

The Concept of Nature in the Works of Natsume Sōseki

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Almost all Sōseki critics, both Japanese and Western, are agreed that the concept of nature plays a prominent role in his work, with the consequence that the bibliography on this particular topic is extensive—in fact, too extensive to cover adequately in this paper. I have chosen, therefore, to focus on Sōseki's view of nature as it emerges in only two of his works, *Kusamakura*¹ (The Grass Pillow) (1906) and his last novel, the unfinished *Meian*² (Light and Darkness) (1916). Since Sōseki did the bulk of his writing during his last decade of life, these two works can serve as examples of his early and late periods respectively. Moreover, selection of these particular two novels for examination helps to underscore the dramatic change in his view of nature, whereas a survey of the many intervening works would tend to blur such a distinction. Thus I am deliberately choosing to contrast two radically different works, in order to determine more precisely the extent and direction of the development of his view of nature. I trust that whatever distortion results from such an arbitrary selection will be amply compensated for by a clearer understanding of the fundamental transformation of his view of nature effected between the opening and closing of his career as a novelist. Ironically, however, despite their startling differences in theme, conception, and style, both *Kusamakura* and *Meian* rank extremely high in the estimation of Japanese critics, and without exaggeration both can be termed modern classics.

¹ All references in this paper are to Alan Turney's English translation of this work under the title *The Three-Cornered World* (London, 1965). I have made minor modifications in the translation wherever I have felt that they are appropriate.

² All references in this paper are to the writer's English translation of this work, *Light and Darkness* (London, 1971).

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In *Kusamakura* Sōseki quite self-consciously presents an account of one man's brief escape—or at least attempt at escape—from the ugliness, complexities, and disturbances of modern urban life. As the title indicates,³ the work describes a journey, one during which the protagonist-narrator, a thirty-year-old⁴ Western-style painter, leaves behind him the “vulgar world” (*zokkai*) to wander in the mountains, alive with the colors, scents, and sounds of spring, and to refresh his spirit with the beauty of nature. At the end of the work he returns to “modern civilization” (*gendai bummei*), unmistakably represented by a railway train. Indeed Sōseki goes so far as to have the painter observe that “there is nothing more typical of twentieth-century civilization” than such “an unsympathetic and heartless contraption.”⁵

From the very beginning of the first chapter Sōseki is intent upon emphasizing the contrast between the turbulence, confinement, and general unpleasantness of modern life and the peace, freedom, and joy to be found in communion with nature. Already in the second paragraph of the work, we find the first element of the contrast neatly summed up: “It is not a very agreeable place to live, this world of ours.”⁶ The painter sees the artist's vocation as one of mitigating life's unpleasantness, “although [he] may only succeed in this for short periods.”⁷ It is the poet or the painter who “can enter at will a world of undefiled purity, and throwing off the yoke of avarice and self interest, is able to build up a peerless and unequalled universe.”⁸ A few pages further on it becomes abundantly clear that it is nature, in her myriad manifestations, which provides at once the stimulus and the material for the construction of such a sublime world. In rapid succession, the dark-green foliage—of cryptomeria or cypress the narrator cannot tell—completely covering a towering peak, the pink patches of wild cherry blossoms among the greenery, the solitary red pine on top of a cliff plunging far down to the valley floor below, the lark suddenly bursting into song, and

³ The term *kusamakura* is a standard one from classical poetry referring to a trip or a journey.

⁴ This is according to the traditional Japanese way of counting age. In the Western manner he would be only twenty-nine years old at most. Interestingly, Tsuda in *Meian* is precisely the same age.

⁵ Turney, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁷ *Ibid.*, *loc. cit.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

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the golden rape-blossoms carpeting the valley combine to make the painter's heart leap and dance within him:

... There in the mountains, close to the delights of Nature, everything you see and hear is a joy. It is a joy unspoiled by any real discomfort. Your legs may possibly ache, or you may feel the lack of something really good to eat, but that is all.

I wonder why this should be? I suppose the reason is that, looking at the landscape, it is as though you were looking at a picture unrolled before you, or reading a poem on a scroll. The whole area is yours, but since it is just like a painting or a poem, it never occurs to you to try and develop it, or make your fortune by running a railway line there from the city. You are free from any care or worry because you accept the fact that this scenery will help neither to fill your belly, nor add a penny to your salary, and are content to enjoy it just as scenery. This is the great charm of Nature, that it can, in an instant, discipline men's hearts and minds, and removing all that is base, lead them into the pure, unsullied world of poetry.⁹

This uplifting, disciplining, and purifying activity of nature, leading man to the realm of poetry, then, becomes a central motif of *Kusamakura*, and Sōseki is not slow in contrasting that exalted state with "the dust and grime of the workaday world,"¹⁰ which he—or at least his painter-narrator—sees as the usual milieu of the dramatist and novelist: "There are no plays, however great, which are divorced from emotion, and few novels in which considerations of right and wrong play no part. The trademark of the majority of playwrights and novelists is their inability to take even one step out of this world."¹¹ Significantly the painter prizes nature all the more because it does not arouse and exacerbate man's selfish tendencies, and in contradistinction to plays and novels is, in itself, emotion-free and indifferent to considerations of right and wrong. In writing *Kusamakura*, with its exaltation of nature's beauty and the pure poetry derivative therefrom, Sōseki also presents a trenchant critique of realistic literature, especially the psychological novel, in which he himself excelled in his later years, and of which *Meian* is perhaps the pre-eminent example in

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, *loc. cit.*

modern Japanese literature. There is more than a touch of irony in the fact that the narrator's following stricture applies with such devastating accuracy to the second of the works under examination in this paper: "However, I think it is just plain vulgar the way the average novelist probes the whys and wherefores of his characters' behavior, tries to see into the workings of their minds, and pries into their daily troubles."¹² It is of great importance in an analysis of Sōseki's artistic development to determine the reasons for his abandonment of the aforementioned position—if indeed it genuinely represents his aesthetic theory in his early period—and for his becoming precisely the "vulgar" (*zoku*) novelist against whom the narrator of *Kusamakura* inveighs. Herein I cannot but consider that the profound change in Sōseki's perception of the role of nature provides a key. For so long as he is seeking some pure unsullied realm in nature and sees a basic opposition between it and the vulgar world of human emotions, his quest is doomed to failure. The painter bears within himself the seeds of corrupting the exquisite natural scenery he encounters. Thus, despite all of the enthralling beauty of the lark and the rape blossoms, he must recognize that he is still mortal enough to have no desire to camp out in the mountains. As he meets several other people traveling on the mountain paths he is struck with the realization that even "several hundred feet above sea level, surrounded by thousands of cypress trees, the air is still tainted by the smell of humanity."¹³ The remainder of the work, apart from a few moments during which the painter almost loses himself and merges with his natural surroundings, is an account of his failure to remove the taint of his own humanity from the nature he is so ardently admiring. At one point, as he soaks in the hot water of a hot spring, he feels an immense freedom, wherein his very soul is floating, and he has entered "a state more blessed than had [he] become a disciple of Christ."¹⁴ Although the quoted phrase may easily be interpreted as a semi-humorous one, gently mocking the major Western religion, it serves to emphasize the high value placed on the *physical* merging with nature. Significantly, the reader of *Kusamakura* never learns of any inner spiritual transformation on the painter's part which would constitute a preparation for receiving the beneficence of nature's beauty. Sōseki never informs us of any of the painter's antecedents or of any unresolved personal problems of human relationships which might have

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

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impelled him to abandon the workaday world and embark on his springtime journey through the mountains. Consequently, despite all of the beautiful scenes of nature, described with utmost fidelity, a certain air of unreality pervades the entire work. The concentration on the aesthetic perceptions of man, to the almost total exclusion of the intellectual, moral, ethical, volitional—and more importantly, religious—dimensions of man, cannot but create an imbalance which becomes only too painfully obvious by the end of the work. The painter does not work through his existential problems to the point where he can enjoy the beauties of nature; he simply avoids them or pushes them to one side. Having thus shut out the mundane world temporarily, he becomes a kind of blank screen upon which nature projects itself, or a kind of sponge-like entity assimilating the very essence of nature. Sōseki describes this process in one of the most brilliant passages of the work:

If pressed for an explanation, I would say that my soul was moving with the spring. Imagine all the colors, breezes, elements, and voices of spring solidified, ground to powder and blended together to form an elixir of life, which had then been dissolved in dew gathered from the slopes of Olympus, and evaporated in the sun of fairyland. I felt now as though the vapor rising from just such a precious liquid had seeped through the pores of my skin and, without my being conscious of it, saturated by soul.¹⁵

And yet however much the painter attempts to blot out the vulgar world, it obtrudes even in the inn at the hot spring resort where he stays for a few days. Not only is he attracted to the enigmatic but beautiful inn-keeper's daughter, O-Nami, in violation of the aloofness to humanity which he professes, but he learns that her cousin, Kyūichi, is about to go off to Manchuria to fight in the Russo-Japanese War, which was then raging. Suddenly he perceives that the ethereal realm in which he has been dwelling, at least from time to time, has been rudely invaded by the shattering force of war.

Since my arrival I had been under the impression that this was an idyllic, dream-like mountain village where birds sang, petals fell to the earth and hot water gushed forth in streams, but where nothing else ever happened. How wrong I had been, for Reality had crossed the seas

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

and mountains to this isolated old village to call again to battle the descendants of . . . the warriors of medieval days.¹⁶

Such interruptions of the narrator's serene mood of enjoyment of the succession of nature's canvases—significantly, in the course of the work the painter does not paint a single picture—together with the end of the work, previously alluded to, where he returns to the “vulgar world,” serve to emphasize the fragility and brevity of the “non-human” (*bininjō*)¹⁷ world of *Kusamakura*. It is as if Sōseki is telling the reader—and himself—that he cannot indefinitely postpone grappling with that very world of dust and grime and human passions from which the painter has found temporary release. Moreover, these and other passages suggest that Sōseki was already embarking on his quest to discover another realm *within man* possessing the beauty and purifying qualities of nature which in *Kusamakura* are found only outside man. Such an interior spiritual realm of “naturalness,” akin to physical nature but independent of it, would, if attained or discovered, be neither as fragile nor as impermanent as the one in which the painter briefly dwells in *Kusamakura*.

One important passage in this most un-novel-like novel provides a clue to the direction in which Sōseki would move after *Kusamakura* and which would lead him ultimately to his most profound, albeit unfortunately incomplete, portrayal of man, *Meian*. The painter sets forth on an evening walk to the local Zen temple, the Kankaiji, but not because he has any particular business with the abbot, nor even because he feels the desire for a chat. He is simply strolling with complete openness as to its outcome, or, as he puts it, with perfect “irresponsibility” (*musokinin*). This utter naturalness of the painter at this point is significantly different from the physical sense of freedom induced by the bath, mentioned earlier, and different from any of his other expansive moods where nature exerts its beneficent influence from without. For here it is the narrator who taps a freedom within himself which is not dependent on the natural beauty surrounding him. He realizes instead that he has uncovered a truth about his own basic nature:

My aimless wandering on that beautiful spring evening at the Kankaiji was a practical manifestation of a nobility of spirit. If inspiration

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

¹⁷ This term is a central one in *Kusamakura*. It refers to a transcendence of the world of human feeling, or passions.

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came to me, I would accept its coming as the reason for my walk; if it left me, then its departure would become my reason. If I should compose a poem, to compose would have been my object; if I should not, then my aim would have been not to compose. Moreover, I was not inflicting myself on anybody. Thus mine was an unimpeachable principle (*shinsei no boshi*).¹⁸

Despite the frequent assertion that *Kusamakura* is a work filled with a Zen atmosphere, made largely on the basis that a Zen abbot is one of the characters and that Sōseki obviously evinces a keen Zen-related sensitivity to natural beauty, I venture to assert that the aforementioned passage is virtually the only one which points to a genuine awareness of Zen truth.

By 1916, precisely one decade later, when Sōseki came to write *Meian*, his understanding and experience of Zen—and religion in general—had deepened to the point that no extraneous references to Zen temples or priests, or to the innumerable anecdotes of enlightenment were necessary to convey them. Instead he presented an exhaustive—and many would say even exhausting—study of a young married couple, Tsuda Yoshio and his wife O-Nobu, in their uppermiddle class world of urban Tokyo, who are veritable embodiments of a panoply of ills besetting man: deceitfulness, hypocrisy, vanity, envy, jealousy—most, if not all, of which may be subsumed under the term Sōseki himself preferred, namely egoism. Herein the reader finds no escape from, or prettifying of, the vulgar world, but rather he is thrust into the very center of it. References to nature are rare for nine-tenths of the lengthy work, and even then are largely either trivial or intended primarily as metaphors for the spiritual condition of the principal characters. Indeed one of the very first references¹⁹ to nature is intimately linked to the coquetry and probable prevarication of O-Nobu. She says she is observing some sparrows building a nest in the eaves of a house, but Tsuda sees no sign of them, so that the reader is left to conclude that she probably fabricated the story to conceal the fact that she was lying in wait for him and that she wished to strike a graceful pose. In Section 13—the novel in its unfinished state contains 188 of them—Tsuda looks out from a streetcar window at the dark water of the palace moat, “the dark embankment, and the dark pines stretching tortuously alongside it.”²⁰ Clearly Sōseki is here portraying the

¹⁸ Turney, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

¹⁹ Viglielmo, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

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somberness of nature as a reflection or extension of Tsuda's gloomy mood, for at that point he is remembering the painful episode of having been jilted by his former fiancée on the eve of their marriage. We see here, then, that nature is functioning in a way diametrically opposite to that of nature in *Kusamakura*. Nature does not console, uplift, or purify Tsuda or O-Nobu for most of *Meian* but rather confirms or underscores their spiritual plight. The seasons too are reversed, for whereas *Kusamakura* is a paean to spring and its regenerative powers, *Meian* is set in autumn, and the increasing chill has its psychological and emotional counterparts.

Moreover, since *Meian* is for the most part set in Tokyo, nature is at best fragmentary and always secondary to the workings of man, notwithstanding the Japanese genius, maintained until quite recently, of preserving some aspects of nature within the urban environment. This reduced role of nature in *Meian* is neatly shown by an episode²¹ in Section 131 wherein Mrs. Yoshikawa, the officious and worldly wife of the president of Tsuda's firm, brings a *bonsai*, a potted dwarf tree, to Tsuda's sick-room.

And yet the absence or the rarity of nature in the world of *Meian* serves only to increase the urgency of the need for an inner naturalness to heal and bring life to the characters who are suffering and dying in the spiritual desert of egoism. It is in this general context that the elaborate and sustained symbolism of Tsuda's physical operation is to be viewed. For in the very first section the doctor tells Tsuda that by making an incision "the two sides which are now separated should join and *heal naturally, so you should really be cured once and for all.*"²²

For much of the novel, however, the prescribed inner naturalness is almost as rare as physical nature. Only too often the characters appear to be vying with one another to determine who is the most skilful at deception or at concealing his true feelings. Artifice and artificiality almost always win out over frankness, sincerity, and honesty. But Sōseki's created world of *Meian*, as the title indicates, is not all darkness. As Ward William Biddle has mentioned in a recent perceptive article,²³ at the culmination of one of the ugliest scenes in the work, the quarrel at the hospital between Tsuda and O-Nobu on the one hand and Tsuda's

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²³ "The Authenticity of Natsume Sōseki," *Monumenta Nipponica*, XXVIII, 4 (Winter 1973), p. 420.

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younger sister O-Hide on the other, Tsuda's and O-Nobu's feelings merge as they had rarely done before:

... Tsuda's heart, which until then had been carefully guarded to preserve his dignity in front of her, softened involuntarily. His caution in trying so very hard to draw a curtain of vagueness over his relation with his parents... melted away. And he was not aware that this had happened. Without any effort and without exerting his will in any way he had been gently pushed in this direction *by a natural force*. ... O-Nobu was very happy about this development. For his attitude had changed *naturally*, without his deciding to change it.²⁴

The change in O-Nobu is equally startling:

... The dissension with O-Hide, however, had accidentally burst open this locked door in O-Nobu's mind. And O-Nobu herself was not in the least aware of this. Without any effort or decision at all to open herself up to him she had *quite naturally* done precisely that. Thus to Tsuda too she appeared happily as a completely different person.²⁵

Unfortunately, however, such closeness, because it is built on the shaky foundation of having vanquished O-Hide, is short-lived. They draw away from each other again, and it is uncertain at the point where the novel is broken off whether they ever will attain true emotional union. Nevertheless, in the latter tenth of the work the mood and style of *Meian* undergo an extraordinary transformation as Sōseki describes a trip which Tsuda takes to a hot spring resort in the mountains, ostensibly to convalesce from his recent operation but more importantly to meet his former sweetheart, Kiyoko, who is utterly unsuspecting of his plan. A comparison of Tsuda's trip with that of the painter-narrator of *Kusamakura* virtually thrusts itself upon the Sōseki critic. For here, in this final novel, we see a man, whose every foible and flaw has already been mercilessly exposed to the reader, confronting the beauty and majesty of nature at a time when he has been spiritually prepared to respond to them. His response, however, unlike that of the *Kusamakura* narrator, is not one of unalloyed joy but rather one of realizing that he has been oblivious of nature, and by implication devoid of naturalness, until then. In other words, his encounter with nature is not an escape from himself into some ethereal realm but actually another step in his re-encounter with his own true nature within. As the following passage

²⁴ Viglielmo, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

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shows, Soseki here emphasizes the change produced within Tsuda, while wholly disregarding the beauty of nature in itself:

On one side a tall tree soared to the sky. This tree, which, judging from the weird shadow cast by the light of the bright starry night, appeared to be an old pine, and the sound of a rushing stream which he suddenly began to hear on one side, caused in Tsuda, who had not been away from the city for a long time, an unexpected change of mood. He began recalling forgotten experiences.

"Ah, I wonder why I've forgotten until now that such things as this still exist in the world."²⁶

As his spirit is stirred, he turns to consider, on a profound existential level, his entire relationship with Kiyoko, the severance of that relationship, and the effect his meeting with her again at the hot spring inn will have on him. Sōseki describes superbly how Tsuda is overcome with dread at this confrontation with the deepest areas of his being as all of the manifold masks he has worn to deceive himself are suddenly stripped away:

As the cold air of the mountain gorges, the hues of the night, which mysteriously and darkly obscured those mountains, and Tsuda, whose very existence was being swallowed up in those hues, all fused for a moment, he was seized with fright. He trembled with fear.²⁷

The remaining sixteen sections of the novel show how this process of Tsuda's internal transformation is further broadened and deepened as he finally achieves his long sought-for meeting with Kiyoko. Tsuda is by no means completely cured yet of his disease of egoism and its concomitant deviousness, although Sōseki indicates that Tsuda is becoming aware of the difference between naturalness and artificiality, and is developing an antipathy for the latter. For example, Tsuda is displeased upon discovering the morning after his arrival at the inn that the sound of the water which disturbed his sleep was produced by an *artificial* fountain and not by rain or a mountain torrent.²⁸

Yet it is Kiyoko who, as the embodiment of naturalness, provides Tsuda

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 337.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 351.

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with a compellingly attractive alternative to his deplorable human condition. He finds himself becoming increasingly relaxed in her presence although he had been anticipating considerable awkwardness. She answers his questions with complete candor, revealing herself as wholly devoid of artifice. In response to his question as to why she is now so relaxed when she was so stunned the night before by meeting him unexpectedly in the corridor, she says quite simply: "It's just that last night I was that way, and this morning I'm this way, that's all."²⁹ What she is saying is that the previous night she was *naturally* surprised but that by morning she has become *naturally* composed. Both her surprise and her composure are expressions of her true inner nature.

Thus Kiyoko's naturalness can be viewed both as the state to which Tsuda will ultimately attain and as the culmination of the development of Sōseki's conception of nature. For Sōseki has rediscovered the sublime world of *Kusamakura* in the unlikeliest of places, the true nature of man, from whom he had fled with such aversion a decade earlier.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 372.