

# Intertextuality and Dialogue: On the Pillow of Grass's Aesthetic Response to Laocoön

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**Abstract:** *The aesthetic view of “the unity of poetry and painting” presented in The Pillow of Grass by Natsume Sōseki, a giant of modern Japanese literature, constitutes a creative response to the theoretical system of “the distinction between poetry and painting” constructed in Laocoön, a classic aesthetic work by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, the German Enlightenment thinker. This response forms a trans-temporal and trans-spatial intertextual dialogue between the two texts. Specifically, the dialogue is embodied in three aspects: first, at the core proposition level, the Eastern aesthetic view of “the unity of poetry and painting” advocated by Natsume Sōseki stands in opposition to the Western aesthetic framework of “the distinction between poetry and painting” by Lessing; second, in specific aesthetic practice, The Pillow of Grass directly refutes the normative boundary set by Lessing for painting, which takes visual pleasure as the criterion, through the aesthetic transformation of “the ugly”, thus opening up a new path for the possibility of artistic expression; third, in terms of ideological origin, the Eastern philosophy of “contemplation” advocated by Natsume Sōseki forms a fundamental cultural contrast with the Western spirit of “action” advocated by Lessing. Such cross-cultural aesthetic practice of Natsume Sōseki not only demonstrates the ideological consciousness of East Asian intellectuals in the face of the impact of modern culture, but also provides a valuable example for understanding the profound differences and dialogue possibilities between Eastern and Western aesthetics.*

**Keywords:** The Pillow of Grass, Laocoön, Intertextuality, Natsume Sōseki, Contemplative Aesthetics.

## 1. Introduction

Published in 1906, *The Pillow of Grass* was referred to by Natsume Sōseki himself as a “haiku-like novel that takes beauty as its life”. With a thin plot, the work is permeated with the author’s reflections on the essence of art. In Chapter 6, the narrator “I”, a young painter, directly mentions Laocoön (or *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*), the classic aesthetic work by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, the German Enlightenment thinker. This explicit textual reference is no accident; it acts like a key, opening a channel for in-depth dialogue between the two texts. Lessing’s *Laocoön* aims to clarify the boundaries between poetry (a temporal art) and painting (a spatial art), with its core argument being the “theory of the heterogeneity of poetry and painting”. The core aesthetic issue of *The Pillow of Grass* is precisely also “the boundaries between poetry and painting”. The two works present meaningful differences and unity, forming a complex relationship of intertextuality and dialogue.

Based on the theory of intertextuality, this paper deeply analyzes the intertextual connection between *The Pillow of Grass* and *Laocoön* from three dimensions: thematic dialogue, propositional refutation and ideological origin, aiming to explore the Eastern aesthetic response of *The Pillow of Grass* to *Laocoön* behind the texts. This not only helps us understand the ideological connotation of Natsume Sōseki’s early creations, but also provides a research perspective for examining the collision and integration of Eastern and Western aesthetic thoughts in modern times.

The concept of “Intertextuality” was first put forward by the French theorist Julia Kristeva. In *Word, Dialogue and Novel*, she pointed out that no text is an isolated island, but an absorption and transformation of other texts, a convergence point of countless textual discourses. The meaning of a text is generated precisely in such a crisscross network of references. The introduction and research of the intertextuality theory in the domestic academic circle began in the 1980s and has gone

through three stages: the initial stage focused on theoretical translation and introduction, mainly introducing the core viewpoints of Kristeva, Roland Barthes and other scholars, and clarifying the differences between “intertextuality” and “citation” and “influence”; the middle stage shifted to literary criticism practice, applying the intertextuality theory to the interpretation of Chinese and foreign literary texts, and exploring explicit references, implicit borrowing and cultural appropriation between texts; in recent years, more attention has been paid to interdisciplinary and localized integration, combining cultural characteristics such as the Eastern “genre tradition” and “allusion inheritance” to enrich the interpretative dimensions of the intertextuality theory. On the whole, the core framework of the intertextuality theory can be summarized as follows: a text is an open field of meaning, which forms an interactive relationship with pre-texts through two ways: “explicit reference” (direct mention and citation) and “implicit connection” (thematic response, propositional refutation, ideological dialogue), and this interaction ultimately promotes the generation and proliferation of the meaning of the new text. This framework provides a solid theoretical support for this paper to examine the cross-cultural aesthetic dialogue between *The Pillow of Grass* and *Laocoön*.

## 2. “The Distinction between Poetry and Painting” and “The Unity of Poetry and Painting”

Through in-depth research on classical examples such as the *Laocoön* sculpture, Lessing established the aesthetic cornerstone of the Enlightenment era of “the distinction between poetry and painting”, aiming to draw a clear boundary between the two art forms. With the textual practice and theoretical declaration in *The Pillow of Grass*, Natsume Sōseki put forward an Eastern subjective aesthetic proposition with “the unity of poetry and painting” as the core. The confrontation between the two sides on this core proposition actually stems from the differences in the core of their artistic philosophies, and ultimately manifests as a fundamental

divergence between the two aesthetic pursuits of “poetry for action” and “painting for contemplation”. Therefore, analyzing the reversal of this core proposition is the logical starting point and key to understanding the intertextual dialogue between the two works.

### 2.1 Lessing’s “The Distinction between Poetry and Painting” and the Superiority of Poetry

In *Laocoön*, Lessing demonstrates the essential differences between poetry and painting by analyzing the different expressions of the same theme of the suffering of *Laocoön*, the Trojan priest, in poetry (Virgil’s *Aeneid*) and sculpture (the group sculpture *Laocoön*). His theoretical basis originates from the ancient Greek “mimesis theory”, but he emphasizes the differences in the media and objects of mimesis. Mr. Zhu Guangqian concisely summarized the differences into four aspects: subject matter, medium, artistic ideal and function. Lessing believed that painting (i.e., sculpture), with physical forms and colors in space as its medium, is suitable for expressing the static beauty of an object at a single “most pregnant moment”; while poetry, with language unfolding in time as its medium, excels at narrating continuous actions and plots. Therefore, Lessing argued that *Laocoön* in the sculpture does not open his mouth to wail in order to maintain the “sublimity of calmness” in the visual form. In contrast, poetry can freely describe his miserable cries.

Based on the above theoretical premise of “the distinction between poetry and painting”, Lessing clearly endowed poetry with a superior status. He believed that the expressive scope of poetry is far wider than that of painting, and life itself is higher than a static picture. Thus, in Chapter 13 of *Laocoön*—“The picture in poetry cannot produce the picture in painting, and the picture in painting cannot produce the picture in poetry”—when Lessing mentions the verses in *The Iliad* depicting Apollo in a rage, he says in a somewhat mocking tone: “As far as life is above a picture, so far is the poet above the painter here.” The artistic ideal he admired is a dynamic and passionate one displayed through actions and conflicts, behind which lies a life outlook of practical action.

### 2.2 Natsume Sōseki’s “The Unity of Poetry and Painting” and the Priority of Painting

Natsume Sōseki held an entirely opposite view to Lessing, and *The Pillow of Grass* established the tone of “the unity of poetry and painting” from the very beginning. The novel opens with: “An overemphasis on reason makes one sharp-edged; an overemphasis on emotion makes one drift with the tide; an overemphasis on will makes one run into obstacles at every turn. In short, the world is a hard place to live in.” It immediately points out a dilemma: “It has given birth to both ‘poetry’ and ‘painting’.” In the narrator’s view, poetry and painting are homologous and interdependent, both being the transcendence and sublimation of the turbulent reality.

More importantly, *The Pillow of Grass* not only advocates “the unity of poetry and painting”, but also expounds the “priority of painting” in the work. The fundamental purpose of the young painter’s travel is to observe the world with the eyes of a painter and transform all things he sees into

“paintings”. He even proposes that painting can express a kind of “mood” solely through the spatial elements of painting, without relying on temporal plots. This is undoubtedly a direct challenge to Lessing’s conclusion of “the superiority of poetry” in *Laocoön*. In the aesthetic system of *The Pillow of Grass*, the artistic ideal of poetry is not to imitate actions, but to approach painting—to capture and present a spatial and contemplative artistic conception. Therefore, the essence of “the unity of poetry and painting” in *The Pillow of Grass* is not an equal integration of the two, but that “poetry” is subject to “painting”.

### 3. The Eligibility of “The Ugly” for Painting

The divergence between *The Pillow of Grass* and *Laocoön* on the question of whether “the ugly” can be the object of artistic expression is a concrete manifestation of the opposition of their core propositions, which fully reflects the dramatic nature of the intertextual dialogue between the two works.

Based on his view that plastic arts should pursue visual beauty, Lessing clearly argued: “Poetry can depict the ugly, but painting should exclude all unpleasant or ugly things.” In his opinion, painting acts directly on the vision, and ugly images will bring immediate displeasure and damage the aesthetic feeling.

Natsume Sōseki responded to this view by carefully designing a scene in a full chapter. In Chapter 5 of *The Pillow of Grass*, the narrative suddenly inserts a lengthy dialogue between “I” and an ugly barber shop owner, and writes: “He had an appearance that could not be praised, bordering on the comical.” From the perspective of pure plot development, this passage seems quite abrupt. However, when placed in the framework of intertextual dialogue with *Laocoön*, its intention becomes clear. Natsume Sōseki deliberately shaped such an “ugly” character, allowing the painter “I” to conduct continuous observation and reflection on him, and finally reached a conclusion opposite to Lessing’s: “Thinking about it this way, this boss is also a man quite capable of being the subject of poetry and painting.”

This is by no means a random digression, but a carefully planned aesthetic experiment and propositional refutation. Through this, Natsume Sōseki showed that under the Eastern “contemplative” aesthetics, the object of art does not depend on the formal “beauty” or “ugliness” of the object, but on the attitude of the subject’s contemplation and the discerning eye of discovery. When the subject contemplates with an aesthetic eye that transcends secular preferences and is “non-anthropocentric”, any object can present its unique interest, thus gaining the eligibility to be painted or written into poetry. This is a successful deconstruction of Lessing’s formalist aesthetic standards by Natsume Sōseki.

### 4. The “Active” Greece and the “Contemplative” East

The opposition between Natsume Sōseki’s and Lessing’s aesthetic views is rooted in their respective traceable cultural traditions and ideological origins, which elevates their dialogue beyond a mere dispute over artistic theories to a reflection of two civilizations, Eastern and Western.

Lessing wrote Laocoön in the Enlightenment era. His debate was ostensibly directed against Winckelmann's theory of "calmness", and more deeply ran through the vein of the "Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns". Through the reinterpretation of ancient Greek poetry and art, he intended to summon a classical spirit of action full of vitality and heroism. Lessing's distinction between the boundaries of poetry and painting is essentially the difference between a contemplative life outlook and a life outlook of practical action. Lessing rejected the static beauty of painting that is merely for contemplation, and admired the dynamic and conflicting narratives that poetry excels at. His ultimate goal is a kind of "Enlightenment": taking ancient Greece as a model, aiming to cultivate modern citizens with rational judgment, moral initiative and sound aesthetic character. Therefore, Lessing's "esteem for the ancients and contempt for the moderns" in Laocoön points to an idealized "active" ancient Greece.

Coincidentally, Natsume Sōseki also adopted a narrative posture of "esteem for the ancients and contempt for the moderns". The Pillow of Grass is full of disgust for the turbulence of the "present" and yearning for the tranquility of the "ancient". However, the "ancient" that Natsume Sōseki admired is not the active Greece of Lessing's style, but an ancient East full of the characteristics of "contemplative aesthetics".

The protagonist of the novel flees the city and goes deep into the mountain villages, and his entire practice is "seeing", that is, "contemplation". This kind of "contemplation" is not passive seeing, but an active, meditative aesthetic way. Scholar Wang Guangsheng pointed out that the core of The Pillow of Grass is not to define "what beauty is", but to explore "the method of discovering beauty", that is, to establish a methodological "contemplative" aesthetics. This aesthetics is deeply rooted in the Eastern tradition and originates from the Zen thought of "contemplation", that is, abandoning utilitarianism and emotional attachment, and reflecting all things with a clear and empty mind—it integrates the idea of "the unity of poetry and painting" in Chinese literati painting with the classical Japanese aesthetic of "Yūgen" (profound grace and subtle beauty).

Therefore, the "contemplation" in The Pillow of Grass is an aesthetic stance and life philosophy completely opposite to the "action" in Laocoön. It attempts to open up a spiritual retreat for the troubled modern soul in the rapidly Westernizing Meiji era, and thereby reaffirm the unique spiritual value in the Eastern cultural tradition. Through the creation of The Pillow of Grass, Natsume Sōseki completed a kind of aesthetic "Enlightenment", a spontaneous and inward-looking one that seeks inner peace and the establishment of subjectivity.

## 5. Conclusion

It can be seen from the above that there is a profound and systematic thread of intertextual dialogue between The Pillow of Grass and Laocoön. On the basis of a thorough understanding of Lessing's aesthetic theories in Laocoön, Natsume Sōseki took it as a target and constructed his own unique aesthetic world through The Pillow of Grass.

The essence of this intertextual dialogue is the collision and exchange between two aesthetic paradigms and civilizational spirits, Eastern and Western, at the beginning of the 20th century. Standing on the position of Enlightenment rationality, Lessing took "the distinction between poetry and painting" as the logical starting point, admired action, conflict and the vertical development of time, and ultimately pointed to the positive construction of society and personality. In contrast, based on the Eastern classical spirit, Natsume Sōseki took "the unity of poetry and painting" as his aesthetic program, advocated contemplation, harmony and the instantaneous artistic conception of space, and ultimately pointed to the settlement of the individual inner self and self-transcendence. From the specific divergence on whether "the ugly" can be painted to the different pursuits of "action" and "contemplation", all reflect the fundamental cultural differences between Eastern and Western cultures.

The excellence of The Pillow of Grass lies in that it does not simply negate Western theories, but takes foreign ideological and cultural elements as an opportunity to activate its own traditions through creative interpretation and response on the basis of full understanding. In this cross-cultural dialogue, Natsume Sōseki successfully used the "mirror of the other" in Laocoön to reflect and proclaim the Eastern aesthetic subjectivity with "contemplation" as the core. This makes The Pillow of Grass not only a simple "haiku-like novel", but also a precious ideological document recording the cultural identity and value reconstruction of East Asian intellectuals under the impact of modern civilization.

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