing to a level comparable to the West as it stands now in the twentieth century is such as to inspire feelings of awe (356).

That Sôseki studied in London between 1900 and 1902 should be understood in order to provide an underlying context for the development of his contrastive viewpoint vis-à-vis the West. Shortly after returning to Japan, Sôseki began serving as an instructor at both the Daiichi High School and the Imperial University of Tokyo in April 1903; at the latter, he delivered lectures presenting an overview of English literature. In the introduction to *A Theory of Literature*, a compilation of transcripts of these lectures, he wrote: "The two years I spent residing in London were the most miserable two years of my life" (12). This sentiment is later reiterated in *Recollections* when he recalls as follows:

A long time ago, during my years in England, I hated England intensely. I hated it with Heine's fury. But when the time came to leave I looked around at the surging whirlpools of unknown humanity in the sea of London. I felt that the brown air enveloping them contained a gas which had drifted into my lungs and become part of me (89-90).

When seen in this light, the misery that Sôseki felt in London can be construed as a subconscious backlash against modernity.

Sôseki's experiences acquired while studying in England were indispensable for the formation of his consciousness. On August 15, 1911, Sôseki was in Wakayama to present a lecture entitled "Modern Japanese Civilization" at an invitational lecture for reporters from the Osaka *Asahi Shimbun*. At this forum, he posited that "Western civilization (by which I refer to civilization in general) is endogenous, whereas modern Japanese civilization is exogenous" (430) and developed his argument in terms of his viewpoint on the differences

between Europe and Japan, which he described thusly: "Modern Japanese civilization is a civilization gliding along on a sheen of superficiality"(437).

Sôseki also had characters that appeared in his novels express similar points of view. For instance, Ichiro Nagano, a university professor in *The Wayfarer*, remarks to his younger brother, "Present-day Japanese society, and perhaps the same might be said of western society, works in such a way that only superficial, clever fellows can live"(197).

Circumstances arise under which this sort of social environment can only be described by acknowledging that "(n)ervous breakdowns are an epidemic disease of civilization" (*Gubijinso* 243). In *The Three-Cornered World*, a painter notes that "(p)lacity and simplicity both indicate the presence of that underlying depth which is an indispensable ingredient of art and literature"(107). A reference to the continuing loss of this underlying depth in both individuals and society also exists in *Sanshiro* as follows:

We hear about the way middle school teachers and such live, and it all seems terribly sad, but the only ones who really feel sad are the men themselves. That's because modern man has a liking for factual knowledge but is accustomed to disposing of the sentiments that accompany the facts—which is unavoidable, because society is pressing in on him so relentlessly that he is forced to dispose of them. You can prove this by looking at the newspaper. Nine out of ten human interest stories are tragedies, but we have nothing to spare, nothing that enables us to feel them as tragedies. We read them only as factual reports (167-168) .

With such a view of civilization, Sôseki understood that even the symbols of westernization engendered ironic consequences. In *The Three-Cornered World*, railway trains are presented as a symbol of civilization and these modern conveniences are recognized for their corrosive effects on individuality.

Anywhere that you can find a railway train must be classed as the world of reality, for there is nothing more sympathetic and heartless contraption which rumbles along carrying hundreds of people crammed together in one box. It takes them all at a uniform speed to the same station, and then proceeds to lavish the benefits of steam upon every one of them without exception. People are said to board and travel by train, but I call it being loaded and transported. Nothing shows a greater contempt for individuality than the train. Modern civilization uses every possible means to

develop individuality, and having done so, tries everything in its power to stamp it out (181).

Thus, it can be seen that the social issues from which development emerged were variously discussed in terms of comparisons with Europe.

### 3. Advocating an egotistical outlook

The character of Doya Shirai in *Nowaki* is depicted emphasizing in a speech the need to acknowledge that the ideal towards which we should strive in life consists of the emotions that well up from within ourselves (432). While the desirability of an endogenous process of westernization was explained in the aforementioned "Modern Japanese Civilization," Doya is dedicated to the idea that this attitude, or approach to things based on endogenous wants, constitutes the foundation underlying the way of life and actions of individuals.

In 1914, Sôseki gave a lecture entitled "My Individualism" at Gakushuin and stressed the need to engage in an egotistical outlook, sounding in the process as if he himself were playing the part of Doya in *Nowaki*: "I gained a great deal of strength from this period of introspection and it prompted me to ask who these Westerners were" (38). The following passage clearly demonstrates that Sôseki reflected on the life he led prior to studying overseas from his standpoint as a person of letters and in terms of the lives of individuals and that his conviction as to the indispensability of an egotistical attitude was forged in London:

At that moment, I understood for the first time that I had no hope of finding salvation if I did not formulate my own basic concept of what literature was. Until then I had floated at random, like a rootless aquatic plant, relying entirely on the opinions of others. At last I became aware that I had reached an impasse (36).

In *Nowaki*, Doya characterizes the very age in which westernization was taking place: "Civilized society is a scene of bloodless carnage" (433). One must be constantly afflicted by the mental torment of insecurity as focus is directed at the reaction of peripheral parties to the consequences of competition if an altruistic outlook were adopted. Sôseki also felt that reality, which offered no escape from competition, was such that "life will come to be more and more difficult as competition continues to intensify in line with the increasing pace of westernization" (*Gendai Nihon no Kaika* 427) and expressly criticized the tendency of society

to regard westernization as being of paramount value. This can also be construed as recognition of the changes in the meanings of the words “misfortune” and “insecurity” in comparison to what they were before the process of westernization had commenced.

Nevertheless, if one were to pursue an egotistical outlook and uncompromisingly act according to his or her own value judgments, then that person would be entirely capable of behaving in self-indulgent behavior vis-à-vis his or her surroundings. In fact, the transformation from *hypocrites* to *honest rogues* is described in *Sanshiro* as follows:

Young men nowadays are too self-aware, their egos are too strong—unlike the young men of my own day. When I was a student, there wasn't a thing we did that was unrelated to others. It was all for the Emperor, or parents, or the country, or society—everything was other-centered, which means that all educated men were hypocrites. When society changed, this hypocrisy ceased to work, and as a result, self-centeredness was gradually imported into thought and action, and egoism became enormously overdeveloped. Instead of the old hypocrites, now all we've got are honest rogues (122-123).

From this standpoint, it can be said that Daisuke in *And Then* is, in a manner of speaking, clearly aware of himself as just such an honest rogue.

Daisuke, in turn, regarded his own nerves as the tax he had to pay for his uniquely keen speculative powers and acute sensibilities. It was the anguish that echoed from the achievement of a lofty education; it was the unwritten punishment dealt to natural aristocrats, those designated by heaven. It was precisely by submitting to these sacrifices that he had been able to become what he was. Indeed, there were times when he recognized the very meaning of life in these sacrifices (8).

This passage reveals that the consequence for Daisuke of obtaining the benefits of higher education was a realization that he had to withstand minute psychological changes and that he had to adopt a nihilistic mindset drained of wonder for whatever he might encounter: “Daisuke, who lived in twentieth-century Japan, Daisuke, who, had barely reached the age of thirty, had already arrived at the province of *nil admirari*” (18).

#### 4. Concerns over modernization

Daisuke Nagai criticized modernization in Japan as follows:

First of all, there's no other country with such a bad case of beggar's twitch. When do you think all those debts can be paid off? Oh, the foreign currency bonds might get paid. But they aren't the only debts. The point is, Japan can't get along without borrowing from the West. But it poses as a first-class power. And it's straining to join the ranks of the first-class powers. That's why, in every direction, it puts up the façade of a first-class power and cheats on what's behind. It's like the frog that tried to outdo the cow—look, Japan's belly is bursting. And see, the consequences are reflected in each of us as individuals. A people so oppressed by the West have no mental leisure, they can't do anything worthwhile. They get an education that's stripped to the bare bone, and they're driven with their noses to the grindstone until they're dizzy—that's why they all end up with nervous breakdowns. Try talking to them—they're usually stupid. They haven't thought about a thing beyond themselves, that day, that very instant. They're too exhausted to think about anything else; it's not their fault. Unfortunately, exhaustion of the spirit and deterioration of the body come hand-in-hand. And that's not all. The decline of morality has set in too. Look where you will in this country, you won't find one square inch of brightness. It's all pitch black. So what difference would it make, what I said or what I did, me standing all alone in the middle of it? (72-73)

The issues attached to the advancements made by society are highlighted in Daisuke's blistering indictment. A similar opinion makes another appearance most notably in *The Wayfarer* among works that were subsequently published. While traveling with his colleague, H-san, Ichiro Nagano discusses the insecurity produced in people by the advance of science as follows:

Man's insecurity stems from the advance of science. Never once has science, which never ceases to move forward, allowed us to pause. From walking to ricksha, from ricksha to carriage, from carriage to train, from train to automobile, from there on to the dirigible, further on to the airplane, and further on and on—no matter how far we may go, it won't let us take a breath. How far it will sweep us along, nobody knows for sure. It is really frightening (285).

Thus, we see that Sôseki was keenly aware of the insecurity felt by people towards the mood pressing down on them by the Meiji era.

Ichiro comments on the unavoidable sense of insecurity harbored by intellectuals: "It is frightening because the fate which the whole of humanity will reach in several centuries, I must go through—in my own lifetime—and at that all alone"(286). He also quotes from Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* when he murmurs, "There is no bridge leading from one man to another,"(293) and "Loneliness, loneliness, thou mine home"(293).

Scientific advances give rise to intellectuals who render concepts more complicated than the real world itself. In *Sanshiro*, Yojiro speaks to Sanshiro of professor Hirota: "He's like he is because his mind is more highly developed than anything in the actual world"(60). This issue is again presented in *The Wayfarer*.

In *The Wayfarer*, H-san takes the psychologically stymied Ichiro on a trip and H-san writes to Ichiro's younger brother, Jiro, to update him on Ichiro's condition (279-320). A typical example of this issue can be seen in the way that H-san analyzes, as follows, Ichiro's critical stance regarding reality, a stance inspired by the fact that Ichiro's contemplations far outstrip what the real world has to offer:

Imagine a world which could react exactly the way your brother expects; that world would undoubtedly be far more advanced than the world as it is now. Consequently, he detests the world which is—aesthetically, intellectually, and ethically—not as advanced as he is himself (296).

While Ichiro can only describe to H-san the outcome reached in the contemplations over which he has been obsessing by declaring, "To die, to go mad, or to enter religion—these are the only three courses left open for me,"(296) his dissatisfaction with his inability to go beyond living in the conceptual realm to carry out actual deeds is captured perfectly when he asks, "But how can I change from a speculative to a practical man? Please tell me that," (307). H-san writes down his views on Ichiro:

I do wish I could provide him with something that can captivate his mind completely, so completely as to leave no room for his inquiring attitude—something as engrossing, let us say, as all the works of art, as all the lofty mountains and mighty rivers, or as all the beautiful women in the world (313).

Yet, place this alongside what is said by Tsunezo Matsumoto in *To The Spring Equinox and*

*Beyond* to Keitaro Tagawa concerning Ichizo Sunaga: "He should find one thing under heaven—and a single thing is enough—which is so great or beautiful or gentle that it will engross his entire being. In a word, he has to become frivolous"(283). On doing so, you may note that both characters reveal a surprisingly shared way of thinking. Having acquired higher education, become more knowledgeable, contrarily agonized over brooding contemplations, and been subjected to wearisome reality, one must obtain psychological stability by reaching a state of emotional respite detached from logical pillars.

In *Kokoro*, Sensei tells the narrator, "But I am an older man, and I can live with my loneliness, quietly. You are young, and it must be difficult to accept your loneliness" (15). While the look Sensei gives the narrator is infused with a manner that is full of the sort of affection that speaks of a standpoint ripe with the experience of life and that resembles the manner directed by Matsumoto towards Sunaga and by H-san towards Ichiro, this judgment is directly conveyed to the other party, in contrast to what happens with both Matsumoto and H-san. Subsequently, Sensei pens his farewell letter addressed to the narrator (125-248). In this letter, he writes, "You see, loneliness is the price we have to pay for being born in this modern age, so full of freedom, independence, and our own egotistical selves."(30) and expresses his belief that modern people must without exception accept their lonely state of mind. From this, it is evident that, while there are differences to some degree or another in the way characters like Sunaga and Ichiro feel beleaguered, Sôseki, the author, has become aware of this as a universal phenomenon in step with the passing of the times.

## 5. Generation gap

In *Kokoro*, the narrator "I" consistently refers to the other party in his ongoing discourse with him as "Sensei"(1-124). The narrator takes the stance that using such a term to refer to one's elder is a matter of respect (7). Shortly after completing *Kokoro*, Sôseki delivered a lecture entitled *My Individualism* at Gakushuin. On this occasion, Sôseki imparted his own assertions to the youth of that time in a tone reminiscent of the way in which Sensei spoke to the narrator in *Kokoro*:

You will all leave this establishment and go out into the world. For many of you, this will not be for some time; several of you will soon start to work in society. But I presume that you are all likely to repeat my experience; that is to say, you yourselves

will feel the same anguish that I once endured (even if it is of a different nature). I think there must be many among you who are very angry because you want to find an opening somewhere but cannot; you would like to grasp something firmly but you grip only a smooth baldhead.

If some of you have already found an opening in some way, you must be exceptional cases. There are also those who satisfy themselves by following a traditional path, and I would not say that there is anything wrong with that, if it brings them inner peace and confidence in themselves. But if you have no support, you must go on whatever the cost until you reach the place where, as you dig with your pickaxe, you discover a seam. You must go on, because if you do not find the seam, you will spend all your life in an uncomfortable situation, treading water, not knowing what to do (40-41).

In *My Individualism*, Sôseki proclaims to the youth of the next generation that it is essential to search for the path they ought to follow by their own efforts and that they must continue to endeavor until they reach such a state of mind. The narrator in *Kokoro* ruminates at one point in the novel:

Moreover, each time I returned, I brought back with me a little more of Tokyo. This, my father and mother neither liked nor understood. As someone in days gone by might have put it, it was like introducing the smell of a Christian into the home of a Confucianist (50).

Similarly, the youth of the next generation who independently fumble about to find their paths in life cause a sense of discomfort in their parents who raised them (and who belong to the older generation born during or prior to the Meiji era).

It can be said that the same viewpoint was inherited by Kenzô in *Grass on the Wayside*, which was Sôseki's first published novel since *Kokoro*. The writing in this work begins as follows:

Exactly how many years, Kenzô wondered, had he been away from Tokyo? He had left the city to live in the provinces and then had gone abroad. There was novelty in living in his native city once more; but there was some loneliness in it too.

The smell of the alien land that he had left not so long ago seemed still to linger about his body. He detested it, and told himself he had to get rid of it. That he was

also rather proud of it, that it gave him a certain sense of accomplishment, he did not know (3).

As depicted in this novel, Kenzô is set up as a university professor immediately upon his return from studying overseas. While Sôseki shortly after returning from studying in London is regarded as the model on which this character is based, the fact that we must accept the gulf between original ideas obtained in the course of studying overseas and the acquisition of a cross-cultural outlook on the one hand and the culture of one's hometown or place of birth on the other hand is clearly understood.

## 6. Conclusion

Sôseki consistently focused on the bleakness of the modern age and was an author who ceaselessly reminded his readers of the issues in this regard. Certain factors allowed him to engage in dispassionate criticisms of modernity: he was familiar with European culture through his experiences as a student in London and by having read a broad range of relevant material, and he was always living on the cutting edge of his time as a literary scholar, as a teacher, and later, as a writer of serial novels that appeared in newspapers. The perspective of Sôseki, who sounded the alarm on the forward march of his times, is full of lessons that should be revisited by those of us who live in a society that continues to change at an ever greater rate.

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