

“Braving the London fog”: Natsume Sōseki’s *The Tower of London*

Andreas Pichler

Abstract

Sōseki’s encounters with London during his two years’ stay from 1900 to 1902 were for the first time published in the English language under the title *The Tower of London* in 2005. Fog – as a material meteorological substance and as a literary metaphor – not only occurs frequently in his stories but is tied to question of darkness when depicting London on the brink of modernity at the turn of the last century. This article is guided by a form of critical literary analysis that draws on a meteorological concept in an attempt to link literature and fog, the British capital and modernity, and the innovative approach of a Japanese encountering the foggy maze of late-Victorian London. The investigation into the meteorological aspects of fog to comprehend Sōseki’s “fog-like light” will shed some light upon a possible process of rendering the darkness gradually brighter.

Keywords: London fog, Sōseki, The Tower of London, cultural and geographic alienation, modernism

“I am again standing all alone thinking in the darkness” (Sōseki, p. 148): This enigmatic claim seems to capture how Natsume Sōseki was experiencing his two years’ stay in London from 1900 to 1902. Sent to England on a Japanese government scholarship in 1900, Sōseki arrived in the British capital on 28 October and moved in at 76 Gower Street in the Bloomsbury District just north of the British Museum. Life in England and in London for Sōseki was characterised by profound historical and cultural changes, marked by Queen Victoria’s death on 22 January 1901 and London’s emergence as the world’s leading metropolis.

Sōseki developed a deep admiration for the British literature and the arts during his stay: “Many things have caught my attention: how literature and the arts are flourishing in this country and how the flourishing of literature and the arts is influencing the national character” (Sōseki, p. 53). But while English literature and art exerted a positive influence on him, the sheer vastness of the cityscape fed a psychological and creative anxiety. His poor English skills were in part responsible for this anxiety, his difficulty to grasp the dimension of the urban sprawl furthermore reinforced his feeling of angst. Malcolm Bradbury points out that London “was – this was part of its essential attraction – the world’s largest city, still expanding with extraordinary rapidity, generating a remarkable cityscape and a fascinating technology” (Bradbury, p. 179). In a *Letter from London* Sōseki writes: “but London is so vast that it is hard to know how far it spreads” (Sōseki, p. 65). He would only later be able to reconcile in his writing the psychological and somatic unease encountered in the British capital’s infinity. As Flanagan observes: “Yet it was London that was to be the crucible and crossroads of his life, the place where Sōseki was faced with the intense cultural shock and social alienation that led to the eventual tumultuous release of his pent-up creative urges” (Flanagan 2005, p. 11).

Sōseki’s alienation seems to point to a much deeper feeling of uneasiness within a renewed set of spatial and cultural contexts shaped by modernism’s intrinsic relationship with materiality, science, spatiality and technology. Sōseki pictures London as “the workshop of the world” (Sōseki, p. 62) and notices “to what extent this country’s development has advanced materially” (Sōseki, p. 53). It is pivotal therefore to come to terms with the origins of this uneasiness and anxiety that orient this article’s focus on Sōseki’s collection of autobiographical short stories entitled *The Tower of London*¹, which were put on paper upon his return to Japan in 1903. The eleven short stories dealing with his experiences in the British capital were published for the first time in Great Britain in 2005 under the title *The Tower of London* and consist of three parts: ‘Letter from London’ (1901) and ‘Bicycle Diary’ (1903) published in the magazine *Hototogisu (The Cuckoo)*, the stories ‘The Tower of London’ and ‘The Carlyle Museum’ (1909) included in the volume *Yokyoshu (Drifting in Space)*, and a selection of short stories such as ‘A Warm Dream’, ‘Impression’, ‘Fog’ and ‘Long Ago’ from *Eijitsu Shohin (Short Pieces for Long Days)* printed for the first time in 1909 in the *Asahi* newspaper.

Sōseki’s textual relationship with the vastness, darkness, and fogginess of London leads to the main claim of the article. At its source lies a feeling of geographical displacement within the urban landscape: “At that time I hardly knew one direction from another and, of course, knew nothing at all about geography” (Sōseki, p. 91). Equally discomfoting, the cultural differences lead to an estrangement: “rather than happy, I have a feeling of indescribable

¹ Natsume Sōseki’s *The Tower of London* was translated from the Japanese by Damian Flanagan. All quotes are from the same edition. ISBN 0 7206 1234 9.

strangeness” (Sōseki, p. 126). In the following pages I will shed some light upon Sōseki’s disorientation and feeling of deracination in the British capital.

Angela Yiu’s insightful notion of “a dark, romantic voice” in *Order and Chaos in the Works of Natsume Sōseki* (Yiu, p. 1) is linked to her portrayal of chaos in Sōseki’s novels. If we agree at all with this analysis, then it is logical to find strands of chaos and darkness in all of his works, including the short stories linked to the British metropolis. What Yiu terms as chaos in Sōseki’s works refers to “something cavernous and amorphous, like an unidentifiable fear or a formless anxiety, that threatens to overtake reason and self-control” (Yiu, p. 2). How does this “formless anxiety” manifest itself for Sōseki in London? How did a London on the brink of modernity represent this cavernous entity? Interdisciplinary and intercultural research have not yet stressed the link between “something undefinable, energetic and powerful” (Yiu, p. 2) present in such works as *Kokoro* and *Kōjin* and his stories on London. Very little research has been done on these eleven accounts written mostly between 1903 and 1909.

His encounters with the “London fog” reside at the heart of Sōseki’s cavernous fear and formless anxiety. But why the fog, one might ask. In most of his works, Sōseki does *not* depict urban landscapes in conjunction with fog, notably in the novel *Kokoro*, in which Tokyo appears under a clear blue sky: “I intended of course to visit Sensei when I returned to Tokyo. [...] The atmosphere of the great city affected me a great deal [...]. It was a lovely day, and the sky was so blue that I was filled with a sense of well-being” (Sōseki, *Kokoro* p. 8-9). The feeling of well-being conveys a stunning contrast to the oppressiveness he experienced in London. One is indeed tempted to wonder whether fog conveys more than just a material substance intrinsically linked to the topography of the British landscape. Fog, I argue – as a material meteorological substance and as a literary metaphor – not only occurs frequently in his stories but is tied to question of displacement and loneliness that characterize Sōseki’s London at the beginning of last century. This article is, therefore, guided by a form of critical literary analysis that draws on a meteorological concept and focuses on the trope of fog.

Fog as a meteorological phenomenon exercises its influence on the immediate environment in that the misty mass invades human space enshrouding the local physical geography. Fog unveils its own dynamics due to its characteristics of formlessness (fog has no definite or consistent spatial form), content-lessness (apart from the water particles in the air) and site-lessness (no specific geographic location). There is no beginning nor end for fog forms and dissolves along the lines of its own fluctuation. Fog acts like a self-vibrating region with its own intensities because its substance – white, empty and colourless – relies on the vibration of the water particles constituting its own energy.

Sōseki’s evocation of behaving like “water particles” unveils a first link to fog’s formlessness. In the short story entitled ‘A Warm Dream’ Sōseki describes the grim attitude of the Londoners while strolling through the streets lined by high-rise buildings. Forms, contours and outlines of the city gradually disappear within the misty darkness: “I am the most inactive particle in the midst of those blackly moving objects” (Sōseki, p. 141). While the blackly moving objects refer to the movement of the “little people”, Sōseki plays an inactive part within the foggy mass. Water particles in the air scientifically connect to each other in order to form the spatial dimension of fog in the atmosphere. Sōseki’s inactive part on the other hand refers metaphorically speaking to his displacement at “the bottom of claustrophobic valleys” (Sōseki, p. 141). He remarks: “It is as though every single person’s existence has been extinguished in this great darkness, and both shadow and form are no longer, and it is totally quiet” (Sōseki, p. 142). Fog has no definite or consistent spatial form. Shadows and forms simply vanish within “the midst of darkness”. The story concludes: “I feel somehow

oppressed at being in this metropolis” (Sōseki, p. 141). The oppressiveness evokes the closeness and sultriness of weather with its humidity, dampness and fogginess. Sōseki is condemned to remain inactive among the water particles of this formless foggy mass.

Sōseki moreover alludes to fog’s content-lessness. Fog appears without content to the human eye as it renders the environment uniform: “Only a total emptiness clogs the air” (Sōseki, p. 146). Apart from the water particles suspended in mid-air, fog appears empty and quiet. The emptiness overshadows Sōseki’s impressions of London and affects his state of mind: “I have no peace of mind at present – gradually things start getting complicated” (Sōseki, p. 63). Flanagan remarks: “London was a vast, dark, foggy maze where one street and house was often indistinguishable from the next and the dizzy heights of the grey buildings seemed overwhelmingly oppressive” (Flanagan 2005, p. 14). The fog’s content-less aura underpins Sōseki’s feeling of mental emptiness.

Apart from formlessness and content-lessness, fog’s site-lessness appears to be revelatory in ‘Fog’, a story in which Sōseki details the view from his boarding home window: “deeply sealed in the depths of a dense fog where the shapes of bells are invisible” (Sōseki, p. 147). The story focuses on his meandering strolls through the fogginess around damp Westminster. On his visits to the Tate Gallery, Battersea and Big Ben, Sōseki wonders whether “the world has shrunk to four yards square, and the more I walk the more a new four yards square appears” (Sōseki, p. 147). As he continues strolling through Westminster “only about four yards ahead is visible. When one proceeds four yards, another four yards ahead becomes visible” (Sōseki, p. 147). The fog’s density reduces Sōseki’s visibility to a four-yard square. Topographical boundaries vanish and geographical sites lose their distinctive features. Describing the garden outside his boarding home, fog appears boundless: “Now this garden, so rich in memories, is also buried in fog, and between it and the unkempt garden of my own boarding-house there is no boundary, as one seamlessly fuses into the other” (Sōseki, p. 146). Fog blurs contours, clear outlines disappear. Geographical dimensions are lost to sight: “One hour later London’s grime and soot and the sound of carriage horses and the river Thames divide me from Carlyle’s home, which seems like a distinct world disappearing into the distance” (Sōseki, p. 129). Fog’s site-lessness exercises its immediate effect on Sōseki reinforcing a feeling of geographical displacement as distinct physical landmarks wane.

Aspects of geographical displacement owing to the London fog can also be found in the second story of the volume *Drifting in Space* entitled ‘The Carlyle Museum’. The plot centres around Sōseki’s visits to the Carlyle Museum in Chelsea and portrays the Scottish writer’s home in London. In painstaking details, Sōseki describes the furniture on each floor of the house, the crammed book shelves and Carlyle’s transformation of the attic to allow the sun shine through the newly installed glass ceiling. When approaching the site from the opposite Thames river bank, the home’s distinct topography disappears: “I prop my chin on my cherrywood walking-stick and look straight ahead at the shadows of fog creeping along the road on the far distant bank as they become gradually darker until, from the bottom of the five-store terraced buildings, everything disappears little by little into the trailing mist” (Sōseki, p. 117). London’s site on the Thames River evaporates behind a veil of fog. The Carlyle House in Chelsea gradually recedes from view.

Fog’s formlessness, content-lessness and site-lessness lead to Sōseki’s geographical displacement. But what exactly is to be found in the fog, and more significantly, what kind of psychological state of mind is provoked by London’s haziness apart from a geographical displacement? First, fog seems to create impressions of invisibility to the human eye. In ‘The Tower of London’, Sōseki’s writes: “In the midst of air saturated with sepia-coloured

moisture I vacantly stand and gaze at it. Twentieth century London gradually disappears from the back of my mind” (Sōseki, p. 93). Published in 1906 after his return to Japan, ‘The Tower of London’ is an account of his visits to the Tower of London portraying, as Flanagan mentions, “a withdrawal from modern life into mystical places” (Flanagan 2005, p. 16). As Sōseki strolls through the damp moisture-laden rooms of the Tower, he ponders upon the significance of the lives of all those who were imprisoned inside, including Archbishop Cranmer, “unspeakable numbers of people in the War of the Roses” (Sōseki, p. 96), Edward V, the Duke of York, and Henry VI in the “Bloody Tower”. Linking fog to the murderous and mysterious aspects evokes the nineteenth century literary portrayals of London. But more importantly, the twentieth-century Tower increasingly becomes invisible to Sōseki’s eyes due to the fog: “Droplets of drizzle so fine that they could pass through the eye of a needle are melting the dust and smoke of the whole city, dimly closing up heaven and earth” (Sōseki, p. 112-113). Fog’s moisture laden air reduces the visibility and empties London’s cityscape of its geographical features. Similarly, in ‘The Carlyle Museum’, “nothing was visible” (Sōseki, p. 122). When looking out of one of the windows on the upper floor of Carlyle’s home, “neither Westminster nor St Paul’s are visible” (Sōseki, p. 123). The space created by the fog appears to be suspended between the earth and the sky: “Tens of thousands of houses, hundreds of thousands of people, millions of noises are standing, floating and moving in the space between me and the cathedrals” (Sōseki, p. 123). London’s distinctive skyline dissipates leaving the city invisible to Sōseki’s eyes. An impression of bleak and dismal emptiness, an utterly wretched desolation results from such concealment.

Another psychological consequence of fog is a feeling of isolation. In ‘Impression’ Sōseki illustrates his isolation as he loses himself among London’s indistinguishably similar rows of houses. He finally ends up at a large square with a “pole-like column” not knowing what it is. The story evolves around his saunters through the endless lines of houses as he struggles to come to terms within the city’s foggy reality. An escape from this urban desolation is not likely to happen: “Yet if offers no escape. If I turn to the right, the way is blocked. If I look to the left, the way is closed” (Sōseki, p. 144). Amid the “quietly moving sea of humanity”, Sōseki experiences “unspeakable loneliness” in the fog. If the fog symbolizes a homogeneous medium effacing all notions of physical urban qualities, it delineates a psychological state of isolation in which social contacts are absent: “London is so vast that once one begins socializing it takes up all one’s time” (Sōseki, p. 57). Not one person can be distinguished from another in the foggy darkness rendering his isolation even more precarious: “There are many thousands of people here, but now they are buried in darkness, not a single voice is heard. It is as though every single person’s existence has been extinguished in this great darkness” (Sōseki, p.142). Sōseki’s isolation literally starts befogging his mind: “I felt like being a Gotenba rabbit suddenly set loose in the heart of Nipponbashi. Thinking I might be swept away in a human wave when I went outside, [. . .] I had peace of mind neither day nor night” (Sōseki, p. 91). The reference to the dislocation of the Mt Fuji rabbit within Osaka’s most commercial district, the Nipponbashi, called *Nagamachi* during the Edo period, alludes to the fogging of the mind and places Sōseki out of time and space. He is isolated and lost in London, geographically as well as culturally.

Yet, Sōseki’s psychological state mirrors a much deeper moral dimension to fog. In *London: A Book of Aspects*, Arthur Symons writes: “There is nothing in the world quite like a London fog, though the underground railway stations in the days of steam might have prepared us for it and Dante has described it in the ‘Inferno’ when he speaks of the banks of a pit in hell, [. . .]. Foreigners praise it as the one thing in which London is unique. They come to London to experience it. It is as if one tried the experience of drowning or suffocating” (Symons, p. 62-63). Symons underlines London’s historical relationship with the material principles and

literary values of fog. Since the age Dante, fog has enjoyed an intrinsic relationship with the British capital. Later, the Industrial Revolution added smoke to the fog to create the new compound word ‘smog’.² In the latter half of the nineteenth century fog was a negatively connoted image of hiding and covering up by authors such as Charles Dickens, Arthur Conan Doyle and Oscar Wilde. The image of fog is used to shroud specific and rational settings in Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: “In this fog, my dear Basil? Why, I can’t even recognise Grosvenor Square. I believe my house is somewhere about here, but I don’t feel at all certain about it” (Wilde, p. 167). Wilde’s use of fog to blur the clear contours of Grosvenor Square in central London is similar in its metaphorical depiction to Doyle’s covering up of the murder in *The Hound of the Baskerville*: “I have said that over the great Grimpen Mire there hung a dense, white fog” (Doyle, p. 189). And Dickens’ London in *Bleak House* is nothing but fog: “Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights” (Dickens, p. 13). Texts by such literary greats contributed significantly to the body of literature written about the city, in which the fog is as intrinsic as the River Thames and many famous monuments. Sōseki anticipates the weather in his visit, and is anxious to see it: “I had been thinking I would never witness such weather in London” (Sōseki, p. 55). His experiences with London however are all but foggy.

Far from existing merely as a literary trope or symbol of the Industrial Revolution, fog is—and has probably always been—a part of the geographical area of the Greater London area, between the Chiltern Hills to the North-East and the Kentish Downs to the South. Meandering through the London area, the River Thames adds humidity to the moisture brought from the West by the Gulf Stream. It is also useful to differentiate between fog’s various meteorological forms. It may dissolve into lesser degrees of humidity giving rise to mist, haze or clouds.³ Sōseki’s depiction of fog is attentive to these variations. Fog is gradually being transformed into mist as “everything disappears little by little into the trailing mist” (Sōseki, p. 117). Light and brightness intensify when haze appears in ‘A Warm Dream’: “The haze suddenly clears beneath my eyes. Far below, beholding a sea glowing warmly in bright light, a handsome man wearing a yellow coat and a woman in long, purple sleeves are clearly visible on green grass” (Sōseki, p.142). The warm, bright light associated with the clear view of the sea stands in opposition to depressive depths of darkness shrouded by the dense fog. And the outlines of objects increasingly offset themselves against a background becoming more visible in ‘Fog’: “Braving the fog, I jump on and look down, but the horse’s head has already become slightly hazed. When the bus comes across another vehicle, I think at that moment how pretty the scene is” (Sōseki, p. 147). The horse’s head, a symbol of strength and of direction as it leads the carriage, is no longer obscured by fog. From fog to mist to lighter haze, Sōseki emerges from the deep dark depths in order to appreciate the prettiness of such a luminous scene.

² Smog, a compound word coined from smoke and fog in 1905 by Henry Antoine in the July 26 edition of the London newspaper *Daily Graphic*, had not appeared in literature until the Georgian period.

³ The *Dictionary of Physical Geography* defines fog as “confined to situations where visibility falls below 1 km” (Whittow 2000, p. 195). Mist is referred to “the degree of atmospheric obscurity midway between haze and fog, with visibility officially recorded as being within 1 and 2 km” (Whittow 2000, p. 339). Haze is officially classified “when visibility falls below 2 km” (Whittow 2000, p. 241) and, finally, cloud is “a visible mass of tiny particles of water and ice held in suspension by vertical motion of air” (Whittow 2000, p. 93).

Respecting the fog's meteorological variations means acknowledging its dissipation. This is the case in 'A Warm Dream'. As the title suggest, an agreeable and pleasant dream might finally brighten up his desolation and disorientation when suddenly "a section to the front, cut out into a square, seems raised up in the midst of the darkness, and has suddenly started to faintly brighten" (Sōseki, p. 142). When fog evaporates it scientifically goes through the various stages of relative humidity in the air leading to its final evaporation. Sōseki's fog follows a similar pattern: "By the time I have ascertained that it is indeed being softly lit, I have made out in the midst of the fog-like light some turbid colours, yellow, purple and indigo. [. . .] The haze suddenly clears beneath my eyes. Far below, beholding a sea glowing warmly in bright light" (Sōseki, p. 142). The story finishes with the enticement of a breeze blowing from the south of "warm Greece". The warm bright light has finally replaced the fog's obscurity. The resemblance to Virginia Woolf's experimental novel *Jacob's Room*, in which the protagonist Jacob leaves the London fog to embark on a trip to warmer Greece, is strikingly similar: "And surveying all this, looming through the fog, the lamplight, the shades of London, [he] decided in favour of Greece" (Woolf 1992, p. 64). Although Sōseki's story was written about ten years earlier than Woolf's novel, the dissipation of the fog as a literary metaphor in his short stories foreshadows a British modernist tradition.

While fog as a meteorological phenomenon abounds in London until the 1960s, literary modernists shake off the Victorian stuffiness of fog. Fog increasingly becomes absent in English literature from around 1910 onwards and authors like T.S. Eliot, E.M. Forster, James Joyce, Lytton Strachey and Virginia Woolf no longer link London to its fogginess. Forster for example observes in *Howards End*: "London was beginning to illuminate herself against the night. Electric lights sizzled and jagged in the main thoroughfares, gas lamps in the side-streets glimmered a canary gold or green. The sky was a crimson battlefield of spring, but London was not afraid. Her smoke mitigated the splendour, and the clouds down Oxford Street were delicately painted ceiling, which adorned while it did not distract" (Forster, p. 104). London's nights come to light. A bright, spring-like sky scattered with clouds broods over Oxford Street decorating the cityscape like a colourful modernist painting. Imaginary urban spaces belong to the Victorian past. Modernists portray London's physical reality. Peter Brooker observes in *Geographies of Modernism* that "the distinction between the physical and imagined city proves important [. . .] and is closely related to the distinction between literary or artistic modernism and social modernity" (Brooker, p. 5). In Woolf's *The London Scene* a crystalline clear transparency reigns over London's roofs: "The charm of modern London is that it is not built to last; it is built to pass. Its glassiness, its transparency, its surging waves of coloured plaster give a different pleasure and achieve a different end from that which was desired and attempted by the old builders and their patrons, the nobility of England" (Woolf, p. 31).

Sōseki shakes off fog as a literary trope in a similar fashion. In the last of his stories 'Long Ago', bright sunshine, clear visibility and colourful vistas replace fog: "My house stands on top of a small hill, well suited for gazing at the clouds and the valley. From the south the sun shines over all the walls of the house. [...] At my feet the hill sinks into the Vale of Pitlochry, and everything I see far below is uniformly filled with colour. Rising up the opposite mountain, the yellow birch leaves overlap one on top of another, creating many shaded inclines" (Sōseki, p. 149-150). From the Vale of Pitlochry, in the county of Perth, Scotland, Sōseki enjoys gazing at the clouds and the autumnal valley below. Sōseki's short stories close with an urban-rural, city-pastoral contrast. This contrast is common to both English and Japanese modernism. The Scottish valley 'uniformly filled with colour' contradicts the fog he left behind in London. "Braving the London fog" finally pays off. The drying up of fog as a

literary metaphor as well as meteorological phenomenon in literature allows the Japanese visitor to finally overcome anxiety, isolation and deracination.

References

- Bradbury, M. (1976), *Modernism 1890-1930*, Penguin: London.
- Brooker, P and Thacker A (2005), *Geographies of Modernism*, Routledge: London.
- Dickens, C (1853/2003), *Bleak House*, Penguin: London.
- Doyle, A C (1902/2007), *The Hound of the Baskerville*, Penguin: London.
- Eliot, T S (1922/2010), *The Waste Land*, Penguin: London.
- Forster, E M (1910/2000), *Howards End*, Penguin: London.
- Joyce, J (1914/2000), *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Penguin: London.
- Sōseki, N (1901/2005), *The Tower of London*, Owen: London.
- (1914), *Kokoro*, (2010) Owen: London.
- Strachey, L (1918/1986), *Eminent Victorians*, Penguin: London.
- Symons, A (1909/2012), *London: A Book of Aspects*, Forgotten Books: London.
- Whittow, J (2000), *The Penguin Dictionary of Physical Geography*, Penguin: London.
- Wilde, O (1890/1992), *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Random: New York.
- Woolf, V (1922/1992), *Jacob's Room*, Penguin: London.
- (1932/1988), *The London Scene*, Snowbooks: London.
- Yiu, A (1998), *Chaos and Order in the Works of Natsume Sōseki*, UP Hawaii, Honolulu.