



Monet: The River of Dreams

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I am going to give the first word to William Wordsworth and the last word to Monet. In 1802 William Wordsworth wrote 'On Westminster Bridge', the first eight lines of which read:

*Earth has not anything to show more fair;
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glistening in the smokeless air.*

It is the penultimate word I want to hold for a moment - 'smokeless'. Last week, in the lecture on Canaletto, you saw a smokeless London. This week, you will see the results of environmental change, physical change and aesthetic change, and I think it is important to keep all those things together, as London comes to look different but also, just as crucially, London becomes to be perceived differently. It is ways of seeing, as much as what is actually seen, that is our central story today.

When we think of Turner's picture, shown at the Royal Academy in 1835, of the burning of the old Houses of Parliament, or Constable's picture of the ceremonies for the opening of the new Waterloo Bridge, shown at the Royal Academy of 1832, we have images that these are, in a sense, history paintings. These are paintings about the physical history of London, about the major changes of London, but they are also paintings that do engage in some sense with the atmosphere of London as well, with the physical ambience, the air, that created London's extremely distinctive tenor and, indeed, very distinctive smell.

The changes are mapped out gradually in a number of texts and images, the changes of perception as well as the physical change, and one of the most pioneering of these images is in an essay published by the French writer and polymath, Théophile Gautier, in 1842. I would like to quote this for you now, because it seems to me to usher in the Thames that we are going to be looking at and a Thames that is the absolute antithesis of the crystalline vision of Canaletto and indeed of Wordsworth's 'smokeless air':

I'll never forget the magnificent spectacle that presented itself to my eyes. The gigantic arches of London Bridge stood out as dark silhouettes against the setting sun. A long trail of fire sparkled along the lapping waves. Clouds of violet smoke and fog bathed the space as far as Southwark Bridge, whose arches one could see vaguely brushed in, and on the South Bank, the lines of the horizon were happily punctuated by monumental chimneys, which one could take for votive columns if ionic or Doric capitals were in the habit of belching forth smoke. Their vigorous tones made the orange and lemon yellow tones of the sky stand out still more. This smoke, spread over everything, blurs harsh angles. It veils the meanness of buildings. It enlarges views. It gives mystery and vagueness to the most positive objects. In the smoke, a factory chimney readily becomes an obelisk. A warehouse of poor design takes on the airs of a Babylonian terrace. A grim row of columns changes into the porticos of Palmyra. The symmetrical baroness of

civilisation, the vulgarity of the forms it adopts, all become softened or disappear thanks to this kindly veil.

In a sense, it is the result of, and the aesthetic of, this 'kindly veil' that we are looking at today. I think that it is this process of actually seeing the fog, seeing the atmosphere of London as something that can materially transform the experience, can transport the everyday into something of great and startling and surprising, indeed unique, beauty that is really the story we are pursuing in this lecture, but it is a story that not every artist pursued.

We can see that not much had changed in the imagination of artists viewing London if we think of paintings thirty or so years after the ones I mentioned of Turner and Constable. For instance, there is David Roberts' 1861 painting of the new Houses of Parliament, which depict them with a sort of ambient light that could be pretty much almost anywhere, or the 1884 painting looking back to St Paul's from near London Bridge by Atkinson Grimshaw which shows his remarkable capacity to pretend that mist and fog never existed down on the Thames at night-time. Here, of course, we are dealing with the relationship between the Thames and the monuments that flank it. These monuments could be brand new, such as the Houses of Parliament in the painting by Roberts. There, the Victoria Tower had been literally completed at that particular moment in the very early 1860s.

This appearance of the new in paintings serves to bring out the importance of material change in paintings of London. I want to emphasise material change, because of course the central part of London along the Thames becomes absolutely transformed by the emergence of railway, but particularly of course by the creation of the Victoria Embankment, particularly the first tranche from Blackfriars through to the Houses of Parliament, which is opened in 1870. We can see this in paintings of the construction of the railways along the Thames by people such as E.A. Goodall, who painted numerous pictures of the construction of the railways around Blackfriars, Waterloo Bridge and Embankment. When we look at pictures such as these, we begin to get a sense of a gradually changing aesthetic which begins to emerge.

An interesting work to look at in the lead up to Monet's vision of London is an early work by W.L. Wyllie, from 1870, done from the view from the top of the Monument, as far as one can see. Dominant in the picture is, naturally for a picture done there in London, Cannon Street Railway, but in the dim and hazy distance, right in the centre we have the Houses of Parliament. When you look at this part of the picture you cannot but be reminded of the images which Monet would later produce of that part of London. But in Wyllie's picture, again, we very much have a sense that we are looking at monuments, we are looking at the physical changes of the environment, with of course the emphasis on the railway as the central axis of what we see, but it is also certainly the modern monumental London as mediated by the atmosphere.

When we come to Whistler's images of London, we might take, for example, one of the very earliest of his Thames scenes, which are essentially pictures where the fog is the predominant element. A picture that appears to be as early as the mid-1860s shows a scene that looks from Chelsea Embankment, where Whistler lived, over towards Battersea. It is a not particularly well-known canvas - it is a picture that is now in a private collection in North America - but it is a picture that certainly suggests that, as early as this, Whistler is already very well aware of the way in which he can use the atmosphere of London to create an overall aesthetic ambience that absolutely overrides and absorbs the physical elements of the scene that he is looking at. But the point is not to paint a picture of the place; the point is to use the ambient atmosphere as a way of creating an extraordinary aesthetic pictorial unity. But at the same time, I would insist, all the way through, looking at Whistler at his most seemingly non-representational, these are pictures of the place. These are ways of trying to convey something distinct about London. It is not just an aesthetic field; we are not looking at a proto Mark Rothko.

Then, in the same year as the Wyllie painting I mentioned before, we have another foreign visitor, who is leaving France because of the Franco-Prussian War, and taking refuge from the possibility of getting enlisted - in fact, as far as one can see, he would not have got enlisted, but he left nonetheless. On this first visit, Claude Monet painted three pictures of the Thames, of which two show the Pool of London - so we are just down from Monument where Wyllie did his picture. Of course, at that time, the Pool of London is not just an atmospheric ambience. Here, I have Mr & Mrs S.C. Hall, *The Book of the Thames*, 1859:

From the tower stairs, the view looking either way is very striking. The river is crowded with shipping and steamer and, from this point, begins that succession of vessels which affords the voyager so grand an idea of the vast trade of the British metropolis. There are perhaps few sights in the world more striking, certainly none more calculated, to make an Englishman proud of his country. The Pool of Thames is truly a grand and glorious sight, the proudest station of the world.

That was how a patriotic English person saw it, but what did a Frenchman make of it? Here is Elisee Reclus, writing literally the following year, in a guidebook to London, although quoting an English text, which has a rather different tone:

It's by the Thames, Mr Bullworth says, that the foreigner should enter London. The breadth of the powerful river, the lofty factories, with their sombre and funereal appearance, which line its sad banks, the thick fog through which one can only with difficulty make out the vague shadows of these gigantic contours, the marvellous silence with which one glides through the city of the nations, alongside all the large ships, symbols of her power, the melancholy, the solemnity, the grandeur, the dimness of all the objects that surround you prepare you for the sight of serious and austere splendours.

I think there is an extraordinary combination here between a sense of the gradual exploding commercial power, and indeed maritime power and temporal power, of Britain, London, England, the conglomerate, but also a very strong sense of a very particular aesthetic quality in the experience of going through London.

Monet was doing just the same thing ten years later, coming up into the Pool of London and playing on this contrast between the scale of it - think of how different the scale of this is from the Seine in Paris. Monet in fact is brought up at Le Harve on the Seine estuary, in a major port. But I think the sheer scale of the London activities at this date would have still startled him, although he had had this experience of a great port-scape, you could call it, in his childhood at Le Harve.

The third of Monet's pictures he did in London at this time is the one that, happily, is owned by the National Gallery, it is his iconic view of the Houses of Parliament. One of the things about this that immediately needs to be emphasised with this picture is that almost everything in it is incredibly recently constructed. The image of the Houses of Parliament is something that we feel to be a comfortable view of what we now readily see as a historic London. In fact Big Ben had only been completed in 1858 and Victoria Tower was finished a little bit later. Westminster Bridge was done in 1862. On the right of Monet's picture we have the Embankment, which was still being built and so we see part of the structure of construction going on - the lamp-posts which are on brackets have not yet been installed, so it has been opened to the public, but it is not yet complete, and nor was St Thomas' Hospital, which is completed the following year, in 1871. So you do have in this picture, a scene that is absolutely of the moment. I remember when I was first looking at this picture, years ago I actually visualised it as being the 19th Century equivalent of London Wall, outside, at that moment when there was that succession of rather ugly rectilinear tower blocks going along it, which of course now have all given way to the extravaganza of post-modernism that surrounds the Museum of London today, which is not perhaps quite so clear-cut about what it means by the modern. But I am not talking about that today, but instead, wanting to emphasise the fact that Monet, by choosing this site, is choosing a site that is just as much of the moment as the docks. The docks are of the moment in terms of activity, although some of the buildings are older, and in the picture all the structures themselves are new.

I would like to, again, quote two contrasting views of the effect of the London atmosphere here. The first is a great French author, who visits London very shortly after Monet, and publishes his book on London and England, in 1872, which had some wonderful descriptions of many aspects of London life and also the London landscape.

I've just spent half an hour on Waterloo Bridge. The Houses of Parliament, blurred and indistinct, appear in the distance but a wretched pile of scaffolding. Nothing is discernable, and more particularly, nothing is living, except a few steamboats skimming along the river, black, smoky, unwearied insects.

But also, of course, there is a residual feeling that what is happening to London is not part of this rather murky, seemingly illegible poetry that you feel lurking behind this account, but that it just is a besmirched city; it is a city that has been wrecked by the arrival of industry. But I will move on to give you the Honourable Rollo Russell, from the book called London Fogs of 1880.

For Londoners, the fog contaminates the vital breath of heaven, so that they lose the glorious and almost universal privilege of looking upon the clear azure above them. They lose all distant prospects, urban or rural, and the pleasant variations of cloud shadows which delight us in the views of great continental cities which are not blurred or blotted out by smoke. These things are sermons from nature which humanity has heeded of. London is indeed hideous to look at, but would be less hideous without its smoke.

When Whistler visited London in the 1870's, he did not see it that way, and wrote, at almost exactly the same moment, to his sister-in-law, when he was away from London:

I begin rather to wish myself back in my own lovely London fogs. They are lovely those fogs, and I am their painter!

One of the art historical teasers with which I have wrestled for years and years, without ultimately resolving it, is whether Monet visited Whistler while Monet is in London and realised that Whistler was at work on pictures like the one of 1871. My own feeling is that the visual evidence is that it is extremely likely that he did, and we know that Whistler is in the address book of another French artist, Daubigny, with whom Monet was in close contact at this date, but we have not yet found the document. It is one of those teasing things that I have been concerned for most of career with trying to work out whether Monet actually met Whistler in 1870/1871. So I have been literally working on this problem for well over thirty years, as yet without any definite answer.

But again, I think that that sense of being able to use the paint so economically to create a sense of the overall ambient atmosphere, to create a unity, both of colour and tone, but also, to quite an extent, of touch - certainly, Monet does create a broken touch on the river surface with the darker strokes that run across the foreground of his London pictures of this time. But if one looks at this picture closely, both the sky and the treatment of the broader areas of water, there is a real similarity between it and the qualities that you get in the Whistler London nocturnes of the same period.

Through this period of the 1870s and 1880s, Whistler is the reference point. Again, I would like emphasise I am able to talk about him in this lecture on a foreign artist in London, since of course he was an American, so he is also a foreign artist in London, and indeed he was somebody whose national identity is something that he himself played with, as a sort of conjuring trick. He could be British at certain points; he then could become fairly French at certain moments; and certainly American if he needed to be. So that there was a strong sense that Whistler could be something of a cultural chameleon, though he did not try to blend in through his shifting cultural identity; rather, he consistently wants to emphasise his 'otherness' in whatever circumstance he might find himself. So, in London, he would be either French or American, and in Paris, he would probably be trying to be chic enough to be thought to be a Parisian, until you realised that it was even cleverer to be an American who looked like a Parisian. So Whistler is a charming object of study and another great wordsmith, as you'll hear in a moment.

But before I read the famous Whistler quote about the transforming powers of the fog, I would like to read another quote. If you remember back to the Gautier quote about the way in which the warehouses become like Palmyra and so on, and then the factory chimneys seem as if they have capitals on top of them, like great Greek antique columns, you will see that a lot of the metaphorical imagery of the transformative powers of the mist seems to be in these texts before Whistler produces his formulation. So remember Gautier, and now listen to Aaron Watson from, *The Lower Thames*, published in the *Magazine of Art* in 1883:

For there is a marvellous quality in our London atmosphere: it brings quite near to us the effects that we ordinarily associate with distance; it enfolds all ugliness in a purple haze and subdues it. That row of dusky buildings, of various heights and with tall chimneys looking like towers, makes the best of possible backgrounds for the vivid colours of the Thames barges, which, with sloping masts and sails partially unfurled, cluster along what, at low tide, still deserves the name of shore. There is no portion of the Lower Thames which is more majestic and impressive than that which lies between the Houses of Parliament and Waterloo Bridge. The further bank - that's the Surrey bank - is just far enough away to lose its natural harshness in the softening influences of a dim atmosphere. On the South Bank, there is ugliness and squalor enough. Everywhere, great poverty is visible, side by side with the sources and the materials of great wealth. One knows all this, leaning over the Embankment and looking towards the Surrey side, but the knowledge of it does not disturb the picture in which all that is ugly and dismal glides into colour and form.

Again, that is a wonderfully precise, concise statement of the fact that the effects of atmosphere in London were perceived as simply, if you like, obliterating questions of poverty and of the actual physical nature of urban life. It is a process of aestheticisation, but again, it is juxtaposed with the knowledge of that life that is going on there on the other side of the river, on the Surrey side, through the mists. So the awareness is there, but yet a space is carved out for the possibility of the quintessential aesthetic experience which does not have to take into account the problematic social conditions of the people who lived there.

So, remembering both Gautier and that last text by Watson, here is Whistler's famous version of the same idea, published in 1885 in his celebrated Ten O'Clock Lecture by this wonderfully called 'Mr Whistler's Ten O'Clock', so you had to stay up for the privilege. Here is Whistler:

And when the evening mist clothes the riverside with poetry, as with a veil, and the poor buildings lose themselves in the dim sky, and the tall chimneys become campanile, and the warehouses are palaces in the night, and the whole city hangs in the heavens and fairyland is before us, then the wayfarer hastens home. The working man and the cultured one, the wise man and the one of pleasure, they cease to understand, as they have ceased to see, and Nature, who for once has sung in tune, sings her exquisite song to the artist alone.

Again, this is the idea of this transformative thing. The metaphors here lead on to Venice, where Whistler had recently spent extended periods, but the idea that somehow the structures that you see silhouetted in the mists here, Battersea or Cremorne Gardens and so on, is reduced to a series of lights, reflected mysteriously across the water. Here, the social element being drained out in favour of the aestheticised effect. One of his pictures in grey and silver of this period was Cremorne Lights, which is a pointer which enables the viewer to make a chain of associations, but then, in a sense, withdraws them by the way in which the scene is treated.

Perhaps the most sort of evocative statement about the issue of aestheticisation comes from Oscar Wilde in 1889. One's first reaction is that this is rather silly; your second reaction I think is that it is not at all silly.

Where, if not from the Impressionists, do we get these wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets? To whom, if not to them and to their master [by which he means Whistler], do we owe these lovely silver mists that brood over our river and turn to faint forms of fading grace, curved bridge and swaying barge. The extraordinary change that has taken place in the climate of London in the last ten years is entirely due to this particular school of art. One does not see anything until one sees its beauty. Then, and only then, does it come into existence. At present, people see fogs not because there are fogs but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. There may have been fogs for centuries in London - I daresay there were - but no one saw them, and so we don't know anything about them. They didn't exist until art had invented them.

I think that is a fascinating statement of the sense in which our vision is conditioned by cultural frameworks. It reminds one that these frameworks are absolutely cultural, that they are not simply about unique individual subjects going out into a physical environment and experiencing their surroundings, but rather they are about something much more complex than that, which means that we can only process our surroundings by a chain of associations which attribute values to the different aspects of what we see. What we have got here is this dramatic value shift, from the appreciation of the monuments, the appreciation of the physical things, to a sense that the place acquires its poetry through this apprehension of the atmosphere and the way that the atmosphere actually transformed the experience of the mundane into a metaphorical level, into a form of personal, internalised dream.

Even the solidly materialist Émile Zola was, to some extent, party to all this. He gave a rather wonderful interview to The Guardian on 3rd October 1893, after visiting London.

Reminded of his experiences of a London fog, Monsieur Zola said he believed that it suited the landscape, London landscape, better than the sunlight - Westminster Abbey and the Thames looked heightened in artistic effects in its folds. Moreover, he noted that all the Turners that he saw showed London in such a fog. 'On the whole,' said the novelist, 'I came away from London with a profound admiration of its wealth, its grandeur and its immensity. Each bridge is a Cyclopean structure. We have nothing in France to equal such things, nothing to be compared to the port of London.' Asked if he was about to write something on the city, he said: 'I may probably go back there, live in a quiet hotel, and take my notes at leisure. I shall introduce the Thames above all - it so deeply impressed me.'

Sadly Zola never wrote a novel set in London. This is sad because, for the extraordinary novel, La Terre, the Earth novel, the peasant novel, his research apparently lasted him inside of a week, which enabled him to write 600 pages of sort of ghastly, tragic, sort of semi-pornography of a relentless sort, which implied a deep level knowledge of the whole fabric of rural life. So who knows what we could have got from a novel on his on London.

But I want to come back to his idea of going to live in quiet hotel, because the quiet hotel he would probably have gone to in the 1890s would have been the Savoy. We have engravings from that time, such as from Eric Shanes' book about London and the Thames - which show us contemporary depictions of staying at the Savoy on the Thames. In one you have a publicity engraving from a magazine emphasised all its facilities. In another, which is the most important thing for my argument, you see a hazy background to diners sitting at lunch overlooking the Thames. This shows the fact that, by this date, the fog and the

London atmosphere was already part of the tourist appeal of the city. In the image we see, in the foreground, the coloured effects of the fashionable people dining on a terrace, and in the distance an almost monochrome depiction of the Embankment and the Houses of Parliament. But the point I am making here is that it is actually part of the advertising propaganda of the Savoy to present it as having this viewpoint into the fog, and I think that that is enormously interesting, by around 1900.

In the late 1890s, two artists spent time in upstairs rooms at the Savoy, of which the first was Whistler, in very sad circumstances, because his wife was in the bedroom with him dying of cancer. This is something behind his extraordinarily minimalist little lithographs of the views out of the window in 1896. He finds lithography at this very difficult moment to be the only medium he can really work with, but also a medium tremendously well-suited to rendering the effects of atmosphere, in this case, entirely tonally of course, entirely in monochrome.

We know that Whistler and Monet knew each other by this date, and we that they become quite good friends in the late-1880s and early-1890s, but we still do not know whether or not Whistler met Monet at some point and told him about the Savoy. Or perhaps it was that Monet saw the prints of Whistler's lithographs and suggested to him that a visit to the Savoy might be a good idea.

Monet certainly had been toying with the idea of coming back to London after his first visit there in 1870/1871, and he pays a couple of short visits, without painting, one in the late-'80s, one in the early-1890s, but the idea of doing a major London series becomes absolutely focused as one of his prime missions, one of his prime ambitions, from around 1890 onwards, as he begins to work in fairly systematically organised series that are the keynote of his later work.

He comes to London for three visits in successive years, 1899, 1900 and 1901, and he paints a very large number of canvases here, or at least he begins a very large number of canvases here. They are of three subjects: the view that Whistler had done across Waterloo Bridge, to the east from the Savoy; the view, that Whistler had also done, down to the south, across from the Savoy towards the Houses of Parliament and the Bridges; and the third one, which he only begins on the second visit, is a view onto the Houses of Parliament.

But the strange thing is that the major group of pictures, and also those done by Whistler, do not include Cleopatra's Needle, which we can see clearly in the Savoy advertisements. There are three unfinished paintings by Monet where Cleopatra's Needle is in there, as indeed it should be. I had the very great good fortune to go up into one of those Savoy rooms, and the Needle is unmistakably there in the foreground of your visual field. It is quite inescapably there. I think the question that has to therefore arise here is: why does he omit it? Why does Monet omit it? I think that it has to be because he felt that it intruded into this sense of atmospheric ambience and unity which he saw as the keynote of the series. So we have from earlier sketches that he starts mapping it in, and then thinks it just won't do, it just is spoiling that sense of atmospheric unity that is the point of my being here, and so it has been erased from the other pictures. I have looked quite hard to see whether there is a hidden columnar form in the foreground of the other ones, and I have never found a pentimentoed-out version of Cleopatra's Needle, but he just decided it would not do and so he dropped it. I think it is really important that he felt that that freedom was something he had to manipulate his scene. His aesthetic or ethic, if you like, of a certain form of naturalism did not stop him from dropping the Needle.

If we think now of the Waterloo Bridge pictures that Monet did at this time, we are looking into fog most of the time, but we are also, mostly, looking into the sunlight, so he mostly begins the Waterloo Bridge pictures in the morning, when the light is over in the east, when he is looking eastwards and towards the sun. The pictures are, of course, of the original Waterloo Bridge that was falling down, sadly, by the 1930s and replaced by the equally handsome one at the moment, which I think is another great London bridge.

Monet also did many paintings of the view down towards the Houses of Parliament. These were usually done during the midday and into the early afternoon. As we can see in them, we have the sun in the picture in such a way that we know it is an early afternoon sun. Monet was in London in winter, so he has very short working days, but he had a greater likelihood of fog at that time.

The pictures Monet did from the St Thomas' Hospital looking towards the Houses of Parliament, all of which are afternoon pictures which, again, look into the sunlight. This effect of looking into the light means, first of all, that you get the sun itself in the fog, more or less directly represented, and also of course that the forms of the buildings themselves are silhouetted. You do not get that sense of three-dimensional space. You certainly do not get any of the detailing of course on the Houses of Parliament, and the

Houses of Parliament, if anything, is a building with detail.

We can see these same predominant tactics of painting towards the sun across the 34 pictures that Monet exhibited in the spring of 1904. When you look at them all together, it gives you a strong sense of the way that the series function, in terms of variations, and I think that this is rather crucial to this question about Monet's attitude towards his subject matter.

From the beginning of the experiment of painting these groups of serial paintings, Monet is absolutely focused on this idea of the unifying effects of the atmosphere. Here he is, in 1891, talking at the first of these exhibitions, that of what we now call the grainstacks - I will not go into the reason why they are no longer haystacks, but this is, again, a matter that has troubled art historians deeply now for nearly thirty years. Here's Monet:

For me, a landscape does not exist in its own right, since its appearance changes at every moment, but the surrounding atmosphere brings it to life, the air and the light which vary continually. For me, it's only the surrounding atmosphere that gives subjects their true value. The paintings only acquire their full value through the comparison and succession of the entire series.

Then, a few years later, he said:

To me, the motif itself is an insignificant factor. What I want to reproduce is what lies between the motif and me.

He wants to paint the air around the objects and not the objects themselves. That implies a really radical abandonment of the actual subject matter, and certainly, when we look at the range of different subjects that Monet chooses for the series, this is very much a matter for ongoing debate among art historians. My view is that the primary reason he chose particular subjects is because of the atmospheric effects he was going to get out of them, rather than because of the symbolic content of those subjects. That is a very vexed issue in relation to the pictures of Rouen Cathedral, which were exhibited in 1895.

But now we come to the question of what does he actually make of London. I still think that the primary reason why London is extraordinary for him and a place he has to come and paint at this length is because of the atmospheric effects.

Here is Monet, again, talking about London - this is from while he is actually here:

The fog in London assumes all sorts of colours. There are black, brown, yellow, green and purple fogs and the interest in painting is to get the objects as seen through all these fogs. My practised eye has found that objects change in appearance in a London fog more and quicker than in any other atmosphere. The challenge is to get every change down on canvas.

This is Monet very much presenting himself as the naturalist. This can be put alongside what he says a couple of times later on, in the last part of his life, when he talks to an dealer about his experience of London:

What I like most of all in London is the fog. How could English painters of the 19th Century have painted its houses brick by brick? Those fellows painted bricks they didn't see, bricks they could not see. It's the fog that gives London its marvellous breadth. Its regular massive blocks become grandiose in this mysterious cloak.

And then, a couple of years later, another conversation with the same art dealer:

I so love London, but I only love it in winter. In summer, it's nice enough, with its parks, but that's not nearly as good as the winter with the fog, because, without the fog, London would not be a beautiful city. It's this fog that gives it its breadth, its magnificent breadth. Its regular blocks, regular massive blocks become grandiose in this mysterious mantle.

There he is, really talking about the fact that these subjects, although very loaded for us in many ways, are for him, as a painter, interesting for their appearance through the fog more than anything else. So you could certainly see these as pictures that are absolutely about London's great sights, but at the same time, I think it would be right to say that the primary motivation for choosing to paint here, and also choosing to paint those scenes, was because the particular configurations of forms acquired these effects, these extraordinary veiled effects, in the London fogs.

He tells us, in an interview, later on, about the problems he had in his Savoy Hotel balcony:

At the Savoy Hotel, or at St Thomas' Hospital, from where I took my viewpoints, I had over 100 canvases on the go of a single subject [In fact, this is not quite true]. By searching feverishly through these sketches, I would choose one that was not too far away from what I could see, from the effect, that is, outside, but in spite of everything, I'd change it completely. When I'd stopped work, shuffling through my canvasses, I would notice that I'd overlooked precisely the one which would have suited me best and which was at my fingertips.

Even though Monet is exaggerating here - certainly clearly with the number of canvasses he was working on - but I think we have to imagine that as a perfectly realistic scenario: that he would have all the pictures around him, and as the light changed, he would have them all half-visible so he could quickly pick one up that looked more or less like what is in front of him. But, the process was much more complex than this. This sounds like it was all done like the celebrated Impressionist sunrise; the whole thing meant to be, in principle, done in half an hour. He had three long visits to London, for three months at a time. He leaves London last in the spring of 1901. These paintings are finished for exhibition in the spring of 1904. Many of them are dated 1902, 1903, 1904, which were years when Monet was not in London. We also know from letters too that he was basically spending every winter of that period reworking the London pictures back at Giverny. In the summer, he was painting the Water Garden and redesigning the Water Garden; in the winter, he was working away at the London paintings. So, the final results of these paintings are not, I think, at all closely related to the way they would have looked when he finally left the London painting period in the spring of 1901.

That does of course imply something about the sense that there is an idea of London lying behind them, as well as simply the fruits of direct observation. I think there is one wonderful moment in his time in London where he makes this very clear; that he is not just working from immediately what he sees, but that there is a preconceived idea about what London ought to look like. This is, at one point, where he finds that there is a period of successive days where there is no fog. There are some wonderful descriptions, where he sits on his balcony drumming his fingers, saying, 'can't those people out there in the factories quickly stoke up their factories so that it starts belching out a whole lot of filthy, polluting smoke?' But what he says is that he has started painting some of these pictures when there was not much fog, but he says he was very worried about them because they were not London-like enough. That is extraordinary, because of course he is here and painting London, but it means that he has an idea of what a London-like picture ought to look like, and that is pretty much what we see in the famous foggy paintings we have, with their range of different atmospheric effects. But it means that, even when he is working from nature, he has some preconception about what should be the dominant tone of this particular series, and that dominant tone is one that, when the winds are blowing and the people in the factories have not yet stoked up their furnaces, he just cannot find as he looks off his balcony.

But I think it is a reminder of how much of even the type of artist who is working from nature, trying indeed, in principle, to work directly from what he sees - although he has to rework it to turn it into a finished picture - but how far he is also working towards some preconception of what his subject ought to look like. In this case, and this is really my concluding point, he worked with the idea that London ought to be likethis. London ought to be this extraordinary parade of polychromatic fogs that transform the brick by brick of the city into these magnificent monuments, in paint, not in reality. It is that process of transformation that is of course the fundamental point.

But the last thing one has to say is that, if Monet had been a little bit younger, life would have become very disappointing because of the Clean Air Acts of the 1950s. Many will still remember the thick fogs on the 50's when busses would have to have someone walk out in front of them because the visibility was so poor. So London is now no longer a beautiful city, as Monet would have seen it, but we have at least gained a city that is, at least visibly, less polluted. So if we wanted to reproduce Monet's pictures today, we would have to reply on Monet's idea of what London looked like perhaps even more heavily than he did himself over a century ago.

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