

To Study Russian Literature in English: The Reception of Maurice Baring and Dmitry Merezhkovsky in Modern Japan

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Abstract:

This paper examines the perception and influence of the English books on Russian Literature in modern Japan, especially *Tolstoi as Man and Artist: with an Essay on Dostoïevski* by a famous Russian novelist, poet, religious thinker and literary critic, Dmitry Sergeyevich Merezhkovsky (1865–1941), which was published in 1902, and *Landmarks in Russian Literature* by an English writer and scholar of the Russian literature and Russian affairs in general, Maurice Baring (1874–1945), which was appeared in 1910. Their books were widely read among the Japanese intellectuals in the early 20th century. As the previous studies have indicated, Russian literature became a worldwide craze in those days, and Japan was also one of the countries where it gained popularity. There are some studies of the Japanese translations of Russian literature in modern Japan, which revealed that the greater part of them were translated not from Russian originals, but from the translations in the Western languages.

On the other hand, it is not well known that the characteristics of Russian literature were received in Japan at that period by books written in the Western languages other than Russian, such as English, and research to elucidate this reality has not progressed sufficiently. We analyze the English books and the English translations of the studies of Russian Literature by Baring and Merezhkovsky in the collection of Natsume Soseki (1867–1916), one of the most famous writers of modern Japan and an avid reader of these books, in Tohoku University Library in Sendai, Japan. We discuss their texts, and line drawing and comment writing by Natsume in these books which were published in the early 20th century. This paper shows that it is essential to understand the reception of Russian literature in Japan not only from the bilateral perspective between Japan and Russia, but also from a

broader international perspective, such as the trilateral relationship between Japan, Britain, and Russia.

Keywords: Natsume Soseki, Maurice Baring, Dmitry Merezhkovsky, The reception of Russian Literature, Modern Japan

It is one of the great topics on Comparative Literature to reveal reception and impact of Russian literature in modern Japan because Japanese novelists developed their modern literature, having deeply influenced and inspired by Western literature including Russian literature.¹ As Numano mentioned, the role of “indirect translation” (“juyaku” in Japanese) especially of Russian Literature from Western languages, especially from English translations into Japanese cannot be ignored from 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century (Numano, 2016, p. 336). Numano (2016) also pointed out the following:

It should also be noted that many writers and intellectuals used to have an excellent command of English (at least as far as reading proficiency is concerned), from the Meiji period until the middle of the 20th century, and they avidly read Russian literature in English (or other West European) translations: [...] Their knowledge of Russian literature, acquired by reading Western European translations, naturally influenced them directly (p. 336).

This indication is worth considering when we understand the features of modern Japanese reception of Russian Literature. It is important to understand that most Japanese writers and intellectuals read Russian literature not in Russian, but in English and other Western languages. It is impossible to establish the overall picture of the modern Japan reception of Russian literature without clarifying the Western impact on Japanese writers and intellectuals.

¹ To take a general view of the role of Russian Literature in the Development of Modern Japanese Literature, see Numano (2016). <https://repository.dl.itc.u-tokyo.ac.jp/records/54763>

There are numerous comparative approaches which study the reception and translations of Russian Literature from English or other West European translations in Japan.¹ Most of the previous research on Comparative Literature between Japan and Russia, which have been conducted in Japan, have focused on translation studies. They revealed how Japanese writers and intellectuals translated Russian literature from Russian originals directly into Japanese, or how they conducted “indirect translation”. However, all of them have overlooked the influence of guides to Russian literature, commentaries on it, and books on Russian literary studies that were actively published in the Western countries during the 19th and 20th centuries. Japanese writers and intellectuals read not only Russian literature translations, but also these kinds of books to understand careers of Russian novelists and characteristics of their literary texts, to grasp the overviews of their novels, and to study the history of Russian literature.

Purpose and Aim

The aim of this paper is to examine the reception and influence of English books and English translations of the studies of Russian Literature in modern Japan. We focus on how Natsume Soseki (1867–1916), one of the most famous writers in the 20th century Japan, read the English translation of the work by Dmitry Sergeyevich Merezhkovsky (1865–1941), *Tolstoi as Man and Artist: with an Essay on Dostoïevski* (Merezhkovsky, 1902), and the work by Maurice Baring (1874–1945), *Landmarks in Russian Literature* (Baring, 1910) in Soseki’s former book collection in Tohoku University Library in Sendai, Japan. This book collection is called “The Soseki Library” (“Soseki Bunko” in Japanese). Soseki was one of the most famous writer in the 20th century Japan, who wrote novels, for example, *I am a Cat*, *Botchan*, *Kusamakura*, *Sanshiro*, *Sorekara* [And Then], *Kokoro* [Heart], and etc. He was also known as a distinguished scholar of English literature and literary criticism who had studied in London for two years London, and became a professor of English literature at the Imperial University of Tokyo, teaching literary theory and literary criticism. Soseki read these books, drawing marks and underlines and writing comments in them. Soseki was, indeed,

¹ The following books and articles in Japanese can be listed: Araya (1976), Fujii (1985), Mochizuki (1995), Yanagi (1998), Kato (2012). None of them are translated in English.

one of the writers who was highly interested in it and eagerly read Russian literature in English to utilize its technique for his creations in modern Japan. It is considered to be effective to examine the marks, underlines and comments by Soseki in these books when we reveal the actual conditions of the reception of Russian literature in modern Japan.

Merezhkovsky was “a Russian poet, novelist, critic, and thinker who played an important role in the revival of religious-philosophical interests among the Russian intelligentsia” (Britannica, n.d.). He issued two books of Russian literary criticism, *Tolstoy and Dostoevsky* (1901–02) and *Gogol and the Devil* (1906) in Russian, which were translated into the Western languages, having influence in the 20th century Western World and Japan. Baring was a man of letter who became a journalist and reported the Russo-Japanese War in Manchuria, later was a correspondent in Russia and Constantinople (Britannica, n.d.). He wrote not only poems and novels, but also studies of Russian literature and Russian affairs in general, such as *With the Russians in Manchuria* (1905), *A Year in Russia* (1907), *The Russian People* (1911), *The Mainsprings of Russia* (1914), *An Outline of Russian Literature* (1914-1915).

The Books on Russian Literature in The Soseki Library

The Soseki Library in Tohoku University Library covers almost all of the books, the diaries, the manuscripts, and other materials that Soseki owned in his lifetime. The main part of it consist of approximately 1,650 Western books and 1,200 Japanese and Chinese books. There are many notes, comments, underlines, and marks written by Soseki with a black pencil, a red pencil, and black ink. According to Tohoku University Library, the books with notes, underlines and marks written by Soseki account for about 30% of The Soseki Library as a whole. They also indicate that the main feature of The Soseki Library is that most of the books in it are books that Soseki actually picked up and read, or attempted to read. To Study a writer’s library helps us to understand what literary works and literary studies the writer had read or tried to read, and how he or she read them.

As a result of our research, it was revealed that this collection holds 14 English books on Russian literature.¹ Seven of them are Russian novels which were translated in English. Three of them are novels by Dmitry Merezhkovsky (Merezhkovsky, 1904, 1905a, 1905b), two of them are the collections of novels by Chekhov (Tchekhoff, 1903, 1908). One of them is the novel written by Ivan Goncharov (1812–1891) which was translated by a famous English translator of Russian literature, Constance Garnett (1861–1946) (Gontcharoff, 1894), and the rest of them is the collection of Ivan Turgenev (1818–1883) also translated by Constance Garnett (Turgenev, 1906). Five of the English books on Russian literature in The Soseki Library are the works and translations of the books on Russian literary studies and history of Russian Literature: the English translation of the book written by Merezhkovsky and the study and guide of Russian literature published by Baring, which we have already mentioned, a English translation of a study on a literary history of Russia by a Polish scholar of Slavic languages and literature in German, Aleksander Brückner (1856–1939) (Brueckner, 1908), a literary criticism on Russian literature by an American scholar and critic, William Lyon Phelps (1865–1943) (Phelps, 1911), and an essay on Russian literature by a famous Russian revolutionist Piotr Kropotkin (1842–1921) (Kropotkin, 1905). One of them is the essay on art by Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy (1828–1910) (Tolstoy, n.d.). The rest of them is the English translation of the collection of the letters between Ivan Turgenev and his French circle (Tourguéneff, 1898).² It is important to mention that there are marks, underlines, and comments by Soseki in the most of these books; it means he actually read and studied them seriously.

It is clear that Soseki did not own English translations of novels of Russian literature by Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and others. According to Soseki's diary, he read Russian literature, such as *The Seven Who Were Hanged* (1908) by Leonid Andreev (1871-1919) in German with his young follower-critic, Komiya Toyotaka (1884-1966) who eagerly recommended Russian literature to Soseki (Natsume, 1996, p. 7, pp. 10-14, p. 17, p. 21). He borrowed *Crime and Punishment* and *The Idiot* translated in English from his young

¹ There is also a French translation of the novels by Anton Chekhov (1860–1904) in this collection (Tchekhov, n.d.).

² According Soseki's diary, he actually read this book on March 15th, 1909, and noticed that Turgenev was impressed by Tolstoy and a French novelist, Gustave Flaubert (1821–1880) (Natsume, p. 8).

follower in 1910s. (Natsume, 2017, p. 727). However it is difficult to say that Soseki bought and owned the literary works of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and other Russian novelists, excepting Goncharov, Turgenev, Chekhov, Merezhkovsky, and Andreev. How did Soseki get the information and knowledge of Russian literature? Judging from the books on Russian literature in The Soseki Library, it could be assumed that Soseki obtained much of his information and knowledge of Russian Literature, reading Russian literary studies books in English and translated into English.

Natsume Soseki's Reception of Dmitry Merezhkovsky

Firstly, we examine which parts of the English translation of *Tolstoi as Man and Artist: with an Essay on Dostoïevski* by Merezhkovsky Soseki actually left marks and underlines. It is possible to mention that Soseki had a deep interest in Dostoevsky's life, his character, and his literary view, reading comments on Dostoevsky by Merezhkovsky. Soseki underlined the sentence as follow: "On January 26 he [Dostoevsky —Matsueda] had hemorrhage in the throat" (Merezhkovsky, 1902, p. 155).¹ It is highly possible that Sōseki read this Merezhkovsky's work after he seriously vomited blood while writing a novel *Mon* [The Gate] at Shuzenji in Shizuoka, Japan in 1910, therefore, it is assumed that Soseki sympathized with Dostoevsky's pain and agony.

The following underline indicates a literary struggle shared by Dostoevsky and Soseki: "From that time [After 1846, the time when Dostoevsky published his second novel *The Double* —Matsueda] his [Dostoevsky's —Matsueda] literary career was a life-long and desperate struggle with what is called "Russian public opinion", and with the critics" (Merezhkovsky, 1902, p. 103). It is worth considering that Sōseki paid attention to Dostoevsky's struggle with what is called "Russian public opinion", and with the critics. Sōseki was also constantly exposed to the eyes of many readers and critics through his popular novels in magazines and newspapers.

Soseki attempted to understand the features of Dostoevsky's style, reading Merezhkovsky's commentary on *Crime and Punishment*. "[...] it is to this extreme point, to this one last moment in the action of the story, that

¹ All underlines in our quotations in this paper below are in the original texts of the books in The Soseki Library.

everything is directed, gathers itself up and gravitates; to this tragic catastrophe every thing [*sic*] tends, as towards a cataract the course of a river long confined by rocks” (Merezhkovsky, 1902, p. 246). It is considered that Soseki learned Dostoevsky’s distinguished style of storytelling from Merezhkovsky’s critique. Although Soseki also deepened his understanding on the features of the works and heroes of Tolstoy as far as we examine the Soseki’s underlines and marks (Merezhkovsky, 1902, p. 244), it is important to point out that the main focus of Soseki was to study Dostoevsky. Sōseki concentrated on understanding the features of Dostoevsky’s heroes.

The following passage with an underline by Soseki is noteworthy:
Of course Tolstoi and Dostoïevski are both popular in the sense that they aim at what really ought to become popular and part of the universal culture. [...] Neither possesses the perfect simplicity which makes the Iliad of Homer, the Prometheus of Æschylus, and the Divine Comedy of Dante, expressions of the spirit of the nation, as of the world-spirit. Both are still too complicated, too artificial, too much in a hurry to escape from convention and “become simple.” He who needs to become simple is not yet simple, and he who wishes to be of the people is not yet of the people. Pushikin, Tolstoi, and Dostoïevski will long remain “caviare to the general (Merezhkovsky, 1902, p. 158).

It could be mentioned that Merezhkovsky considered *the Iliad* of Homer, *the Prometheus* of Æschylus, and *the Divine Comedy* of Dante as what today we call World Literature, using the word “the world-spirit”. Compared with those works, Merezhkovsky judged that Pushkin, Tolstoi and Dostoevsky are too complicated and artificial to be the literature of the people and the general. It is considered to say that Soseki already had a viewpoint of World Literature to understand the Merezhkovsky’s opinion.

Natsume Soseki’s Reception of Maurice Baring

Secondly, we analyze which parts of the English translation of *Landmarks in Russian Literature* by Baring Soseki actually left marks and underlines. Soseki wrote “I started reading *Russian Literature* by Baring yesterday” (Natsume, 1996, p. 224) in his diary on October 6th, 1910. It is assumed

that “*Russian Literature* by Baring” means one of Soseki’s book collection, *Landmarks in Russian Literature*. Soseki also described Dostoevsky’s disease, his agony, and his state of mind when he spared from the death sentence in detail, as if he experienced Dostoevsky’s life vicariously in his essay *Omoidasu koto nado* [Literally random memories] in 1910 (Natsume, 2017, pp. 415–420). Although it cannot be analyzed due to the width of the paper, this description by Soseki is based on Baring’s commentary in *Landmarks in Russian Literature*. We focus on how Soseki understood the characteristics of Russian literature from this Baring’s book.

Compared with the marks, underlines by Sōseki in the English translation of the book by Merezhkovsky, the number of underlines and marks in the book by Baring is much smaller. However, it is considered that this Baring’s book helped Sōseki to understand Russian literature from the standpoint of English readers. For example, Soseki underlined some words in the section of Aleksandr Pushkin (1799–1837) and Russian Romanticism:

[...] Moreover, there is an element in Russian Romanticism of passive obedience, of submission to authority, which arises partly from the passive quality in all Russians, and partly from the atmosphere of the age, the political regime of the beginning of the nineteenth century. [...] Russian poetry, like the Russian nature, is plastic. Plasticity, adaptability, comprehensiveness, are the great qualities of Pushkin (Baring, 1910, pp. 26–27).

Soseki studied the qualities of Pushkin as Russian poetry and nature – plasticity, adaptability, and comprehensiveness, paying attention to the words “the atmosphere of the age”. It is considered to be said that description of “the atmosphere of the age” was one of the great literary topics for Soseki, taking his works, such as *I am a cat*, *Botchan*, *Sanshiro*, *Sorekara* [And Then], *Kokoro* [Heart] into consideration. Baring also taught Soseki important characteristics of heroes in Russian literature. Soseki steadily grasped the essence of Russian literature from Baring’s commentary in English as English readers did so:

I believe that I am stating a fundamental truth in saying that the Russian character can, roughly speaking, be divided into two types, and these two types dominate the whole of Russian literature. The first is that which I shall call, for want of a better name, Lucifer, the

fallen angel. The second type is that of the hero of all Russian folk-tales, Ivan Durak, Ivan the Fool, or the Little Fool. There are innumerable folk-tales in Russian which tell the adventures of Ivan the Fool, who, by his very simplicity and foolishness, outwits the wisdom of the world. This type is characteristic of one Russian ideal. The simple fool is venerated in Russia as something holy. It is acknowledged that his childish innocence is more precious than the wisdom of the wise. Ivan Durak may be said to be the hero of all Dostoevsky's novels. He is the aim and ideal of Dostoevsky's life, an aim and ideal which he fully achieves. He is also the aim and ideal of Tolstoy's teaching, but an aim and ideal which Tolstoy recommends to others and only partly achieves himself (Baring, 1910, pp. 26-27).

He only underlined "by his very simplicity and foolishness", though, read the commentary on two types dominated in Russian literature because he understood that it was traditional type of Russian ideal, in other words, "the holy fool". It considered to say that Soseki was thinking how he could apply national literary traditions to his works to obtain literary cosmopolitanism and universal literary sense. The following passage from the book by Baring with Soseki's underline indicates this, mentioning Dostoevsky's reputation in foreign countries:

He [Dostoevsky – Matsueda] was universal and cosmopolitan in his admiration of the literature of foreign countries; and he was cosmopolitan, not because he wished to cut himself away from Russian tradition and to become he wished to cut himself away from Russian traditions and to become European and Westernised, but because he was profoundly Russian, and had the peculiarly Russian plastic and receptive power of understanding and assimilating things widely different from himself (Baring, 1910, p. 155).

It is obvious to say that Dostoevsky was one of the ideal novelists for Soseki, who became universal and cosmopolitan in the literary world, purely pursuing national literary traditions.

Conclusion

Russian literature and its features were received in modern Japan not only by Russian books directly, but also by books written in the Western languages other than Russian, such as English, which were major and had more influence among Japanese intellectuals in those days. Even distinguished famous Japanese writers, as Natsume Soseki, could not read all Russian literature, therefore Soseki had to rely on research books and commentaries on Russian literature written in English, such as Merezhkovsky and Baring. This reminds us of the keen indication by Moretti (2000), “[...] no matter what the object of analysis is, there will always be a point where the study of world literature must yield to the specialist of the national literature” (“Tree, waves and cultural history” section). However, Soseki rather actively learned from them the titles and information on Russian literary works to be read, the characteristics of Russian literature, and inspiration for his own creative works.

This paper shows that it is essential to understand the reception of Russian literature in Japan not only from the bilateral perspective between Japan and Russia, but also from a broader international perspective, such as the trilateral relationship between Japan, Britain, and Russia. This study was not quantitative, but qualitative research, thus we could not discuss other books on Russian literary studies in The Soseki Library, and in the libraries of other writers in those days, Therefore, they are going to be the further research topics.

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