

The Break with Nature : the Train as a Symbol of Monstruous Westernization in Sōseki Natsume's *Kusamakura*.

Martina Sorge
(Sapienza University of Rome)

Introduction

The Meiji Restoration (1868) is a turning point in Japanese history in that, among many other changes in society, culture, and customs, it marked the beginning of an industrialization process that enabled Japan to compete with the world's superpowers from an economic and political point of view¹. As the Meiji government promoted progress and advancement, it also encouraged the ideology of *kokutai*, or “national essence”, which had to embody loyalty to imperial control and what was considered genuinely Japanese. Many factors contributed to Japan's development, and some of them are objects of study in various fields: for example, this industrialization process occurred in a specific socio-cultural environment and took advantage of Western experts, called *oyatoi gaikokujin* (hired foreigners), who worked as engineers, laborers, and architects. They were employed especially in railway construction (De Maio, 1991) since the Japanese government considered the immediate introduction of new transport systems essential for modernization. This means that external elements played a significant role in Japan's race toward progress, probably making it “less Japanese” than expected.

We also have to consider that these changes affected Tōkyō in particular, since the Japanese government had put a great deal of effort into making it a “world-class capital city” (Freedman, 2011:17) after the Russo-Japanese war (1905) and, above all, after the Great Kantō Earthquake (1923). These two historical events seem to represent important steps to the dramatic urban change Japan was about to face.

This state of affairs also affected literature, which became quite “Tokyo-centered” (Marcus, 2009 : 39) as writers found themselves surrounded by a new, bustling reality, which they tried to describe in order to reduce the sense of displacement and alienation caused by those radical changes. It is interesting to note that trains and railways started to appear very often in literature, as if this novelty in particular had captured Japanese people's attention more than any other as an embodiment of the “leading symbol of civilization and enlightenment” (Ericson, 1996 : 55). In this sense, trains were generally considered a positive and convenient component of the new infrastructure, but writers such as Sōseki Natsume (1867-1916), Kafū Nagai² (1879-1959), Jun'ichirō Tanizaki³ (1886-1985), Ryūnosuke Akutagawa⁴ (1892-1927),

¹ For a better overview of Japan's modernization process, its causes, and its consequences cf. Burks, Ardath W. (edited by, 1985). *The Modernizers. Overseas Students, Foreign Employees, and Meiji Japan*. Boulder; London : Westview Press.

² For detailed information about Kafū Nagai's position on the modernization of Japan cf. Follaco, Gala Maria (2017). *A Sense of the City : Modes of Urban Representation in the Works of Nagai Kafū* (1879-1959). Leiden ; Boston : Brill.

³ Cf. i.e. the short story “Kyōfu” (Terror) in Tanizaki, Jun'ichirō (ed. 1966-1980). *Tanizaki Jun'ichirō zenshū. Vol.2*. Tōkyō : Chuōkōronsha.

⁴ Cf. i.e. the short story “Mikan” (Tangerines) in Akutagawa, Ryūnosuke (ed. 1996). *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke zenshū. Vol. 4*. Tōkyō : Iwanami shoten.

and others, often expressed their concern about the quick advancement these machines had brought to Japan.

Today, we probably think about *Sanshirō* (1908) by Sōseki Natsume as the forefather of criticism about the negative impact of trains and railways on society, the individual, and the environment: in *Sanshirō*'s opinion they constitute a limitation to individual mobility and can cause severe nervous diseases due to sensory overstimulation—for example because of the smoke and smells emitted by trains, the deafening clang of the rails and the overcrowded wagons. His inability to understand the trains' routes and get used to modern city life seems to embody Sōseki's perspective on modernization, which is not entirely demonized, but can lead to loss of values, traditions, and individuality if it occurs too fast. This position would be strengthened in his lecture and essay *Gendai Nihon no Kaika* (The civilization of modern Japan, 1911), as we shall see.

However, we can trace his dissatisfaction with Japan's modern civilization back to one of his previous works, *Kusamakura* (The Three-Cornered World, 1906). This novel has been, and still is, studied in detail from many perspectives, such as the influence of Western aesthetics on Japanese authors, the meaning of painting and colors, and the importance of Chinese classics in Sōseki's works, but there seems to be slightly less attention paid to the trope represented by the train⁵. As a matter of fact, this novel may represent the very first sign of the author's disapproval, since here the train, which often assumes animal-like traits, suggests alienation and dehumanization, as well as nature's devastation. It is probably for these reasons that the protagonist, a painter, tired of the bustling city where he cannot focus on his art, goes back to nature in search of the perfect landscape, which he wants to paint in the total absence of the human feelings and turmoil caused by the urban lifestyle. Unfortunately, the sound and view of the train will bring him back to reality, feelings, and bustling modernity.

1. Positive and negative dehumanization

It is crucial to consider how two different kinds of dehumanization (*hininjō*) coexist in *Kusamakura*: the first one is positive, and it is represented by the absence of interior and exterior turmoil that the main character seeks in order to improve his condition and become able to paint the perfect image without the interference of feelings. His return to rural life can be seen as the reunification of man and nature, which plays an important role in Japanese traditional beliefs and practices⁶ and may simply represent a safe place, distant from the frenzied streets of Tōkyō, but its significance could be even deeper: not only does it correspond to the end of sensory overstimulation, but also to the inner peace brought by the absence of crowds and the mumbling flow of their thoughts and anxieties. In the thirteenth chapter we read:

« The number of people crossing the Nihonbashi bridge is about a hundred every minute.
If you stood near the bridge and could feel the interior conflicts hidden in the heart of each

⁵ Most of the publications in this sense refer to the 80s and 90s, but in this brief study I have tried to consider more recent works.

⁶ For a detailed study of the role of nature in Japanese culture, religion, and traditions see Nishino, Jun'ya (2019). *Nihon rettō no shizen to nihonjin*. Tōkyō: Tsukiji shokan.

passer-by, living in this ephemeral world would be unbearable. »⁷ (*Kusamakura* ed. 2018 : 170)

The inner peace – or absence of human feelings–guaranteed by rural life is threatened by the train, which represents the second and negative aspect of dehumanization : it brings the protagonist back to an unpleasant reality made up of anxieties, chaotic feelings, and problems. In other words, it represents the material and concrete world the protagonist is trying to escape from. Another significant aspect that may allow us to identify the train as a “dehumanizing” element, is the way passengers are carried : people are going somewhere without actually moving, their movement is passive as they are carried like animals toward their destination “in the same box”:

« [The train] rumbles along carrying hundreds of human beings jammed in the same box. It is merciless. People crammed together that way all proceed at the same speed […] . People are said to board a train. I say they are loaded. People are said to go by train. I say they are transported. Nothing disdains individuality more than the train. »⁸ (*Kusamakura* ed. 2018 : 175)

This passivity and simultaneous stillness–motion⁹ lead to a sense of displacement and uprooting: on the one hand, passengers witness the environment’s change caused by the introduction of rails and cables–where there were fields and mountains, they could now observe barren plains and tunnels. Sacred and traditional spaces had been irremediably altered as the introduction of railways proceeded, marking a break with secular customs.

On the other hand, they are helplessly subjected to new interpersonal relations that end up being unnatural. Let us consider the boat episode when the protagonist accompanies Kyūichi to Yoshida station. While they are on the boat heading for the train, they are all sitting so close that he cannot avoid observing Onami – something that a man seldom had the chance, or the courage, to do. Moreover, the situation is made even more unusual since the passengers are five men–the protagonist, Kyūichi and the old man accompanying him, Onami’s brother, Genbei–and only one woman, Onami. These individuals have very little to share, but they are forced to occupy the same space and to talk about pointless things as the boat sails by, switching the topic, asking random things, and chatting about unlikely circumstances such as the one in which Onami herself becomes a warrior and is sent to war. Even though they are not yet on a train, these circumstances are caused by the necessity to reach it, meaning that such interaction is obligatory not only on trains, but also in other moments that, in a way or another, all lead to the train, allowing it to violate every aspect of private life.

2. The serpent of Eden and the iron monster : the return to reality

Trains and railways undoubtedly represent an improvement in means of transport as they created new routes to places that had always been hard to reach. As Foster (2012) clarifies, community

⁷ All the translations from Japanese are by the author. For a reviewed English translation see Natsume Sōseki : Turney, Alan (1906, ed. 2015) pp.176-177.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p.181.

⁹ Freedman (2011) .

borders changed, enabling people to travel and expanding their possibilities regarding work and education. On the other hand, as already mentioned, railways altered the environment by creating a rupture with the traditional “space-time continuum” that was previously well enclosed in nature¹⁰. Legends of *tanuki* and *kitsune*¹¹ started to include references to trains, which often became an actual character with animal-like features. Comparisons with snakes, fearsome dragons emitting smoke from their iron nostrils, and fierce beasts roaring as they approach unaware passengers started to populate common beliefs and novels, with *Kusamakura* being no exception.

«Whenever I see people all crammed together like mere freight as the train fiercely runs along, individuals carried in each wagon while the iron machine does not even care about individuality, I think “Watch out! Watch out! Or you’ll be in trouble!”. Modern civilization is very full of this kind of danger. The reckless train proceeding towards the deeper darkness is one of them. » (*Kusamakura* ed. 2018 : 175,176)

It is interesting to note that in this passage the author used the word *mōretsu* (猛烈) to describe the train’s movement, which denotes fierce, beast-like characteristics. Moreover, a few lines later the train is called a “long snake” born of civilization as it approaches slithering and exhaling black smoke from its mouth¹².

The comparison between trains and snakes was not unknown to Japanese imagery, since the train had already been compared to the serpent of Eden that had corrupted the pure Adam and Eve as the railroads were tainting fields and tunneling through thousand-year-old mountains: as Ericson (1996 : 57) suggests, “railroads had corrupted village youth by exposing them to the enticements of the city and, in so doing, endangering the rural repository of traditional values”. In other words, trains appeared like demonic creatures that symbolized the destruction of nature and traditions and started to populate tales as phantoms or fearsome beasts that often ended up accidentally killing *tanuki* on the rails.

At the same time, it is noteworthy that this kind of image was counterbalanced by an enthusiastic acceptance of the modernization process, which was strongly encouraged by the government¹³. In fact, the inauguration of railways and stations often constituted festive occasions that were immortalized in pictures and newspapers. This is because the construction of rails, trains, and other infrastructures or means of transport could become an important source of income and economic success for Japan, placing it among other powerful, leading countries of the world.

Even though the protagonist is longing for tranquility and nature, as the boat gets closer to the station, he realizes that the chase after progress seems to be essential for Japan and that, for this reason, it is by no means about to come to a halt. He is therefore awakened from his quiet and

¹⁰ Here Foster cites Schievelbusch, Wolfgang (1986) . *The Railway Journey : The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nine-teenth Century*. Berkeley, CA : University of California Press.

¹¹ For a detailed study of traditional legends and Japanese folklore related to nature, see Gluck, Carol (1985) . *Japan’s Modern Myths : Ideology in the Late Meiji Period*. Princeton : Princeton University Press.

¹² *Gō to oto ga shite, shiroku hikaru tetsuro no ue wo, bunmei no chōda ga notakutte kuru. Bunmei no chōda ha kuchi kara kuroi kemuri wo haku* (Kusamakura ed. 2018 : 177) . For a reviewed English translation see Natsume Sōseki ; Turney, Alan (1906, ed. 2015) p. 183.

¹³ Some bureaucrats initially resisted the introduction of railroads and the modernization process in general. For a detailed explanation about the topic see the paragraph “Early Reactions to the Railroad” in Ericson (1996) , p.57-62.

dehumanized world to be thrown again into harsh reality, symbolized by the train itself, for

« the railway train represents the world of reality. There is no other thing more typical of twentieth-century civilization than the train. » (*Kusamakura* ed. 2018 : 174) ¹⁴

Conclusion

In conclusion, we could again ask the old question: was Sōseki Natsume against Japan's modernization? The answer may lie in the lecture he gave in 1911 entitled *Gendai Nihon no kaika* ("The civilization of modern Japan") ¹⁵ : trains, steamboats, telegraph, telephone, and automobile are all listed as convenient methods of horizontal development ¹⁶ aimed at facilitating life and reducing human efforts. This could suggest that Sōseki did not despise modernization and its products but recognized them as useful tools ; at the same time, he was worried about how these changes had occurred in Japan and how long they took to become effective.

Firstly, modernization was so unnaturally rapid that people could only be overwhelmed by the new lifestyle without being able to get used to it. Japanese people could not absorb the changes but simply accepted them passively while their reality was being reshaped. The same civilization process that in the West took almost a century to bear fruit was completed by Japan in twenty years ¹⁷, generating that sense of alienation and displacement that *Kusamakura's* main character manifests by seeking refuge in the rural life distant from the city and the reality it came to embody.

Another important theme is what Sōseki calls internal (*naihatsuteki*) and external (*gaihatsuteki*) motivation : Japan's modernization was not entirely spontaneous but modelled upon that of the Western countries and merely reflected her need to equal them in power and importance. Civilization in Japan, therefore, was not internally motivated, but was actually determined by external forces that were pushing the nation toward an unnatural development.

Lastly, as suggested above, it is noteworthy not only that the civilization process was led by Western countries, but also that those countries sent their experts and laborers to Japan to complete the work. In other words, the modernization process was totally "Westernized" as it was based on Western timings, West-related reasons, and Western people with their techniques, materials, and engineers. That is to say, very few parts of this process can be properly defined as "Japanese".

Even though it is made explicit only in the last pages, Sōseki's disapproval is well manifested in *Kusamakura*, but it will reach its best expression in *Sanshirō*, where the train leaves its passive, background role to become an actual monstrous—and even murderous—character that the protagonist has to face. *Sanshirō's* point of view on trains seems clear at the beginning of the second chapter, when he is described as being startled by Tōkyō in general and by the ringing of the streetcars, in particular, but it is the episode of the suicide on the rails that exemplifies the demonic aura associated with the train and the irrational fear it can instill. It is interesting that the only dramatic

¹⁴ For a reviewed English translation see Natsume Sōseki ; Turney, Alan (1906, ed. 2015) p. 181.

¹⁵ For a complete English translation of the work see "The Civilization of Modern-Day Japan" by Jay Rubin in Rimer, J. Thomas; Gessel, Van C. (edited by, 2011) . *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Japanese Literature Abridged. With poetry selections by Amy Vladeck Heinrich, Leith Morton, and Hiroaki Sato, Poetry Editors.* New York : Columbia University Press : pp. 154-161.

¹⁶ Ishihara ; Komori (2017) .

¹⁷ It is not a coincidence that, in *Sanshirō*, Sōseki writes that "Meiji thought had been reliving three hundred years of Western history in the space of forty" (Natsume Sōseki ; Rubin ; Murakami, 2009 : 54) .

event that occurs in the storyline is caused by the train, and that this is so shocking for Sanshirō that, after the tragedy, he has a night full of “dreams of danger” (Natsume Sōseki; Rubin; Murakami, 1908 ed. 2009 : 77) . He is generally scared and bewildered by Tōkyō, but only after the suicide episode is he so “terrified he can’t think about anything else”.

In other words, while in *Kusamakura* the train epitomizes a sense of displacement and anxiety, resembles mythical, animal-like creatures, and makes useless the protagonist’s attempt to escape reality, in *Sanshirō* it becomes an actual monster. It is also true that it is seldom described with animal characteristics, but it turns into an active character that commits the cruelest and most “dehumanizing” act : homicide. Therefore, it not only destroys the environment and causes dizziness and interior turmoil, but it can also concretely harm people.

Perhaps Sōseki was not fully against the modernization of means of transport, from which he himself had benefited during his travels abroad, but he most likely represents the uncertainty and worries of those Japanese intellectuals who were helplessly witnessing the drastic changes brought by trains and railroads—modern inventions unexpectedly capable of causing strong emotions and tragic events.

Bibliographical references

- De Maio, Silvana (1991) . “Gli *oyatoi gaikokujin* e l’introduzione dell’ingegneria civile in Giappone. Richard Henry Brunton : ingegnere « figlio del suo tempo » . Parte I” . *Il Giappone*, Vol. 31, pp.209–229, 231, 233, 235, 237.
- De Maio, Silvana (1992) . “Gli *oyatoi gaikokujin* e l’introduzione dell’ingegneria civile in Giappone. Richard Henry Brunton : ingegnere « figlio del suo tempo » . Parte II” . *Il Giappone*, Vol. 32, pp.63–85
- Ericson, Steven J. (1996) . *The Sound of the Whistle : Railroads and the State in Meiji Japan*. Cambridge (Massachusetts) ; London : Harvard University Press.
- Foster, Michael Dylan (2012) . “Haunting Modernity : Tanuki, Trains, and Transformation in Japan” . *Asian Ethnology*, Vol. 71, No.1, pp.3–29.
- Freedman, Alisa (2011) . *Tōkyō in Transit : Japanese Culture on the Rail and Road*. Stanford, California : Stanford University Press.
- Ishihara, Chiaki; Komori, Yōichi (2017) . *Sōseki gekidoku. Series : Kawade Bukkuso*, Vol. 104. Tōkyō : Kawade shobō shinsha.
- Marcus, Marvin (2009) . *Reflections in a Glass Door : Memory and Melancholy in the Personal Writings of Natsume Sōseki*. Honolulu : University of Hawaii Press.
- Natsume, Sōseki (1906, ed. 2015) ; Turney, Alan (Translated from the Japanese and with an Introduction by) . *The Three Cornered World. Series : UNESCO collection of representative works. Japanese series*. Washington, D.C. : Regnery Gateway.
- Natsume, Sōseki (1906, ed. 2018) . *Kusamakura*. Tōkyō : Shinchōsha.
- Natsume, Sōseki (1908, ed. 1971) . *Sanshirō*. Tōkyō : Shūeisha.
- Natsume, Sōseki (1908, ed. 2009) ; Rubin, Jay (translated by) ; Murakami, Haruki (with an introduction by) . *Sanshirō*. London : Penguin Group.
- Natsume, Sōseki (1911) . *Nihon gendai no kaika* in Natsume Sōseki (1970) . *Natsume Sōseki shū*,

- Vol. 1*, pp.454–487. Coll.: *Nihon bungaku zenshū Vol. 13*. Tōkyō: Chikuma Shobō.
- Satō, Ryōta (2009). “Natsume Sōseki *Kyō ni tsukeru yūbe* ron. ‘Kindai izen’ e no dōkei”. *The Bukkyō University Graduate School Review Compiled by the Graduate School of Literature, Vol. 37*, pp.91–107.
- Tsuruta, Kin’ya (1988) . “Sōseki’s *Kusamakura*: A Journey to « The Other Side »”. *The Journal of the Association of Teachers of Japanese, Vol.22, No.2*, pp. 169–188.