

Spiritual Discernment in Soseki Natsume's *Kokoro*

Daniel Wright, Auburn University

The Orient—from the European borders of the old Ottoman Empire to the archipelago of Japan—often has been regarded by the West as a land of mystery, enigma, and alien sensibility. Such an attitude and its attendant postures towards cultures of the Orient, which are as diverse as they are rich, reflect a failure of studied appreciation for these societies. Such misinformed opinion also sometimes betrays a not-too-well-disguised jingoism and xenophobia that occasionally permit the West to conveniently, simplistically, and erroneously classify the peoples of the Pacific Rim and the interior of Asia as inhabitants of cultures which are altogether removed from the psychological, religious, and social experiences of life as these are understood and lived in the West. This misapprehension of the East may, in part, be based on the two hemispheres' relative lack of common recognition points of reference in language, metaphor, and story, but this misapprehension can be corrected in part by a close examination of the literature of the East—especially when the author under review is someone like Soseki Natsume, a Japanese writer with more than passing familiarity with the West.

Soseki Natsume, one of Japan's most significant contributors to the literature of the twentieth century, effects a bridge between the philosophical and religious traditions of East and West which not even Mishima Yukio, for all of his Western affectations of style and habit, could achieve. In all of Soseki's works, but most especially in *Kokoro* ("The Heart"), Soseki explores the nature of evil and man's fundamental "alone-ness," alienation, and existential sense of "separate-ness" in categories which at once are distinctively Japanese and which yet are accessible to the Western reader by Soseki's presentation of persons and events which accommodate our recognition of those elements of personality and behavior which inhere within man's universal being.

Such assimilation can be enhanced and magnified by an elemental understanding of the various Japanese religious traditions, especially as these inform us of Soseki's purpose in *Kokoro*: man's journey, through others, into experience with himself—a journey which leads man to the confrontation with evil and the recognition that evil does not so much exist without as within a man.

Kokoro, the consummate expression of Soseki Natsume's beliefs and convictions, was composed in 1914, two years before the author's early death. *Kokoro*'s lyrical and sensuous prose is the ironic vehicle of Soseki's harsher revelation of man's twisted and perverse being: that life is fully capable of being comprehended only when man first recognizes that all evil is personal. Such recognition, Soseki continues, invariably leads the man of conscience to disillusionment and despair, although these distressing experiences, compounded by alienation and guilt, curiously prove the maturity of man's consciousness in the experience of his own diminishment and loss of ego; man, in effect, can become aware of who he really is only through the process of his

own humiliation (a lesson not far removed from the Hebrew story of Adam and Eve).

These convictions pervade *Kokoro* and many of Soseki's other novels, e.g., *Meian* ("Light and Darkness," 1915) and *Michikusa* ("Grass on the Wayside," 1915). The author's dark assessment of the human condition is hauntingly echoed, for example, by his narrator in the novel, *Wagahai wa neko de aru* ("I Am a Cat," 1905), when he declares that no authentic self-understanding is possible if one does not acknowledge one's baseness: "Unless a person realizes that he is a scoundrel, he cannot be called worldly-wise."¹

In *Kokoro*, man's disquieting confrontation with himself begins when he ignorantly develops confidence in relationships which are grounded in love, affection, and trust. Soseki argues that we invariably discover such qualities to be fragile and painfully impermanent; man will always betray and be betrayed. Despite man's proud boasts to the contrary, Soseki argues that man's one constant is his persevering (even if unwilling) faithlessness to others. Soseki would agree, therefore, with Oscar Wilde, his British contemporary, who declared in 1897, in "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," that perhaps despite his better intent, man "always kills the thing he loves." Subsequently, to Soseki, unless one chooses to surrender to a life wherein one perpetually betrays and is betrayed, one must achieve, instead, that stoic isolation from the world which the Buddhist tradition teaches and which, in turn, is nurtured by dispossessing oneself of love and obligations to friends and companions. In doing so, two noble goals might be attained: one may avoid contaminating the innocence of others who as yet are uninfected by their recognition of humanity's evil, and one might also preserve oneself from further corruption by securing oneself from assault by personal demons within or by the intricacies and secret evil of those who surround us. Hence, in his lengthy suicide "testament," *Kokoro*'s Sensei confesses to the youthful narrator that he would not pollute the innocent, uncontaminated soul of his wife who abides in an ignorant state of bliss; he will not share with her the terrible discovery he has made of man's true nature: ". . . my wife is the one exception--I do not want her to know about any of this."²

Soseki's early novels, though stylistically less refined than his later accomplishments, nonetheless share a common perspective with his more deservedly acclaimed novels of the early twentieth century. Furthermore, all of Soseki's works reflect a personal philosophy which is rooted not only in Buddhist spirituality, but in the Western existentialist tradition, especially as that tradition is defined by such representatives as Karl Jaspers, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Martin Buber.

For example, in *Botchan* (1906), Soseki's youthful and popular novel, Botchan, a young teacher, discovers the malignancy of human evil as it is personified by Badger, his superior and a vile man who exercises his petty tyranny over terrified and intimidated subordinates while protecting his morally bankrupt authority with the servile assistance of sycophants, hypocrites, and

¹ Soseki Natsume, *I Am a Cat*, trans. Katsue Shibata and Montanari Kai (Tokyo: Kenyusha, 1961) 295.

² Soseki Natsume, *Kokoro*, trans. Edwin McClellan (Chicago: Gateway, 1957) 248. All future references to this edition will appear in the text.

liars. The disillusionment and alienation which Botchan experiences when he encounters this moral abyss in the place and person where and in whom he should expect a monument to integrity convokes a despair which Japanese cultural authorities have identified as "the loneliness that results when the spirit of justice and simplicity has to struggle in a world of injustice and vanity."³

In *Kokoro*, the theme of personal evil, its alienating effects, and our futile attempts to conceal these realities from ourselves is more fully developed. The unnamed narrator, through his reading of Sensei's testament, discovers others' and—perhaps more importantly—his own capacity for treachery and betrayal. The young narrator acquires this terrifying revelation, in part, by his recognition of himself in Sensei's confession of the old master's betrayal of his friend, K, during the old master's youth—an act of deceit which led to the friend's suicide. The young narrator shudders with self-recognition while reading this account of another's cruel manipulation of a friend, for like Sensei, the narrator, too, has betrayed someone (in this case, his father) for personal advantage. Both Sensei and the young narrator's acts therein reflect the evil of self-interest which Soseki mourns, acts which are archetypally expressed by such fearful acts of betrayal as those of Brutus toward Caesar, Lancelot of Arthur, and Judas of Christ. And lest one be inclined to dismiss, as a mere Japanese peculiarity, Soseki's evaluation of betrayal as the chief and most disruptive manifestation of sin, one would do well to recall that it was no less representative a Westerner than Dante who saw fit to condemn those who had betrayed their masters to the deepest pit of the *Inferno*. Soseki's observations and comments upon the dark regions of the human heart are not, therefore, exclusively Japanese or Oriental exercises; rather, these observations penetrate to that which is undifferentiated by human custom or tradition—the soul of man.

In Soseki's works, if man is not an ignorant, stupid (and therefore somewhat more sheltered) person, then he is a creature of the night: deceitful and manipulative, conspiratorial and cruel. When man awakens to self-awareness in Soseki's novels, he does not rise to joyful enlightenment but is instead thrust into the terror of a Kafkaesque abyss where reason is no guide and goodness a mere illusion of the naive, untutored optimist. In *Kokoro*, man's heart, as Joseph Conrad would say, is a heart of darkness, and it beats to a silent, demonic pulse: man is enslaved to an evil not of his own choosing, and it is an evil which he can only partially subjugate and from which he can be fully delivered only by death.

Buddhist doctrine affirms Soseki's observations of man's captivity to a baser nature, for Buddhist teachings inform us that man's most significant feature of character is his bondage to *bon-no* (desire), the acquisitive instinct which drives man to possess—to employ all of his means to achieve power, authority, and control in a world which he intuitively knows to be and experiences as unstable. Man's desire to control his own destiny—which frequently involves the destruction of others' attempts to acquire autonomy over their own lives—reflects man's perceptions of life as tenuous and vulnerable. Buddhist philosophy acknowledges that man nurtures illusions of power and control in the vain

³ Centenary Cultural Council, *Japanese Literature in the Meiji Era*, ed. Okazaki Yoshie, trans. V. H. Vigiellmo (Tokyo: Obusha, 1955) p. 271.

hope that their acquisition will permit him to gain ascendancy over his own fundamental powerlessness. Confidence or faith in anything which provides (or which seems to provide) the consolations of security, guarantees, and certainty in a world of impermanence and loss are responses to man's desperate hope for an end to the one thing for which there can be no end: the struggle to make lasting that which, by nature, cannot endure.

Buddhism affirms that a release from the anguish of life is achieved only by the experience of *satori* (epiphany), and this experience, though it can be momentarily realized in life, is most perfectly accomplished by death. In death, man most completely and forever transcends those lustful desires of the heart which so violently disrupt his life, make him unhappy, and fill him with disgrace and shame, for these desires tempt man to descend to the depths of human darkness and enslave him to that ineradicable corrosive within man's mortal essence which many religious traditions call sin. Understood within this context, Sensei's choice for death seems, therefore, to be less an act of despair than a thoughtful and considered attempt by a troubled man to definitively and finally repudiate his own egoism. In this century, the French existentialist, Albert Camus, has suggested that the choice for death is the only truly serious or meaningful choice which we confront, and Buddhist philosophy similarly proposes that it is through the choice for death that man ultimately is able to completely absolve himself of the guilt he has incurred in life--to become, by death, as Tetsumaro Hayashi declares, "absolute." ⁴

The state of Buddhist "absolution" is the Nirvana of nothingness, dissolution, extinction: the world of the eternal void which transcends, because it negates, all categories of existence which make life painful and imperfect, ignoble and shameful. As he writes to his young friend, Sensei reflectively muses on death's invitation to this state of perfect absolution: "When at last it became clear to me that I could not remain still in the prison [of my mind] much longer, and that I could not escape from it, I was forced to the conclusion that the easiest thing I could do would be to commit suicide. . . . If I wished to move at all, then I could move only towards my own end" (244). Understood thus, Sensei's death, like K's, affirms intelligent purpose and personal meaning in each man's choice for death. Each suicide is a final act of self-renunciation, committed by a mature Zen philosopher who, acutely aware of himself, seeks to be liberated from the dark and horrifying specters that haunt and corrupt the diseased soul of man. Armando Janeira illustrates the distinction between Western and Oriental perspectives which explain some Western readers' misapprehension of these suicides, for he reminds us that in the West, if a man fails, it is expected that he ought once more to set himself against the obstacles which have defeated him ("try and try again," as it is said), but to the Japanese, failure of endeavor has often demanded obedience to a strict code of duty which insists upon nothing less than self-sacrifice (*junshi*) as an act of satisfaction and atonement.⁵

⁴ Tetsumaro Hayashi, "Natsume Soseki's *Kokoro* (*The Heart*): The Ethical Imperative," *Persica* 15 (1988): 161.

⁵ Armando Janeira, *Japanese and Western Literature: A Comparative Study* (Tokyo: Chas. Tuttle, 1970) 270.

Therefore, if the plea from the Western Christian to his God could be summarized as "Save us from death!" the cry from the depths of the Buddhist soul, such as we hear in *Kokoro*, is "Save us from life!" The Christian sees man as tainted and fallen but capable of restoration by personal redemption and sanctification; the Buddhist, however, sees man as capable of noble acts only by the resolve of severe moral discipline, for perhaps more wisely, he is aware of the limits of human possibility because of man's deep, ineradicable corruption. As one who adheres to this Buddhist truth, Sensei directs the narrator of *Kokoro*: ". . . don't put too much trust in me. You will learn to regret it if you do" (30). And, elsewhere, following his initially unsatisfying explanation of an earlier cold rebuff to the young narrator, Sensei confesses, "It is not you in particular that I distrust, but the whole of humanity" (29).

To the Western reader, Sensei's chilly directive to his young friend may appear to be haughty and misanthropic, but to the student of Zen, such a warning against misplaced trust reflects a wise, honest, unequivocal evaluation of man's fundamental untrustworthiness, emanating from one who comprehends the range of inadequacy, suffering, and sorrow which each person creates for himself and others--perhaps even in spite of one's attempts not to do so. After all, man's unchosen lot, says the disciple of Zen, is to suffer in a world of essentially conflicting desires; it is his fate to feel that which he is and despise it. In Part One of *Kokoro*, for example, the narrator recollects his earlier musings on board his train to the country: "I thought about my own inconsistency. . . . I became dissatisfied with myself" (79). How similar to Saint Paul is this Japanese expression of a man's frustration with his inability to govern himself: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (Romans 7: 15, 19).

Not only Buddhism, however, informs Japanese (or Soseki's) religious sensibilities. Significantly, for example, within a religiously eclectic culture such as Japan, Shinto tradition continues to strongly emphasize man's indissoluble unity with nature, especially as that unity is revealed in the hierarchy of relationships that one either forges or is born into; and Confucianism provides the ancient prescriptions and canons by which these relationships are to be regulated.⁶

When the influence of these religious traditions are therefore considered in combination with the even more influential Zen discipline of Buddhist religion, it becomes easier for one to see how a Shinto/Confucian identity, which places a premium on faithfulness in relationships, can be threatened by a Zen tradition which suggests that faithfulness in relationships is probably an impossible endeavor! Given such conflicting religious traditions, one can appreciate how the advent of existentialist thought in Japan would further complicate the search for meaning and struggle for identity in such thoughtful persons as Soseki, for prior to the introduction of Western philosophical ideas to Japan, Japan already was a culture fraught with intellectual contradiction.

⁶ Renu Juneja, "Hungry Ghosts, Honorable Elders and Senior Citizens: Reflections in Inter-generational Relations," *The Cresset* 51 (April 1988): 5-6.

Commenting upon that existential terrain in *Kokoro* within her survey of the religious character of the novel, Maria Flutsch says that Soseki's purpose in *Kokoro* is the illustration of the alienation and anxiety induced in the Japanese through rapid cultural transformation.⁷ Hisaaki Yamanouchi agrees, declaring that by the end of Meiji era--the dynastic age in which Soseki wrote--"spiritual ideals increasingly [were] overshadowed and atomised by the material progress of an impersonal industrialisation."⁸ Janet Walker suggests that Soseki and his contemporaries "existed between two worlds, one a declining world and the other a new Western world of which they had inadequate understanding and virtually no experience"⁹--although this latter remark is certainly an overstatement, for Soseki's experience with the West was not only considerable but perhaps even definitive of his character; he had, as is well known, studied and lectured extensively when he was at the University of London, and he was intimately familiar with Western tradition and the naturalistic writers of the period who so much influenced his own composition.

Soseki, therefore, was a product of both the Western philosophical tradition (especially the early existentialist schools of thought) which he embraced and mingled with a larger Japanese religious tradition, but his purpose in *Kokoro* was not so much to self-consciously engage these various traditions in debate as to invite us to see in them a common perspective: that evil is not some commodity "out there," some abstract entity or quality which we can choose to reject or avoid. Rather, in *Kokoro* and elsewhere, Soseki would make us aware of evil as an enduring personal reality, original in our being, an "emboss'd carbuncle in [our] corrupted blood," as Lear would say, an evil which we must discern in all of its terrible manifestations. For Soseki, a twentieth-century explorer of the human *kokoro* --and perhaps for those of us who would journey with him through the religious and philosophical jungles of our time--we can affirm, in the midst of our journey, that to know who we are is to know first of all that the kingdom of Hell is within us.

⁷ Maria Flutsch, "Spiritual Anguish in an Age of Modernization," in *An Invitation to Japan's Literature*, ed. Tobata Seiichi et al. (Tokyo: Japan Culture Institute, 1974) 102-03.

⁸ Hisaaki Yamanouchi, *The Search for Authenticity in Modern Japanese Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1978) 70.

⁹ Janet Walker, *The Japanese Novel of the Meiji Period and the Ideal of Individualism* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1979) 98.