

*Stream, or Continuity: Comparing the idea of time-consciousness in Natsume Sōseki
and William James*

Annette Thorsen Vilslev

University of Copenhagen, Denmark

0308

The Asian Conference on Cultural Studies 2013

Official Conference Proceedings 2013



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Natsume Sōseki (1867-1916) is widely known as one of the major modern novelists in Japan. A nationally canonized writer his fiction has been scrutinized in great detail. Less studied is his theoretical work. An exception is his speeches. “My Individualism” (Watakushi no kojishugi, 1914) according to Jay Rubin has been the most discussed, and it is also included as an addendum in his translation of Sōseki’s most canonized novel *Kokoro* (‘Heart’) from 1914. So, Sōseki’s critical work is generally recognized to be fundamental to understanding the complex situation of modernity with the intensive westernization and modernization of Japan during the Meiji period (1868-1912). Though they are all rather different in style, his critical, theoretical, and fictional work, as I see them, all treat problems with are not essentially different, though their style and approaches differ. A recent translation of parts of Sōseki’s major theoretical work *Theory of Literature* (2009, *Bungakuron*, 1907), which he wrote while he was studying English in London, has instigated a renewed interest in investigating the relations between his theory and fiction (see Bourdaghs et al., ed.) In this connection, Japanese critic Karatani Kojin has stressed the need of rethinking his theory (Karatani 2008), and has previously pointed to Sōseki’s rejection of the universality of English literature as indicative of a more general rejection of universality: “[h]is real concern was to point out that universality was not a priori, but historical” (see Karatani, 1993, 12). This historicizing and critical impetus is already identifiable as Karatani shows in Sōseki’s preface to *Theory of Literature*. In this paper, I want to use Sōseki’s theory to bring his work into dialogue with some of the psychological and philosophical ideas that also inspired western twentieth century modernism.¹ In particular, I suggest analyzing how the idea of a *stream* or *continuity of consciousness* (意識の連続, *ishiki no renzoku*) is presented, interpreted, and developed in Sōseki’s literary theory as a critical term for understanding cultural and historical difference. Moreover, I investigate how this concepts links to American psychologist and philosopher William James’ idea of stream of thought, or consciousness, as well as to his idea of a specious present.

Inspired by the new schools of physiological psychology,² Sōseki conceptualizes consciousness as continuous waves of ebbs and flows. His point of departure for theorizing time-consciousness is similar to James psychological idea of the moment as a wave.³ The fundamental element in Sōseki’s model of conscious experience resembles James’ *specious present*. This idea relates to a widespread discussion of time-consciousness within philosophy of mind at the time. When James first defines the stream of consciousness it involves a specific conceptualization of the continuity of the moment, which he refers to it as the specious present. The specious present doctrine that James formulates is that any conscious experience per se has duration. James on his part got the expression from Scottish common sense psychologist Thomas Reid (1710-1796), who used the term *specious present* about his particular

¹ In Japan there are a number of publications on his theory and English literature: Ando Fumihito, and Tsukamoto Toshiaki, among others have written on the influence from English literature. [Ogura Shuzo](#) has written a book-length study on the influence from William James. In Japan Forum’s special issue on Sōseki from 2008, Thomas Lamarre discusses James’ radical empiricism in relation to Sōseki’s theory.

² New experimental psychology had flourished since the late 19th century around the laboratories of Wilhelm Wundt in Germany where William James had also gone to study.

³ To graphically illustrate the continuity of the moment he uses a semicircle, where the apex represents the focal point as the clearest portion of consciousness fading towards its peripheries. This wave-model he found in Lloyd Morgan’s *Introduction to Comparative Psychology* from 1896, which also builds on the time philosophy of James. See also Murphy 2004.

idea of time-consciousness.⁴ Criticizing Locke for confusing memory and consciousness, yet trying to avoid Hume's skepticism, Reid had argued that time-consciousness differs from memory. James' idea of time-consciousness differs from memory: "there is a conception of duration where there is no succession of ideas in the mind." (Intellectual Powers. essay III. chap. V.)" (James 1950, vol. 1: 627) As James argues the stream of consciousness is not just a succession of ideas, but of the experience in time has a certain extension or duration. According to James even the smallest unit of any conscious experience is continuous. Any single perceptual experience in the stream of consciousness in other words spans a certain interval of time. James' idea of this kind of *inner time-consciousness* was no isolated phenomena, but widely circulated at the time. The idea of continuity influenced the new experimental psychology, and appears in a number of different contexts. It seems pertinent to stress how widespread the idea of this continuity of the moment as such was at the time. Particular influential was Bergson's idea of *durée* (duration), time as a duration-block, which is not a psychological concept like James, but a critique of the homogeneous account of time that Bergson found in mathematics and philosophy at the time.

Sōseki's speech "The Philosophical Foundations of the Literary Arts" ("Bungei no tetsugakuteki kiso", 1907),⁵ where he repeatedly uses the concept continuity of consciousness, furthermore, shows close resemblance to James's work. In a world literary perspective, Sōseki's use of the expression *flow* or *stream of consciousness* is particularly interesting since this term also influenced discussions of western modernism. James first used the metaphor *stream of consciousness* to describe characteristics of consciousness in his *Principles of Psychology* from 1890. Yet, comparative analyses of their respective ways of using the idea are surprisingly scarce. I argue, that the concept *stream of consciousness* helps bring Sōseki's novels into a cross-cultural comparison (that does not assign primacy to western definitions). Stream-of-consciousness (in literature) is often considered a western invention, which then manifests belatedly, or derivatively in other regions of the world. But Sōseki, in fact, used the term in relation to literature before the western modernists. In the west, its first use about modernist literature by Mary Sinclair (who, like Sōseki, was well-read in new psychology), in her review of a novel by Dorothy Richardson in 1918.

Consciousness as Continuous

In Japanese, Sōseki uses both *stream* (流れ, *nagare*) and *continuity* (連続, *renzoku*) to convey the idea of the flow of consciousness (Natsume 2009: 56, 133 / SZ 31, 433). When he first uses the term *stream of consciousness* it is to describe a characteristic of consciousness. Namely, that the focal points, which he designates F, structure its flow: "indeed, in the *flow* [alt. *stream*] of consciousness for even an hour resides something that lays claim to the same designation F? (一時間の意識の流れにも同じく F と称し得べきものあるにはあらざるか。(SZ: 31) The English version

⁴ See e.g. Holly Andersen and Rick Grush: "A Brief History of Time-Consciousness: Historical Precursors to James and Husserl!", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 47(2): 277-307. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009. Shaun Gallagher: *The Inordinance of Time*, 1998.

⁵ Sōseki delivered this speech in 1907 at an art college in Tokyo: "I find it quite interesting that you here at the Art College have formed this literary society" (Natsume 2009: 161). Later the same year a slightly revised version was published in the newspaper *Asahi Shinbun*.

here translates 流れ (*nagare*) as *flow* but it could also be translated as *stream*. To understand in more detail what Sōseki has in mind when using the term *stream of consciousness* in this way, I investigate how the *continuity* and *focal points* ideas relate to the physiological psychology he was reading at the time. Therefore, initially, I present the psychological wave-model Sōseki uses, and then, compares how Sōseki and James elaborate on this basic philosophical idea of the wave of consciousness. Finally, I explain how Sōseki expands the idea of the focal point of the stream of consciousness to cover, not only individual, but also collective focal points.

The comparative and physiological psychologists were fond of using art and literature to exemplify their theories. James frequently describes consciousness using examples from the arts: "The grass out of the window now looks to me of the same green in the sun, as in the shade, and yet a painter would have to paint one part of it dark brown, another part bright yellow, to give it its real sensational effect." (James 1950 vol. 1, p. 231) In that sense it also no wonder that their theories reversely became sources of inspiration for the arts. Another example James uses is listening to music:

"Every brain-state is partly determined by the nature of [the] entire past succession. Alter the latter in any part, and the brain state must be somewhat different [...] just as, in the senses, an impression feels very differently according to what has preceded it; as one color succeeding another is modified by the contrast, silence sounds delicious after noise, and a note, when the scale is sung up, sounds unlike itself when the scale is sung down; as the presence of certain lines in a figure changes the apparent form of the other lines, and as in music the whole aesthetic effect comes from the manner in which one set of sound alters our feeling of another; so, in thought, we must admit that those portions of the brain that have just been maximally excited retain a kind of soreness which is a condition of our present consciousness, a co-determinant of how and what we now shall feel." (James 1950 vol. 1: 234-235)

References to aesthetic experiences complement experimentation. In his theory of literature, Sōseki, similarly, exemplifies the idea of continuity with both temporal and spatial metaphors. Accordingly, the near-past and near-future are contained within the experience of every single moment. Referring his reader to Edward Wheeler Scripture's *New Psychology* from 1897 for detailed scientific explanations, he illustrates the fluctuations of consciousness, how one focal point gradually changes into another: "This is not just something we can feel in our daily experience; it has been precisely verified by scientific experiment" (Natsume 2009: 55). Sōseki, like the physiological psychologists, recommends his reader to verify the argument by thinking of everyday experiences commonly used as introspective methods in experimental psychology at the time. He also uses a spatial metaphor to illustrate the idea, asking his readers to imagine someone watching St. Paul's cathedral:

"Let's say there's a person, and [he's] standing before St. Paul's Cathedral. Suppose that as they gaze upon that splendid architecture, their eyes move gradually from the pillars at the bottom section, to the balustrade at the upper portion, and finally reach the highest point at the tip of the cupola. While they are first gazing on the pillars, that portion of the structure is the only part perceived clearly and distinctly, and the rest only enters the field of vision indistinctly. However, in the instant the eyes move from the pillars to the balustrade, the perception of the pillars begin to accentuate, and simultaneously the perception of the balustrade gains in clarity and distinctness. The same phenomenon is observed in the movement from the balustrade to the cupola. When one recites a familiar poem, or listen to a familiar piece of music, it is the same. That is to say, when one separates off for observation a moment of consciousness from the continuity of a particular conscious state, one can see that

the preceding psychological state begins to attenuate, and the portion to follow by contrast is gradually raised in distinctness through anticipation. (Natsume 2009: 55)".

As Sōseki's private *notes* reveal this description paraphrases contemporary descriptions of art as well as Scripture's *New Psychology*. Comparative physiological psychology is the outset of his wave-model of consciousness, and it leads us straight back to James. Furthermore, Sōseki like James uses the metaphor stream of consciousness to describe the flux, or flow of consciousness. This fact alone, as I see it, calls for a closer comparison of how the two conceptualize this idea. Therefore I turn to see how James conceptualizes the idea of a continuous *stream of thought* in *The Principles of Psychology*.

Juxtaposing Lecture Rooms

So what did James say about consciousness: In the chapter "Stream of Thought" in the first book of *Principles of Psychology*, James defines continuum as that which is without breaches, and the stream of consciousness as that which belongs to a personal consciousness: "Within each personal consciousness, thought is sensibly continuous".⁶ No thought appears independently; there is no thought without a body, and no thought that is not different from other thoughts. James refers to this as irreducible pluralism: every conscious thought is always part of a stream of thoughts. "Thought is in Constant Change", writes James: "I do not mean necessarily that no one state of mind has any duration – even if true that would be hard to establish. The change which I have more particularly in view is that which takes place in sensible intervals of time; and the result on which I wish to stress is this, that *no state once gone can recur and be identical with what was before.*" (James 1950 vol. 1: 229-30)

Many of Sōseki's formulations are suggestive of James' idea, or at least not far off it, indicating that he conceives of consciousness in a similar way. Both James and Sōseki stress that no thought exists independently. There is no thought without a body, and consciousness as a personal stream of thought is *sensibly* continuous. James insists that both the spiritualist and the associationist must both be 'cerebralists'.⁷ In short, James wants to equally stress the cognitive foundations and the lived experience, pointing to the physical and habitual elements of consciousness, before his chapter nine: "The Stream of Thought":

⁶ James does see a possibility of gaps in the stream but if such exist they still do not change the basic principle of a continuity of consciousness: "I have already said that the breaches from one mind to another is perhaps the greatest breach in nature. The only breaches that can well be conceived to occur within the limit of a single mind would either be *interruptions, time-gaps* during which the consciousness went out altogether to come into existence again at a later moment; or they would be breaks in *quality*, or content, or the thought so abrupt that the segment that followed had no connection whatever with the one that went before." (James 1950 vol. 1: 237).

⁷ "to the extent at least of admitting that certain peculiarities in the way of working of their own favorite principles are explicable only by the fact that the brain laws are a co-determinant of the result. Our first conclusion, then, is that a certain amount of brain-psychology must be presupposed or included in Psychology." (James 1950 vol. 1: 4-5) James is trying to unite these two positions, physiology and the concretely lived experience: "The dance of the ideas is a copy, somewhat mutilated and altered, of the order of phenomena. But the slightest reflection shows that phenomena have absolutely no power to influence our ideas until they have first impressed our senses and our brain. The bare existence of a past fact is no ground for our remembering it. Unless we have seen it, or somehow *undergone* it, we shall never know of its having been." (James 1950 vol. 1: 3-4)

“We now begin our study of the mind from within. Most books start with sensations, as the simplest mental facts, and proceed synthetically, constructing each higher stage from those below it. But this is abandoning the empirical method of investigation. No one ever had a simple sensation by itself. Consciousness, from our natal day, is of a teeming multiplicity of objects and relations, and what we call *simple sensations are results of discriminative attention*, pushed often to a very high degree. (James 1950 vol. 1, pp. 224-225)

When James writes that “the baby, assailed by eyes, ears, nose, skin, and entrails at once, feels it all as one great blooming, buzzing confusion.” (James, vol. 1. 488), it might seem a rather naturalized idea today. But it says as much about new ideas about the relation between experience and the physical mind. For James, as a physiological psychologist, the point was to examine how the two relate, how consciousness is embodied according to certain principles. In accordance with the philosophy and psychology of James, Sōseki first and foremost sees the emotive and the cognitive as part of continuous embodied stream of consciousness. Sōseki wants to understand literature in relation to both psychological and sociological reflections on consciousness, and in relation to the particular idea of time-consciousness that he found it in James. In his chapter “Thought tends to Personal Form” from *Principles of Psychology*, James writes

”In this room - this lecture-room, say - there are a multitude of thoughts, yours and mine, some of which cohere mutually, and some not. They are as little each-of-itself and reciprocally independent as they are all-belonging-together. They are neither: no one of them is separate, but each belongs with certain others and with none beside. My thought belongs with my other thoughts, and your thought with your other thoughts. Whether anywhere in the room there be a mere thought, which is nobody's thought, we have no means of ascertaining, for we have no experience of its like. The only states of consciousness that we naturally deal with are found in personal consciousness, minds, selves, concrete particular I's and you's. (James 1950 vol. 1, pp. 226-227)

Making a virtue of necessity describing the particular time and space of the *classroom lecture*, his speech is full of deixis:

”So, to begin with, I am standing here. And all of you are sitting there. I am standing down here, while you are sitting up there. That I stand here like this, and that you sit there, is a matter of fact. To put this matter of fact into other words, I am the self, while in relation to me you are something other than the self. ... Moreover, with me standing here like this, and you sitting there like that, there exists between us a certain distance. It may be a distance of one or two *ken*, or perhaps even twenty *ken* — how big, by the way, is this lecture hall? At any rate, it extends over a certain number of *tsubo*, and within that span I am standing and you are sitting. This extension is called space (you knew that without my telling you). In sum, there is a dimension called space, and all objects occupy a certain position within it. (Natsume 2009: 162)

Obviously influenced by James, Sōseki defines literature in terms of consciousness, and consciousness in terms of time and space, positioning the event in time and space, asking how big the auditorium is, ensuring the students not to worry since the speech at some point will end, like James, using anecdotes and examples.⁸ In a similar

⁸ Murphy has described the setting of the stage, the lecture room as a “quasi-laboratory”, how Sōseki “would continually propose various ways of accounting for, quantifying and analyzing the experience of literature to his students, and then ask them to consult the fact of their own experience to see if it does, or does not agree with the model”. (Murphy 2004: 50)

fashion, Sōseki builds this speech on the idea of *continuity of consciousness* defined in *Theory of Literature*, now presenting it in a more light-hearted manner:

"Second, today's speech began at one o'clock. I don't know when it will end, but I am fairly certain that at some point it will end. More than likely, it will end before the sun goes down. I will make my haphazard remarks, and then after I finish, Mr. Ueda will take my place and give what will no doubt be a very interesting talk. After that we will adjourn. My talk and Mr. Ueda's speech are both events that will pass by, and without the dimension known as time, this passing by could never take place. This too is something that is already clear and requires no special explanation." (Natsume 2009:162)

James continues the above discussion in his chapter "Consciousness of Self". James, like Sōseki's, describes the dual aspects, feeling and thought. The nucleus of 'me' is always the bodily existence felt to be present at the time. "(James 1950 vol. 1: 400) In daily speech Locke's "Idea" does not connote emotions, and thus might be misleading. Thought and feelings change. James makes the following five points:

"How does it go on? We notice immediately five important characters in the process, of which it shall be the duty of the present chapter to treat in a general way:

- 1) Every thought tends to be part of a personal consciousness.
- 2) Within each personal consciousness thought is always changing.
- 3) Within each personal consciousness thought is sensibly continuous.
- 4) It always appears to deal with objects independent of itself.
- 5) It is interested in some parts of these objects to the exclusion of others, and welcomes or rejects - *chooses* from among them, in a word - all the while. (James 1950 vol. 1, p. 225)"

Already in his theory Sōseki expands the idea of *continuity* to describe aspects of consciousness that cannot be described in psychological terms alone, and in "The Philosophical Foundations of Literature" he connects it to a vital principle for maintaining life, consciousness tends towards continuity.

Though he maintains the idea of self, James is trying to avoid a fixed self. Insisting on the irreducible pluralism of life, he does not deny the benefit of cognitive faculties for selective attention, mental faculties and selective attention structures this stream.

A major point in James' physiological psychology is that consciousness is made up of all our capacities for sensing, feeling, categorizing, thinking and acting. People are not predetermined entities (ready-made souls). If there is a self, in his philosophy, it seems to be a rather minimal core-self, or, the self is made of various experiences, so that we might even rather speak of a narrated self. According to both James and Sōseki, consciousness exists in time and space, yet they insist that consciousness also includes metaphysical experiences, as well as dreams, memories, hallucinations (James' *Principles of Psychology* features a number of remarkable consciousness phenomena). In "The Philosophical Foundation of the Literary Art" Sōseki emphasizes the *continuity* aspect of consciousness. Like James, he insists that there is no mind-body dualism. Thus, he understands the stream of consciousness as intricately related to the emotions and the body. Whereas *Theory of Literature* describes feelings as *the* pivot of literature, this speech defines literature as orientated *both* towards feelings *and* towards continuity. According to Sōseki, literature differs

from other ideals in life because of its orientation towards feelings and continuity itself, the continuity that is life.⁹

Collective focal points

Thus Soseki's aim is much broader than describing individual consciousness as isolated psychological phenomena. He describes them as embedded in larger focal points that structure change and transformation in literary history. According to Sōseki, these literary focal points are bound up with the affectivity of our conscious lives. Literary focal points are accompanied by feelings, this has to do with individual habit and taste, but also *culturally* people invest feelings in some particular focal points: "even a difficult theory can gradually seep into ordinary people's brains (whether or not it comes to govern our lives)." (Natsume, 2009: 82). We need for example some botanical knowledge to relate to a poetic expression like the one Emerson uses in *Representative Men* from 1850: "Man is that noble endogenous plant which grows, like the palm, from within outward" (ibid.) Sōseki also uses the example of how *evolution theory* as idea spreads to the general populace (Natsume 2009: 83). His definition of *collective focal points* distinguishes his theory from psychological descriptions of consciousness, adding another sociological or cultural layer to it. Feelings are in other words, not only natural, but also cultural. Although our physiology provides predispositions, cultures, social forms of interaction, which are historical, shape feelings in their own fashion. Expanding the idea of focal points in this way, Sōseki takes the focal point, to represent the most clear point of consciousness not only in a single instant of consciousness, but also within longer spans of time within a given society (Natsume 2009: 57). Even historical periods have their focal points: "capturing and expressing with the single letter F the most prominent focal points of the combined thought and ideas shared by individuals across a given age." (Natsume 2009: 123) These collective focal points are continuously changing. "Because the material of consciousness changes with the passage of time, we can only speak of it within the context of a specific historical moment (Natsume 2009: 123) To Sōseki the focal point helps explain why in literature there might at one point be a focus on truth, while at another point in history some other idea stands out more clearly. These focal points he also compares to the German *zeitgeist*, or what he sees as its Japanese equivalent, *ikio* (勢い, force, or energy) of the age ("which not even a genius or sage can defy" according to Sōseki). Joseph A. Murphy describes how Sōseki's in his speech "The Civilization of Modern-Day Japan" ("Gendai nihon no kaika") from 1911 was aiming at dissecting "the various elements structuring civilization, and discourse on its nature" (Murphy 2004: 34). By dissecting the affectivity of focal points in literature, Sōseki might already have been arguing along these lines in *Theory of Literature*.

In conclusion, Sōseki's theory relies on this particular philosophical idea of time as a duration-block, the moment-by-moment experience. Sōseki, however, expands the idea of the focal point much further. He believes such focal points also exist for longer time-periods. In any period of time in the *stream of consciousness*, he argues, a focal point exists. When Sōseki uses it in his theory, he does not refer directly to James, but there is no doubt that the fundamental *idea* behind Sōseki's model is in accordance with James. As my comparison of how it is conceptualized has illustrated

⁹ His particular focus on the affective aspects of literature is reflected on various levels and in various guises in fiction (which would take another paper to demonstrate).

Sōseki's basic philosophical idea of time as *continuity* stems from James. Sōseki, however, expands the model to also cover longer periods of time, and thus culturally embodied aspects of consciousness. Sōseki maintains his interest in the new psychology's focus on the physiological aspects of consciousness, and James' focus on the felt aspects of consciousness, however, expands the model to describe larger historical structures of consciousness. Thus collective focal points affectively guide the individual ones. In that sense the literary description of individual minds is not only about the feelings of private subjects, but about how the world is refracted through individual minds, moment-by-moment. Theories about consciousness and literature in the beginning of the twentieth century, in that sense were intersecting in various and profound ways of understanding the human mind, body, and world. James's psychology gives Sōseki the opportunity to dwell on the moment in his theory, and theorize how consciousness is in constant change.

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