Natsume Sōseki in England:

The Meaning of His Encounter with the West

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Natsume Sōseki (1867-1916) was part of the first wave of Meiji intellectuals who were sent abroad by the government in the hope of successfully carrying out the modernization of Japan. The differences in culture and civilization between Japan and the West in the year 1900 were far greater than those between Japan and the West of the 1990's. Today intercultural encounters of all kinds are daily occurrences, and yet we often hear of the problems that people experience in adjusting to a new culture. Therefore we can imagine how great the culture shock must have been to the Meiji intelligentsia. This paper discusses the culture shock Sōseki experienced while in the West. We shall analyze the problems he faced in adjusting to a new environment in order to discover the meaning of Sōseki's encounter with the West.

Before we proceed to this discussion, we must briefly examine the phenomenon of culture shock. This will provide us with a useful framework in which we can closely examine the meaning of Sōseki's interaction with the West, his two-year stay in England (28 October 1900-5 December 1902) in particular. We can define culture shock as "the psychological shock people experience when they find themselves in an environment relatively unfamiliar to them in terms of customs, habits, values, aesthetics, and any other cultural phenomena."¹

Oberg and Trifonovitch both discern four stages which most people undergo while adjusting to a new culture: 1) the honeymoon stage; 2) the hostility stage; 3) the humor stage; and 4) the home stage.² They explain these four stages as
follows. The honeymoon stage is the stage of sheer exhilaration and excitement over the new. The second stage is characterized by a hostile and aggressive attitude toward the new environment growing out of the genuine difficulty which the visitor experiences in the process of adjustment. This hostile stage is in a sense a crisis which the visitor must overcome. If he stays in the new environment without overcoming the crisis, he may have a nervous breakdown. The humor stage is when the visitor begins to feel more relaxed in new situations in his new environment, and his sense of humor begins to function. Instead of criticizing, he jokes about the people and even makes jokes about his own difficulties. The visitor is now on the way to recovery. The fourth stage marks the period when the visitor not only retains his allegiance to his old culture but also begins to “feel at home” in his newly acquired one. He now accepts the culture of the new environment as just another way of living.

Trifonovitch further argues:

The stages are easily recognizable; the difficulty is that delineations between the stages are not clear-cut and they overlap. Thus there is a bit of honeymoon mixed in with hostility, hostility with humor, and humor with home. In some instances, a person may move back and forth between these stages. These four stages are cyclic in nature, not linear, and a person will encounter periods of adjustment continuously as he moves from one situation to another.3)

On October 17, 1900 Sōseki arrived at Naples after a voyage of forty days. He wrote in his diary that he was not only impressed by the sublimity of the cathedrals, the magnificence of the museums, and the beauty of the Arcade Royal Palace in Naples, but he was also surprised to see roads neatly paved with stone.4) On October 23 he wrote from Paris to his wife about his impressions of the West.5) He states that even a small Western city such as Genoa is
splendid and no Japanese city can be compared to it. He further writes that the
grandeur of Paris is beyond description: roads and houses are huge and impos­
ing; a network of horse cabs, trains, and subways extends afar; men and
women have a fair complexion and are well-dressed; and there is a beauty even
among maids. The above descriptions of Sôseki indicate that he was deeply im­
pressed or rather overwhelmed by the advanced material civilization of the
West. The tone of his exhilaration and excitement which comes through his
writings clearly shows that Sôseki was in his honeymoon stage.

On October 28 Sôseki arrived at London, but wrote nothing about his reac­
tions to the city in his diary. Deguchi Yasuo, who did a most comprehensive
study of Sôseki's stay in London, maintains that this silence which is too cold a
reaction for a man who specialized in English literature probably derived from
Sôseki's seasickness and the bad weather, rainy and cold.6) Etô Jun interprets
Sôseki's silence from another perspective.7) He maintains that London in the
year 1900 was the most developed modern industrial city in the world cov­
ered with soot and smoke and that it did not appeal to Sôseki's aestheticism.
Both Deguchi's and Etô's interpretations are correct, for Sôseki later com­
plained about the bad weather and the soot and smoke of London over and
over again.

Sôseki's early letters from London contain more positive reactions than
negative ones. In his first letter from London he again refers to the way people
are dressed, and states that ordinary men on the street are as well-dressed as
a Japanese higher official.8) The way people dressed in the West seems to have
made a strong impression on Sôseki, who was concerned about what to wear.
He also writes that the prosperity of London in terms of its advanced trans­
portation system is something that no one understands unless he sees it with
his own eyes.9) Praising the people in London, Sôseki further writes:
I am deeply impressed that people here are full of public spirit. If there is no seat on a train and you are standing, even a lower-class laborer will make room for you. In Japan there are some simpletons who take great delight in occupying seats enough for two people. When you go shopping, you sometimes find goods displayed in a place easy to steal. Used books, for example, are often laid out for sale outside of the windows without a clerk. The baggages of railway passengers are placed on the platform and each passenger helps himself to his own. In Japan smart fellows fancy themselves great by doing such unworthy things as stealing a ride, taking a horse cab for two sections for one sen [which is good for only one section], and lifting a flowerpot at a fair. I want to bring these fellows and show them the way things are here.10)

Sōseki’s honeymoon stage naturally did not last long, for he was beginning to face difficulties in adjusting to his new environment and had to cope with real conditions of life there. Starting around the beginning of the year 1901 —two months after his arrival in Europe— Sōseki’s letters and diaries began to contain far more negative comments than positive ones. Sōseki was in his hostility stage.

Kondō Hiroshi, a psychiatrist, divides the environmental factors which cause people difficulties in their adjustment process into the following two categories: A) the natural environmental factor and B) the social environmental factor.11) He further divides the latter into three subcategories: 1) the human environmental factor; 2) the psychological environmental factor; and 3) the material environmental factor.

In the case of Sōseki, we find problematic factors in each category: 1) the climate in London (A); 2) his separation from his family and his inability to make friends with the British (B-1); 3) the prejudice against the Japanese on the part of the British and the inferiority complex toward the British on the part of Sōseki (B-2); and 4) Sōseki’s lack of money (B-3).
The problem which Sōseki talked about first was the last one on the list—his lack of money. In his first letter from Europe to his wife (23 October 1900) he already began to complain: “Without money I don’t feel like staying in Europe a single day. Though Japan may be shabby, I feel more relaxed there.” In every one of the five letters Sōseki wrote to his wife and his friends before the end of the year he complained about his difficult financial situation. He laments to his wife that the cost of living in London is so high that how to make do with his meager government allowance is a big problem.

Sōseki first thought of studying at Cambridge University, but he had to give up the idea because his allowance was insufficient to cover the tuition, the cost of living, and the active social life there. He attended, as an auditor, Professor Ker’s lectures on medieval English literature at University College of the University of London for two months, but this also took much of his time and money. So he decided to buy as many books as possible and study at home. This is, in Sōseki’s words, how he came to be confined in his lodging house.

Should we accept Sōseki’s words at face value? Etō and Tsukamoto Toshiaki are both skeptical about them. Etō maintains that Sōseki probably became unable to endure his state of being exposed to a world foreign to him and that his choice was the only way to protect himself from the world of which he was not a part. Tsukamoto maintains that because other Japanese students with the same government allowance somehow managed their studies as planned, Sōseki might unconsciously have used his financial difficulties as a pretext for eluding the overwhelming pressure of Western civilization. We also have Deguchi’s study which concretely shows that Sōseki’s economic life in London was a stable one and that he was not as poor as he said he was.

Sōseki’s decision to seclude himself in his lodging house seems to have been partly due to the identity crisis he was experiencing at that time. Several years earlier when he made up his mind to become a scholar of English literature, he
entertained hopes of leaving behind a literary achievement in the English language which would impress Westerners. However, the more he studied English literature, the more insecure and depressed he became. This insecurity of Sōseki's was not an easy one to overcome, for it was deeply related to the gap in aesthetic sensibility between the Englishmen and the Japanese. Sōseki later concluded that what was called literature in China and Japan differed considerably from its English counterpart.

In spite of his facility to appreciate a work, to study it in depth, and formulate his own opinions, he thought that if English scholars and critics voiced opinions contrary to his, being a foreigner, he would be obsessed by the insecurity arising from the feeling that their views were always correct and his were not. This was a most difficult position for a person with so much self-respect. It did not matter, however, whether he could actually tolerate the distress. As long as he lacked the strength to ignore his fears, he was constrained to suffer in silence. The conflict between his highest dream and miserable reality caused a serious identity crisis.

When Sōseki arrived in England, he unconsciously knew that if he studied at an academic institution of higher learning, his position of being a foreign student studying the literature of the country where he was staying would aggravate his identity crisis. Small wonder that Sōseki felt an urge to avoid confronting his problem.

Sōseki's behavior of secluding himself in his lodging house and of avoiding social intercourse is also explicable from the perspective of culture shock. For they are two of the common symptoms that a man suffering from culture shock often shows.

Whatever the reasons for Sōseki's decision to confine himself to his lodging house, his academic and social life in London became a limited one. Except when he visited his tutor, William J. Craig (1843-1906), who was a prominent
but unsociable Shakespeare scholar, he seldom had a chance to talk about subjects of his academic interest. Craig resigned his post of a university professor in Wales in 1879 in order to devote his time and energy to compiling a comprehensive dictionary of Shakespeare. When Sōseki met Craig, Craig had been devoting himself to his work for many years, sacrificing his rank and material comfort. Though Sōseki respected Craig for his scholarship, Craig had neither the time nor intention to develop his relationship with Sōseki to more than that between a tutor and his student.

Apart from Craig, Sōseki did not make friends or become acquainted with any English intellectuals. This inability of Sōseki to make friends with the British is another important factor which caused him adjustment problems. For everyone needs someone with whom he may share his experiences and feelings in order to maintain his psychological stability. When someone is separated from his family in a foreign country, friends are indispensable.

On the whole the English people whom he saw and talked to daily were mostly commoners of the lower middle class with little education, such as his landlords, landladies, and their servants. Through his contact with them, Sōseki learned that there were many different kinds of people among the English: not all the English were intelligent or refined. For example, he wrote in his diary that it was not rare that uneducated Englishmen made mistakes in accent and pronunciation and that a female student once asked a professor how to spell Keats and Landor. He thought it was foolish for the Japanese to respect English people and feel inferior just because they were English.

Therefore Sōseki was angry and hurt when a landlord who did not even know that Robinson Crusoe was a fictional character showed contempt toward him just because he was a Japanese. The more Sōseki tried to tell him good things about Japan and the Japanese, the more he looked down upon him, for since the landlord had neither knowledge of nor interest in Japan or the
Japanese, he thought what Sōseki said was a tall tale or an expression of his conceit.\textsuperscript{22}) The prejudice against Japan and the Japanese on the part of the British made Sōseki hostile toward them.

Sōseki's hostility toward the British also derived from his inferiority complex. Sōseki felt inferior when he compared himself with Westerners in terms of physical appearance. He wrote in his diary, "Once on a street I thought there came a short, queer, and ugly-looking man and then it turned out to be myself reflected in a mirror. I have indeed realized that we are the yellow race now that I am here."\textsuperscript{23}) As Etō points out, a pock-marked face was "a fundamental and ontological wound" for Sōseki.\textsuperscript{24}) Sōseki's sense of physical inferiority toward Westerners was doubly serious because his pock-marked face made him extremely sensitive about his appearance.\textsuperscript{25}) The fact that Sōseki regularly recorded in his diary when he changed his shirts and his collars seems to indicate how much attention he paid to the way he looked. If he could not look like a Westerner, he could at least look as neat as a Westerner.

As we have seen, Sōseki was first overwhelmed by the advanced material civilization of the West. However, as he moved from the honeymoon stage into the hostility stage, what greatly impressed him became the source of irritation. As Hirakawa Sukehiro rightly points out, Sōseki's ambivalent attitude toward England was one which a student from a developing country usually has toward a developed country where he is studying.\textsuperscript{26}) Hirakawa further explains Sōseki's feeling by stating that the more impressed with England and English people Sōseki became, the more depressed he became. For when he discovered a good point about a certain thing in England, he compared it with the situation in Japan. Unluckily he often found the situation in Japan deplorable and was compelled to feel inferior to English people.

Sōseki's inferiority complex was also enhanced by the above mentioned insecurity he felt while studying English literature. Though he avoided studying
at any academic institution, his physical presence in London pressured him to confront his identity crisis deriving from the gap between his highest dream and the miserable reality. Sōseki's insecurity may seem to be a problem more or less shared by the Japanese intellectuals of the time who were sent abroad to study. This, however, was not the case. For the majority of them accepted Western supremacy as a fact and turned toward the West as the source of civilization.27) They did not from the beginning entertain such high expectations as Sōseki did. The combination of their inferiority complex toward the West and their blind worship of it made them gullible about anything Occidental.

It was probably Sōseki's personality and inclination such as his unusually high self-esteem and his tendency to be against the authorities that made him refuse to take the way of the majority of the intellectuals.28) Instead of blindly following Westerners, Sōseki felt that he should assume the following attitude:

A Westerner might say a poem was very fine, for example, or its tone extremely good, but this was his view, and while certainly not irrelevant, it was nothing that I had to repeat if I could not agree with it. I was an independent Japanese, not a slave to England, and it was incumbent upon me as a Japanese to possess at least this degree of self-respect. A respect for honesty, as well, the ethic shared by all nations, forbade me to alter my opinion.29)

Even with such an attitude Sōseki would not have been able to overcome the sense of insecurity. For it is most unlikely that English scholars of English literature at that time showed any interest at all in a Japanese scholar's interpretation of English literature.

Sōseki's Bungaku ron (A Theory of Literature, 1907), which he started to conceive while in England, was an attempt at searching for a "universally valid
formula applicable both to Western and Eastern literary phenomena. With this formula, a literary work can be evaluated by scholars of the native culture and those of a foreign culture on an equal footing: a Japanese scholar’s evaluation of an English work should claim to be of equal value to that of an English scholar. Thus, *Bungaku ron*, at least temporarily, gave Sōseki confidence and a theoretical base upon which he could argue some aspects of English literature. His *Bungaku hyōron* (Literary Criticism, 1909), a study of eighteenth century English literature, is “still worth reading, as his occasional comparisons, remarks and references to Oriental literatures make it very interesting.”

Yet, Sōseki was not completely free from the sense of inferiority he felt while studying English literature. For comparative literature was not a well established field of study then. Moreover, English scholars never thought of comparing their literature with Oriental literatures. They would not have shown any interest in Sōseki’s *Bungaku hyōron* even if he had translated it into English. Thus, Sōseki’s insecurity was not resolved until he started writing creative works whose values transcended national boundaries.

As Oberg points out, the hostility stage of culture shock, in which Sōseki found himself at that time, is a crisis in a person’s life in the new cultural environment, and if he stays without overcoming the crisis, he may have a nervous breakdown. Sōseki, who was selected to study abroad by the Ministry of Education, was not free to leave on his own. He had no intention of leaving with his study half-done, either. And yet as a matter of fact Sōseki suffered from a serious nervous breakdown. His nervous breakdown at one time became aggravated to the extent that someone sent a telegram to the Ministry of Education saying that Sōseki had become insane.

When Sōseki was in a poor mental state there were only a few things which gave him some consolation: 1) fine weather; 2) the beauty of plays at the thea-
ter; 3) friends from Japan staying in his lodging house including Ikeda Kikunae, the inventor of Ajinomoto, a condiment; or 4) a letter from his wife, Kyoko. Sōseki time and again wrote both in his letters and diaries how much he was impressed by the startling magnificence and splendor of English plays: the beauty of the costumes, sets, and the dances of the actresses. However, these moments of joy made him forget his anguish only for a short period of time. Also Ikeda, a friend whom Sōseki highly respected and whose company he greatly enjoyed, stayed with Sōseki only for fifty days.

In addition, more often than recording the nice weather in London Sōseki time after time complained about the fog and soot and the generally bad weather there. He wrote, for instance, that in London he never saw such fine weather like that which is called Nippon-bare (clear Japanese sky). He also wrote that people in London did not mind the bad weather and were more like beasts in that sense. Sōseki seems to have been comparatively oversensitive and was constitutionally predisposed to be influenced by weather. We should not underestimate the negative effect that the bad weather in London had on Sōseki’s psychological state.

In his worsening psychological state Sōseki craved for news from home as a thirsty man craves for water. Sōseki’s letters eloquently tell how lonely he was in London. For instance, he wrote to Kyoko, “As days go by I often think about how things are back there. Even an unfeeling man like myself greatly misses you. You must praise me for that!” At another time he even wondered if Kyoko’s letter was lost when a ship named “Rio de Janeiro” bound for England sank soon after it departed from Yokohama. Though Kyoko had her reasons for not writing as often as Sōseki wanted her to—her giving birth to a baby girl (26 January 1901) among other things—her seeming coldness deeply hurt Sōseki’s feelings, and became one of the reasons for Sōseki’s later conflict with Kyoko.
Thus, as we have seen, in London Sōseki was lonely, separated from his family and friends without being able to make new friends. Moreover he frequently felt pressed for money. He was also suffering from an identity crisis which made it all the more difficult for him to adjust to the new environment. He was surrounded by people prejudiced against Japan and the Japanese, and felt inferior to the British and Westerners in general. The gloomy weather in London had a negative effect on his already worsening psychological state. It is not surprising, therefore, that several years after his return from England Sōseki wrote that his two years in London were one of the most unpleasant periods in his life.\(^{40}\)

This does not mean that Sōseki was always in his hostility stage. His diaries, letters, and random jottings written in London indicate that Sōseki was sometimes in the humor stage. For instance, he comments:

> Westerners do not learn to control their emotions whereas Japanese people do. Westerners do not hesitate to boast whereas Japanese people are modest. Japanese people are hypocrites in a way but at the same time they are said to be governed by an ideal that they should not be emotional and that modesty is a virtue. Westerners do not value what Japanese people regard as their ideal.\(^{41}\)

Here Sōseki observes both the Japanese and English peoples objectively without having a hostile attitude toward the latter.

However, his writings on the whole show that he was unhappy, if not hostile, during most of his stay in London. In conclusion, Sōseki did not advance dominantly beyond the "hostility stage" of cultural adjustment and, therefore, he never reached the well adjusted "home stage" while in England. When we consider the tremendous differences in culture and civilization between Japan and England in Sōseki's time, his unsuccessful adjustment to England is not
Sōseki's study in England from the perspective of cultural adjustment was a failure. It was also a failure in a more technical sense: he did not acquire a degree.\textsuperscript{42} However, Sōseki's unsuccessful adjustment was a blessing for both himself and his readers. For if he had not suffered from culture shock in England as seriously as he did, he might not have felt as strong an urge as giving up his career as a scholar of English literature. Sōseki's unhappy encounter with the West was greatly instrumental in directing his future course to creative writing.

Through his anguish and suffering in England Sōseki, with far greater seriousness than ever, confronted the West and its civilization and came to ask such question as "What is the West?" "What is Japan?" "Who am I?" and "What course should I and Japan take?" By asking these questions with the seriousness that no Japanese scholars who adulated the West possessed, Sōseki reached a deep understanding of the West and Japan that the Japanese in the Meiji period rarely acquired. As a result he became one of the first Japanese who confronted the ideological conflict within himself between traditional Japanese values and Western values. During the rest of his life Sōseki continued to face this conflict both in his life and in his work and seriously struggled to resolve it.

NOTES

This paper is a revised version of a portion of chapter two of my dissertation ("A Study of Conflict in the Life and the Later Novels of Natsume Sōseki") submitted to the University of Hawaii, 1988.


3) Trifonovitch, pp. 21-22.

4) 18 October and 19 October 1900, Diary, in Sôseki zenshû (The Complete Works of Sôseki), Vol. XIII (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1966), p. 16. (Hereafter all the references to Sôseki zenshû will be abbreviated simply as SZ.)

5) Letter 146, SZ XIV, pp. 151-52.


8) 30 October 1900, Letter 147, SZ XIV, p. 154.


10) Letter 150, SZ XIV, p. 158.


13) Letter 147, SZ XIV, p. 154.


— xliv —
15) Etô, p. 85.


17) Deguchi, pp. 138-144. Though Deguchi’s data shows that Sōseki’s financial situation was that of an average student studying in a foreign country, this objective reality is not incompatible with the subjective reality that Sōseki frequently felt pressed for money. Among some reasons for Sōseki’s feeling poor is that he spent one-third of his allowance on books, which seems to be too much for an average student.

18) Introduction to Bungaku ron, SZ IX, p. 10.

19) Kondō, p. 100.

20) 18 January 1901, SZ XIII, p. 33.

21) 12 January 1901, SZ XIII, p. 32.

22) 25 January 1901. Diary, SZ XIII, p. 35.


25) Hirakawa, p. 162.

26) Hirakawa, p. 17.

27) Hirakawa, in his Koizumi Yakumo to kamigami no sekai (Lafcadio Hearn and the World of the Gods) (Tokyo: Bungeishunjû, 1988), pp. 216-20, discusses the West supremacist value of Raphael von Koeber (1848-1923), the most respected foreign professor of philosophy at the Tokyo Imperial University, and his great influence on his students.

28) Sōseki’s rejection of the doctorate awarded by the Ministry of Education (1911) clearly shows his tendency to be against the authorities. For details, see Etsuko Nakayama, “A Study of Conflict in the Life and the Later Novels of Natsume Sōseki,” Diss. University of Hawaii 1988, pp. 60-71.


31) Tsukamoto, p. 34.


33) Oberg, p. 45.

34) See, for example, Sōseki’s letter of March 5, 1901, SZ XIV, pp. 179-180.

35) Letter 150, SZ XIV, p. 158.

36) 13 February 1901, Diary, SZ XIII, p. 39.

37) Deguchi, p. 29.

38) 20 February 1901, Letter 160, SZ XIV, p. 176.

39) 9 March 1901, Letter 162, SZ XIV, p. 179.


41) SZ XIII, p. 87.


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