

Struggling Between Two Worlds

— Soseki and Henry James —

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Introduction

In this paper I want to examine how Henry James and Soseki, two intellectual, modern writers living in different parts of the world, experienced the turning point from the nineteenth century to the twentieth century, shared the same kind of pain and each struggled to establish an identity in a changing world as illustrated by their works.

In *Sanshiro*, Soseki uses the term “stray sheep” to express the dilemma which he and Henry James had to resolve as well as the dilemma Sanshiro and Daisy Miller had to resolve. Did these two writers settle down at the last part of their lives and find fulfillment? What clues in their writing can we find in answer to this question? Then, taking their last works, *The Golden Bowl* (1904) and *Light and Darkness* (1916), I would like to follow their struggle and trace how each developed in his works ways seeking to resolve his dilemma.

I. Lost Self

Soseki was not only one of the greatest figures in modern Japanese literature but also undoubtedly one of the best exemplars of the inner struggles of a Meiji intellectual. This is related to the fact that Meiji writers

possessed a strong sense of cultural identity as Japanese writers — despite, or rather because of, their having been the first Japanese intellectuals to be thoroughly exposed to the influence of the West in every aspect of their life and thought.

The pre-Meiji Japanese had enjoyed relative peace under the rigid system of Tokugawa (Edo) feudalism since the seventeenth century. With the Meiji Restoration of 1868 Japan launched into one of the most dramatic chapters in her long history, declaring her determination to become a modern state, using Western powers as political, social, and cultural models. The Meiji Restoration promised to its first generation a new world, a new order, and a new vision. Soseki's birth in 1866 coincided with this critical junction in modern Japanese history, and he made the most of it.

We can call Soseki an unusually versatile and learned man in both the traditional and Western arts. Through his early training, he had access to the Chinese classics, which fostered his sense of tradition. He became one of the finest creators of Chinese poetry that Japan had produced in many centuries as well as a gifted *haiku* poet. He was also a talented calligrapher and classical painter. He was called a formidable scholar of English literature, concentrating upon such eighteenth-century writers as Swift, Fielding and Sterne, and for a period of time served as lecturer on English literature at Tokyo University.

Soseki can indeed be said to have been the ideal Meiji intellectual, who was required to be knowledgeable in three fields of learning — Japanese, Chinese and Western. In spite of his many options, and even in spite of his personal tastes, he chose the hardest, but nevertheless one of the most rewarding of them: the career of a professional novelist in Meiji Japan.

Much of the motivation behind his decision lies in his two-and-a-half-year stay in England (1900-1902). Soseki experienced personal despair and profound disillusionment with his national ideal, because it became depressingly clear to him that his own background of Oriental culture left

him irrevocably separated from the organic whole of Western civilization. He was thrown back, and indeed bitterly, upon his own cultural identity. It was a form of rebirth or awakening which left him with a sense of self (or ego) that was the center of his crisis; totally unrelated, undefined and undefended.

Had Soseki been the kind of scholar who, like many of his contemporaries, had been content merely to introduce recent achievements of English scholarship into Japan, he would not have been confronted with this kind of frustration and disillusionment. But he aimed much higher: he wished to compete with, even surpass, the foremost scholars of English literature in the English-speaking world, but discovered this to be impossible. Soseki the scholar gradually disappeared, and Soseki the writer emerged.

Consequently, his belated debut as the first professional novelist in modern Japan has significance as an exemplary case of the impact of Western literature on the creative spirit of modern Japan and the Orient. His stay in England became a crucial turning point for him as he searched for his identity between Japanese and Western concepts. After recovering from a nervous breakdown, he turned to literature in order to explore the conflict within himself. It was no longer the despairing Soseki, but a reoriented Soseki who determined to commit himself to the pursuit of literature in order to gain a sense of self-identity.

In one of his early works, *Sanshiro*, Mr. Hirota and his young friends take an outing to the chrysanthemum displays, when Mineko is exhausted by the crowd. Then Sanshiro leads her to a nearby brook. This is their first chance to be alone together, but Sanshiro soon grows nervous about rejoining the others. Mineko reminds him that, while they may be "lost children," they are big enough to fend for themselves. She adds cryptically that the English term for "lost child" is "stray sheep." This leaves Sanshiro mystified. In the final scene of *Sanshiro*, at the gallery, Sanshiro is asked

about a portrait of Mineko:

“How do you like ‘The Girl in the Forest’?”

“The title is no good.”

“What should it be, then?”

Sanshiro did not answer him, but to himself he muttered over and over,

“Stray sheep. Stray sheep.”⁽¹⁾

The life of Sanshiro, who is both protagonist and narrator of *Sanshiro*, parallels Soseki’s student experiences. Soseki was not a country boy, but when he was introduced to the world of English literature at the university, and when he was forced to face the Western world in London, he was impressed, threatened and overwhelmed.

Sanshiro, a country boy from Kyushu, Japan’s most conservative island, experiences the same shock and difficulties as Soseki. The novel goes on to portray a young man from the “drowsy” countryside opening his eyes to the life and culture of the city. This new world, this modern society, is threatening. The woman, Mineko, also represents a threat because she too is part of that different, complex world. Soseki portrays his protagonist as naive, innocent and uncomprehending.

When we follow Soseki’s life and that of his character, Sanshiro we can point out similarities between Soseki and James and also between Sanshiro and Daisy Miller. James’s Winterbourne, the protagonist-narrator of *Daisy Miller* already knows about the culture of Europe. However, Winterbourne and Sanshiro have not established their positions in the cultural world. Throughout his life, Henry James also sought to establish his position in this world. “He had travelled so much from his earliest years that he had never had any real roots anywhere.”⁽²⁾

In *Daisy Miller*, we find “Daisy represents something which has walked out of the frame of Europe. She walks indifferent to the social code that

surrounded her, free of parental control, radically detached from any history or tradition.”⁽³⁾ Daisy is the familiar figure of the American innocent, the rootless and deprived individual, forced to rely upon her own judgement in place of the old conventions. Daisy is a naive American girl and Sanshiro a naive country boy, but the difference between them is that Sanshiro knows the old conventions and cannot ignore them. We should pay attention to the fact that Europe is the old culture while Soseki indicates that Tokyo is the new culture, and that the conservative background of Sanshiro is quite different than Daisy’s American background.

As Daisy is out of the sphere of tradition, so is Mineko. She is a modern girl whose “disregard for the conventional”⁽⁴⁾ springs from a lack of influence from the elder generation. Daisy seems to choose Giovanelli, innocently and without conscious thought, but she can’t make her decision clearly and her innocence of social laws and conventions leads to her pathetic end. Mineko chooses another way, attracted to both Sanshiro and Nonomiya, but knowing that she could only choose the one who would establish his position in the cultural world. Mineko represents the fate of a modern person who deliberately constructs her life against the demands of the heart. She loves Sanshiro and Nonomiya at the same time, driven by her “subconscious life” as William James calls it, but she does not (and cannot) recognize this driving force. She is like a “stray sheep.” She makes a conscious compromise, building a self-centered life. She cannot be innocent like Daisy, who is propelled by her “subconscious life.”

“Daisy’s story therefore seems to reach more deeply into the pathos of a vulnerable innocent attempting, in vain, to live by her own moral lights.”⁽⁵⁾ Though we are led to different solutions in these two similar stories, we can see these two intellectual, modern writers who lived in a different part of the world, experiencing the turning point from the nineteenth century to the twentieth century. Both authors recorded the struggling to establish an

identity in a changing world. As a man of Meiji, Soseki brought to his writing an enormous energy and a passionate struggle which greatly strained his health and even, at moments, his sanity.

In Henry James's mind, the European and American points of view vied for dominance all of his life. It is quite mistaken to say that James had uprooted himself from America in order to live in England. When Civil War broke out in 1861, Henry James was prevented from enlisting by a back injury. He suffered from a deep sense of physical inadequacy. The sense of guilt engendered by this incident remained with him even if he never expressed it directly in his fiction.

Mattiessen tells us what Henry James thinks about his task. James refers to his task in an essay, showing his special interest in Turgenieff:

For James discovered several resemblances between American and Russian life, particularly in the artist's relation to social change. Turgenieff struck him as being quite 'out of harmony with his native land — of having what one may call a poet's quarrel with it. He loves the old, and he is unable to see where the new is drifting. American readers will peculiarly appreciate this state of mind; if they had a narrative novelist of a large pattern, it would probably be, in a degree, his own.'⁽⁶⁾

The term "stray sheep" implies the dilemma which Soseki and Henry James had to resolve, a dilemma Sanshiro and even Daisy had to resolve. This is why both Soseki and Henry James have a special interest in the person who awakens to a different culture and who symbolizes the pain of searching for identity. In 1892 one of Henry James's characters spoke for him: "We work in the dark — we do what we can — we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art."⁽⁷⁾ Searching for identity gives Soseki and Henry James great energy and passion for writing.

II. Self Discovery

Light and Darkness is Soseki's last novel. It is a work which turned out to be longer than he had expected; even in its unfinished state, it is the longest of all his novels. The plot of this story, stripped of its psychological subtleties, is deceptively simple. It covers approximately ten days in the life of a young couple, Tsuda and Onobu, who have been married only six months.

The novel opens with a casual but highly unsettling talk between Tsuda, a twenty-nine-year-old office worker, and his physician about his hemorrhoids. After an examination, the doctor declares that Tsuda has to have a radical operation but has a good chance of recovery. This scene sets the tone for the entire novel because Tsuda must undergo a radical change, both physically and spiritually.

Tsuda and Onobu look happy but they feel restless and something is lacking in their marriage. Tsuda plays the role of a doting husband but he would have preferred to marry Kiyoko, a quiet beauty who rejected him for another man. At age twenty-three, Onobu appears to be an obedient wife, but Tsuda is not the man that she expected him to be. They managed to live together by indulging each other's whims. It could be said that Tsuda and Onobu are leading a peaceful married life, however, the more peaceful it is, the more it makes us feel the peace as a temporary balance of antagonistic powers. The husband and wife who appear in the work in an artificial manner are inevitably made to walk in an artificial way. The relation between the husband and wife seems to be a battle of ego from the very beginning.

Tsuda is committed neither to marriage nor to love; or he is incapable of committing himself to either of them. Onobu is passionately determined to

love her husband and to make him love her in return. However, when she is told that Tsuda will need a radical operation, she does not know how to deal with the situation nor does she have any sympathy for him. She only has anxiety, "If the operation should fail."⁽⁸⁾ Her egoism only lets her think about the trouble it may cause her. Thus, Tsuda and Onobu, an outwardly well-suited and loving couple, are already experiencing increasing tension in the course of their brief marriage because of their incorrigible vanity and unyielding ego.

Both Tsuda and his wife were raised by an aunt and an uncle, both are disproportionately attracted to the aunt or uncle who is their sexual opposite.

Onobu secretly prefers her uncle, who is a relative by marriage, to her aunt. "She believed that in exchange for her favor he paid her special attention"⁽⁹⁾

Tsuda's aunt often takes her nephew to task as though he were a child in need of reprimand. And the relationship between Tsuda and Mrs. Yoshikawa as his patroness also implies unconscious sexual appeal. "In one sense, Tsuda enjoyed being treated like a child by this woman because of the special air of intimacy that such treatment produced between the two."⁽¹⁰⁾

Light and Darkness is a world of egoists in constant clash. All the characters maintain their precarious balance which allows neither peace nor truce, only tension. The marital battle between Onobu and Tsuda is not the only one. There is another between Onobu and Ohide, and between Onobu and Mrs. Yoshikawa, of course, on different relational basis. Everyone carries his own ego, which is an atom of his being, and suffers from the chain reaction it creates.

In this novel, Soseki renews his efforts to find some sort of solution to this selfishness, as if it were not part of the outwardly critical moments but in the midst of common humdrum everyday life.

As Tsuda leaves for a spa, he considers three paths he can choose: "From the start, he had three alternatives, only three. First was to remain indecisive, so that he may not lose his past freedom; second, to go ahead, even if that's to make him a fool; and the third, to find a satisfactory solution without becoming a fool."⁽¹¹⁾ And he takes the third way. This choice is actually a wishful compromise between the first two alternatives. To seek a solution within the framework of the community, to lead an average man on to his way of salvation without resorting to the violence of rebellion, is what Soseki is trying to accomplish in his last novel. As long as a man remains earthbound, he must be part of his world, and on that basis try to transcend his own ego. Soseki is trying to believe in this possibility as the only possibility left for humanity. To face up to egoism is self discovery for Soseki. This is his way to be independent after struggling between two worlds, Japan and the West.

It has often been argued that *The Golden Bowl* and *Light and Darkness* are very similar in their plots, and it is also rather easy to point out that each character in *The Golden Bowl* matches one in *Light and Darkness*. But it is very dangerous to jump to the conclusion that Henry James influenced Soseki or that Soseki borrows from *The Golden Bowl* or adapts it into *Light and Darkness*, although it is almost impossible to find this kind of story at that time in Japan.

In one of his early letters, Henry James clearly tells us about the task of writing.

To have no national stamp has hitherto been a defect and a drawback, but I think it not unlikely that American writers may yet indicate that a vast intellectual fusion and synthesis of the various National tendencies of the world is the condition of more important achievements than any we have seen. We must of course have something of our own. We must of course have something of our own—something distinctive and homogeneous and I take it that we shall

find it in our moral consciousness, our unprecedented spiritual lightness and vigor.⁽¹²⁾

But when a treatment of conflicting American and European manners was what the reading public had come to expect from James as an international theme, he was growing more and more to feel that a literature that insisted upon national differences was beside the point.

He had written to his brother William in 1888: "For myself, at any rate, I am deadly weary of the whole international state of mind — so that I *ache*, at times with fatigue at the way it is constantly forced upon me as a sort of virtue or obligation."⁽¹³⁾ However, Henry James returned to his task.

I confess as a "critic of life" in any sense worthy of the name, than the finer — if indeed thereby the less easily formulated — group of the conquests of civilization, the multiplied symptoms among educated people, from wherever drawn, of a common intelligence and a social fusion tending to abridge old rigours of separation. Behind all the small comedies and tragedies of the international, in a work, has exquisitely lurked for me the idea of some eventual sublime consensus of the educated.⁽¹⁴⁾

After struggling between two cultures, Henry James's aim was to reach a sublime consensus, a rapprochement between the two.

At the close of *The Golden Bowl* when the Prince puts his hands on Maggie's shoulders "his whole act enclosing her," and says, "I see nothing but you," the force of what he says kindles a strange light in his eyes, "so that for pity and dread of them she buried her own in his breast."⁽¹⁵⁾ Maggie needs the pity of his eyes because she realizes how inadequate she is to sustain his love; and she is in dread of his eyes because she reads in their strange light the prospect of her possible failure. There is small consolation for the American bride in her husband's European philosophy.

Faced by the fact of her husband's adultery with Charlotte, Maggie gives no thought to the rigidities and principles that control social ethics in the European world. By winning him back Maggie may be said to reassert the moral order of the family, but her overriding need is for love. She is willing to endure the knowledge of his adultery, and to see the adulterous Charlotte depart with her father without punishment.

Maggie is, like all of James's American heroines, generous, tender and passionate. She has another aspect of the familiar American innocence—the simple-heartedness. So this story is designed to show, among other things, how Maggie starts by being as innocent as she is simple-hearted; and ends still simple-hearted but no longer innocent.

She achieves her triumph entirely within the framework of the situation she has created, by which she, her husband, her father and her friend are held united on another plane free from pressure. This ending signifies the unification of American and European concepts. Each character has been transformed by a discovery of love and its power, and also of his own capacity for love.

That is why each of them emerges more wonderful and prodigious at the end than they were at the beginning. For each has contributed according to his means and received back according to his need. Adam has given his power and wisdom; Maggie has given her love, sustained by her courage; the Prince has given his good faith; Charlotte has given her pride. Between them they have in the end succeeded in restoring the dignities, decencies and serenities of their common life, and in finding their individual salvation. James can only find his consensus in the unbelievable compassion of Maggie. Soseki sought for the same kind of consensus between Japan and the West, between ego and the other, but Tsuda's egoism undermined his goal.

Light and Darkness is interrupted at the climax when many subplots have accumulated. There is no limit to the number of endings we might

compose for this novel. Will Tsuda's encounter with Kiyoko awaken him from his dream? Will he be able to reject a semblance of freedom for a life devoted to the loving Onobu? And will Onobu achieve new insight into life? We have no means of knowing.

Surely, nothing so drastic or so dramatic may come out of the unwritten part of the novel. The word salvation sounds too grandiose to be applied to those earthbound creatures clinging to their own small egos. But what matters is man's progress towards salvation, because that is what we call life, and what man makes of his life, gaining bit by bit spiritual insight into the darkness of the ego within himself. Life must be the process of continual rebirth. That is what Tsuda and Onobu seem on the point of discovering, probably for the first time in their lives.

Soseki himself must have recognized that Tsuda's problem was not only an exceedingly serious one but also one that represented in compressed form the dilemma of modern man. We know from his correspondence that he was still searching for the meaning of life and that he was renewing his efforts to find the Way.

I am now fifty-years-old. It sounds strange to say but I am such a foolish man that I have decided to make my efforts to find the Way at this age. And I am at a loss to realize how far I have still to go seeking the Way.⁽¹⁶⁾

It appears, however, that when he realized that he would be unable to find an answer to Tsuda's problem and his own, and that the novel would have to be concluded without the solution he so earnestly desired, he collapsed from massive internal hemorrhaging and never rose from his sickbed to write again.

Now when we come back to the relationship between Maggie and Amerigo, we can easily understand that Henry James is symbolizing their struggle as the one in himself between the new American culture and the

old European tradition. And Soseki shows us his inner conflict between traditional Japanese thought and the cultivated Western philosophy or literature through the relationship of Tsuda and Onobu. Both Henry James and Soseki spent their entire lives seeking to find the way through their writings.

Notes

- (1) Soseki Natsume, *Sanshiro* (Seattle and London, University of Washington Press, 1977), translated by Jay Rubin, p. 212.
- (2) Edmund Wilson, *The Triple Thinker* (New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1938), p.144.
- (3) *Ibid.*, p. 144.
- (4) *Ibid.*, p. 144.
- (5) Henry James, *Great Short Work of Henry James* (New York, Harper & Row Publishers, 1966), p. viii.
- (6) F. O. Matthiessen, *Henry James: The Major Phase* (London, Oxford University Press, 1944), p.138.
- (7) James, p. xv.
- (8) Soseki Natsume, *Light and Darkness* (London, Peter Owen, 1971), translated by V. H. Viglielmo, p. 5.
- (9) *Ibid.*, p. 110.
- (10) *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- (11) *Ibid.*, p. 341.
- (12) Henry James, *Letters* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University. Press, 1974), edited by Leon Edel, vol. I. p. 77
- (13) *Ibid.*, Vol. III. p. 244.
- (14) Henry James, *Lady Barbarina* (London, Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1922) p. x. & xi.
- (15) Henry James, *The Golden Bowl*, (London, Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1923) Vol. II. p. 325.
- (16) Soseki Natsume, *Collected Letters of Soseki Natsume* (Tokyo, Sohgei-sha, 1954) p. 551.