

WRITING THE METROPOLIS IN P. ACKROYD'S NON-FICTION

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Abstract: In the present paper I will focus on the configuration of the contemporary urban space in P. Ackroyd's non-fiction, with focus on the city of London as a site of memory. In his fiction as well as in his non-fiction writing, Ackroyd anticipates modern quantum physics concepts of reality while playing with the space-time continuum by permanently shifting London's boundaries and thus turning it into a morphogenetic space. In his London. The Biography, Albion. The Origins of the English Imagination or Thames. The Biography, literature, approaching history, geography and cultural studies are interwoven in his description of the urban space and it is this interdisciplinarity that casts light on its polymorphism.

Keywords: urban planning, morphogenetic space, temporal dimension, spatial dimension, suburbanization

Introduction

In the light of my recent readings, I dared to make an analogy between Ackroyd's view on space-time and *superimposition*, a mysterious phenomenon that quantum physicists strive to decipher. According to the scientists studying this field, a particle exists in several places and/or conditions at the same time, a state which "entails the (in)famous issue of quantum nonlocality" (Elitzul et al 2018: 2). Using a complex set of experiments, the team proves that a selected particle of light (a photon) can be subject to the phenomenon of *nonlocality*, which refers to:

"...its ability to disappear and reappear, with certainty, across various locations at certain instances. This unique dynamic is indicated by the particle's reflecting a probe photon from all these spacetime points, with the aid of photonic quantum routers." (3)

As explained by Philip Ball (2018), according to the theory of two-state-vector formalism, retrospective knowledge of what happened in a quantum system can be grasped by the observer who selects the outcome, more precisely:

"Instead of simply measuring where a particle ends up, a researcher chooses a particular location in which to look for it. This is called post-selection, and it supplies more information than any unconditional peek at outcomes ever could. This is because the particle's state at any instant is being evaluated retrospectively in light of its entire history, up to and including measurement. The oddness comes in because it *looks* as if the researcher—simply by choosing to look for a particular outcome—then causes that outcome to happen." (<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/quantum-physics-may-be-even-spookier-than-you-think/>).

As I am going to argue in the present paper, Ackroyd's use of the nonlocality phenomenon is meant to challenge the cause-effect logic that defines the traditional view on

reality.

When analyzing Ackroyd's work made up of both fiction as well as non-fiction books one of the questions that pops into the reader's mind is: 'Can London be said to have a spatial context at all since it is in a continual process of remaking?' With a special focus on London. *The Biography* (2000), one of his many books of non-fiction, the present study attempts to provide an answer to this dilemma.

On the other hand, only recently have I started to see the connection between the British writer's vision on time and space and the morphogenetic approach on the urban space, a methodological device which is quite new to the cultural field. In what follows, I will try to briefly pinpoint the main features of morphogenetic urbanism as seen by Peter Trummer in an article published in 2009.

First, 'morphogenesis' is a word that originates in the Greek language, *morphê* 'shape' and *genesis* 'creation', thus literally meaning "the beginning of the shape". Second, it should be noted that the morphogenetic model of urban design entails a pattern in which matter and form are placed in a dynamic relationship. Peter Trummer (2009) draws a distinction between the morphogenetic model and the hylomorphic schema. Dominating the relationship between matter and form within Western culture, the latter results in a copy, a representation of the original (Gr. *Origin hyle*, meaning 'wood' and *morph*, meaning 'form'). It refutes the interdependence of ideas (form) on *hyle* (matter) since this model sees form as fixed and matter as homogeneous.

Between form and matter, however, there is a medium, an intermediary zone made of energetic, molecular dimensions that is known as 'morphogenetic space'. This zone is characterized by a dynamic relationship existing between form and matter.

Urbanism and morphogenetics

In my opinion, many of the principles that define the morphogenetic space apply to London, as envisaged by Peter Ackroyd. In his *London—the Biography* (2000), for example, we can see how the collective behavior of the geometrical constituents unfolds the morphogenetic potential (cf. Trummer, 2009: 66).

The title of this book gives the reader a hint about Ackroyd's vision of the city: 'biography' suggests the fact that the writer is to resort to an extended personification. In my opinion, another suitable subtitle for this book would also have been "The Biography of the City or How to Break the Conventions of Historiography" because of Ackroyd's notable change of attitude in approaching traditional history. Although he offers an overview of the everyday life lived in the city of London, prominent events and personalities are mentioned with the only purpose to reveal the mental framework of the average people. The perspective offered, therefore, is a complex one since Ackroyd provides an interdisciplinary set of information: religion, geography, cartography, sociology, literature being only several disciplines that help create the sort of the 'global' history envisaged by the historians belonging to 'L'École des Annales'.

In order to understand the writer's standpoint on the writing of history as biography it is necessary to correlate this study with the information offered by Ackroyd himself in *Albion*, which was published two years later. According to it, the biography is an eclectic literary product made up of both fact and fiction, dramatic and epic elements (cf. Ackroyd, 2002: 353). Consequently, the biographer is not involved in a process of factual rendition; he has to interpret the collected data, he has to

“... fashion the narrative to accord with his or own personal vision; it is also necessary to alter or discard facts and details in order to create a coherent character out of the raw materials lying all around.” (Ackroyd, 2002: 351)

In London, Ackroyd takes an obsessive interest in time which is justified mostly by its fluidity:

“The nature of time in London is mysterious. It seems not to be running continuously in one direction, but to fall backwards and to retire; it does not so much resemble a stream or river as a lava flow from some unknown source of fire. Sometimes it moves steadily forward, before springing or leaping out; sometimes it slows down and, on occasions, it drifts and begins to stop, altogether. There are some places in London where you would be forgiven to think that time has come to an end.” (Ackroyd, 2000: 661)

In addition, different temporal streams are detected: the ‘old’ time in Clerkenwell and Maiden Lane, the ‘slow’ time in Shoreditch and Limehouse, the ‘rapid’, ‘continuous’ time in Cheapside and Stoke Newington, the ‘fitful’ time in Holborn and Kensington, and the ‘novel’, ‘unfamiliar’ time in Tottenham Court Road and Long Acre make up the multi-layered London time (Ackroyd, 2000: 665).

As a matter of fact, the structure of the book itself mirrors this interlaced temporal pattern:

“Focusing ... on the idea of continuity—on the repetition, in particular, of similar activities on similar sites over the centuries—Ackroyd dispenses almost entirely with the chronological ordering typical of the standard history or the standard biography. Certain events serve as structural devices to support this vast edifice of scholarship, such as the Great Fire of London of 1666, or the explosion of development of the mid-Victorian period, when much of what we now recognize as contemporary London was built...” (McGrath 2001: 1-2)

At the centre of the researcher’s attention lie not only the written evidence but also architectural elements (39) and pictures (136) which are analyzed and appreciated for their textual qualities. For example, when making a point of London’s palimpsest-like appearance, Ackroyd refers to the provenience of stones used in order to build St Bartholomew’s:

“[These] came from many parts of London, and in that sense the narrative of construction is a true representation of the fact that St Bartholomew’s was a collective work and vision of the city; it became, in literal form, its microcosm.” (Ackroyd, 2000: 39)

Having a very powerful visual impact, the pictures scattered throughout *The Biography* act as memorabilia of London’s past. Coming back to the morphogenetic pattern presented earlier, if we have a look at the samples of maps displayed in the pages of this book, we can notice how matter is regarded as “an active material with ‘morphogenetic capabilities’ to generate different structures through the constraints of its material properties.” (Trummer, 2009: 64)

If in physics, ‘a population of interacting physical entities, such as molecules, can be constrained energetically to force it to display organised collective behaviour’. (cf. Manuel DeLanda, ‘The machinic phylum’ quoted in Trummer, 65) in urban planning it seems that, when the instruments of urbanization are directly applied to the landscape of a rapidly

expanding city such London the generated result resists homogeneity and constancy, both in terms of time and space.

Even though suburbanisation is formed by the collective desire of everyone to own their own home (cf. Elizabeth I's proclamation issued in 1580 that supported the increase of the suburbs, Ackroyd, 103), in terms of content, 'the forces that determine the layout of a suburb are the economic, legislative, administrative and technological regimes particular to a city', as Trummer underlines (64)

However, in London, Ackroyd sees how the forces of modern planning – a culture of how to subdivide the land to produce the maximum number of similar plots – prove to be inefficient when pressed into the urban fabric, failing thus to erase its distinctive ecology. London, made of an active matter, of molecules (re)acting collectively, seems to resist being subdued by the hylomorphic model described above. Even if in the 1950's the urban planners thought they could create a 'new world, their grand goal was already doomed to failure: "As any historian of London might have told the various urban boards, neither schemes nor regulations would be able to inhibit the city."' (Ackroyd, 2000: 756)

Conclusion

To conclude, the present pages focused the issue of the urban space in P. Ackroyd's London. The Biography, attention being paid to the city of London as a site governed by morphogenetic forces with their constant interplay over time, culture, and human agency. Here we saw how Ackroyd plays with the spatial and temporal dimensions by permanently (re)mapping the urban boundaries and we noticed how literature, history, geography and cultural studies can be used together as an interdisciplinary perspective that highlights the polymorphous nature of the City. Therefore, with Ackroyd, London contains its beginning within its end. Finally, to answer the question set in the introductory section, we can say that not only does the urban space seem to challenge the concept of time, but it also seems to pose questions about the relation of linear time and contingent space.

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