

“THREE LEAGUES AWAY FROM A HUMAN COLOUR”: NATSUME SOSEKI IN LATE-VICTORIAN LONDON

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NATSUME SOSEKI ARRIVED IN LONDON in October 1900, with great expectations, both his own and those of the Japanese government officials who sponsored his scholarship to study abroad for two years. Soseki would eventually become one of the most important figures in modern Japanese literature, featured on Japan's 1000-yen note from 1984 to 2004; before he wrote the novels that earned him such fame – including *I Am a Cat* (1906), *And Then* (1910), and *Kokoro* (1914) – Soseki, who was then a young English teacher in the Japanese provinces, was sent to study English language and literature as part of Japan's large-scale modernization and westernization efforts, following the “opening” of Japan to the West by Commodore Matthew Perry in 1854 and the Meiji Restoration of 1868. Soseki's London sojourn coincided with the peak of British imperial might and also Japan's emergence as a world power. Soseki witnessed numerous important historical events as the Victorian era drew to a close, including the return of troops from the second Boer War and Queen Victoria's funeral procession.¹ Following the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95, Japan won major financial and territorial concessions from China, a sign of Japan's new military power and ambition. Indeed, much of the funding for the “rapid expansion of the Japanese higher education system” came from these war reparations that “essentially bankrupted the Chinese government, hastening the downfall of the Qing Dynasty and the Sino-centric order in Asian culture. . . . Soseki's journey to London – metropole of the British Empire – was part and parcel of the geopolitical rise of one empire and the fall of another” (Bourdagh, Ueda, and Murphy 4). Questions of empire and the relative strength of nations were very much on Soseki's mind during his time in London. During what was then a fifty-day journey by sea from Japan to England, “all ports between Yokohama and Marseilles were under British, French, or Dutch rule” (Hirakawa 171).

In London, Soseki's great expectations were quickly beset by hard times: his funding was woefully inadequate; he lacked useful academic connections; and his terrible homesickness was exacerbated by conditions in the dreary boarding houses where he stayed. He couldn't afford to study at Cambridge or Oxford, and he quickly stopped attending classes at University College London, instead choosing weekly tutorials with the eccentric Shakespeare scholar William Craig. Soseki's unique vantage point, as one admiring of English culture but outside of and alienated from it, offers an intriguing lens through which to view late Victorian culture and society. Soseki's London writings have garnered some attention within Asian Studies

circles and are well known in Japan, but very little has been written about Soseki within the context of Victorian Studies, despite the recent translation of some of this work.

Soseki's London writings depict the author as an isolated, lonely man in the midst of a bewildering city – a place of crowds, dirt, noise, and barely controlled chaos. This is not an unusual view of turn-of-the-century urban life and alienation, but Soseki's account is intriguing in that he constructs an image of himself through comparisons with Britons, most frequently women, whom he imagines as sharing his plight. That is, though Soseki himself is alienated and isolated – and describes this in clearly racial and national terms – he sees these experiences mirrored in many of the Britons he meets. At the same time, however, this identification with women – real and fictional – deepens Soseki's experience of otherness in London. Soseki's London writings thus necessitate a reconsideration of the usual narratives of the relationship between East and West in the late nineteenth century. More specifically, we must reconsider what Bradley Deane has recently described as “one of postcolonial theory's dominant tenets – amounting virtually to an orthodoxy”: the idea that imperial ideology is always founded on “the construction of *difference* between the colonizing self and the colonized Other” (207; emphasis original). In other words, difference is not the only structuring tool of Orientalism, or the only way in which the relation between East and West can be understood. Soseki's complex negotiations of culture, nationality, and race in his London writings demonstrate that he is at once Other and not Other, that the distinction between self and other is far less rigid or stable than we often imagine.

I. “A Lone Shaggy Dog” in London

SOSEKI'S MOST WELL-KNOWN COMMENTS about his time in London were published in 1907, well after he returned to Japan, in the Preface to his *Theory of Literature*. Soseki writes:

The two years I lived in London were the unhappiest two years of my life. Among the English gentlemen [英国紳士], I was like a lone shaggy dog mixed in with a pack of wolves; I endured a wretched existence. I heard that the population of London is five million. Five million beads of oil and I the sole drop of water: I have no hesitation in asserting that I barely survived! The owner of a freshly laundered white shirt will certainly be displeased if he splashes a drop of ink on it. In London I was that drop of ink, wandering aimlessly like a beggar through Westminster. I feel sorry for the English gentlemen who for two years had to endure my drawing breath from the same thousands of cubic yards of the great city's skies, filled as they were with man-made clouds being emitted from smokestacks. (48)

This passage enumerates several ways in which Soseki feels he is inherently other to the English around him. Not only is he a member of a different, less formidable species – a “shaggy dog” among wolves – but he is black in a pool of white, terms that establish a stark contrast that is difficult not to see for its racial implications.² Soseki imagines himself as an unassimilable and unwanted presence – water in oil, ink on a white shirt – with no sense of purpose or connection to the world around him. Soseki feels *he* is polluting the city's air just as its factories are, a troubling image of racial contamination akin to the rhetoric of scientific racism developing during the late nineteenth century.

Soseki's remarks seem to indicate his internalization of Orientalist views and to confirm a familiar narrative about the relationship between East and West at the turn of the century. In

Orientalism, Edward Said claims not only that the relationship between West and non-West is founded on difference – difference between “us” (the colonial power, the self) and “them” (the colonized, the other) – but also that the West essentially creates the Oriental: “what gave the Oriental’s world its intelligibility and identity was not the result of his own efforts but rather the whole complex series of knowledgeable manipulations by which the Orient was identified by the West. . . . Knowledge of the Orient . . . in a sense *creates* the Orient, the Oriental, and his world” (40; emphasis original). The case of Japan, however, does not fit easily into Said’s theory, as Meiji Japan is in many ways anomalous in the modern history of the West’s domination of the East. Eager to escape the fate of China, Japan sought to avoid imperial domination by the West, and the Meiji government shrewdly understood that this would require not just political and military effort but also control over cultural representations of Japan in the West. As Anna Jackson has shown, Japan’s efforts to control its image abroad included its decision to represent itself at all major international exhibitions after 1867. In 1876, for example, Japan sent its own Commissioner to the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia to organize and oversee the Japan exhibit, a strategic decision that was highly unusual among non-European nations at the time. Jackson argues that the Philadelphia Exhibition indicates Japan’s understanding of and ability to manipulate popular Western images of Japan, demonstrating both knowledge and agency that negates, at least in part, Western efforts to create the Orient (251–52).

Nineteenth-century popular science and anthropology also struggled to place the Japanese in racial hierarchies. Rotem Kowner’s excellent analysis of nineteenth-century Western discourse on the Japanese “race” outlines a period from the 1860s to the early 1890s in which Japan was given a kind of “racial moratorium, a limited exemption from its natural, albeit despised, origins” (125). During this time, Japan was a popular destination for “romantic travellers, curio collectors, and technical experts” (125) who were generally impressed by Japan’s rapid modernizations (particularly the construction of railways and the establishment of a parliamentary system) and the politeness and refinement of the Japanese people.³ This admiration, Kowner argues, resulted in very little expression of overt racism toward the Japanese, “an early tendency to grant the Japanese the status of ‘honorary whites’ and separate them, at least in Western public representations, from the ‘Mongoloid yellow masses’ in body and spirit” (125). This was also a result, of course, of Victorian impatience and disillusionment with China; Japan’s fortunes in Western discourse tend, even today, to be closely tied to Western attitudes about China at any given moment.

Other Victorian travellers to Japan were troubled, however, by what they saw as Japan’s defiance of “the unwritten ‘rules’ of the colonial encounter” (104). The Japanese “were neither submissive nor uncivilized, and often not at all ‘inferior.’ Moreover, the Japanese proudly ‘resisted’ foreign labels, and were constantly on the move to shape their own national destiny.” As the West became increasingly alarmed by Japan’s growing military power and imperial ambition, demonstrated most notably in its victory in the Sino-Japanese War, its perception of Japanese racial identity began to change. The Japanese were now cast as “genuine members of the Mongoloid race” and as part of the “yellow peril” threatening Western hegemony (126). Kowner observes that “with the political rise of Japan and the widespread acceptance of new anthropological theory, the racial position of the Japanese became firmer and more consistent than ever,” and even increased interaction between the West and Japan could not dislodge the notion that Japanese were “yellow” members of the Mongol race (128), ideas that just fifty years earlier had been much less rigid or widely held.

Interestingly, Kowner claims that the racial discourse on Japan that developed during the Victorian period powerfully shaped not only Western attitudes toward Japan, but Japan's own "self-image and attitudes toward the West" (105). Indeed, Soseki's writings about his time in England, such as the Preface to his *Theory of Literature*, offer substantial support for Kowner's claim. Soseki's 1901 "Letter from London" similarly reflects his intense feeling of racial difference.⁴ Soseki refers to Londoners as "depressingly tall" and then remarks:

Most people are extremely busy. Their heads seem to be so teeming with thoughts of money that they have no time to jeer at us Japanese as yellow people. ('Yellow people' is well chosen. We are indeed yellow. When I was in Japan I knew I was not particularly white but regarded myself as being close to a regular human colour, but in this country I have finally realized that I am three leagues away from a human colour – a yellow person who saunters amongst the crowds going to watch plays and shows). (*The Tower of London* 62)

The fact that most Londoners ignore him completely when they pass on the streets does not keep him from feeling his difference. Indeed, Soseki adopts Western terms of racial difference, labeling himself "yellow" and thus inherently abnormal and inhuman. Soseki also links his sense of racial and cultural inferiority repeatedly to his sense of inadequacy as a gentleman. Comparing Japanese and English gentlemen, Soseki comments, "Japanese gentlemen are, I fear, extremely lacking when it comes to their moral, physical, and artistic education. How nonchalant and self-satisfied our gentlemen are! How foppish [浮華] they are! How inane [空虚] they are! How satisfied they are with modern Japan, and how they continue to lead the ordinary populace to the brink of degeneracy [墮落の淵]!" (53).⁵ Translator Damian Flanagan rightly chooses English terms used anxiously by Britons in discussions of fin de siècle men and masculinity; "foppish" and "degeneracy" were associated with the dandies and aesthetes who were seen by some as emblems of social and cultural decline. Despite this anxiety in England about insufficiently masculine "gentlemen," Soseki holds them up as a positive contrast to what he sees as ill-equipped, inadequate Japanese gentlemen.

Susan Napier observes that Soseki's novels are fascinating not just for their "significant incorporation of the Western Other" but also their "exploration of other 'Others,' most notably the problematic role of the historical Other and the gendered Other" (44). Indeed, Soseki's London writings show that his own sense of cultural difference is often conveyed through representations of gendered or historical others. In the Preface to his *Theory of Literature*, for instance, he casts his cultural difference in terms of gender:

The gentlemen of England might well be an exemplary collection of model persons, endowed with noble characters and worthy of imitation. But for someone like me, who had spent his youth in the oriental fashion, chasing after much younger English gentlemen and *trying to acquire their habits of conduct would be like a fully grown adult whose bones are no longer limber trying to master all the deft techniques of a lion-dance acrobat*. No matter how much I might admire them, no matter how much I might worship them, no matter how much I might adore them, this belonged to the realm of impossibility – even if I resolved to cut my daily meals from three to two. (40–41; emphasis mine)

Soseki thus recalls feeling doubly alienated from the role of gentleman in London: incapable of keeping up with other Japanese students financially, but also of emulating English gentlemen. That role is wholly foreign and unnatural to him, he suggests; performing it

would require *physical* contortions, rather than simply a modification of manner or dress, virtually impossible for an adult Japanese man to achieve. The faintly Chinese connotations of the “lion-dance acrobat” suggest another layer of alienation at work in this passage. Taken together, these passages from “Letter from London” and the Preface to *Theory of Literature* signal Soseki’s complex exploration of race, nationality, and culture in his London writings – more specifically, experiences of difference mediated by discussions of gender and history. On the one hand, as I discuss in more detail below, Soseki expresses nostalgia for a kind of Carlylean heroic masculinity; on the other hand, he identifies more frequently and more closely with a range of female figures, both real women he meets in London and English fictional characters he recasts in his own work. Soseki’s identification with women and his adoption of female personas underscore his essential alienation not only from available forms of English masculinity, but also from modernity more broadly, whether English or Japanese.

II. Lodgings, Landladies, and Literary Houses

SOSEKI’S CLEAR IDENTIFICATION WITH English women he meets in London provides him with a powerful way of conveying his sense of otherness in England. In a short piece entitled “Lodgings” (originally published in his 1909 collection *Spring Miscellany*), for instance, Soseki describes his first London residence, in West Hampstead. He focuses on his landlady, an unhappy woman who takes in lodgers in an effort to supplement her family’s modest income. Alone at tea with the landlady one day, Soseki notes “a forlorn daffodil arranged on the mantelpiece” (*The Tower of London* 133). The landlady abruptly announces that she is French, not British, upon which Soseki observes, “Turning her black eyes and looking at the daffodil placed in the glass bottle behind her, she told me that Britain was terribly cloudy and cold. She probably meant to imply that even the flowers here were not pretty.” She eventually shares her rather sad family story, which includes the recent death of her mother; the estrangement of her German stepfather from his son, both of whom live with her; and the loss of her deceased mother’s property to her stepfather. As Flanagan observes, Soseki’s depiction of this miserable, down-on-her luck landlady suggests that she is an “isolated figure like the narrator himself, alienated and without true family in a foreign land” (223). Soseki’s identification with this woman on the margins does not give him a foothold in the society, but rather deepens his sense of isolation in England.

Soseki also finds himself reluctantly identifying with his third London landlady, a woman who runs a shabby boarding house off Camberwell Road in southeast London. In “Letter from London,” Soseki describes the landlady as a forty-year-old woman who has recently married a much younger man; she and her younger sister formerly ran a girls’ school but were forced to close it due to an outbreak of illness among the students. The sisters were not in any way qualified to run a school, Soseki notes; they were merely looking for some quasi-genteel way to support themselves. The boarding house is not much more successful than the school; Soseki is their only boarder, and despite their repeated entreaties, he fails to help them locate additional lodgers. Soseki’s observation of the women’s efforts to cling to middle-class life is reminiscent at times of something from Elizabeth Gaskell, particularly in its nuanced depiction of the indignities of a downward economic slide. Although Soseki doesn’t particularly like the sisters, or the elder sister’s husband, he feels more or less stuck with them, as he can’t afford other lodgings. He longs “to be in the house of someone capable

of speaking with a little learning and would not even mind the house being dirty or cramped if I had the pleasure of their constant companionship" (*The Tower of London* 67).

Soseki relates his search for better lodgings, including his written inquiry about an ad posted by an elderly woman he refers to as "the purple lady" (69). When he learns that the rent at the advertised lodging is far out of his price range, he is reluctantly persuaded to move with his Camberwell landlady and her family to their new house, which is shabbier and located even farther from town. He remarks:

Looking back and imagining the purple lady and her sister and their splendid house, and looking forward and imagining this poor but honest pair of sisters and the humble abode they still expect to be a future paradise, I feel with keen interest the difference between the two. I also feel how prosaic a thing is the disparity between rich and poor. And I also feel like David Copperfield living with Micawber.

Soseki's representation of the Camberwell landlady's family highlights their desperation to preserve some semblance of middle-class life. Their desperation leads them to take some bizarre actions, including an elaborate strategy to avoid paying late rent on their old apartment and moving house in the middle of the night to avoid the owner's agent. Ultimately, however, Soseki is sensitive to such struggles, noting his own fall in status since arriving in London. He remarks that he has "a strong sense of not being the same person I was in Japan, but merely a student" (60); he compares his house and servants in Japan to his current destitute student life and location in Camberwell, a slum populated by prostitutes and streetwalkers. Soseki's description of his landlady and her family echoes his own experience of isolation, financial difficulty, and desperation. Much like these sisters, he finds himself clinging to the edges of a rather shabby, deteriorating gentility.

At the same time, however, Soseki's identification with English ladies is strained in a number of ways. For one thing, the women he meets, from landladies to missionaries to Japanophiles, consistently refuse to identify with him; they are condescending, offering "footnotes" in both their speech and their letters that explain even the simplest English words (66). There is also the problem of the missionary impulse, which plagues Soseki in his encounters with English ladies. Soseki describes one such encounter with a woman who "is a great believer in Christ and consequently unbearable. She held forth at great length about Divine Virtue. She is a truly refined, graceful old woman. But I was asked whether I knew the word 'evolution.'" Proselytizing is one way in which English ladies repeatedly mark Soseki as an outsider. His troubles are thus made to feel solitary and alienating, rather than representative of a broader, transnational cultural or social experience.

Soseki's representation of his life in London suggests his recognition that his experiences in the city most closely resemble those of the English women he meets. But Soseki's identification with these English women is always partial and uneasy; he is reluctant to associate himself with the financial desperation and lack of cultural or intellectual sophistication he sees in many of the women he encounters. Furthermore, Soseki's recognition of his similarity to these London women represents a kind of Orientalist emasculation, as the Oriental male is incapable of fully occupying or properly performing the role of man in the imperial metropole. Perhaps it is not surprising, thus, that one of English literary figures that dominates Soseki's London writings is Thomas Carlyle, whose heroic man of letters persona both attracts and eludes the young Japanese writer in London at the turn of the century.

Carlyle’s house was converted to a museum in the 1890s, and Soseki’s account of his 1901 visit to Carlyle’s Chelsea house (one of several visits Soseki made to the house) is described in his essay “The Carlyle Museum,” first published in 1905 and later collected in the volume *Yokyo-shu* (1906).⁶ This piece, a blend of fact and fiction, articulates a fantasy of escape from the mundane distractions and grime of the city to a refuge that would allow for clear thought and artistic productivity. Soseki expresses widely shared fears of cultural and social decline at the fin de siècle, as well as nostalgia for an earlier time he sees as more productive and full of confident vitality. The essay suggests that Soseki sees Carlyle as a model for his own quest to become a writer and modern sage. For Soseki personally, Carlyle represents an ideal masculinity, albeit one that is hopelessly unattainable for Soseki himself, for both cultural and historical reasons. As James Eli Adams has argued, Carlyle’s construction of the hero depends very much on the figure of the dandy, which Carlyle viewed as “the grotesque icon of an outworn aristocratic order, a figure of self-absorbed, parasitic existence” (21) – a figure not unlike the Japanese gentleman Soseki critiques in his “Letter from London.” The Carlylean hero, by contrast, is “founded on superbly self-forgetful devotion to productive labor” – most famously, the Captain of Industry. Adams’s point that the “dandy and the Carlylean hero are far less securely opposed than this familiar account suggests” (22) is particularly helpful in making sense of Soseki’s negotiation of masculinity during his time in London. Soseki’s remarks about the degeneracy and foppishness of Japanese gentlemen, quoted above, contrast starkly with his clear admiration of Carlyle and his longing to embody a kind of Carlylean heroic masculinity.

Near the beginning of the essay, Soseki writes, “With the vigour of another Cromwell or Frederick the Great, like a factory chimney churning out smoke, in this house Carlyle wrote his books *Cromwell* and *Frederick the Great*, turned down a pension recommended by Disraeli, and lived a straight, upright and purposeful life” (*The Tower of London* 120). Soseki admires Carlyle’s productivity and independence, and he describes the house as a refuge, especially as he follows the tour guide to its upper floors. In the third-floor study, which Carlyle had added to the house so that he would have a quieter place to work and write, Soseki feels he has “left below the grime and noise of London” and is “sitting alone at the top of a five-storey pagoda” (126). The higher he climbs, the happier he becomes; he also *becomes* Carlyle, to some extent, as he climbs to the top of the house. He mentions Carlyle’s irritability and intolerance of noise, which necessitated the third-floor refuge. But even though the retreat blocked certain noises (barking dogs, pianos, roosters) there were *new* noises to contend with: church bells, voices floating up from below, and so on.

“The Carlyle Museum” also expresses a sense of loss and nostalgia for an earlier era of vitality and productivity. Soseki notes a feeling of exhaustion and torpor that have set in at the end of the century. He sticks his head out various windows during the tour, trying to see what Carlyle said (in his letters and diary) could be seen from each one, but everything has changed. Soseki writes:

Carlyle also says that if one looks in the direction of London nothing is visible but Westminster Abbey and the topmost dome of St. Paul’s; other faint ghosts of spires disclose themselves as smoke clouds shift.

‘In the direction of London’ is already an anachronism. To come to Chelsea today and look in the direction of London is equivalent to entering into the middle of a household and looking in the direction of the house, or pretty much the same as attempting to look in the direction of oneself with

one's own eyes. But Carlyle did not himself think that he was living in London. He believed himself to be living quietly in the countryside and viewing the cathedrals of the city centre from a great distance. I stick out my head for a third time. I cast my eyes towards what he would have called 'the direction of London.' But neither Westminster nor St. Paul's are visible. Tens of thousands of houses, hundreds of thousands of people, millions of noises are standing, floating and moving in the space between me and the cathedrals. The Chelsea of 1834 and the Chelsea of today seem to be completely different places. (123)

The idea that looking "in the direction of London" is the same as "look[ing] in the direction of oneself with one's own eyes" indicates the deep solipsism and unease with the self that pervades Soseki's writing. Part of the problem of modern life and individualism, he suggests, is this feeling of being trapped within the self, without any broader perspective or sense of scale. Another problem, of course, is the crowded, overpopulated city – a deterrent to significant, serious work, in Soseki's view. As Soseki and the guide descend into the basement, Soseki becomes an "ordinary man" again, no longer seeing himself as Carlyle, though he does imagine seeing Carlyle and Tennyson smoking together in the kitchen as they pass through it – the site of the two writers' first meeting in 1844, the guide tells him. But Soseki feels he has lost his hold on the fantasy as he leaves the house: "One hour later London's grime and soot and the sound of carriage horses and the river Thames divide me from Carlyle's home, which seems like a distinct world disappearing into the distance" (129). Soseki regrets the loss of what seems like a more real, more tangible world, compared to the surreal chaos of modern London, where one is quickly swallowed up by crowds and traffic.

Ultimately, the Carlylean "heroic man of letters" seems an unattainable identity for Soseki. Not only is Soseki, at the end of the century, alienated from Carlylean heroism historically, but as the Oriental Other Soseki is essentially unable to occupy such a hegemonic role. In "The Carlyle Museum," Soseki's sense of otherness is represented in terms of gender and historical difference, a representational strategy he adopts again when he imagines himself as the Lady of Shalott.

III. Soseki and/as The Lady of Shalott

THE BRIEF MENTION OF TENNYSON near the end of "The Carlyle Museum" points readers to another literary figure that appears in several of Soseki's London writings: the Lady of Shalott.⁷ His most extensive treatment of this figure is the Arthurian tale "Kairo-ko" ("The Shallot Dew: A Dirge"),⁸ originally published in the Japanese literary journal *Chuo-Koron* in November 1905 and later collected, along with "The Carlyle Museum" and another Arthurian tale ("Maboroshi no Tate," or "A Phantom Shield") in *Yokyo-shu* in May 1906. Soseki's interest in Arthurian legend stemmed in part from his brief attendance at the lectures of William P. Ker, a medievalist at University College London. Although Soseki expressed frustration that he lacked the linguistic skill necessary to study medieval English literature, he was fascinated by it. Keiko Hamaguchi notes that Soseki's library contained at least sixteen volumes of medieval literature and criticism (78), and Mihoko Higaya argues that Soseki was strongly influenced by both Swinburne's and Pre-Raphaelite representations (in poetry and visual art) of medieval romance.⁹ "Kairo-ko" draws on Malory and Tennyson, particularly the latter's *Lancelot and Elaine* and "The Lady of Shalott." Soseki comments in the preface to "Kairo-ko" that he prefers Tennyson's characterization of Arthurian figures to Malory's:

“[Tennyson’s] character portrayal succeeds in making nineteenth-century men and women act out their parts on the medieval stage” (103). Soseki’s retelling of the Lady of Shalott story has a similar goal; despite his mythical subject, Soseki works to make Arthurian legend relevant to modern readers.¹⁰ Particularly when read alongside Soseki’s London writings, “Kairo-ko” suggests that Soseki himself identifies with the Lady of Shalott; he sees her, busily crafting her magical web in her lonely tower, as a figure for himself, toiling away at his studies in the isolation of his London lodgings. More broadly, Soseki’s Lady of Shalott tale offers a complex consideration of difference and otherness, refracted through the lenses of gender and history.

In “Kairo-ko,” Soseki weaves the Lady of Shalott into what is otherwise a fairly straightforward retelling of Tennyson’s version of the Lancelot and Elaine story. “Kairo-ko” is divided into five sections, the second of which is entitled “The Mirror” and devoted to the Lady of Shalott; it is this second section of the story that I will focus on here.¹¹ Soseki’s Lady of Shalott bears a strong resemblance to Tennyson’s: she spends her days weaving a web at her loom, crafting intricate images of the outside world that she sees reflected in her mirror. The Lady must never look directly upon the outside world – “a mire of sin” (108) – or she will suffer a terrible curse. But one day a handsome knight on a horse appears in her mirror, and the Lady of Shalott recognizes him as Lancelot. Throwing down her shuttle, she cries out his name and goes to her window to look directly at the knight as he rides by, thus defying the curse that has kept her from the outside world. The mirror immediately splits in two, the web is torn to shreds, and the Lady dies: “like a rotted tree giving way before an autumn storm, she fell with a crash amidst the havoc of threads and crystal splinters” (112).

Soseki’s description of the Lady of Shalott highlights her total isolation from the outside world and the pain and loneliness that result. The story begins, “Never looking at the world of reality, but only at the world reflected in her mirror, the Lady of Shalott lived all alone in a tall tower. For someone who knows only the world that inhabits a mirror, what hope is there of finding a companion?” (107). In essence, as Soseki writes, “The world reflected in her mirror forms the walls of her prison” (108). The Lady’s isolation is underscored by Soseki’s downplaying of Lancelot’s role in the story; though Lancelot features prominently in the other sections of “Kairo-ko,” he appears in only the last two paragraphs of the section devoted to the Lady of Shalott. Furthermore, Soseki’s Lady does not travel by barge down the river to Camelot upon her death, as she does in Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott”; rather, she is killed instantly by looking out the window at Lancelot. This difference highlights the Lady’s predicament in her lonely tower, shifting the focus away from the romance and chivalry evident in the other sections of the text.

The Lady of Shalott’s isolation results in her painfully limited knowledge of the world outside her window: “The fardel on the back of a passing pedlar might be filled with red ribbons, white linen, coral, agate, quartz, or pearls. But while it goes unopened the contents will never be reflected in the mirror. And what is unseen by the mirror is also unseen by the Lady of Shalott” (108). The Lady has only indirect, superficial contact with the outside world; her view of it is limited to the surfaces of things, as reflected in her mirror. If we read the Lady as a figure for Soseki during his time in London, this description is quite poignant: these beautiful, valuable objects might be literally passing below the tower window, but they will never be seen by the tower’s occupant. This seems akin to learning a culture or place from books, rather than direct experience with or immersion in it. Soseki’s comment to his wife in a 1901 letter underscores the similarity between him and the Lady: “It is already

unpleasant enough to live in an environment to which one is not accustomed, and as I have no money I feel my powerlessness all the more keenly. I shut myself away in my boarding house as in a besieged castle, and my only resource is to study, because I am afraid that if I go out I shall spend money" (*Spring Miscellany* 153). Soseki comments repeatedly in his letters and diary that all he wants to do in London is buy books and hole up in his room at the boarding house – to study rather than to spend time with people. Indeed, he often constructs these two options as mutually exclusive: he can buy books *or* he can spend time with people, but he cannot do both. Soseki later described his research notebooks as the one "real asset" he brought back with him to Japan: "The notebooks I compiled during my overseas stay, written in tiny script the size of a fly's head, amounted to a stack five or six inches tall" (*Theory of Literature* 45). Soseki's "tiny script," crafted in the isolation of his boarding house and in response to voracious reading, is analogous to the Lady of Shalott's intricately woven "web" of patterns and images (from nature, as well as literary and mythical figures) ("Kairo-ko" 109–10). Soseki's identification with the Lady of Shalott suggests that he, like the Lady, attempts to shield himself from the harmful effects of an alien society, even as his work depends on representations of that very society.

Although Soseki emphasizes the Lady of Shalott's loneliness, her isolation does afford her welcome protection from the outside world: "Confined though she was to the narrow cosmos of her mirror, the Lady of Shalott was spared from knowing pain and anguish, the bitterness of him who stands at the crossways, swept by the rains of sorrow, minding the comings and goings of his fellows" (108). The phrase "the bitterness of him who stands at the crossways" refers to a person caught in a difficult liminal position, between worlds, much like Soseki in London; self-chosen isolation is a useful shield from such disorienting experience. Soseki summarizes this tension in "Kairo-ko": "The Lady of Shalott's fate was as much to be envied as pitied, but sometimes she would become restless with a yearning to turn from the mirror and look down at the wide world spread beneath her window" (109). Though the Lady is occasionally impatient with her isolation, Soseki suggests that it is her separateness that enables her creativity; she cannot create unless she is removed from the world she aims to represent. The mad creativity at work in the case of the Lady of Shalott, who "worked at her loom without pause" (110), is akin to the fevered pitch at which Soseki drove himself to work during the last year of his London sojourn. Having abandoned his initial academic project – to read as many literary and critical texts in English as possible – Soseki had turned to a new task: the development of a comprehensive theory of literature, one that, according to Haruko Momma, would "define Western literature from the viewpoint of a non-Western thinker" (156).¹² With this ambitious task in mind, Soseki set aside his literary texts and turned to a rigorous new program of study, reading widely in sociology, psychology, and other non-literary fields in an effort to understand the basic motivations behind Western literature. Soseki's efforts eventually led to the publication of his *Theory of Literature* (1907), but the project in its early stages was met with skepticism and concern over his health and mental stability. The Japanese Ministry of Education, which sponsored his scholarship abroad, censured him for failing to submit the appropriate reports on his work, and various acquaintances (both British and Japanese) remarked that he seemed to have had a mental breakdown (*Theory of Literature* 49).

Indeed, Soseki's primary interest in the Lady of Shalott figure has to do with her relationship to those outside the tower. Despite the clear influence of Tennyson on Soseki's Arthurian tale, Soseki imagines the interaction between the Lady and Lancelot quite

differently than Tennyson, in ways that highlight his identification with the Lady. While Tennyson’s Lady never directly addresses Lancelot, Soseki’s Lady curses him in the moments before her death: “With her last strength, she raised both arms above her and called out, ‘Lancelot has killed the Lady of Shalott, but she shall kill Lancelot! You bear my dying curse, knight, as you ride north!’” (112). Despite these rather startling final words – from a character usually associated with placid suffering – Soseki’s Lancelot does not hear the Lady’s curse and remains unaware of her existence. The Lancelot of Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott” is confronted, finally, with the beautiful corpse floating down the river, but Soseki’s Lancelot never sees the Lady of Shalott; rather it is Elaine of Astolat’s corpse – “the most beautiful in the world” – that floats down the river to Camelot at the end of the story, where it is witnessed by Arthur, Guinevere, and “thirteen knights” (126). Tennyson’s Lancelot is not clearly aware of his personal impact on the Lady, but he at least witnesses her death and briefly, if inadequately, eulogizes her.¹³ The Lady of Shalott’s vengeful dying words, in Soseki’s “Kairo-ko,” constitute a wholly ineffective attack on the knight; not only does she die, but her dying complaint goes unheard. This sequence of events echoes Soseki’s own sense of the futility of engaging with the outside world in London. Not only is it frightening and even dangerous to leave the tower, he suggests, but it is potentially pointless: it is difficult to make oneself heard, even when one offers a dramatic, powerful message.¹⁴

The difficulty of leaving the tower is intensified in Soseki’s story because those on the outside seem to fear the tower. Soseki writes, “Whenever a passer-by heard the sound of the shuttle plied by the Lady of Shalott, he would look up in dread at the window in the tall tower atop that lonely hill. . . . It was a lively rhythm, yet it echoed from another world. . . . The numbing sense of desolation it produced was more unbearable than even the creeping silence that usually enveloped the tall tower of Shalott. Looking up at it, wide-eyed with terror, the passer-by would hurry on, his hands over his ears” (109). Both sound and silence inspire fear in passersby, suggesting that it is mere anticipation of the unknown that causes their anxiety. In Tennyson, by contrast, the reapers in the field outside the tower are untroubled by the sounds of the tower, as the “fairy Lady of Shalott” sings.¹⁵ Tennyson’s Lady is otherworldly and mysterious, but never threatening to those who stand outside her tower. In Soseki, the outside world’s response to the Lady – its “terror” – incorporates a sharp fear of difference, perhaps even a xenophobic fear of a threatening Other. In “Kairo-ko,” the Lady’s otherworldliness becomes frightening and ominous.

Soseki returned from a difficult (even disastrous) study abroad experience in England to a Japan undergoing rapid, disorienting cultural and political change; his Lady of Shalott tale offers a culmination of his musings on culture, nationality, and difference at the turn of the century. Soseki looks to a medieval, foreign past, casting himself as the Lady of Shalott, a figure he sees as similar in some ways to his London self. In London, Soseki identified most closely with English women, but this identification was consistently rebuffed by these women’s othering of him as a foreigner. With the Lady of Shalott, Soseki casts himself once again as a kind of English lady; that he now sees his experience through the lens of a mythical figure suggests the extent of his alienation from actual English people. Perhaps most importantly, Soseki’s Lady of Shalott tale illustrates the blurred distinction between self and other, showing that the relationship between other and not other is not one constituted only by difference, but also by recognition and emulation.

While Soseki identifies with another English lady in “Kairo-ko,” this identification has as much to do with a longing for a lost past as it does with gender. As in “The Carlyle Museum,”

Soseki expresses nostalgia for an earlier era, one in which the world is clearer and more transparent, and in which heroic action (whether successful or tragic) and creative productivity are plausible. These themes of Soseki's London writings would become important to his novels, as well, even as the setting shifts from England (mythical or present-day) to Japan. One early novel, *Kusamakura* (1906), presents a particularly interesting example.¹⁶ In this novel, Soseki depicts a young painter who attempts to escape the noise and distractions of the modern world, traveling to a remote mountain hot spring where he hopes to craft "a poem which abandons the commonplace and lifts [him], at least for a short time, above the dust and grime of the workaday world" (19). The narrator-protagonist paints in the Western style and discourses at length about the differences between Western and Eastern art, literature, and aesthetics; he comments, for instance, that Western poets are generally "oblivious to the existence of the realm of pure poetry" (19) but that "[h]appily, oriental poets have on occasion gained sufficient insight to enable them to enter the realm of pure poetry" (20). After encountering a mysterious woman named Nami at the hot spring, the narrator, who is obsessed with the John Everett Millais painting of Ophelia, begins to imagine her as Ophelia. After an early sighting of Nami, for example, he writes the following lines about her, in English: "Might I look on thee in death, / With bliss I would yield my breath" (65). Later, when Nami asks him to paint a picture of her floating in the water, the narrator imagines such a painting in great detail but concludes that Nami's facial "expressions were all wrong" for such a portrait, given her rapid fluctuations between intense suffering and "immoderate gaiety" (137).

The *Kusamakura* protagonist, a painter struggling with a creative block, is positioned in some ways as an outsider, even within his home culture, and he shares some of the experiences of alienation we see in Soseki's London writings. He is drawn to Western art and aesthetics, but he is also critical of them. He wants to remove himself from modern urban life to pursue his art – much like the protagonist in "The Carlyle Museum" and, in another way, the Lady of Shalott, whose creativity depends on her isolation – but his efforts are frustrated. Like the Lady of Shalott, the protagonist of *Kusamakura* is threatened by the arrival of an outsider – in this case, the beautiful and unconventional divorcée Nami – who simultaneously represents opportunity, in the form of inspiration, and a threat to his art, in the form of distraction, as he feels himself getting "dragged back down to the common everyday world" (38). Seeking a retreat from the social world in which to create art that does not fit easily into his own cultural traditions, the narrator positions himself as an outsider. As Susan Napier observes, Soseki's work often "highlight[s] outsiderhood in terms of the self *vis-à-vis* not simply the West, but also mainstream Japan" (44). In *Kusamakura*, then, Soseki is once again writing about the figure of the Other in relation to the self, and the ways in which that distinction collapses and blurs. The *Kusamakura* protagonist is at once both Other and not Other, insider and outsider in modern Japanese culture.

While the narrator-protagonist of *Kusamakura* is in some ways an outsider, he also enjoys a hegemonic role in terms of class and gender, and he does not identify with the novel's most striking figure of otherness, the mysterious Nami, a character reminiscent of Soseki's Lady of Shalott. In other words, Soseki here separates the two figures – the artist and the historical or gendered other – whose surprising similarities he explored in his London writings. In this way, in *Kusamakura* Soseki simplifies the forms of otherness he explored in his London writings, in that the female, historical other is clearly separate from the protagonist and thus somewhat contained. Furthermore, Nami ultimately facilitates the protagonist's art. The novel ends not

with her tragic death, as the narrator anticipated, but with her grief over her ex-husband’s departure for Manchuria (he can no longer afford to live in Japan), which transforms her face in a way that makes her finally seem a worthy subject for a painting, in the narrator’s view: “‘That’s it! That’s it! Now that you can express that feeling, you are worth painting,’ I whispered, patting her on the shoulder. It was at that very moment that the picture in my mind received its final touch” (184). In this novel, the female other becomes a muse for the male artist’s creativity, stabilizing the relationship between self and other that was much more fluid and complex in Soseki’s London writings.

Soseki’s London writings require us to rethink the idea that difference is the primary structuring tool of the relationship between East and West at the turn of the century. Soseki certainly felt his difference in London, and he sometimes described that sense of difference clearly in terms of race, but his experience of outsidership also includes elements of recognition, emulation, and identification between self and other, often filtered through representations of gender or history. Although Soseki’s imagining of himself as the Lady of Shalott, for example, underscores his failure to assume a number of possible gender roles – English lady, Japanese gentleman abroad, English gentleman – it also constitutes a meditation on loneliness, cultural exchange, and creativity. Soseki works to imagine, and to inhabit, a kind of otherness that frees him – from contemporary cultural and gender roles, for instance, but also from the distinguished academic career for which he was being groomed. Soseki abandoned a prestigious teaching post at Tokyo Imperial University in March 1907 and joined the staff of the *Asahi* newspaper; he would go on to publish ten full-length novels in daily installments in that newspaper (starting with *Gubijinso*, or *The Poppy*, in 1907). Although Japanese writers had been serializing popular fiction in newspapers and magazines since the 1870s, this was an essentially unprecedented move for a serious writer, one that won Soseki an enormous readership. As Jay Rubin notes, Soseki “caused a sensation” when he left the university to become a full-time novelist; novel writing was still seen as a vulgar profession, “closely related to the world of the actor and the prostitute” (70), a strange choice for a man with Soseki’s elite education. Soseki’s fascinating negotiation of otherness, both at home and abroad, seems to have helped to free him to develop a narrative voice in which to write a new kind of novel for a new audience.

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NOTES

I would like to thank Phyllis Larson and Kristina Troost for their help with the research for this essay, as well as the editors and anonymous reader for *Victorian Literature and Culture*.

1. Soseki arrived in London on 28 October 1900. The next day, he noted in his diary that he was absorbed in the large crowds of people in London who witnessed a remarkable display of English imperial power (Yamanouchi 106), when troops recently returned from the Boer War marched from Paddington Station, past Whitehall, to Trafalgar Square and on to St. Paul’s and the Guildhall, along streets filled with cheering throngs of Britons. Schnee writes that the “idea was to display the heroes in such a way as to create, or to sustain, a mood of imperialist determination among a public which might begin to grow weary of war” (28–29). One witness commented that “the multitudes who poured into the streets exceeded in number the crowds that came out to celebrate her Majesty’s Jubilee [of 1897]” (qtd. in Schnee 31).

2. Momma observes that Soseki reverses this formulation in the opening of his most famous novel, *Kokoro* (1914). In that scene, at a crowded swimming beach in Kamakura, a single Westerner's "extremely pale skin" stands out in the sea of "black heads" (*Kokoro* 3; ch. 1). See Momma 146.
3. Toshio Yokoyama notes that mid-century British travellers to and writers on Japan often viewed Britain as an "ideal suitor" for Japan (unlike the "mean merchant" Dutch and the gun-boat diplomacy Americans), frequently commenting on what they saw as Japan's "singularity," and thus its affinity to Britain's own singular status as a world power (16–17). An 1858 essay in the *Times*, for instance, praised Japan in terms characteristic of this period: "in its climate, its fertility, and its picturesque beauty, Japan is not equaled by any country on the face of the globe; while, as if to harmonize with its surpassing natural endowments, it is peopled by a race whose qualities are of the most amiable and winning description, and whose material prosperity has been so equalized as to insure happiness and contentment to all classes. We never saw two Japanese quarrel and beggars have yet to be introduced with other luxuries of Western civilization" (qtd. in Yokoyama 23). Algernon Bertram Mitford wrote, in 1872, about the rapid pace of political and social change in Japan following the Meiji Restoration of 1868: "Four years ago we were still in the middle ages – we have leapt at a bound into the nineteenth century – out of poetry into plain, useful prose" (qtd. in Yokoyama 109). These sentiments were widely shared among British writers on Japan at mid-century.
4. "Letter from London" was published in the Japanese literary magazine *Hototogisu* (*The Cuckoo*) in May 1901. The piece was edited by poet Masaoka Shiki from three letters Soseki sent to Shiki and another poet, Takahama Kyoshi, in April 1901 (Flanagan 204).
5. Though "foppish" and "degeneracy" are the translator's words, they are well chosen, as Soseki refers to the idea of degeneration several times in his London writings and seems, thus, to have these key Victorian terms in mind. At the beginning of his essay "The Tower of London," for instance, he comments on his feelings of disorientation and alienation in London: "Thinking that I might be swept away in a human wave when I went outside, and fearing that a steam train might come crashing into my room when I went home, I had peace of mind neither day or night. If I have to live for two years amongst this noise and these crowds, I mused, the very fabric of my nerves will eventually become as sticky as a gluey plant in a cooking pot. I even had times when I thought Max Nordau's *Degeneration* all the more keenly to be the absolute truth" (91).
6. Flanagan translates *Yokyo-shu* as *Drifting in Space* (12); Takamiya translates it as *Fugitive Pieces* ("Kairo-ko" 95).
7. For example, Soseki comments, in "The Carlyle Museum," that Carlyle's wife looked like a "prime shallot" (*The Tower of London* 122), a comment that brings to mind his punning on shallot/shalott in "Kairo-ko." Soseki's "The Tower of London," published along with "The Carlyle Museum" and "Kairo-ko" in *Yokyo-shu*, describes a retreat into a tall tower which is a place of imagination and creativity, not unlike the Lady of Shalott's castle. Soseki describes the narrator wandering through this London landmark; as he climbs the tower, "the stage of the imagination vividly appears" (97) and he sees visions of historical personages who spent time there – Lady Jane Grey, Edward V, and the Duke of York.
8. The title of the story, "Kairo-ko," is difficult to translate, as it draws on classical Chinese but also puns on "shallot." Translators Takamiya and Armour explain: "'Kairo' literally means 'dew drops on a shallot leaf,' and is derived from a line in an ancient Chinese dirge, originally composed for a nobleman who had committed suicide: 'Human life is as evanescent as the dew drops on a shallot leaf.' . . . As for the 'ko,' this refers to a song or poem characterized by a slow but steady rhythm. Thus, pedantic though it sounds, the title of *Kairo-ko* is meant to refer to a lament or dirge for one of noble birth" (95–96).
9. Higaya reports that Soseki's personal library included Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Collected Works*, and William Morris's *The Earthly Paradise* (377); Soseki also owned four volumes of dramatic verse and essays by Algernon Swinburne, all of which were purchased by Soseki in London in 1901 (378–79). Furthermore, in Soseki's 1906 novel *Kusamakura*, the

- protagonist, a painter, “is obsessed by the image of the heroine Nami in the posture of Millais’ *Ophelia*” (378).
10. Momma argues that Soseki’s Arthurian tales, published during and just after the Russo-Japanese War, offer a meditation on the geopolitical position of Japan at the beginning of the twentieth century. Despite Japan’s victories in the Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5), postwar negotiations with Western powers (including, in Soseki’s view, the 1902 Anglo-Japanese Treaty) were “conducted to the advantage of the West, reminding the Japanese that the fellowship of colonial powers did not easily offer a Round Table to newcomers” (144). More broadly, Momma shows how Soseki’s Arthurian tales adopt “a non-Western perspective to reveal how medievalism intersects with colonialism and Orientalism” (141).
 11. A brief outline of the story may be helpful here. In the first section, entitled “The Dream,” Guinevere tells Lancelot of the disturbing dream she had in which the two of them were entrapped in the slimy coils of a serpent; Higaya observes that this section incorporates several images from Swinburne’s poems, particularly “*Laus Vaneris*” (382ff). The first section concludes with Lancelot’s departure for a tournament in the north. The second section, “The Mirror,” offers the story of the Lady of Shalott in her tower. In section three, Soseki relates Lancelot’s arrival at the castle of Astolat and Elaine’s immediate love for the famous knight; after a brief stay at the castle, Lancelot departs with a borrowed shield and plans to wear Elaine’s red sleeve in the tourney, both part of his efforts to joust as an unknown knight. In section four, “The Transgression,” Guinevere learns of Lancelot’s wearing Elaine’s favor in the battle and responds jealously, arousing Arthur’s suspicions; at the end of the section, she is accused by Mordred, in front of Arthur, of transgressing with Lancelot. Section five, “The Boat,” relates the aftermath of the tournament: Lancelot’s serious injury, Elaine’s precipitous decline when she learns that Lancelot loves Guinevere and not herself, and the journey of Elaine’s corpse down the river to Camelot.
 12. In the Preface to his *Theory of Literature*, Soseki describes his frustration at his lack of progress in studying English language and literature, compared to his understanding of Chinese literature, despite his lack of a “solid scholarly foundation in classical Chinese” (44). As a result, he says, he began to feel that the West must have a fundamentally different way of conceiving and thinking about literature, and it is this difference that he set out to theorize.
 13. Lancelot’s remarks conclude Tennyson’s poem: ““She has a lovely face; / God in his mercy lend her grace, / The Lady of Shalott”” (lines 169–71).
 14. In “Letter from London,” for example, Soseki describes an experience during his journey to England. An older English woman offered to correct any writing he was doing in English for him; when he took her up on her offer, she remarked that she was very impressed and had corrected only a couple of small things. Soseki notes, “When I looked at it I saw that she had corrected things which in no way needed correction. And completely nonsensical things had, as usual, been written down as footnotes” (*The Tower of London* 66–67).
 15. Tennyson writes: “Only reapers, reaping early / In among the bearded barley, / Hear a song that echoes cheerly / From the river winding clearly, / Down to towered Camelot: / And by the moon the reaper weary, / Piling sheaves in uplands airy, / Listening, whispers ‘Tis the fairy / Lady of Shalott”” (lines 28–36).
 16. The title *Kusamakura* literally translates as “Pillow of Grass”; Turney’s English translation adopts the title *The Three-Cornered World*.

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