

# Soseki Natsume, Hiroike Chikuro, and the Uses of Freedom

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Very different in character and gifts though they were, there are still common features in the lives and thinking of Soseki and Hiroike that repay identifying and exploring. Chronic illness (which may, although it cannot be proven, have had more than physical causes) was an important motif in the story of their mature years. They also shared a deep and sustained interest in China and its culture, and this acted as a sounding board for much of their own work. And, being almost exact contemporaries (Hiroike was born in 1866 and Soseki the following year), they could not avoid confronting the problems of the legacy bequeathed to the country by the architects of the Meiji Restoration. As members of the second generation of 'modern' Japanese, they were not the creators of change; but they had to deal with its consequences, many of which the pioneers of modernity had not envisaged.

Among those consequences was the question of freedom and how it was best to be used. It is difficult to deny that those in Japan who came to adulthood at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were, externally speaking, far freer than previous generations, as much in their personal lives as in any other aspect. Traditional social and political structures had been

severely shaken or remodeled, while the cultural impact of westernization and the economic tide of industrialization also worked to erode the bonds set in place in previous centuries. Particularly pressing was the question of how to use the opportunities that now seemed to abound to garner and employ wealth. To understand the true meaning of the new conditions, and to discern the proper use of them, were urgent tasks to some of those experiencing what appeared to be a climate of disintegration and self-indulgence.

Cut loose amid so much uncontrolled change, both Soseki and Hiroike became preoccupied with the moral dimension of existence in their search for a firm footing. That this is so clearly the case with the founder of moralogy may obscure the importance of the theme to Soseki, but as a novelist he was equally preoccupied with the question of how his contemporaries were behaving, and should behave, under the new order. He may have approached the issue from a very different angle, seeking first to depict the crisis from inside the human spirit, but he did set out his thoughts on the matter more directly in the form of the lecture delivered to an audience of the youthful elite in 1913 and published the following year as *Watashi no kojīn-shugi* ('My Individualism').

The context of a lecture to the young naturally influenced the manner in which Soseki expressed his ideas. He understood both the uncertainty of those on the threshold of life, and their need for guidance in how to go about charting a course into the future. As a result, his lecture falls into two very different sections. The first is a discursive account of his own early years, in which he explained how he lacked a clear sense of direction in life. Rather than simply describing this, the lecture enacts what it means to experience youthful confusion and lack of confidence. It follows no clear track, being seemingly nothing more than a series of personal anec-

dotes and stories, connected only by the theme of how ill-prepared Soseki felt himself to be to deliver the lecture. But all of this is quite deliberate, for its very absence of structure replicates the phenomenon it describes, which is the lack of organization and purpose in life that Soseki experienced as a young man, and which he sensed in the young people in front of him. The intimate, self-deprecating tone of his inner revelations worked to create the necessary rapport with his audience, as well as offering them reassurance. He knew how baffling it might well be for them, as it had been for himself in his own time, to struggle to find one's true path in life.

“Since I was born into this world, I must do something in it,” I told myself, but I had not the faintest idea of what was good for me. I remained paralyzed, like an isolated being surrounded by mist. I expected at least one ray of sunshine to penetrate the darkness, or, even better, I would have liked to have a searchlight so that I could see clearly before me. But a single ray would have been enough. Unfortunately, no matter where I looked, everything was indistinct, confused. I had the impression of being trapped in a bag which I could not get out of ... I spent dark days within myself speculating on what was to become of me.<sup>1)</sup>

The language here (‘paralyzed’, ‘trapped’) bears explicitly on the question of freedom, and its twin aspects, internal and external. As far as the latter was concerned, the young Soseki may not have had so much to complain about. But ‘within myself’, he was bound hand and foot, unable to move. Looking back at this young self, he could now see that the root of the problem was his lack of independent judgment. He lacked true freedom because he was a slave to the opinion of others. All his standards came from outside himself, especially from the ‘advanced’ West.

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1) Soseki, Natsume, *My Individualism* (trans. S. Tsunematsu, Boston, 2004), p. 35.

... I had floated at random, like a rootless aquatic plant, relying entirely on the opinion of others ... I was an imitator ... For example, if I read a critique by a Westerner of a book written by a Westerner, I would spread the ideas all over the place, whether or not I understood them, not thinking at all about the proper merits of the judgment. I would stroll around arrogantly, talking about some subject which was foreign to me, which was not in any sense my own, *deriving from my own being.*<sup>2)</sup>

The upshot was that if he wished to become truly free, by which he meant free within himself to form his own judgments and abide by them, he would have to dispose of his strongest enemy, his own weakness and dishonesty.

... I began to understand that if I did not abandon the borrowed plumes, that if I did not go back to something more authentic, the anxiety within me would never disappear.

For example, a Westerner may well say that a poem is magnificent ... If I did not agree, I was not obliged to adopt his ideas. I was *an independent Japanese*. I was never the servant of England. As part of the Japanese nation, I owed it to myself to *make my own judgment*. Besides, from the *moral* point of view—in which honesty is central and a virtue that is prized by all the countries in the world—I had to stay faithful to my personal opinion.<sup>3)</sup>

For Soseki, then, the greater part (though not the whole) of freedom was internal. This realization finally came, after much turmoil. The next problem, though, appeared instantly. How was this freedom properly to be used?

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In the second part of Soseki's lecture, the tone changes, so suddenly that the voice becomes almost unrecognizably different. Doubts, hesitations, sidetracking, all are banished. We listen now to someone on a far firmer footing in life, for from this point on, Soseki goes directly to the point, almost

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2) Ibid., pp. 36-7. Italics added.

3) Ibid., pp. 37-8. Italics added.

didactically so. What he wishes his young listeners to understand is that, while freedom must certainly be achieved if one is to become fully human, it is neither an end in itself nor merely an opportunity for self-indulgence. Rather, it is just a beginning, the opening of the gate to one's true path through life. Thus, in his own case, it was no coincidence that, having resolved his inner chaos, Soseki immediately set out to use his new freedom for a purpose.

I gained a great deal of strength from this period of introspection and it prompted me to ask who these Westerners were. In fact, this concentration on myself set me in motion—I who up to then had remained stuck in one place, disorientated—and pointed out the way to me.

I must admit that this marked a new departure in life for me. When we imitate Westerners and make a lot of noise about nothing, it only brings us anxiety. So if I endeavored to explain to people why they should not let themselves be thus influenced, telling them it was better that they should not act like Westerners, not only would I feel that I was doing the right thing but they too would benefit greatly. That is what I thought. Then *I decided to dedicate my life's work to carrying out this plan* by writing books and in other ways.<sup>4)</sup>

Soseki had seen at once that his task was to help others, to free them as he had freed himself. Instantly, he came to know that the purpose of freedom is not self-gratification, that his focus needed to be entirely elsewhere. This distinction between liberty and license was crucial, for that choice were not recognized and correctly made, the consequences could only be harmful. One of the chief forms of self-gratification that worried Soseki, on this and probably other occasions, was that of succumbing to the temptations of power. His immediate audience at the Gakushoin comprised the offspring of those of 'a comfortable social position' who would go on to enjoy the 'exercise of power' in their adult

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4) Ibid., pp. 38-9. Italics added.

years. The dangers that lay in wait for them called forth a clear, direct and stern warning from Soseki.

When I analyze this notion of “power” ... I realize ... [it] is an instrument that allows us to infiltrate ourselves to some extent into the head of someone else ...

The power of money accompanies power in the strict sense of the term. It is inevitable, ladies and gentlemen, that you hold this power too, and in a much more clearly defined manner, than poor people ... the power of money ... seems to me to be an extremely useful instrument in enlarging the field of one’s own individuality by seducing or suborning others ... Those who have this strength may seem to be remarkable people. In fact, they are extremely dangerous ...

... if you also have the power that money confers, you will spread it around and you will try to force others to accept your image. Using money as a means of subjugating people, you can get others to change by force of seduction, leading them to act according to your will. People who do this are very dangerous! <sup>5)</sup>

For Soseki, then, freedom is not to be won only to be abused. If its proper uses are not respected, not just the individuals concerned, but society itself would fall victim, first to corruption, then to disintegration.

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The parallels with the life and thought of Hiroike Chikuro are striking. A decade later than Soseki, he underwent his own crisis of the spirit, from which he ultimately emerged greatly changed, and ready to embark upon a new path. He, too, came up against barriers to full freedom within himself. In his case these were his scholarly ambitions and his deep attachment to Tenrikyo. While both of these elements represented in part an attempt to do good in the world, they were also linked to personal ambition. And before Hiroike could move freely into his own being, that ambition had to be

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5) Ibid., pp. 43, 45.

renounced. It took a grave crisis of health to give him the strength necessary for this.

When in 1912 I was seriously ill, I reflected upon my self in this way: "I was born poor in a far corner of this country and I have reached my present status. What I am today I owe to God, to the virtue of the sages and to the favour of several senior scholars. If I rise further to higher rank or office and obtain more wealth or honour, it will be too good for me and ill-boding. Fortunately, I am now suffering from this serious illness and hovering between life and death; this must be a warning from God." Accordingly I made up my mind to give up all honours and advantages and devote myself to the enlightenment and salvation of mankind.<sup>6)</sup>

Just as with Soseki, a new purpose was immediately born of the inner freedom won by renouncing the desire to be well thought of. But, for Hiroike, there was a second stage still to be completed. Tenrikyo also represented a temptation, perhaps the temptation of power, which had to be forgone. This was renounced at great personal cost, the struggle leaving Hiroike 'out of money, out of books, lacking even one acquaintance or friend'.<sup>7)</sup> But the prize was the inner freedom that marked the remainder of his life. He now had complete independence of judgment, and could use this freedom to act on his own responsibility for a new purpose, the creation of moralogy.

In this work, Hiroike had to confront, like Soseki, the manner in which freedom was being abused by their contemporaries in the grip of western ideas. For him, too, one dangerous area was the new grasping for wealth in the name of economic freedom. Only now that Hiroike had given up his own desire for success could he warn of the dangers that its pursuit posed to others.

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6) *Towards Supreme Morality. An Attempt to Establish the New Science of Moralogy* [hereafter *TSM*] (Eng. trans., 3 vols., The Institute of Moralogy, Kashiwa, Japan, 2002), III, 300-301.

7) *TSM*, III, 424.

In the world after the Renaissance ... self-interested and capitalistic economics appeared, and rationalized selfishness and capitalism by giving them philosophical bases ... In former ages, the nobility, millionaires and capitalists had been wary of their own luxuries, which they privately regarded as evils; but the self-interested economics admitted luxuries in the name of learning, and so the luxurious way of life among the upper class people became so extreme that it brought about moral deterioration in the spirit of man the world over, provoking at the same time great antipathy among the proletariat.

... the idea of mammonism ... spread to Japan at the end of the nineteenth century. The economic system based on mammonism harbours no true concern for the welfare of mankind nor even for the interests of the country. Millionaires, capitalists and enterprisers may speak of the interests of the country or the development of a certain industry, but they have no aim whatever except to enrich themselves, exercising their influence, whenever possible, in company with political parties or politicians for their common interests.<sup>8)</sup>

Given his new freedom to choose his own direction, Hiroike decided very quickly to become personally involved in trying to resolve labor disputes. The issue of wealth and its abuse could not be allowed to remain just a matter for the individual. Hiroike was well aware of the dangers of the growth of "great antipathy among the proletariat" in the context not just of Japan, but of the unrest elsewhere that culminated in the Communist revolution in Russia and the wider turmoil in Europe in the aftermath of World War I. His view was that the outlook was bleak without a radical change in outlook on the part of the wealthier segment of

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8) *TSM*, iii, 203-4. Hiroike was just as convinced as Soseki of the problems created for their country by its blind imitation of the more 'advanced' west. 'The present civilization which is based on capitalism or mammonism is almost entirely materialistic ... The moral spirit of man is degenerating day by day, and the happiness of mankind is diminishing year by year. Even Japan, whose wealth is still [1927] very low in comparison with that of western countries and whose fundamental spirit has respected simple life, now goes out of her way to pursue the material civilization of the west which is already on the verge of bankruptcy.' (*TSM*, iii, 204-5).



society.

For both Soseki and Hiroike, the only way forward was for those with economic power to give proper place to moral considerations in their use of it. Soseki emphasized that freedom, of which economic power was an expression, brought with it inescapable duties of a moral nature.

Every wealthy man, in my opinion, must understand the meaning of responsibilities ... Money can be changed into anything we choose. And amongst all the possible choices, it can be used as a means of buying people's minds. Is that not frightening? In other words, by spreading their money around, people can use it as an instrument for purchasing the moral sense of others and so cause corruption and degradation of the soul ... The only way the corruption of human nature can be avoided is if those who are wealthy spend their *money with an appropriate ethical sense and do not use it to the detriment of moral principles*. That is why I insist that the power that money confers must be accompanied by the notion of responsibility.<sup>9)</sup>

For Hiroike, economic activity, like all other human activities, was one more aspect of the ever-present imperative to recognize the moral dimension of life.

... The master or leader [who] ... had begun to practise supreme morality before starting his enterprise ... is an executant of supreme morality. *His purpose in starting and carrying on his business is, as an expression of gratitude to God, partly to benefit the world by the enterprise itself and partly to be endowed by God with enough superfluous power to work for the enlightenment and salvation of man*. He attends to every affair, therefore, in the spirit of enlightenment firstly for those people working under him and secondly for people in society in general, so that they may attain happiness.<sup>10)</sup>

Economic power is presented as an opportunity, not to make a material profit in pursuit of self-interest, but to engage in moral action in respect of others.

As for labour problems ... it is needless to say that the capitalist

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9) *My Individualism*, p. 47. Italics added.

10) *TSM*, iii, 425. Italics added.

should pay his workers materially as much as he can afford, but the main point is for each capitalist, in accordance with his capacity, to exercise a spirit of real benevolence towards his employees, provide them with moralogy education, cultivate the moral character of each employee by its principles and try to induce him to find voluntarily the proper way to build up a good destiny for himself.<sup>11)</sup>

The alternative was bankruptcy, and in much more than the economic sense.

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From all this it can be seen that freedom has both internal and external dimensions, and that it exists for a purpose outside the self. Soseki and Hiroike came to an understanding of both these facts in the course of their development. But how has the matter been understood outside of Japan, and what is its history in the years since Soseki and Hiroike did their work?

From the 1920s on, many parts of the world underwent a great trial in the denial of external freedom, spiraling downwards into mass murder. This was the experience of those whose lives were placed within the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, Communist China, North Korea, Cambodia, Vietnam and other experiments in totalitarian insanity. It was the lot of those caught up without hope of escape in the era of the Cheka/NKVD/MGB/KGB, of the Gestapo, of the Holocaust, of the Gulag, of the "Great Leap Forward" and of Pol Pot, and of those like the Boat People, far fewer in number but still remarkably numerous, who were given the chance to risk all they had to win back their external freedom. Soseki never saw even the beginnings of this phenomenon, though in *My Individualism* he did warn against the excesses of nationalism, but Hiroike came to know at first hand what it was like

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11) *TSM*, iii, 396-7.

to live under the scrutiny of the thought police.

So great was this trial that it served, in the west at least, to reinforce strongly the belief that external freedom was what mattered most, indeed that freedom was exclusively an external concept. But this was not always the view of those who actually underwent the loss of external freedom. For they knew that not everyone was denied power in totalitarian societies. Indeed, power greater than is usually granted to any human being was bestowed on those who ruled over the enslaved. The 'madness of pernicious freedom' that resulted stood revealed in its ultimate insanity in the Ukraine of the early 1930's, at Auschwitz, in Mao's secret famine of 1958-62, in the Killing Fields. For those who carried out these atrocities were externally the freest human beings on earth, to whom 'everything was permitted'. The only constraint upon them was the poverty of their imaginations, which equated 'everything' with 'murder'. But just as their external power of choice expanded enormously, their internal freedom contracted at the same pace to vanishing point, in the transition from liberty to license. The most important element, so it turned out, was the preservation or destruction of inner freedom.

This much was apparent to Nazedha Mandelstam, whose husband, the poet Osip, was taken to his death in a Siberia transit camp in 1938, and who herself spent many years subsequently evading the dragnet of the secret police. For her, the truth about freedom that emerged from this wreckage of her own life and that of her country was clear.

Freedom of choice presupposes two paths, one leading to some distant beacon that makes existence meaningful, and the other into the "night and murk of nonbeing." Pushkin called the second path "the madness of pernicious freedom." After Dostoyevski we use the word "license" to describe a person's choice of the second path ... Dostoyevski ... shows us those extremes of license

that lead to death and decay ...

If it were not for a chance conversation with Akhmatova which put everything in a new perspective for me, I should not know what to set against license. I had brought her a volume of Éluard ... Akhmatova leafed through it, pausing to read here and there, and then put it aside with a look of irritation: "This is not freedom, but license." For me this contrasting use of freedom and license was something new ... Later I found it in the works of Sergei Bulgakov and Berdiayev ...

Gradually it dawned on me that man a choice between the way of freedom and the way of license. The language of concepts is poor, and we use the word "freedom" in two senses—in the full meaning and as in the expression "freedom of choice". There is an obvious difference between these two usages. Speaking of "freedom of choice" we mean an act of will. Man is really the master of his fate, as are individual nations and humanity as a whole: it too has freedom of choice. The concept of "freedom" in the full sense is something quite different again, since it refers to values. A man chooses the way of freedom or, better, finds freedom, if he succeeds on overcoming the baser promptings of his own ego and the times in which he lives. Having conquered them, he receives freedom from himself and his epoch ...

... The way of freedom is hard, particularly in times like ours, but if everybody had always chosen the other path, the path of license, mankind would long ago have ceased to exist ...

... Freedom is based on a moral law; license results from freely indulging one's desires. Freedom says: "This is what ought to be done, so I may do it." License says: "I want to do it, so I may do it."<sup>12)</sup>

The point here is not that external freedom ('freedom of choice') is unimportant, but that it is not sufficient. Everything depends on the end to which it is put, and for the proper end to be chosen, the fullest measure of internal freedom is needed, freedom that can be based only 'on a moral law'.

Nor was Nazedha Manselstam not alone in reaching this understanding about the nature of freedom. In August 1976

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12) Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope Abandoned* (trans. M. Hayward, New York, 1974), pp. 266, 273, 274, 275, 276.

Ludvík Vaculík, the Czech writer and dissident, met with friends in a café in Prague where they got into conversation with a visitor from Baghdad. They were baffled to hear him say that he preferred Czechoslovakia to Greece, from which he had just come, because there was more freedom in Prague. Given that this was the dead era in Czech history between the crushing of the Prague Spring of 1968 and the reawakening of Charter 77, the incredulity of Vaculík's friends can be understood. Given time to reflect, though, Vaculík himself didn't share their feeling.

But seriously, what if the man from Baghdad was right? ... he, sitting lonely in a coffee-house in Athens and then in Prague, gazing out of the window and watching the people go by, trying to read their conversations from their lips ... may well be able to assess his surroundings, gauge the atmosphere of a place, and ascertain with what degree of inborn freedom people behave and interact. *Human freedom, which I am sure is a much wider concept than so-called political freedom*, develops together with the inhabitants under weightier pressures than flash-in-the-pan regimes lasting half a century. It has nothing to do with the openness of a political system, or its opposite—indeed, it seems to me that perhaps this type of freedom thrives more in places which have strict regimes than in very free ones, where the *need* for freedom is not so acutely felt and where people, so many of them, don't have to reflect daily on how to define it.<sup>13)</sup>

Here, the distinction between internal and external freedom is taken a step further. 'Inborn freedom' is contrasted with the political freedom so highly prized in the west, and is even seen to grow in inverse proportion to the loss of external liberty, because only when freedom is denied can its truth worth be recognized.

Neither is this a new insight. 'The proverb says: "Freedom spoils, and lack of freedom teaches."<sup>14)</sup> But while this

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13) Ludvík Vaculík, *A Cup of Coffee with My Interrogator* (trans. G. Theiner, London, 1987), pp. 15–16. Italics added.

14) A. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* (trans. T. Witney, Collins, 1975), vol.

may have seemed obvious to some at least of those who survived the tyrannies of the past eighty years, such truths seem to have been laid aside today, in an era where the extension of freedom, by which is understood only external, political freedom, is often taken as a panacea for the world's ills. Such an extension may still be desirable if it leads to liberty, but that is by no means guaranteed. The option of license is available too, which means that simplistic notions about freedom, along the lines of 'the more, the better', need to be treated very cautiously. The true path of freedom remains as hard to find and follow today as it was for Soseki and Hiroike, and for the contemporaries to whom they spoke. These two men came eventually to realize that the true nature of freedom is to be grasped first and most importantly from within, rather than seized from without. The freedom which they had to struggle to win for themselves through self-understanding and self-discipline has not changed radically in nature in the years since they set out to discover its proper uses. But it seems that their lesson is one that needs to be learned anew in each generation.