

prepare him to be the one member of his generation who most effectively revealed the conflict between the independent self and the crushing mechanism of society.

Education of a Writer

Once he was settled again in the Natsume household, Sōseki lived what might be called a fairly "normal" life, but in his teens he developed a tendency to react to stress with physical ailments—most notably ulcers, the condition that eventually killed him. When Sōseki later talked about feeling anxiety in the pit of his stomach, he was speaking with deadly accuracy.

Whether he was sufficiently loved or not by his regained family, the young Sōseki was certainly given an elite education in keeping with his considerable intellectual talents and the family's social standing. (The family's financial standing was less firm: two of Sōseki's older brothers did things like stealing valuable swords and scrolls from the house and selling them to support their carousing.) The Chinese classics dominated his early studies, and he pursued the Chinese language and Chinese literature, which he loved, well into his teens. The increasing importance of Western culture, however, convinced him eventually that his future lay with English, which he made his major in his early twenties, entering the English Department of Tokyo Imperial University in 1890. In 1893 he was the second person to graduate with a major in English, continuing on in graduate school. He never "loved" English literature the way he loved Chinese, but he was by then committed to a scholarly career, and indeed he remained an academic until 1907, when he became a full-time writer at the age of forty. Including his first two years of part-time writing, Sōseki's career as a novelist lasted only twelve years following seventeen or more years as an academic, and even after he changed employers, Sōseki continued to think of himself as a scholar. The two careers were, for him, inseparable, much of the analytical activity—and the pain—of the first serving the creativity of the second.

The pain derived first of all from the lack of intuitive sense of mastery that is almost inevitable in learning a language after childhood. However artificial Japan's Chinese literary culture might have been (cut off as it was from spoken Chinese), it still allowed for immersion early enough in the lives of students so that they felt truly at home with its locutions. It is known from surviving manuscripts that Sōseki learned English well enough that he was able to write with a fluency and style unattainable by most Japanese even today, but he never overcame the sense that he had based his entire professional life on a language and literature that would never truly belong to him, and this caused him tremendous suffering. When he took his first job teaching English, he said in "Watakushi no kojinchugi" (1914; "My Individualism," 1992), a highly personal lecture he delivered to a young audience, "I felt like a fishmonger working in a pastry shop." He went on to say:

Questionable as my language ability was, I knew enough to get along and managed to squeak by each day. Deep inside, however, I knew only emptiness. No, perhaps if it had been emptiness I could have resigned myself more completely, but there was something continually bothering me, some vague, disagreeable, half-formed thing that would not let me alone. . . .

At the university I majored in English literature . . . For three years I studied, and, at the end, I still did not know what literature was. This was the root source of my agony.

(SZ, vol. 16, pp. 589, 591–592;
tr. pp. 292, 293–294).

The turning point for Sōseki came in London, where he was sent for two years (October 1900–December 1902) by the Ministry of Education for further study. Sōseki did not greet this rare opportunity to study abroad with enthusiasm. He was already thirty-three years old, in the fourth year of his fourth teaching position, living in Kumamoto at the far south end of Japan, and sending money from his

salary each month to his half sister Fusa (his father's death in 1897 had relieved him of an even greater monthly burden; and the two free-spending elder brothers who had helped to dissipate the family's savings had died in 1887). He was the father of one daughter and due to have another child by a wife with suicidal tendencies that were exacerbated by pregnancy. (The first pregnancy had ended in a miscarriage. The marriage of the twenty-nine-year-old Sōseki to the nineteen-year-old Nakane Kyōko in 1896 had been an arranged one, following common practice at the time.) The allowance that the Ministry was offering to pay to support his wife and daughter in his absence was minuscule. As a teacher at one of the government's elite higher schools, though, he had little choice but to accept this order from the Ministry, with all its attendant hardships. He deposited his family with his in-laws in Tokyo and set sail for London in September 1900.

Once there, he mostly stayed locked in a series of gloomy lodgings, reading English literature. Eventually, as he says in his lecture on individualism, he realized that "No amount of reading was going to fill this emptiness in the pit of my stomach," and he determined to fashion for himself "a conception of what literature is, working from the ground up and relying on nothing but my own efforts." He would no longer be a mere imitator who "was boasting of borrowed clothes, preening with glued-on peacock feathers" when he regurgitated Western ideas to great applause in the Japanese academy. "It occurred to me now that I must become self-centered. I became absorbed in scientific studies, philosophical speculation, anything that would support this position."

Self-centeredness became for me a new beginning, I confess, and it helped me to find what I thought would be my life's work. I resolved to write books, to tell people that they need not imitate Westerners, that running blindly after others as they were doing would only cause them great anxiety . . . My anxiety disappeared without a trace. I looked out on London's gloom with a happy

heart . . . I would return to Japan with a strength I had not possessed when I left for England.

(SZ, vol. 16, pp. 592–596;
tr. pp. 295–298).

Sōseki spent some potentially thrilling years in London, as the events surrounding the death of Queen Victoria and the beginning of a new age played themselves out, but his experience of discovery was almost entirely internal. He did go to watch the magnificent funeral cortege itself, perched on his landlord's shoulders to see over the heads of the tall crowd. He got out of the house occasionally to go to the theater, to learn how to ride a bicycle (a conscious attempt to find some relief from depression), and to visit the Tower of London (once) and the preserved home of Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) (four times) (Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* and *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and the Heroic in History* were widely read in Meiji Japan). But for the most part Sōseki stayed shut up in his room (or rooms—he was so dissatisfied with his living arrangements that he had no fewer than five different lodgings in his two years there), studying all the while. His gloomy recollections of the time suggest a degree of self-absorption bordering on madness, and in fact, Japanese acquaintances reported that he had indeed gone over the edge. Shortly after receiving the sad news that his haiku friend Masaoka Shiki had died, he left for Japan in December 1902 with hundreds of books and articles that would help him with his reassessment of literature from the ground up. As it happened, though, he wrote only one book "to tell people that they need not imitate Westerners," and that was his *Bungakuron* (1907; *Theory of literature*), which Sōseki referred to as the "deformed corpse" of his projected life's work as a scholar. (Sōseki's other book of criticism was an unedited collection of students' lecture notes.)

Back in Tokyo, Sōseki found his wife living in near-poverty and her once-prosperous and politically prominent father financially ruined by changes in the government. Now he had