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TOWNSCAPES, GENTLEMEN AND BIZARRE CHARACTERS. THE IMPORTANCE OF NATSUME SŌSEKI'S STUDIES IN LONDON

Abstract

The article focuses on Natsume Sōseki's letters, diaries and sketches related to his stay in London from 1900 till the end of 1902. It presents passages from his correspondence with his wife and friends in which he describes his surroundings, his mindset and the people he meets while abroad. It also explores the autobiographical sketches: *The Carlyle Museum* (1905) and *Spring Miscellany* (1909), analysing the images and narrative techniques which anticipate Sōseki's later development as a writer.

Key words: Natsume Sōseki, London, diaries, sketches, *Eijitsu Shōhin*, *Kārairu Hakubutsukan*

INTRODUCTION

Natsume Sōseki's 夏目漱石 stay in England, which lasted two years, influenced – as is commonly recognised – his whole later life and is importantly related to the eruption of his creativity (Natsume, 2009, p. 58). His time spent abroad is recorded in Sōseki's diaries, letters, sketches and is also present in his later novels. The records prove that Sōseki spent most of his time in London, leaving only for Cambridge (1–2 November 1900) and Scotland. At the beginning, he seemed rather eager to visit the sites he had read about in guidebooks or works of literature. He was determined to use the time to deepen his understanding of English culture and history. He also

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might have felt the pressure of public expectations. As a Meiji intellectual, he had to be "knowledgeable in three fields of learning – Japanese, Chinese and Western (or *wa* 和, *kan* 漢 and *yō* 洋) learning – if he was to be considered knowledgeable at all" (Etō, 1965, pp. 604–605). Until December 1900, he visited the Tower of London, the British Museum, Westminster Abbey, the National Gallery, Hyde Park, Kensington Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and St. Paul's Cathedral. With time, however, he gradually reduces his visits to historical sites and supposedly spends more and more time in his rented room, poorly furnished and crammed with books.

Sōseki moved five times during his stay: from 76 Gower Street, a place where students from Japan on government scholarships frequently stayed after their arrival, he moved to 85 Priory Road, then crossing the Thames to live at 6 Flodden Road. Subsequently, he moved even further from the centre to 2 Stella Road before finally settling at 81 The Chase, where he stayed from July 1901 until his departure for Japan in December 1902.[2] His frequent changing of addresses was not unrelated to his financial situation – a scholarship of ¥1,800 per month was, according to Sōseki himself, insufficient to provide for the needs of someone who wanted to lead the life of a gentleman in London (Natsume, 2009, p. 47). Sōseki includes in his *Diaries* entries describing his efforts to economise, such as: "I bought a 'biscuit' and tried to have it instead of lunch. One can costs 80 sen'" (Natsume, 1997, p. 23). Or later: "Whenever I go for a walk I end up spending around 2 yen. What a distress!" (Natsume, 1997, p. 31). Not eager to go out and spend the little money he had on anything other than books, Sōseki "resolved to hole up in the fortress of his room" (Nathan, 2018, p. 57) and devoted most of his time to his research regarding the essence of literature, which would form the foundation of his lectures later published as *Bungakuron* 文学論 (*The Theory of Literature*, 1907). The final year of his stay in London is not recorded in his *Rondon Ryūgaku Nikki* ロンドン留学日記 (*Diaries from Studies in London*), which he had started writing on 8 August 1900, the day he was departing from Yokohama, and wrote continuously until 13 November 1901.

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[2] Comp.: Tomioka, 1997, pp. 270–271. It is said to have been Sōseki's favourite location, which he found by placing an advertisement in *The Daily Telegraph* on 11 July 1901: "Board Residence wanted, by a Japanese Gentleman, in a strictly private English family; with literary taste. Quiet and convenient quarters in N., N.W., or S.W. preferred" (Natsume, 2002, p. 9).

His writings from the period, however, testify to his great perceptiveness as he observes the life in one of Europe's most exuberant cities. He is impressed by "how the ordinary person (in England) is generous and hard working", but also irritated and annoyed by many characteristics of Englishmen and their habits. The article focuses primarily on the way Sōseki perceives London, its culture and people in his diaries and letters while shedding light on the significance Sōseki's two-year-long stay in London might have had on the themes and literary techniques in his sketches.

THE LANDSCAPE OF LONDON

Sōseki includes in his *Diaries* important sites and monuments he visited during his stay in London. His observations later become the basis for his narratives about his first and only visit to the Tower of London (*Rondon Tō* 倫敦塔, 1905) or his trip to The Carlyle Museum (*Kārairu Hakubutsukan* カーライル博物館, 1905).[3] His letters are also full of comments on the transportation system in London:[4]

> Arriving at the station, I pay two pence and get in the lift. There are three or four people inside. The station attendant closes the door and pulls the lift rope, causing the lift to go suddenly down. This is the means by which we pass underground. If going up, I would be like Nikki Danjo in a suit. The inside of the cave is brightly lit with electric lights. A train arrives every five minutes. (Natsume, 2005, p. 58)

Sōseki's interest in the transportation system in London is also reflected in his essays. "Kiri" 霧 ("Fog") opens with a description of Clapham Junction:

> The station is a meeting point for over a thousand trains every day. A rough calculation shows that on average a train arrives or departs every minute. (Natsume, 2002, p. 77)

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[3] I included the analysis of *The Tower of London* in: *Striving to Understand (and Interpret) the Other. Natsume Sōseki's "The Tower of London"* accepted for publication in *Analecta Nipponica*. See also: Szczechla, 2017, pp. 33–53.

[4] An insightful analysis of the importance of underground in Sōseki's work is included in: Tsukamoto, 1999, pp. 101–151.

The confusion caused by this intricate web of roads and railways is evoked in the beginning of *The Tower of London*:

> I did not, of course, get on any trains, nor was I able to get in any carriages, and, when I did make a rare attempt to use a mode of transport, I had no idea where I was being taken. The steam trains, carriages, electric railways and cable railways that criss-cross like spider's legs the wide city of London were unable to provide me with any convenience whatsoever. (Natsume, 2005, p. 91)

Another important means of transport (and leisure) Sōseki explores in his writings about his experience of London life is the bicycle. In *Jitensha nikki* 自転車日記 (*Bicycle Diary*, 1903)[5] he provides his readers with an immensely humorous account of his – albeit forced and altogether unsuccessful – attempts to try and learn how to ride a bicycle around Clapham Common in Autumn 1902. His conclusion resembles in style numerous observations of his cat narrator in *Wagahai wa neko de aru* 吾輩は猫である (*I Am a Cat*, 1905–1906):

> Come to think of it, perhaps they do sometimes end up putting people on bicycles and killing them in this country. If so, Britain is a dangerous place. (Natsume, 2005, p. 88)

In his *Diaries* Sōseki often describes the townscape he found himself immersed in.

> Just look at the sun in London on a foggy day. – He says – It is dark red, like blood. Nowhere else could you see such sun – blood left on a dark brown texture. (Natsume, 1997, p. 25)

He focuses on the horrendous condition of air in the city:

> Have a walk around London and you will find yourself coughing out phlegm with pitch-black lumps that will undoubtedly come as a surprise. The population of several million people every day breathes in all this soot and smoke, all this dust and their lungs are being dyed. (Natsume, 1997, p. 26)

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[5] The text refers to the time not included in Sōseki's *Rondon Ryūgaku nikki* and its form is only modelled on the diary, divided into parts beginning with "bōgetsu bōjitsu" ("on a certain day in a certain month").

Sometimes, however, the landscape of London delights Sōseki. He spots the beauty of tulips, yellow and purple, which have sprung up on the grass in St. John's Park (Natsume, 1997, p. 26). He notices, when he first sees snow in London and how it covers the dust and ash. On 10 January 1901 he enjoys the clear weather after snowfall in Hampstead Heath, calling it "the most delightful day since his arrival in London" (Natsume, 1997, p. 27). The *Diaries* include not only information about the weather but also various hints on how to predict it. One of these is attributed to Sōseki's landlord Mr Brett and quoted in English:

> Red sky at night
> Is the shepherd's delight
>
> Red sky in the morning
> Is the shepherd's warning
>
> Morning red and evening grey
> Send the traveller on his way
>
> Morning gray and evening red
> Send the rain on his head. (Natsume, 1997, p. 44)

Sōseki is most observant with regards not only to weather but also to popular fashion. He spots the silk hats and frock-coats in the streets, some of them rather worn-out (Natsume, 1997, p. 29). He often compares what he sees in London to what he knows from Japan – from fashion through architecture to animals.

> In a grassy plain in the backyard numerous birds resembling bulbuls come and look for food. I asked the maid servant about them and she said they were sparrows. Even sparrows are big in London. (Natsume, 1997, p. 29)

The impressions of the city landscape are evoked in Sōseki's essays. In "Inshō" 印象 ("Impressions") from *Eijitsu Shōhin* 永日小品 (*Spring Miscellany*, 1909), the narrator crosses the threshold of the house and sees three-storey buildings: "their facades were all the same colour. The houses adjacent to mine, like the one opposite, were built in strictly the same style." And he concludes: "This is a very strange city" (Natsume, 2002, p. 56).

Sōseki breathes in the atmosphere of London, its hectic present and its history. He also jots down information about the death of Queen Victoria

and, significantly, he does so not in Japanese but in English. “The Queen is sinking” – he writes on 22 January. These were the words Doctor Reid had addressed to the Royal Family by 4 p.m. that day. And on 23 January Sōseki writes in Japanese: “Last night at half past six the Queen passed away” and then he adds in English: “at Osborne”. He continues in English depicting what he observes in the streets:

> Flags are hoisted at half-mast. All the town is in mourning. I, a foreign subject, also wear a black necktie to show my respectful sympathy. “The new century has opened rather inauspiciously,” said the shopman of whom I bought a pair of black gloves this morning. (Natsume, 1997, pp. 30–31)

The death of Queen Victoria makes Sōseki feel sympathy with the people of England. His entry illustrates how he considered himself one among others, a rare occurrence in his report of how he felt while in London. He also records the day of Queen Victoria’s funeral at Windsor Great Park. He was among the crowds of people gathered in Hyde Park watching the procession, noticing the coffin wrapped in white and red and followed by the King and the “German Emperor” (Natsume, 1997, p. 34).

The description of London is interwoven with comments about its inhabitants and their habits. In *Rondon Shōsoku* 倫敦消息 (*Letter from London*) Sōseki focuses on food he eats, which is something his Japanese readers would most probably like to know:

> As usual the first thing I have is oatmeal. This is a staple diet of Scottish people. But, whereas they eat it by adding salt, we eat it by adding sugar. It is a kind of oat gruel, and I like it a lot. In Johnson’s Dictionary he says that oatmeal is something which in England is generally given to horses but in Scotland supports the people. However, it does not seem remotely unusual for the English of today to eat this for breakfast. The English must have become closer to horses. I have either one rasher of bacon and an egg or else two rashers of bacon. I also have two slices of toast and a cup of tea. (Natsume, 2005, p. 56)

Sōseki’s comments about the people may be more general (“I like the perseverance of the Westerners, their splendour”; Natsume, 1997, p. 45), or limited to a particular group (“It is not uncommon to see drunken women in England”; Natsume, 1997, p. 43). Often they are descriptions of the “unforgettable people” he meets on his way – to use the expression

from Kinikida Doppo's famous short story.[6] Moreover, the scenes Sōseki observes are often treated as a context for understanding the nature of English literature:

> Their splendid character is evident when you watch performances here or when you look at the food, or architecture, or ornaments. You can see it in the way married couples kiss or hug. It is all reflected in literature, so there is hardly any witticism or aloofness. Hardly any tendency to show off. (Natsume, 1997, p. 45)

Sōseki notices the mutual relationship between society and literature. On the one hand, literature reflects the character of English people and their relationships. On the other, it has a great impact on what Sōseki calls a "national character":

> 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. (Natsume, 2005, p. 53)

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING GENTLEMAN

In Sōseki's writings from London there are numerous indications that he admired some of the traits of Englishmen, such as "Here, they surrender their seats to others", or "They advocate their rights" (Natsume, 1997, p. 25). In his comments included in his letters and diaries he often refers to the notion of a gentleman. It appears in the opening passage of the printed version of his *Letter from London* (Natsume, 2005, p. 1901). His attention is captured by the fact that although there is no word in England for samurai or *bushi* 武士, there is a word "gentleman" or *shinshi* 紳士, and he ponders over its meaning (Natsume, 2011d, p. 648). He later elaborates on the concept, giving detailed examples of the characteristics and behaviour befitting a gentleman:

> Being magnanimous and composed in all things is in these parts one qualification of being a gentleman. Overly fussing over trifles like some pickpocket or

[6] Comp.: Kunikida, 1972, pp. 273–341.

> staring at a person's face with curiosity is considered vulgar. In particular, it is considered undignified for ladies to turn around and look behind them. Pointing at people is the height of rudeness. (Natsume, 2005, pp. 61–62)

Sōseki's comments included in *Letter from London* were highly appreciated in Japan and gave Japanese readers invaluable insight into English society. The text was first published in *Hototogisu* ホトトギス (*The Cuckoo*) and were later included in *Shasei Bunshū* 写生文集 (The Collection of Sketches from Life, 1903), and then published by Shinchōsha in *Irodori* 色鳥 (Various Birds) in 1915. Subsequent versions of the *Letter* were altered by Sōseki, private comments were omitted, pronouns changed and the word "nikki" 日記 ("diary") replaced by "tegami" 手紙 ("letter").[7] All this resulted in a narration which resembled more a sketch or a novel.

Without doubt the question of being a gentleman was important for Sōseki while he was in London, and he returned to it also after his arrival back to Japan. It was for him a question of whether someone from Japan may become a part of a Western civilisation. In his "Preface" to *Bungakuron* he describes gentlemen of England as "an exemplary collection of model persons, endowed with noble characters and worthy of imitation" (Natsume, 2009, p. 47). He associates being a gentleman with being handsome, well-dressed and affluent and, all things considered, openly positions himself outside of the privileged circle, which he calls "the realm of impossibility":

> But for someone like me, who had spent his youth in the oriental fashion, chasing after much younger English gentlemen and trying to acquire their habits of conduct would be like a fully grown adult whose bones are no longer limber trying to master all the deft techniques of a lion-dance acrobat. No matter how much I might admire them, no matter how much I might worship them, no matter how much I might adore them, this belonged to the realm of impossibility – even if I resolved to cut my daily meals from three to two. (Natsume, 2009, p. 47)

Sōseki's sense of inadequacy is expressed repeatedly, as he speaks of his life in London in terms of "persevering, persevering, persevering" (Natsume, 2005, p. 62). He compares himself to a drop of water among

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[7] Compare the version of *Rondon Shōsoku* published in *Irodori* in 1915. See: Andō, 2014, pp. 274–286.

five million beads of oil. He claims: "Among the English gentlemen, I was like a lone shaggy dog mixed in with a pack of wolves; I endured a wretched existence" (Natsume, 2009, p. 56). He compares himself with people in the streets, complaining about himself being short and having terrible complexion. He usually does so with a grain of self-irony:

> Once outside, everyone I meet is depressingly tall. Worse, they all have unfriendly faces. If they imposed a tax on height in this country they might come up with a more economically small animal. But these are the words of one who cannot accept defeat gracefully, and looked at impartially, one would have to say that it was they, not I, who look splendid. (Natsume, 2005, p. 61)

He recalls a moment when he thought "a strangely complexioned Tom Thumb" was approaching him, but he turned out to be his own reflection in a mirror. In *Letter from London* he summarises the incident as follows: "There is nothing for it but to laugh bitterly, and, naturally, when I do so, the image laughs bitterly, too" (Natsume, 2005, p. 61). A similar comment is to be found in Sōseki's *Diaries*:

> It amazes me how such beautiful people may live in all this soot and smoke . . . I once found a bizarre Tom Thumb approaching me but he turned out to be my own self reflected in the mirror. It is only after I had come here that I first realised how yellow we were. (Natsume, 1997, p. 26)

The fact that Sōseki viewes himself as an outsider must have been affected also by acts of discrimination he fell victim to while in London. Although he comments that " . . . generally, people are of pleasant disposition. Nobody would ever grab me and start insulting and abusing me" (Natsume, 2005, p. 61), he attributes it rather to indifference than anything else: "They do not take any notice of me" (Natsume, 2005, p. 61). He even reformulates his conclusion in a more straightforward manner:

> London is also the workshop of the world, so they do not laughingly regard foreigners as curiosities. Most people are extremely busy. Their heads seem to be so teeming with thoughts of money that they have no time to jeer at us Japanese as yellow people. (Natsume, 2005, p. 62)

However, Sōseki's *Diaries* and letters provide an insight into how he might have been treated not only in the streets but also in the boarding houses. While he was at 6 Flodden Road, his landlord, Mr Brett told him

one evening that "the Japanese people should be improved" and recommended him marrying a foreigner (Natsume, 1997, p. 40). Later, on 6 April 1901, Sōseki records the following incident: "I walked through Camberwell today and heard two women who saw me say 'least-poor Chinese'" (Natsume, 1997, p. 52). He then develops this short entry into a longer scene as a part of *Letter from London*:

> [S]ometimes there are people who surreptitiously comment on my country of origin. The other day I was standing looking around a shop somewhere when two women approached me from behind, remarking, "least-poor Chinese". "Least-poor" is an extraordinary adjective. In one park I heard a couple arguing whether I was a Chinaman or a Japanese. Two or three days ago I was invited out somewhere and set off in my silk hat and frock-coat only for two men who seemed like workmen to pass by saying, "A handsome Jap." I do not know whether I should be flattered or offended. (Natsume, 2005, p. 62)

Even an immensely self-ironic[8] account of Sōseki's attempt to learn how to ride a bicycle in order to find relief from his depression during his final months spent at 81 The Chase, includes a scene of abuse:

> Just as the act of performing a silent about-turn was the product of sheer necessity, so the man stuck behind me being surprised and falling from his bicycle was also not without reason. It was logic on both sides, so there was nothing strange about it. It was only natural, but it seems that the logic of these Westerners is not that far developed so this fallen person in an attitude of great imperial wrath hurled abuse at me: "Chin Chin Chinaman!". As the victim of this abuse, I might be expected to fire a salvo in return, but displaying my serenely heroic nature I left behind only the single word "sorry" and turned the corner without looking back. (Natsume, 2005, pp. 86–87)

The scene, very much in tune with the rest of the narrative, is strongly ironic, as Sōseki first fails to navigate the bicycle and thus causes the man

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[8] The extent of Sōseki's self-irony in this narrative may be exemplified by his description of himself on a bicycle: " . . . I decide to act out the role of the glorious warrior and begin promisingly by fiercely gripping the handlebar. But when it comes to the step of finally sitting in the saddle, turning around and glaring back in triumph, it does not quite go to plan. It's strange when at the last moment one falls down with a thud" (Natsume, 2005, p. 79). The conclusion is also a self-ironic one: "A bicycle is a whirligig of a social and Sosekian uncertainty, and, just when one thinks that one is about to fall off, one ends up knocking other people off" (Natsume, 2005, p. 87).

behind him to fall. He juxtaposed the words of abuse: “Chin Chin Chinaman!” チンチンチャイナマン with his apology (in Japanese “o ki no doku da ne” 御気の毒だね – “I am sorry for you”; Natsume, 2011b, p. 693), unable to say anything more as the bicycle continues its uncontrollable journey. Sōseki ends this escalation of irony with a self-deprecatory comment:

> if by some chance you were to gain an exaggerated sense of my heroism, you might curse me for rude behaviour for lifetimes to come. (Natsume, 2005, p. 87)

The instances of abuse mentioned in *Letter from London* were all gathered into a poem by Anthony Thwaite (born 1930) who in 1955 went to Japan for two years and who wrote a poem about Sōseki’s time in London. Significant part of the poem evokes Sōseki’s accounts of discrimination:

> Sometimes, walking the streets thronged with such tall and handsome ones,
> I see a dwarf approaching, his face sweaty – and then
> I know it for my own reflection, cast back from a shop-window.
> I laugh, it laughs. “Yellow races” – how appropriate.
>
> “Least poor Chinese” – I think I hear – or “Handsome Jap” . . .
> Sneers of a group of labourers, seeing me go by.
> In frock coat, top-hat, parody of “English gentleman”. (Thwaite, 1984, p. 384)

The poem ends with a verse resonating Sōseki’s words about feeling in London like a shaggy dog among wolves: “I creep into my bed, I hear the wolves” (Thwaite, 1984, p. 384).

Sōseki’s sense of being outside the privileged circle is often compensated by his conviction that he knows more about English literature and culture than many Englishmen he encounters in London. He is fully aware of the fact that foreigners tend to know more about London than the inhabitants of the city, who often are acquainted only with their neighbourhood (Natsume, 1997, p. 32). In a letter written on 9 February 1901 to Kano Kōichi 狩野亨一, Ōtsuka Yasuji 大塚安治, Suga Torao 菅虎雄 and Yamakawa Shinjirō 山川信次郎, Sōseki emphasises that Japanese scholars should not feel that their knowledge of English is inferior to Englishmen. He supports his argument with a series of examples of how native English speakers fail to know their language or literature:

> One Westerner didn't know the meaning of "pillory." Another argued whether "such a one" should be "such an one." An old woman insisted to me that "benefit" was "a noun of multitude." They constantly misplace the emphasis on words they have seen only in books and never heard. And understand that I'm talking about people who have received an education, some of them a college education! The younger sister has little education but at least doesn't pretend otherwise. The husband is a decent fellow but has probably never read a book. Recently we went to theatre together, a "pantomime" of Robinson Crusoe, and he asked me if we were watching something from a novel or a true story! (Nathan, 2018, p. 56; Natsume, 2017, pp. 89–90)

A very similar comment is to be found in Sōseki's *Diaries*. On 12 January 1901, less than a month before the letter was written, Sōseki records the episode of going to the theatre with the landlord who did not know *Robinson Crusoe*, and provides numerous other examples showing the ignorance of English people with regards to their own culture, one of them being a female student asking her professor how to spell the names of Keats and Landor (Natsume, 1997, p. 28). Moreover, while in London, Sōseki soon realises that Englishmen were not aware of how fast Japan had been advancing. Although he tries to convince his interlocutors that there is more to Japan than they may be aware of, he is only ridiculed, which leads him to the conclusion that "[t]here is nothing then but to remain silent and keep on working" (Natsume, 1997, p. 31). In this manner, Sōseki's experience of being a foreigner not understood by others leads to his discovery of the value of individual knowledge and efforts.

STORYTELLING: PLACES AND PEOPLE

As Sōseki gradually withdraws from the outer world and confines himself to the space of his private room, his descriptions naturally focus rather on his immediate surroundings, on his room and on the people he encounters in the boarding house, as well as on his responses to the encounters. In his *Letter from London* he thus describes his third lodgings at 6 Flodden Road:

> I drop my eyes from the ceiling and look around the room, but there is nothing worth looking at. I am actually quite ashamed of this room. In front of the window there is a chest of drawers. They are really just painted boxes hardly worthy of being called a chest of drawers. (Natsume, 2005, p. 55)

The description continues as Sōseki tries to find some parallel between the place he stays in London and what his readers in Japan might know from their experience:

> If one was to describe my lodgings in terms of Tokyo, then Shinagawa first comes to mind. A suburb across the river from the centre of town. The rent is cheap, and, after all I will be in this gloomy place for a little while . . . no, actually, I will probably be cooped up here for the whole of my time in England. (Natsume, 2005, p. 58)

The theme of miserable conditions Sōseki finds himself in returns in the *Letter* as he addresses his complaint directly to his readers:

> [T]he condition of my boarding-house is extremely pitiful, but you are doubtless asking how, like some modern sage, I manage to remain unruffled in such circumstances. Even if you are not asking, I will assume that you are since it is inconvenient to my purposes if you are not as I intend to answer you in all sincerity. (Natsume, 2005, p. 59)

In the *Letter* Sōseki proceeds to describe in greater detail his psychological state which is related to the atmosphere of his lodgings. Later, he recalls the memories of the places he stayed in while in London when he writes a series of sketches included in *Eijitsu Shōhin*, seven of which are based on his experiences abroad: "Geshuku" 下宿 ("The Boarding House"), "Kako no nioi" 過去の匂い ("Odour of the Past"), "Atatakai yume" 暖かい夢 ("A Sweet Dream"), "Inshō" 印象 ("Impressions"), "Kiri" 霧 ("Fog"), "Mukashi" 昔 ("In Bygone Days") and "Kureigu Sensei" クレイグ先生 ("Professor Craig").[9] He describes in detail his boarding house at 85 Priory Road:

> My first lodgings were situated in a certain height in the northern part of the town. The red brick house with one single story appealed to me at once with its peaceful appearance, and this is what made me decide to take the accommodation despite the comparatively high charge which was two pounds a week for a back room. (Natsume, 2002, p. 38)

Sōseki juxtaposes his wretched room in the back with the one used by Mr K., "who at the time reigned over the entire front of the house" (Natsume, 2002, p. 38):

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[9] I have referred to these sketches in: Sonnenberg, 2017, pp. 19–36.

> The floor of his room was covered with a fine carpet, and there were white muslin curtains over the windows. In addition to a magnificent couch and a rocking chair, he had a separate little bedroom. But the most welcome feature of all was the stove which remained permanently alight, devouring the plentiful and still burning embers. (Natsume, 2002, pp. 43–44)

The movement from the surroundings to the building, then from a building to a person is visible in Sōseki's *The Carlyle Museum*. The narrator walks through the park, sits down by the river and looks at the opposite shore through the London fog. He sees the characteristic five-storey terraced buildings and recalls Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881), the famous philosopher and writer, "the Sage of Chelsea". Sōseki crosses the bridge to reach the house of Carlyle, now turned into a museum. The building looks "just as if a large factory chimney had been cut off at the root and had a roof placed on it and windows inserted" (Natsume, 2005, p. 119). The narrator enters the building and is guided through various rooms which he describes in detail while referring to biographical details from Carlyle's life. From time to time, his attention is drawn to his guide, "a plump woman of about fifty", very efficient in enumerating dates, who has "a sing-song and rhythm in her fluent speech" and utters a recitative "Thank you" after having received a silver coin from the narrator for her efforts (Natsume, 2005, pp. 120–129).

In *The Carlyle Museum* the narration oscillates between landscapes and people. In a similar manner, the descriptions of boarding houses found in Sōseki's *Diaries*, letters and sketches are interwoven with portraits of the people living there. In "Geshuku" the first paragraph describing the building is immediately followed by a description of the landlady:

> The lady of the house had sharp features, with sunken eyes, a *retroussé* nose, a pointed chin and prominent cheekbones. She was so far beyond any femininity that it was impossible, on first seeing her, to guess her age. All the human weaknesses – bitterness, envy, obstinacy, rigidity, doubt – must have taken a delight in playing with that face to give it that ill-favored appearance. Such was my particular impression. (Natsume, 2002, p. 38)

Natsume lists the residents of the house at 85 Priory Road, West Hampstead, at the time Sōseki lived there as a lodger: Frederic Milde, a Prussian of 51 years of age, Mariya Muller, 51 years old (most probably the lady described in "Geshuku"), Antonia Dōring, aged 36, Voltaire Paot (20) and

Agnes Brice (15), the housemaid (2002, p. 9). They appear in "Geshuku" and "Kako no nioi", and the description usually moves from their surroundings to their appearances and finally to their character.

With great skill Sōseki spots the colourful characters and, with an even greater skill, sees colourfulness in those who may at first sight appear flat and uninspiring. In the letter mentioned earlier, written on 9 February 1901, Sōseki describes his landlady vividly, although not too favourably:

> No one reads or knows anything about books, and although the elder sister was formerly some sort of governess, her only topics of conversation are dinner and dance parties in the past . . . Her English isn't so bad – she ran a school, after all – but there is nothing elegant about it, and her vocabulary is limited. When she does reach for an uncommon word, she gets the emphasis or the pronunciation wrong. When I use a difficult word, she pretends to know it even if she doesn't, and it's clear from her expression that she wouldn't compromise her dignity as a British gentlewoman by asking a Japanese – a pathetic creature. (Nathan, 2018, p. 56; Natsume, 2017, pp. 89–90).

In many cases Sōseki often resorts to humour. When the landladies from his final boarding house climbs the stairs to persuade him to take bicycle lessons, she does not merely walk, but she rather "sets about carrying her twelve-stone body up to the top of the second floor" and after some time "this enormous woman's face, looking more pained than victorious, looms large in the doorway" (Natsume, 2005, p. 77). Regardless her painful efforts, she is presented as a stout commander, dictating terms of peace treaties. A much similar war vocabulary is used with reference to Sōseki's bicycle instructor. Mr X does not allow any objection to his methods and when Sōseki asks him about the reasons behind them, the instructor "assails me with all sorts of insults, looking down upon me as the surrendered party and saying that this is the only way possible for the absolute novice" (Natsume, 2005, p. 77).

At times Sōseki is able to depict vividly characters which he claims to be uninteresting and thus creates a novel-like narration from something that is "not at all the stuff of novels", as it happens in *Letter from London*:

> Across the way, a young woman and a woman of about forty sit facing one another. About one foot to my right an old woman and a young girl are chattering. The people opposite are nibbling on biscuits or something while reading their magazines. Ordinary passengers. Not at all the stuff of novels. (Natsume, 2005, p. 77)

Some characters are recurrent in Sōseki's writings, appearing both in his *Diaries*, letters and sketches. One of them is William James Craig (1843–1906), an Irish scholar and one of the editors of the Arden Shakespeare. According to Sōseki's *Diaries*, he met him on 22 November 1900. He went to visit him the day after he had received Craig's reply to his inquiry, written "in messy letters, hard to read". The entry gives a concise description: "a scholar of Shakespeare; agreed on 5 shillings per hour; curious old man" (Natsume, 1997, p. 24). This first visit initiated his regular trips to Craig's apartment at 55a Gloucester Place until October 1901. At some point, he records that Craig is working on his "Introduction" to *King Lear* (Natsume, 1997, p. 32).

Sōseki's comments on Craig's character and methods in the *Diaries* are often taunting. Sōseki notices the discrepancies between Craig's words and actions, and even between his opinions on art and commonplace responses:

> Recently I asked Mr. Craig if he liked snow. No – he retorted – and when asked why he said the mud was dirty. Nobody likes the mud but a poet is somebody who loves snow – I replied. Mr. Craig frequently would go on and on about nature. (Natsume, 1997, p. 35)

Sōseki records that once he asked Professor Craig to correct something he had written and was asked to pay an "extra charge", which leads him to conclusion: "What a mean creature" (Natsume, 1997, p. 36). He also aptly records that Craig did not know the work of George Meredith.

In *Letter from London* there is an allusion to William James Craig, although his presence is merely hinted:

> I cannot face writing any more so hope you will not mind if I stop. Actually I would like to tell you about my tutor. He is intriguingly eccentric. But I have a bit of a headache so will break off here. (Natsume, 2005, p. 59)

Craig is also briefly mentioned in Sōseki's "Preface" to *Bungakuron*:

> As for my private tutor, I recall that I saw him for about one year. During this period, I read every work related to English literature that I could get my hands on. Of course, I had no notion then of using these as materials for an essay, or of using them in a university lecture course after returning to Japan. I was merely flipping randomly through as many pages as possible. (Natsume, 2009, p. 49)

Finally, Craig becomes the main character in one of Sōseki's sketches published as *Eijitsu Shōhin* entitled "Professor Craig". The Irish Shakespearean scholar is presented there as a bizarre figure, hidden in his nest on the fourth storey of the building, who has strange habits and does not remember to return change when paid for his tutoring, thus causing Sōseki's embarrassment. The essay explores the characteristics briefly mentioned in the *Diaries* and the portrait of Craig is vividly comic:

> As my teacher is an Irishman, his accent is difficult to understand. When he becomes excited, it sounds as if two people from Tokyo and Satsuma are quarrelling. Added to this, he is an extraordinarily inconsiderate, hasty and confused person. During a discussion about a complicated subject, his words become so involved that I stop, stare at him and leave myself to fate. (Natsume, 2002, p. 111)

As often the case with Sōseki's writings, the edge of his irony is targeted simultaneously at what he describes and at himself. Thus, the reader laughs both at the incomprehensible lecture delivered by Craig and at Sōseki's embarrassment. This double-edged irony is visible also in the passage describing in greater detail Craig's style of lecturing:

> If I listen to him silently, his flight of thought takes me wherever he likes without returning to the starting point. Also this flight relates to the time of the year and the weather. Very often I land with him on the North Pole, only suddenly to be put down on the South Pole. Today it is this, tomorrow something else. Without approaching his subject too closely, he chatters, but in order to save his honor he indulges in literary small talk. Of course, he is right, because, if I think back, it seems to me impossible to give a polished systematic lecture for seven shillings. It was silly of me to make such a request. (Natsume, 2002, p. 112)

The sketch was written after Sōseki's return to Japan. William James Craig had died not long before and Sōseki knew about his death from a short note included in a journal. This note might have inspired Sōseki's narrative. His image of Craig was also included by Thwaite in his poem already quoted above:

> I know
> I sat with Craig for an hour this morning,
> Hearing him mumbling Shakespeare through his beard.
> And gave him seven shillings in an envelope

Bound round with ribbon which he plucked away
Impatiently and mannerless – due fee
For pedagogic drudgery. (Thwaite, 1984, p. 19)

Thwaite's account seems rather accurate, covering many characteristics Sōseki mentioned in his description. However, it lacks the warmth and humour unmistakably present in "Kureigu Sensei".

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS WRITING FICTION

For Sōseki, his two-year stay in London was a time of intense observation, extensive reading and reflection, not only on the essence of literature but also on the meaning of his own existence. He found himself in the hustle and bustle of "the workshop of the world", as he called London, trying to cope with various acts of discrimination, a lack of understanding, financial strains and neurosis. He immersed himself in his work – reading and writing. The letters and *Rondon Ryūgaku Nikki* show him as an acute observer, avid reader and theatre-goer and a person capable of irony – targeted both at the world and at himself. Oka claims that Sōseki might have treated some of the material in his letters and diaries as a draft for his creative works (Oka, 1981, p. 229). Indeed, as has been illustrated in this article, many of the threads and motifs from Sōseki's stay in London are later developed into full-fledged literary sketches. Sōseki returns to his experiences of studying abroad, evokes the places he saw and the characters he encountered in order to feed his artistic imagination. Moreover, the technique of sketching and the ironic vein of depiction present in his letters and diaries is also something characteristic of his early novels, such as *I Am a Cat* and *Botchan* 坊ちゃん (1906).

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