

## Probing the Modern Heart: Natsume Sō seki's *Kokoro*

Van C. Gessel  
Brigham Young University

A compelling argument can be made that Japanese literature has, in virtually every important aspect of the Western definition, been “postmodern” since its writers began expressing themselves some thirteen hundred years ago. One can imagine all manner of outraged objections to such a claim, because theorists—primarily of the twentieth century—who have helped to create the definition of postmodernism revel in its newness, its nowness, its presumably compelling ability to capture the essential evolution of the human predicament in the late twentieth/early twenty-first centuries, following the collapse of traditional beliefs, values, and modes of expression. Somehow, the thought that a literature could be “postmodern” in a non-Western nation centuries before the West got around to inventing the “modern” sounds like the worst sort of aesthetic heresy.

Even so, one raises this tantalizing possibility in order to make a simple point: the Western world has become expert at defining aesthetic terms, identifying artistic movements, tracing lines of influence, and pronouncing transcendent, “universal truths” about literature and art that seem, *prima facie*, persuasive. Yet many of the assumptions underlying such expertise are based on a sample that is limited almost

exclusively to analyses of Western fiction, though occasionally a work outside the tradition will make its way into the discussion—primarily because it validates whatever conclusions are being drawn about the Western sample. Non-Western literatures are, thereby, even further marginalized in a process that paradoxically reinforces the same kind of cultural imperialism that most postmodernists vehemently denounce.

It goes without saying that the social and cultural forces that produced a modernist reaction in the early part of the twentieth century in the developed nations of the West bear virtually no resemblance to the ingredients that produced in Japan a literary response that could be termed “modernistic.”<sup>1</sup> The most profound differences may stem from the fact that, until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Japan had been a closed, semi-feudal society with a stiflingly tight hierarchical structure, precious little contact with the joys and agonies of the Industrial Revolution, and no experience with international warfare. Consequently, any attempt to draw close historical correlations between the experience of the modern in Japan and that of the West would be utterly futile. Though some Japanese writers avidly adopted many of the stylistic features of Western modernism, they could not be expected to share with their Occidental counterparts even vaguely similar attitudes toward either the moral and emotional carnage of World War I or the anti-mechanical reaction that characterized postwar disillusionment.<sup>2</sup> What may prove useful, then, is a compromise stance that will facilitate a view at some issues of belief and modernism through Japanese eyes—in this case, the eyes of the novelist Natsume Sō seki (1867–1916)—in order to discover one example of how the Japanese responded to the extremely rapid changes that engulfed and radically transformed every aspect of their society and culture after 1868, the date of the Meiji Restoration which

<sup>1</sup>The term “modernistic” here distinguishes “modernistic” reaction in Western literature from a very different, though no less “modern” reaction in Japanese writing.

<sup>2</sup>Anna M. Bailey, a graduate student in English at Brigham Young University,

introduced an unprecedented wave of contact with the West. Sō seki's writing provides an unsettled, starkly ambivalent look at a society that had created an artificial definition of modern "individualism" based upon a poorly digested sampling of Western concepts; at the same time, he rails against what he regards as a naive fascination with Western material culture, which during his lifetime was being unquestioningly hailed and indiscriminately incorporated into the daily lives of his countrymen. He was also concerned that the Japanese were swollen with false pride over what they regarded as a "victory" in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, despite their minimal military involvement.<sup>3</sup>

Sō seki was born a year before the dramatic political and social upheavals which attended the Meiji Restoration, when the emperor was ostensibly restored to power, but in fact the country came under the control of a pragmatic oligarchy determined to modernize and Westernize Japan as quickly as possible. Sō seki's upbringing included strict training in traditional Confucian codes of human relationships, but his personal experience did not conform very closely to those Asian ideals: because of financial pressures on his family, he was put up for adoption when he was born, later returned to his original family, sent out again for adoption, and again returned to his natural parents, who were by then so old he initially thought they were his grandparents. Later in life, due in part to a dyspeptic physiology and personality, Sō seki found contentment with neither his wife nor his children, nor did he ever feel fully at home in his career choice of studying a truly foreign literature—that of England. The disjuncture between the ideals inculcated in his youth and the jarring realities of his childhood; between the images of family his background formulated in his mind and the actual struggles of trying to live with others; and between his position as a scholar of British literature and his insecurities about his qualifications to be such—all these dichotomies find their way in some form or other into his writing. Many of his fictional narratives—espe-

<sup>3</sup>One can only speculate what lessons the Japanese learned from their "easy" military victories in 1895 and 1905; were they persuaded that a quick attack

cially *Kokoro* (1914)—play out against a misty backdrop of pained, despairing nostalgia for the values that had held Japan’s unyielding social hierarchy together throughout the preceding two hundred and fifty years of shogunal rule. Not that he wanted to return to a feudal age of inequality and oppression: but the Confucian order had at least provided a moral anchor, a clarity, and a social surety that from his own experience Sō seki felt his own day truly lacked. His intense study of English literature, including a twenty-seven month sojourn in London (1900–1903), provided him with a glimpse of alternative modes of living and thinking characterized by considerably more individual freedom and greater isolation. But he was unwilling to abandon completely the core and substance of traditional Japanese social order despite the obvious attractions of the Western model. Many of his fictional characters—particularly the two male protagonists in *Kokoro*—wander uncharted lands between social responsibility and personal freedom, and most are ruined when they are unable to strike a comfortable balance between the two. After meandering through this tormented no-man’s land, his characters encounter ultimate despair, choosing at best inaction, at worst suicide. Thus, a cultural and, yes, *moral* ambivalence lies at the heart of Sō seki’s fiction.

The Japanese revere Sō seki as the first outstanding novelist of the modern age, and he most assuredly deals more powerfully than any of his contemporaries with the agonies of modernization that plagued his generation. He is such an iconic figure, in fact, that his face appears on the most frequently used currency bill in Japan today, the 1000 yen. But conventionally, the literary term “modernism” in the Japanese context is narrowly applied to a handful of authors from the generation succeeding Sō seki, writers who picked up the gauntlet of radical stylistic innovation they had learned from reading contemporary European authors. These later writers would be heavily influenced by French symbolist poetry, by stream-of-consciousness narrative technique, by impressionism, and even by the extremes of Dadaism. Even so, modernist tendencies or qualities definitely inform Sō seki’s work, despite the failure of most serious readers of Japanese literature to perceive them.

The primary literary influences on Sō seki were the great (and, per-

haps, a few not-so-great) British novelists of the late nineteenth century—for all intents and purposes, his literary contemporaries. Among the many writers Sōseki read intensely during his stay in London, the one who perhaps played the most important role in shaping his earliest notions about what a novel should be was George Meredith. His influence is particularly evident in Sōseki's first few novels, which come closest to replicating Meredith's notion of the comic spirit. Pursuing multiple careers relating to the literary life (as had Meredith)<sup>4</sup>—including professor of English literature, newspaper critic, and novelist—Sōseki was well acquainted with British fiction, but his analytical eye located the thick, insurmountable wall of culture that separated what he read in foreign writings from what he

<sup>4</sup>It is tempting to posit some similarities of personality and familial experiences—albeit coincidental and superficial—between Meredith and Sōseki. Regarding the former, Michael Collie has written: “in domestic talk Meredith's tongue was sometimes waspish and hurtful. At the same time, evidence has come to the surface that Mary [his wife] was often insensitive, coquettish, and hysterical; she once had to be restrained from throwing herself into the Thames. Gradually she became more and more impatient of his long absences and his long periods at work, while he became testy at having to labor for hours at a small table in the corner of the bedroom. Neither gave what the other wanted or needed” (175). Mary, of course, left Meredith in 1857 to live with Henry Wallis in Italy. Sōseki also seemed to have little of the romantic in him: his first words to his bride after their marriage were, “I am a scholar and therefore must study. I have no time to fuss over you. Please understand this” (McClellan 9). His brusqueness took its toll on their relationship, though they never divorced: “[Sōseki's] apparent unwillingness to bend from this stern attitude was matched by her regular bouts of hysteria, which intensified when she was ill or pregnant—and she bore seven children in addition to having at least one miscarriage. The profound fits of depression were paralleled by Sōseki's mental imbalance, which occasionally veered toward full-blown derangement. Their instabilities must have chafed and fed upon one another, leading to a permanent rift” (Gessel 31). His wife suffered from hysterical fits for months following a miscarriage; “in June of 1898, almost a year after the tragedy, she attempted suicide by throwing herself into the Shirakawa river near their home in Kumamoto. Some fishermen who were net-fishing in the swollen river managed to rescue her” (Gessel 34).

produced himself as a Japanese author.

One scholar of the modern Japanese novel, Masao Miyoshi, writes of the impact of Sōseki's study of British literature on his writing:

his works are full of the ironic spirit of Jane Austen, George Meredith, and Henry James, all of whom he loved. . . . [T]he very form and substance of his fiction would not have materialized had he not been possessed of that rich and deep feeling for English fiction. The technique of the English novel which he knew and taught palpably shapes his own fiction and, furthermore, his knowledge of the English language works at critical points in helping him forge a new language for the Japanese novel at this still early stage in its development. (61)

Virtually every existing study of the influence of British writers on Sōseki focuses on the obvious ways in which Meredith's humor, for instance, or Austen's focus on social manners help to shape Sōseki's first two and least characteristic novels—*Wagahai wa neko de aru* (I Am a Cat) (1906) and *Botchan* (1907), both of which are amusing satires on social pomposity in contemporary Japan.<sup>5</sup> The possible influence on Sōseki by the themes and literary innovation of Meredith's late fiction has been largely ignored, yet in works such as *Diana of the Crossways* (1885) Meredith zeroed in on the themes that seem most harmonious with those found in Sōseki's own work: "the individuality which tended always to the isolation of a terribly exclusive egoism; the irredeemable nature of an action once it had been committed; and the concealed motive which could operate without its full force being understood" (Collie 186). Though Sōseki may have been more of a moralist than the late Meredith in continuing to probe the painful consequences of egotistical action, they seem to share a central interest in recording the individual psychological repercussions of human egotism. If so, it is perhaps not too fanciful to suggest that Sō

<sup>5</sup>Sōseki's first two novels are light, hilarious social pastiches that won him a popular reading audience; melancholy and anguished, scarcely ever seasoned

seki fell under the sway of a grandparent of the Western modernist movement.

Although Sōseki did not experiment as boldly with form and technique as later, lesser-known writers commonly referred to as Japanese “modernists,”<sup>6</sup> he most certainly had more than they to say about belief. If there is anything even vaguely resembling faith in the work of the “formal modernists” in Japan, it is limited to an unwavering belief in their own writing. Consequently, they inherit from their Western counterparts a technical daring but not an undergirding crisis of faith. Almost exclusively in the writing of Sōseki does one find both a powerful infusion of the modernistic spirit and a grappling with issues of belief. He stands apart among Japanese writers of the early twentieth century in his concern over the moral losses attending Japan’s modernization; more than any other Japanese author of his day, he lived and wrote of the modern anxiety that gripped his nation in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

*Kokoro*, published in 1914, comes late in Sōseki’s career. Already a revered writer in his own country, literary editor for Japan’s leading newspaper, and patron to a number of promising younger writers, he was much sought after as a lecturer on Japan’s modern dilemma. Many of the novels Sōseki wrote prior to *Kokoro* had dealt, in a more or less

“The writers most directly influenced by Western modernism were largely members of a group called the “Shinkankakuha” (the “New Perceptions Group”), of whom the most important was Yokomitsu Riichi. Other writers manifesting clearly modernist tendencies include Itō Sei, Kataoka Teppei, Hori Tatsuo, Nakagawa Yoichi, and Satō Haruo; interestingly enough, a leading figure in the group who acquired significant fame was Kawabata Yasunari, Japan’s first Nobel laureate in literature. Dennis Keene in his study of Yokomitsu and Japanese modernists notes that “When Nakagawa Yoichi looked back upon the movement in 1950, he said it seemed to have had no real theoretical basis and to have left no mark upon the present. It had been rather an impassioned art for art’s sake movement. . . . This means it stands somewhat outside the mainstream of Japanese letters, although its writers were soon to be reabsorbed into it. The Shinkan-kakuha appeared at a moment when the ‘I-novel’ seemed to have no more possibilities to offer. Its demise occurred when it became clear (which did not take long) that the

oblique fashion, with the individual betrayals that seem endemic to the modern human condition. Betrayal for him—whether of friend, family, country, or traditional modes of thought—became Sō seki’s chief metaphor to describe the anxiety he saw all around him. After testing this metaphorical representation of human interaction in his earlier novels, in *Kokoro* he finally attempts to dig to the very heart of the matter. In fact, *Kokoro* literally means “the heart” as a metaphorical organ of feeling, but it also embraces the meanings of “psyche” and “essence of human nature.” What Sō seki finds, once he has hacked his way through the thoracic cavity and ripped open the hearts of his characters, is that the certitudes of the past have atrophied, and that within the climate of both moral freedom and moral chaos characterizing his time, the selfish, isolated ego becomes a destructive force that first crushes others and then turns against oneself.

Sō seki’s disillusionment is rooted in a sense that the Confucian stitching that had held Japanese society together throughout the pre-modern era was coming unravelled very quickly. A new variety of egotistical “individualism,” a trendy “modern” concept that his contemporaries viewed uncritically as a positive, liberating importation from Western culture, was taking its place. But to Sō seki this seemed a shallow, poorly comprehended imitation bent on destroying the bonds between individuals but replacing them with no sense of responsibility, a boundless, recklessly floating personal freedom that led inevitably to selfish betrayals and extraordinary personal isolation—sometimes so unbearable that it culminated in self-destruction.

*Kokoro* is a variation on the coming-of-age motif. An impressionable college student is inexplicably drawn to and falls under the sway of a brooding older man he always calls “Sensei,” meaning “teacher” or, more closely, *maitre*.<sup>7</sup> The “student”—called only by the title of his social role and not granted a distinctive individual name, thereby reflecting typical “modernist” *anomie*—narrates the first two sections of the novel, describing his growing identification with Sensei, his disillusionment regarding the value of his own modern education, and his in-

<sup>7</sup>See the comment on the meaning of “sensei” in McClellan’s footnote to his

creasing alienation from his simple peasant father, whom Sensei rapidly replaces in his affections.<sup>8</sup> Quite consciously, Sō seki develops several personal relationships that model the five relationships—between superiors and inferiors and between friends—forming the core of traditional Confucian values. He presents modern examples of these classical associations not so much out of nostalgia for them as to demonstrate in rather graphic terms how easily the draining of the trust that had once characterized them can cause profound, even fatal pain when one partner in the relationship, succumbing to individualistic, egotistical impulses, betrays the other.

Because in the Asian context the student is expected to learn from and become more and more like his Sensei, he must probe more and more deeply into the heart of his mentor—a journey into the depths of the human soul not totally unlike Marlowe’s in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902). Sensei is reluctant to reveal the sources of his personal pain and the reasons for his total withdrawal from the world around him; only late in the novel does one learn that he has utterly forsworn interaction with others (including his own wife) because in his own college days he had managed—almost effortlessly—to betray his closest friend when they became rivals for the affections of the same woman. That simple, almost casual betrayal, so common in human experience, means little to Sensei until his despairing friend commits suicide. This extreme response to his own unthinking act of betrayal forces Sensei to stare into the blackness of his own heart—his “kokoro”—and the view horrifies and sickens him to such a degree that he can only live with himself—however hollowly—by avoiding any further contact with others that might reawaken the egotistical monster he discovered in himself. He is, therefore, very reluctant to allow the student into his life, at one point commenting,

“you asked me to spread out my past like a picture scroll before your eyes. . . . I was moved by your decision, albeit discourteous in expression, to grasp something that was alive within my soul.

<sup>8</sup>The novel’s basic plot bears some resemblance to Meredith’s *Evan Harrington* (1861) in which a young man abandons his provincial home and family in

You wished to cut open my heart and see the blood flow. I was then still alive. I did not want to die. That is why I refused you and postponed the granting of your wish to another day. Now, I myself am about to cut open my own heart, and drench your face with my blood. And I shall be satisfied if, when my heart stops beating, a new life lodges itself in your breast.” (129)

The third and final section of the novel, from which this quotation derives, comprises half the total length of the book. Titled “Sensei’s Testament,” Sensei writes it to the student in a final fatalistic attempt to form a communicative link with another human being just before he himself commits suicide. The lengthy epistle is delivered to the student while he is back at his family home in the provinces, languishing in the company of his own dying father. Sensei’s letter opens: “By the time this letter reaches you, I shall probably have left this world—I shall in all likelihood be dead” (122). The epistle presents the student with what might appear to be an insoluble dilemma: does he flee the bedside of his father—who, similarly, “shall in all likelihood be dead” by the time he can return to his country home—and rush to the house of his new spiritual father, Sensei, even though he will “in all likelihood” be too late to stop Sensei from destroying himself?

In *Kokoro*, then, Sōseki provides a sweeping, agonizing portrait of the alienated, egotistical nature of modern man in Japan. But his only overt references to organized belief systems lie in his characterization of Sensei’s young college friend who commits suicide after Sensei steals away the woman they both love. This unfortunate young man, known only by the initial “K,” had been friends with Sensei since childhood. Born the son of a Buddhist priest, K was adopted into the family of a well-to-do doctor who sent him up to Tokyo where he could also train to become a doctor. But K’s innate spiritual leanings drew him more and more in the direction of religious studies, and for three years he deceived his foster family by pretending to be in medical school while he instead studied theology. When they finally discover his lie, they disown him.<sup>9</sup> He seeks consolation in his religious beliefs, but once again he is forced to experience the brutality of untethered human egotism when he confesses to Sensei his love for a woman, and Sensei first

mocks his friend's carnal weakness and then upstages him by proposing to the same young woman.

As he watches the friend he has so coldly betrayed shrivel before his eyes, Sensei for a moment feels guilt for the evil he has done:

Suddenly, I wanted to kneel before him and beg his forgiveness. It was a violent emotion that I felt then. I think that had K and I been alone in some wilderness, I would have listened to the cry of my conscience. But there were others in the house. I soon overcame the impulse of my natural self to be true to K. I only wish I had been given another such opportunity to ask K's forgiveness.  
(225)

One can detect a significant portion of Sō seki's ambivalence in his suggestion here that while Sensei's "natural self" yearned to be true to K, his "socialized self" prevented him from heeding the warnings of his conscience. But he can find no "wilderness" where he can remain true both to himself and to his friend.

Sensei is robbed of any opportunity to heed the cry of his conscience when K commits suicide. Finally awakened to the enormity of his crime, Sensei goes through the motions of marrying the young woman, whom he does in fact deeply love, but he spends the rest of

<sup>9</sup>This sort of rebellion against traditional family expectations is one of the most frequently recurring motifs in Japanese fiction of the early twentieth century; in particular, male protagonists in the autobiographical "I-novels" (*shi-shō setsu*) often set themselves up in opposition to their families, an opposition that often remains hidden until some crisis or another exposes them. This is a key feature, for example, of Shimazaki Tō son's groundbreaking novel, *Hakai* (1906), nor has this kind of rebellion against family disappeared in the postwar era: in its broad outlines, K's deception of his family is replicated in the personal experience of Endō Shū saku, who convinced his father he had been admitted into the medical school at Keiō University when in fact he was studying French literature. The spiritual overtones of K's betrayal is likewise mirrored in Endō's rejection of the faith of his fathers when

his life spiritually dead, afraid that if he allows himself to feel an emotion or reach out to another, the result will once again be catastrophic. Ultimately, Sensei's suicide several years later is merely the delayed physical manifestation of the spiritual death he suffered when the friend he deceived ended his own life.

The final great question posed but not answered by the novel occurs in its inconclusive conclusion: "Sensei's Testament" breaks off with his farewell to the student, but there the novel breaks off as well, leaving the reader to wonder what the student will do after he has read the letter and thereby been taught much about the human propensity toward selfish manipulation of others. Many critics read this novel optimistically, retaining some hope that the student, even though he does leave his father's bedside to take the pointless journey to Tokyo, will be so repulsed by his own betrayal of his natural father in time of need that he will avoid becoming as jaded, isolated, and self-destructive as Sensei had become in the wake of the betrayals he perpetrated. But Sō seki is an adroit enough writer that he does not supply an easy solution to the dilemma he poses. The novel ends as the student, aboard the train to Tokyo, finishes reading Sensei's epistle. Whether Sensei is dead by the time the student arrives at his home, whether the student's father passes away while his son—who is duty-bound to attend his father in his final hours—is inexcusably absent (and likely to no good purpose), or how the student might react should he have to cope, as Sensei had, with the consequences of the ways in which he has betrayed those closest to him—both biologically and spiritually—are not disclosed.

The serious reader of this extraordinary novel can only speculate, wondering if the student, learning from Sensei's pain and despair, resolved not to repeat his mentor's sins, or if he merely learned that the human compulsion for selfish action and the callous inflicting of pain on others—including those best loved and to whom allegiance is owed—lie at the very heart of human individualism. Have his experiences with Sensei taught him, in the final analysis, that because he is human and has awakened to the fearsome destructive power of human egotism, he is destined to become precisely what Sensei has be-

come? Certainly under the traditional rules of Confucian order that would have still prevailed in his father's country home but were being debunked in Westernized Tokyo, the student would have been guilty of an unforgivable abrogation of his family responsibilities by abandoning his dying father, and it is highly likely that he would have been disowned and thereby robbed of both his fathers. That said, why has he undertaken the writing down of his experiences with Sensei and his own father, concluding his chronicle with Sen-sei's testament? Is this extended document designed to be the *student's* testament as well before he ends his own life in despair over what he has discovered in his own heart?

The more pessimistic reading of the novel suggests that the student learned all too well from Sensei that, as Arthur Miller has stated, "We are all separate people" (149), who are easily betrayed by impulses, lusts, and cravings and prone to hurting others over and over and then having to live—and perhaps die—with the consequences thereof. It is a bleak vision, certainly, but one born inevitably of Sōseki's own despair over what he saw as the collapse of Japan's moral scaffolding in the modern age—a collapse that passed virtually unnoticed by his countrymen because of their childlike absorption with all the toys of advanced Western technological culture and their credulous hubris at having become "equal" to the great powers of the world by gaining an unfought military victory over Russia.

In a lecture given in 1911, titled "The Civilization of Modern Japan," Sōseki cataloged some of the technological "advances" that had flooded his nation in recent years, musing,

[e]ven with all the machines we have today to reduce our labors, even with all the means of amusement we now have for the free enjoyment of our vital energies, the pain of existence is far more intense than one would have imagined. Perhaps it would not be overstating the case to call the pain extreme. . . . [Japan] is like a man who has been snatched up by a flying monster. The man clings desperately to the monster, afraid of being dropped, hardly aware of the course he is following . . . the waves that govern

Japan's present civilization roll in on us from the West. We who ride these waves are Japanese, not Westerners, and so we feel out of place with each new surge, like uninvited guests. There is no question of our understanding the new wave, for we have not had time to appreciate the features of the old one that we have cast off so reluctantly. It is like sitting at a dinner table and having one dish after another set before us and then taken away so quickly that, far from getting a good taste of each one, we can't even enjoy a clear look at what is being served. . . . [A]s our civilization is forced to change mechanically because of the unique situation Japan now finds itself in, we Japanese come out looking pretty miserable, or—shall I say?—pathetic: our situation is simply appalling. That is my only conclusion, I have no advice to give, no remedies to suggest, because I do not believe there is anything anyone can do about it. I am simply lamenting the sad fact of it all. (269, 271, 278, 281)

What, then, of belief amid all this despair over the rapid modernization of Japan? What is Sōseki's conclusion about the consequences of the collapse of the hierarchical system that had sustained Japanese society for so long? It is highly problematic to consider the Japanese Confucian codes as constituting an actual "religion"; but it is equally problematic to attempt to view Japanese religious practice through the lens of what is customarily defined as religion in the Judeo-Christian context.

Although Sō seki does not deal overtly with the loss of a particular form of religious belief in *Kokoro*, in *Mon* (The Gate) (1910) he confronts the slippery elusiveness of faith in his study of a man who has brought much suffering upon others—and, of course, upon himself—through egotistical betrayals. Though Sō seki leaves vague the details of the past experience of his protagonist, Sōsuke,<sup>10</sup> it seems that during his college years Sōsuke betrayed his closest friend by stealing away the man's wife. Though Sōsuke married the woman and they live to-

<sup>10</sup>Note the phonological similarities between his character's name and

gether in quiet, if disillusioned, harmony, the dreariness of his daily life, perpetually clouded by the selfish mistakes of his past, leads Sōsuke ultimately to seek a kind of spiritual peace through Zen meditation. Tellingly, he does not reveal to his wife that he has turned to this external source of consolation, fearing no doubt that she would be hurt by his admission that he has not found peace in their marriage and likewise anxious that the repose he seeks might not come so easily.<sup>11</sup>

And, of course, Sōsuke is right to be wary of the benefits he might obtain from the quest for religious enlightenment: surely his own guilt and ennui will stand as formidable roadblocks in his journey toward self-understanding. In fact, he is rendered incapable of action as he approaches the gateway leading from the outer world of mortal concerns into the hallowed sanctuary of the temple:

in his heart he felt it was no longer a matter of great importance whether he ever reached *satori* or not. He had come here to have the gate opened to him, but its warden had remained obstinately within, and had not so much as shown his face, however long he knocked. The only greeting he had received was, "It's no use knocking. Open the gate yourself and enter." He had thought and thought how he might unbolt the gate, and he had formulated a clear plan in his head. But he had been incapable finally of developing in himself the power to achieve his purpose. He was standing now in exactly the same spot in which he had stood before he had even begun to search for a solution. He was left standing before the closed door, ignorant and impotent. . . . It seemed to him that he had been fated from birth to stand forever outside the gate, unable to pass through. There was nothing he could do

<sup>11</sup>There are numerous parallels between the fundamental plots of *Kokoro* and *Mon*: a betrayal within a love triangle sets the narrative in motion, and in both novels the male protagonist takes great pains to shield his wife from the ugliness he has discovered in human motivation. Japanese critics have posited some failed love relationship in Sōseki's own early adulthood that

about it. But if the gate were really impassable, then it had been a contradiction to come here in the first place. He looked behind him and he lacked the courage to retrace his steps along the road he had come. He looked ahead at the firmly-bolted door that would never open to reveal the view beyond. He was not a man, then, to pass through, nor was he yet one who could be content to remain on the outside. In short, he was a poor unfortunate doomed to squat before the gate waiting for night to fall. (*Mon* 204–05)

Unlike Sensei of *Kokoro*, Sōsuke has not, until near the novel's end, relinquished the possibility that he might be able to put behind him the pain he has caused those closest to him. He does seem resigned, though not suicidal, by the very close of *Mon*: after his wife looks out the window to see their garden bathed in sunlight, she comments that “It’s a good thing, isn’t it. Spring is finally here.” Sōsuke’s response is “But it will soon be winter again” (213). Sōseki’s characters stand, like Sōsuke, immobile in their suffering, unable to return to the past to purge their crimes, yet incapable of moving forward into the future because of the burdensome chain of guilt that has forever condemned them, Sisyphus-like, to living in the endless hell of self-torment.

No matter how one defines belief—whether in the supernatural or simply in traditional modes of social organization—the picture that Sōseki paints is not a pretty one; it is, instead, pretty modernistic. At one point in *Kokoro*, Sensei tells the student,

“[D]on’t put too much trust in me. You will learn to regret it if you do. And if you ever allow yourself to feel betrayed, you will then find yourself being cruelly vindictive. . . . The memory that you once sat at my feet will begin to haunt you, and in bitterness and shame you will want to degrade me. I do not want your admiration now, because I do not want your insults in the future. I bear with my loneliness now in order to avoid greater loneliness in the years ahead. You see, loneliness is the price we pay for being born in this modern age, so full of freedom, independence,

and our own egotistical selves.” (30)

Sōseki echoes that sorrowful sentiment in a famous lecture titled “My Views on Individualism” which he gave to a gathering of students at Japan’s most elite university just a few months after *Kokoro* was published, and in which he provided his own definition of individualism:

simply stated, individualism is a philosophy that replaces cliquism with values based on personal judgment of right and wrong. An individualist is not forever running with the group, forming cliques that thrash around blindly in the interests of power and money. That is why there lurks beneath the surface of this philosophy a loneliness unknown to others. As soon as we deny our little groups, then I simply go my way and I let the other man go his, unhindered. Sometimes, in some instances, we cannot avoid becoming scattered. That is what is lonely. (*Watakushi* 42)<sup>12</sup>

What emerges from a consideration of modernism and belief in Sōseki is an author with exceptional gifts of insight and sensitivity, yet one all but torn asunder by the chaotic vertigo of change and displacement that have robbed him of the ability to find any comforting stability in a system that had anchored his nation for centuries. The centrifugal forces generated by the crazed modernization swirling around him created for him a vision of individual souls: free, yes, but at the same time free-falling, untethered to any reliable set of beliefs and unaware of their peril because the technological toys they have embraced amuse them as they plummet. Unable to believe fully in the permanency of the past, Sōseki also lost all faith in the modern, isolated

<sup>12</sup>It is difficult, reading these words by Sōseki, not to be reminded in some ways of Meredith: “Because the individual human being had always to exist as an independent, self-contained, private entity, at issue was how such an individual could relate to other individuals, if he could at all. The individual human being had to manage as best he could by himself, never as part of a

Self; with these gone, there is nothing on which to rely. He was left with only a sense of having been teased and then abandoned to utter loneliness by the allure of the modern age.

Setting aside all the many differences in stylistic innovation, in historical and cultural causation, and in the processes of literary development, one finds something true, painful, and even somehow modernistic about this representation of human alienation, of bewilderment in the face of rapid, uncharted change, and of irreplaceable loss that increases one's understanding of what the experience of the early twentieth century was like for many people in diverse places. The heart of the matter, once all else that shields it from view has been stripped away, is not so very different between peoples, places, and times a century later.

#### WORKS CITED

- Collie, Michael. "George Meredith." *Victorian Novelists After 1885*. Dictionary of Literary Biography. Ed. Ira B. Nadel and William E. Fredeman. Detroit: Gale Research, 1983. Vol. 18. 172-90.
- Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. 1902. *A Conrad Argosy*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, 1942. 27-77.
- Gessel, Van C. *Three Modern Novelists: So ōseki, Tanizaki, Kawabata*. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1993.
- Keene, Dennis. *Yokomitsu Riichi: Modernist*. New York: Columbia UP, 1980.
- McClellan, Edwin. *Two Japanese Novelists: So ōseki and To ōson*. Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1971.
- Meredith, George. *Diana of the Crossways*. London: Chapman and Hall, 1885.
- . *Evan Harrington*. 1861. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922.
- Miller, Arthur. *After the Fall*. 1964. New York: Bantam Books, 1965.
- Miyoshi, Masao. *Accomplices of Silence: The Modern Japanese Novel*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1974.
- Sōseki, Natsume. *Botchan*. 1907. Trans. Alan Turney. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1972.

- . “The Civilization of Modern Japan.” Trans. Jay Rubin. *Kokoro: A Novel and Selected Essays*. Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1992. 257–83.
- . *Kokoro*. 1914. Trans. Edwin McClellan. Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1957.
- . *Mon* (The Gate). 1910. Trans. Francis Mathy. Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle, 1972.
- . *Wagahai wa neko de aru* (I Am a Cat). 1906. Trans. Aiko Ito and Graeme Wilson. Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle, 1972.
- . *Watakushi no kojinchugi* (My Views on Individualism).” Trans. Jay Rubin. *Monumenta Nipponica* 34 (Spring 1979): 21–48.
- Tōson, Shimazaki. *Hakai* (The Broken Commandment). 1906. Trans. Kenneth Strong. Tokyo: U of Tokyo P, 1974.