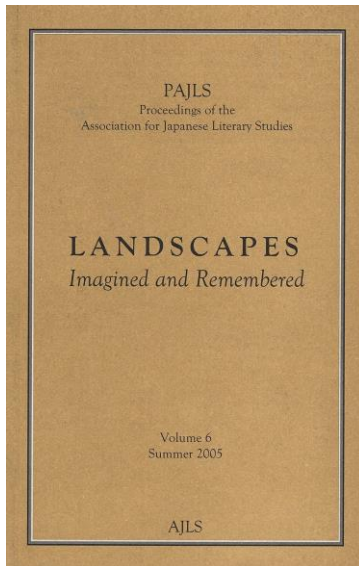


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## Walking in the City with Natsume Sōseki: The Metaphorical Landscape in “Koto no sorane”

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There is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can invoke or not. Haunted places are the only ones people can live in . . . .

– Michel de Certeau

### Preamble

In the waning years of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century, modernization was altering Japan’s physical landscape. One quintessential feature of the new landscape was the train. With thousands of miles of track laid down throughout the country, not only did the steam train transform the countenance of the land itself, but it was also part of a broader “transformation of perception,”<sup>1</sup> as people came to see the land as a series of vistas moving across the still screen of the train window, a picture scroll unfurling through time and space. As trains themselves became increasingly seen and heard throughout the land, this mysterious mechanical form of movement competed with older, now disappearing, icons of mystery, a clash exemplified by local legends and memorates:

Now there’s reclaimed land in the area around Shinagawa [in Tokyo], but in those days . . . it was a lonely place, and there were a lot of *tanuki* [badgers] and *kitsune* [foxes] there as well. At night, when the train would run through, they would hear a sound, *shu shu po po po*— coming from the other direction, and they’d hear a steam whistle blowing, and they’d say, *A train is coming!* At first, even the conductor was thinking, *We’re going to crash*, and he would stop his own train and have a look around.

But the train from the other direction never came. This was strange, they’d think, and then one night, as always the *shu shu po po po*— sound came, and they could hear the steam whistle, and this time they thought, *Let’s not worry about it*, and they gave it more speed and went straight

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<sup>1</sup> Karatani Kōjin, *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*, ed. Brett de Bary (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 21. Although Karatani does not explicitly discuss the advent of the train in this context, he locates the “discovery of the landscape” in the third decade of Meiji, as train lines were becoming a presence throughout the country.

ahead. . . . Everybody thought there would be a head-on collision – but they just went right on with no problem.

When dawn broke, along the tracks at the foot of Mount Yatsu, they found a big *tanuki* lying there dead. . . .<sup>2</sup>

The confrontation of *tanuki* and steam train was a common trope, emblematic of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century ambiguity regarding the supernatural. Old forms of magic, including the shapeshifting talents of the *tanuki*, could still dazzle and deceive, causing train engineers to proceed with caution through the lonely countryside. But the instant they stopped believing – the instant they ignored the warning whistle of the “other train” and plowed full steam ahead – the iron mechanism of technology could make the magic powerless and transform a powerful supernatural creature into nothing more than a natural animal body lying dead beside the tracks of progress.

The imagery here not only betrays a profound anxiety about the burgeoning infrastructure of modernity, but also demonstrates how the altering of the *physical* landscape translates into a reworking of the *metaphorical* landscape. This notion of metaphorical landscape is derived from sociologist Mark Schneider’s work on “referential ecologies.” In Schneider’s understanding, each feature in a given landscape, whether a concrete thing in the external world or an abstract way in which a character behaves, is necessarily interpreted through a specific set of references possessed by the individual observer; a community of individuals who share a “referential consensus,” therefore, can be said to inhabit a particular metaphorical landscape. Members of such an interpretive community speak a common language, invoking the same explanatory strategies and sharing a similar understanding of what each feature of the landscape signifies.<sup>3</sup>

In early twentieth-century Japan, this metaphorical terrain was rapidly shifting – the old paths of the *tanuki* were being replaced by steel rails that shaped new patterns of movement and reflected fresh interpretive paradigms. As important as such changes may have been in the countryside, they were even more evident in rapidly expanding urban centers such as Tokyo. Not surprisingly, the angst and uncertainty of being caught in this shift of terrains is often reflected in the literature of the time. In one of Natsume Sōseki’s short stories, “Koto no sorane” (The Empty Sound of the Koto), we find a revealing portrayal of an urban intellectual caught up in a struggle to define the self

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<sup>2</sup> This memorate is related by the son of the man who experienced it in early Meiji. Matsutani Miyoko, *Gendai no minwa: anata mo katarite, watashi mo katarite* (Tokyo: Chūkō Shinsho, 2000), 34-35. Incidents of both *kitsune* and *tanuki* causing mischief along the train tracks were widely distributed throughout Japan. See Matsutani Miyoko, *Gendai minwakō*, vol. 3 (Tokyo: Rippū Shobō, 1985), 13-47.

<sup>3</sup> See Mark A. Schneider, *Culture and Enchantment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). Schneider develops the concept throughout his discussion, but a brief basic explanation can be found on 5-6.

within this changing geographical and cultural topography. By reading the physical cityscape of the story in terms of a metaphorical landscape, I will suggest that the protagonist's interpretation of the city reflects a profound struggle played out between two extreme metaphorical terrains. One is the older, "premodern" world of the *tanuki*, a terrain dotted with mystical and "superstitious" associations. The other is a newer, modern paradigm, in which science and rational analysis explain the features of the environment. I would stress from the outset that ultimately these two landscapes are interdependent: to take a cue from Karatani Kōjin's famous discussion, it is only the Meiji-period discovery of one landscape that makes possible the discovery of the other, the one that is already disappearing.

### Amble

First published in 1905, "Koto no sorane" demonstrates the ambivalent relationship of a well-educated urban man to the superstitious ghosts of the past.<sup>4</sup> "As intellectualism suppresses belief in magic," Max Weber has commented, "the world's processes become disenchanted, lose their magical significance, and henceforth simply 'are' and 'happen' but no longer signify anything."<sup>5</sup> Sōseki's narrator is, or at least fancies himself to be, a modern, intellectual subject whose worldview is informed by new rationalistic discourses rather than by the customs and magic beliefs of old. But as the story progresses, he is rattled by the uncanny irruption of the features of a premodern metaphorical landscape into his own; despite his faith in the disenchanting discourses of rationalism, he finds the "world's processes" informed constantly by significations beyond what "is" and what "happens."

The story opens as the narrator visits his friend, a scholar named Tsuda who is both well-versed in psychology and a student of ghosts. The two men discuss the narrator's impending marriage, his purchase of a house, and particularly his hiring of a housekeeper, whom he characterizes not simply as "old-fashioned," but as a "superstitious old hag" (92). The narrator complains that the old woman is constantly harping at him to move, claiming his new home is inauspiciously located. She has also interpreted the nocturnal barking of a neighborhood dog as an omen portending misfortune for the narrator's fiancée. To make matters worse, the fiancée has indeed been stricken with influenza.

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<sup>4</sup> "Koto no sorane" originally appeared in the journal *Shichinin*, no. 7 (May 1905), 25-69. Citations in the present article are from Natsume Sōseki, *Sōseki zenshū*, vol. 2 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1994) and will be noted parenthetically in the text. All translations are my own, although I have also consulted the English translation ("Hearing Things") found in Natsume Sōseki, *Ten Nights of Dream, Hearing Things, The Heredity of Taste*, trans. Aiko Itō and Graeme Wilson (Rutland: Tuttle, 1974).

<sup>5</sup> Max Weber, quoted in Schneider, *Culture and Enchantment*, 30.

Upon hearing this, Tsuda relates the sad tale of his own cousin's recent death from influenza, and warns the narrator to take care. To the narrator, who feels increasingly uneasy about his fiancée's well-being, Tsuda's words ring ominously. He responds, "Don't be so inauspicious – you're just frightening me. *Wa ha ha ha ha ha*" (96). His forced laugh here, uncomfortable and hollow, lies at the crux of the modern intellectual's uneasy relationship with the superstitions of the past. Though he knows rationally that there can be no causal relationship between signs and misfortune, he slips into a less positivistic mode of thought and adopts an old interpretive paradigm that permits such causality. And his anxiety is nurtured all the more by Tsuda's account of a strange occurrence associated with his cousin's death. Away in the army, the dead cousin's husband peered into a mirror his wife had given him. Instead of seeing his own face, however, he saw hers, pale and sickly. This occurred on the very day she died – though he would not actually hear of her death for several weeks.<sup>6</sup> The tale does nothing to assuage the narrator's growing concern for his fiancée. Furthermore, he is troubled by this intrusion of old metaphors into the new:

I hate nothing more than thinking about such fantastic things as ghosts [*yūrei*], hauntings [*tatari*], karmic connections [*innen*] . . . . To tell the truth, I had believed that such things as ghosts and palanquin bearers had permanently closed up shop since the [Meiji] Restoration. Nevertheless, to judge by Tsuda's appearance, it seems somehow that, unbeknownst to me, these ghostlike things [*yūrei taru mono*] have made a revival. (100)

At eleven in the evening, the narrator bids his friend farewell and begins his journey home in the rain. As he walks, his surprise at Tsuda's interest in ghostly systems of belief causes him to question his own taken-for-granted acceptance of rational thought. In a sense, a veil of modernity has been lifted from his eyes, and the city through which he now steps has been made strange. The defamiliarization of the physical landscape transforms his walk through the rain-soaked streets into a journey of discovery; he finds himself experiencing the sights and sounds of the urban night through a metaphorical ecology rife with possibilities that confound positivist interpretation. This walk from Tsuda's home in Hakusan-goten machi to the narrator's own house in Kohinatadai-chō is a dreamlike sequence in the text, a walk through metaphorical landscapes that conflict, converge, and overlap.

Of course, walking through any city is always a subjective experience, as the meaning of the landscape is determined by the memories, dreams, and imagination of the individual doing the walking; there is, as Karatani writes, a

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<sup>6</sup> Similar accounts in which a person mysteriously appears on the day of his or her death are common. See, for example, Matsutani Miyoko, *Gendai minwakō*, vol. 4 (Tokyo: Rippū Shobō, 1985), 335-68.

“link between landscape and an introverted, solitary situation.”<sup>7</sup> In his classic work, *The Image of the City*, urban planner Kevin Lynch suggests that the experience of the cityscape can be likened to a form of reading: every urban space must be considered in terms of its “legibility.”<sup>8</sup> The journey through the text of the city is determined by the experience as it takes place and, simultaneously, by memories of past experiences, projections of future events, and images of other times and other places. “There is,” Michel de Certeau asserts, “a rhetoric of walking,”<sup>9</sup> complete with turns of phrase and figures of speech. A route seen on a map charts a course taken in the past or one that might be taken in the future, but the journey itself is always in the present: fleeting, singular, irreproducible, like the individual act of reading a story. Unfolding through time and space, each experience of the text – even the same text read over and over – is necessarily unique, made new and different by the singular position of the reading subject. Every feature of the urban landscape – broad thoroughfares, litter-strewn alleys, rickety tenements – is a metaphor, a simile, a metonym, or even an ellipsis, a broad expanse of unnoticed space between two points of stimulus or memory.

By landscape I do not mean only immovable structures and passageways; as Lynch explains, “moving elements in a city, and in particular the people and their activities, are as important as the stationary physical parts.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, my point about the narrator’s experience in Sōseki’s story is not that the landscape itself has necessarily changed – though this too is true – but rather that the exteriority of the landscape is a reflection, or projection, of the narrator’s interiority. The way he interprets, how and what he reads, has changed. As he walks through the darkened defamiliarized city, sights and sounds taunt his sensitized consciousness with ominous forebodings. His journey is peppered with real, physical landmarks: the *mōa gakkō* (school for the deaf and blind), the *shokubutsuen* (botanical gardens), and the reverberations of a clock bell, perhaps from Ueno. These are recognizable signposts that help situate Sōseki’s narrator, as well as many of his readers, in familiar territory. But now, for the first time, the narrator finds in this cityscape a robustness of signification – the visible gesturing to the invisible – as each feature and each encounter signifies something beyond itself. For instance, walking through Gokurakusui, an area of *nagaya* (tenements) inhabited by the poor, the narrator contemplates the eerie silence

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<sup>7</sup> Karatani, *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*, 25.

<sup>8</sup> See Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1960), 2-6.

<sup>9</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 100.

<sup>10</sup> Lynch, *The Image of the City*, 2. This is what Karatani refers to as “people-as-landscape.” See Karatani, *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*, 24.

surrounding him.<sup>11</sup> Rather than considering rationally that the residents, exhausted from the daily grind of a workaday existence, are sound in their sleep, however, he reads the absence of activity as an absence of life: “Perhaps,” he thinks, “actually, they are dead” (105).

Suddenly the narrator encounters two men carrying what appears to be a small box draped in white – it is, he realizes, the coffin of a baby. As the men disappear in the distance, he hears one of them say, “There are those who are born yesterday, and die today.” And the reply: “That’s life. It’s life, so there’s nothing that can be done about it” (106). The narrator, for the first time in his life, contemplates his own mortality, asking himself, “How had I been able to live so indifferently until now?” (107). A baby, the quintessential metaphor for life’s vital promise, is encapsulated in a coffin, and thus becomes to the narrator a metonym for death: for his own, for his fiancée’s, indeed, for all death, past, present, and future. My point here is not simply that the narrator is suddenly obsessed with the possibility of death, but that he is positing a causality, an agency, into the topography of the city itself, reading each feature and each encounter as a sign akin to the pale face of Tsuda’s cousin in the mirror. The cityscape is no longer the quotidian here and now of the physical landscape; rather, it has become an uncanny terrain. Afflicted with what Freud would call “omnipotence of thoughts” and what Todorov would label “pandeterminism,” the narrator experiences each landmark as a symbol in a mysterious code that, if correctly read, will determine something about his own future.

Defamiliarized by his morbid state of mind, the cityscape torments him, each sign signifying something personally relevant and somehow foreboding. At Kirisutan-zaka in Takehaya-chō, for example, a sign (literally) warns him, “The steepest slope in Japan. Those who value life, beware, beware” (107). Only yesterday, the narrator thinks, this tongue-in-cheek sign would have been amusing, but now it signifies the terrifying truth of his own mortality and all the perilous obstacles that await him. The slope itself, while remaining a physical feature, a contour on the map of the land, assumes a powerful metaphoric meaning: it represents not only the immediate danger of a steep rain-drenched incline, but also warns of the dangers attendant with his own journey through life.

This sojourn on foot through dark, rainy Tokyo is anything but pedestrian. It is a profound act of interpretation through which the narrator fills the hollow form of the city with content. Just as it is possible to liken such “pedestrian processes to linguistic formations,”<sup>12</sup> so the narrator’s walk is as much an act of writing as it is of reading, of inscribing subjective meanings

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<sup>11</sup> For a detailed discussion of Gokurakusui and other features of the landscape mentioned in Sōseki’s text, see Takeda Katsuhiko, *Sōseki no Tōkyō* (Tokyo: Waseda Daigaku Shuppanbu, 1997), 5-32.

<sup>12</sup> de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 103.

into the landscape (the same process, of course, that the reader undertakes as he or she journeys through Sōseki's text). Central to this process of reading/writing is a seemingly causal relationship between sign and subsequent occurrence, a relationship that is not rational by the narrator's own common-sense standards. And yet, just as the image of Tsuda's cousin in her husband's mirror signified her death, so the narrator reads the signs of his urban journey as omens of his own fiancée's demise. The specific associations are less important than the fact that he creates them in the first place: he is a well-educated, sensible student of law, and yet he makes the sort of causal, mystic associations so diligently explained away by the rationalist discourses of his own university professors. He is walking through a metaphorical landscape that he knows, or thinks that he knows, does not exist. Although he is well aware that his thoughts are inconsistent with the grammar of modernity, he cannot avoid making causal links. When he sees the flame of a lantern in the distance, for example, his thoughts inexplicably turn to Tsuyoko, his fiancée:

Even Tsuda the psychologist would be unable to explain the relationship between the flame and my future wife. However, there is nothing preventing me from thinking things that cannot be explained by a psychologist. Red, vivid, like the dwindling tail of a fuse, that fire caused me immediately to recall my future wife. At the same time, the instant the fire is extinguished, I cannot help but think of Tsuyoko's death. I stroke my forehead and it is slippery with sweat and rain. I walk in a dream. (108-9)

The confluence here of sweat and rain as the narrator strokes his forehead is a minor detail, to be sure, but one that emphasizes the inseparability of his own interiority from the exteriority of the landscape: self and city coalesce in a walk that is simultaneously dream (topography of the mind) and reality (topography of the city). By the time he completes his oneiric journey and arrives at his home, he is drenched and thoroughly disheveled. The old housekeeper greets him at the door, and in a comic exchange alluding directly to the act of (mis)interpretation, the two try to read each other's face. Eventually, the "superstitious old hag" (practiced as she is in the magical arts of interpreting signs) is the more "skillful at reading appearances [*ninsō*]" (110) and manages to deduce that the narrator has been worrying about his sick fiancée. It passes that no word has come from Tsuyoko, and there have been mysterious howling sounds outside, signs that, according to the housekeeper, presage the worst.

After a sleepless night, the narrator rushes off to Tsuyoko's home, arriving covered with mud and so early that most of the family is still in bed. His fiancée, it turns out, has completely recovered from her illness. The



narrator's relief quickly turns into awkwardness as he attempts to make excuses for his early-morning visit, clearly embarrassed at having succumbed to the same superstitious worries as his "old-fashioned" housekeeper. The scene is comic, to be sure, but here the laughter of the reader echoes the uneasy laughter of the narrator as it wells up from the gap between the "subjective" landscape of the dark rainy evening, and the landscape seen "objectively" by the light of day. The constant awareness of both, the ever-present threat of the intrusion of one into the other, creates the comic/anxious moment.

On leaving his fiancée's home, the narrator goes into a barbershop. While his hair and beard are trimmed, he listens to a light-hearted conversation that echoes the very concerns dealt with throughout the story: the clash of different metaphorical terrains. The men in the barbershop have been reading a book on "psychology."<sup>13</sup> The book, it turns out, is written from the perspective of a *tanuki* upset with Japan's embracing of a Western model of modernity:

Despite the fact that all kinds of native Japanese magical techniques [*kijutsu*] have been handed down, there is such a commotion about Western this and Western that. It is my humble opinion that the Japanese of today simply have too much contempt for *tanuki*; I speak for *tanuki* throughout the country in expressing the hope that all of you honorable people will reconsider these issues. (126)

Though the *tanuki*'s comic diatribe explicitly concerns native superstitious magic versus foreign scientific magic, it must also be read within a broader historical context in which Japan's old ways were being overwritten by monolithic new codes for expressing and interpreting agency. Indeed, when "Koto no sorane" appeared in 1905, Japan had already embarked on its war with Russia and irrevocably entered the world (or Western) arena. In Japan's rush to modernize, native "techniques" and native voices were being subsumed by Western imports imprinted with the label of science. The *tanuki* here, in his cry for respect, speaks for the neglected native voice. Like the *tanuki* in the countryside desperately mimicking the whistle of the steam train, it assumes a voice that echoes plaintively, futilely, across a vanishing landscape.

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<sup>13</sup> The title of the book, *Ukiyo shinri kōgiroku* 浮世心理講議録 might be translated as "Record of Psychology Lectures of the Floating World." The name of the author, Uyamuya Dōjin 有耶無耶道人, is satiric: *uyamuya* signifies vagueness, ambiguity or even obfuscation, while *dōjin* denotes somebody who has embarked upon a particular "path" or "way." Thus, the name might mean, "he who follows the path of ambiguity," ridiculing both the psychological paradigm's power to enlighten and the mystic paradigm it replaces.

If the influence of modernity can be likened to a form of totalitarianism, then, in de Certeau's words, it "attacks what it quite correctly calls *superstitions*: supererogatory overlays that insert themselves 'over and above' and 'in excess,' and annex to a past or poetic realm a part of the land the promoters of technical rationalities and financial profitabilities had reserved for themselves."<sup>14</sup> But even for the intellectual progenitors of modernity caught up in the totalizing project of reshaping the landscape, change must also inspire a certain ontological confusion. Ultimately, "Koto no sorane" portrays a struggle to locate the modern individual, and by extension the nation, in a world in which the features of one metaphorical landscape constantly irrupt into another. The text itself artfully straddles both terrains: Tsuda, the psychologist, relates an "objectively" true story of mystical omens and after-death visitations while our narrator, with his sensible degree in law, endures a "subjective" experience of ominous signs that ultimately prove empty. The ambiguity of the story reflects the ambiguity of the period, demonstrating a multiplicity of voices, each one conscious of the shifting cultural landscape. Although this tectonic movement was, of course, felt on many broader fronts, including politics, education, and industrialization, Sōseki's focus here on issues of belief locates these concerns at the very heart of the everyday experience of the Meiji populace and the individual's attempts to define the self.

### Post-amble

Of course, Sōseki was not the only intellectual to recognize the difficulty of walking through the shifting metaphorical landscape of late Meiji. Even for Mori Ōgai – medical doctor, literary genius, and quintessential representative of the pervasion of Western knowledge into the Japanese cultural imaginary – such concerns are at the heart of the struggle to locate a modern subject. Ōgai's 1909 story "Kompira," for example, tells of a "Professor" who, while in Shikoku for a series of lectures on psychology, finds himself near the home shrine of the deity Kompira, to whom he is encouraged to pay his respects.<sup>15</sup> Anxious to return to his wife and children in Tokyo, however, he departs without visiting the shrine, only to discover when he returns home that his infant son has been stricken with whooping cough. As the baby boy's health deteriorates, the professor thinks with regret of his failure to visit the shrine and is haunted by the feeling that a visit might have prevented his son's illness.

The parallels between "Kompira" and Sōseki's "Koto no sorane," published four years earlier, are striking. Both narratives present a modern intellectual grappling with the intrusive powers of "premodern" systems of belief and trying to locate his own identity within a changing metaphorical

<sup>14</sup> de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 106.

<sup>15</sup> See Mori Ōgai, *Mori Ōgai zenshū*, vol. 1 (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1995), 383-435.

terrain. For Sōseki's narrator, the agency he reads into the landscape ultimately proves to be a *misreading*, and his fiancée recovers completely. For Ōgai's protagonist, however, the outcome is different. Despite his reluctance to believe them, the signs prove devastatingly accurate: much of the story relates, in heart-wrenching detail, the steady decline and eventual death of the baby boy.

After he finally dies, the child is carried out in a tiny coffin, his parents watching mournfully as the coffin bearers disappear into the distant cityscape. For the reader of both texts, perhaps this coffin is the same small box draped in white that passes through Sōseki's story. While Sōseki presents a randomly encountered baby's coffin as a poignant symbol of all human mortality, Ōgai painfully reveals the specific circumstances, the individual, personal pathos, encapsulated in the tiny box – the very sort of tragedy that might befall Sōseki's narrator several years after he embarks on his marriage. Regardless of whether there is a conscious intertextuality between the two stories, the experience of one informs the reading of the other: the space of the city becomes a space of discourse. The journey through the cityscape, like our own journey through a text, overlaps and intersects with other such journeys. “We are not simply observers of this spectacle [of the city],” Lynch reminds us, “but are ourselves a part of it, on the stage with the other participants.”<sup>16</sup>

If the city is always also a metaphorical landscape, then the intersecting of journeys and the crisscrossing of storylines serve not only to layer the terrain spatially: they also allow discourse through time. “Objects and words,” de Certeau says, “also have hollow places in which a past sleeps, as in the everyday acts of walking, eating, going to bed, in which ancient revolutions slumber.”<sup>17</sup> As he walks through the rainy night, Sōseki's narrator rouses both the dusky ghosts of the past and the even ghostlier shades of future possibilities. For the reader of a story, like the walker in a city, all these specters converge upon the journey through the present, transforming the parchment of the city into a palimpsest layered with intersecting inscriptions and endlessly telling tales of what is, of what was, and perhaps, of what will be.

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<sup>16</sup> Lynch, *The Image of the City*, 2.

<sup>17</sup> de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 108.