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The city as body

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The city as body

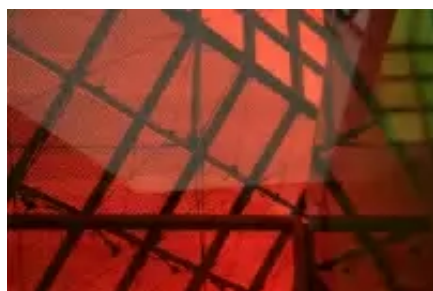
Book review of: Peter Ackroyd. *London. The Biography*.

OLIVIER WALTHER AND LAURENT MATTHEY

Bibliographical reference

Peter Ackroyd. 2000. *London. The Biography*. London: Vintage.

Full text



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- 1 The largest cities have often provided food for metaphor. Different authors have compared these cities to social bodies, monsters devouring souls and Nature, animals recovering from the blows meted out to them or organisms growing without limit or logic. In *London: The Biography*, Peter Ackroyd has chosen to see London as a human body, shot through with arteries, made up of organs and subject to violent moods. This process, which consists in considering London as a subject rather than an object, is common in literature: Thomas Mann, Henry James, Friedrich Nietzsche and Marcel Proust have applied it to Venice, while Honoré de Balzac and Victor Hugo have done the same with Paris.
- 2 It is true that such anthropomorphism grants the author a great deal of freedom. When the city becomes the protagonist of the story, rather than being merely the substratum on which men's actions take place, it is no longer necessary

to follow urban development in a chronological manner. Peter Ackroyd knows this well and glides skilfully between the different themes which, together, constitute London in the human image. These include, for example, “London as theatre”, “Pestilence and flame”, “London as crowd” and “Blitz”. This original approach is announced by the author from the introduction on, although it is more evident in the second part of the book than in the first 100 pages, which retrace the human origins of the city from pre-historical times onwards. Treating the big city as a human body allows the author to bring out London’s most characteristic traits: commerce and violence.

3 The big city engages in trade and the Thames – to which the author has since dedicated another book to – is its backbone. The city owes the river its appearance and its character, Ackroyd claims. The Thames reflects the diverse activities conducted by Londoners to make their city the world’s largest conglomeration. This was the case in 1840: London was then both capital of an empire, a financial centre on an international scale and the commercial centre of the world. The docks were then at the heart of London’s prosperity. Their activity collapsed from the 1970s onwards and were reborn with the internationalisation of finance which led to the development of the Isle of Dogs, on which Canary Wharf today stands. The project is chaotic, another of London’s character traits, according to the author, who notes that all its grand urban projects have ended up with results very far removed from the original intentions.

4 In its daily life, the city feeds on men and the ideas which they provide it with. She is irrigated by the flow of immigrants. In 1870, the author tells us, London housed more Irish than Dublin and more Catholics than Rome. These migrants brought with them a little of the places they had left for London. The author describes how Soho took on, by 1844, French characteristics, due to the importance of the immigrants from across the Channel to this district. Here, the London of Peter Ackroyd takes its place in the long line of writers who, like Daniel Defoe (1725 [1841]: 78), felt that “*London consumes all, circulates all, exports all, and at last pays for all; and this is trade; this greatness and wealth of the city, is the soul of the commerce to all the nation.*”

5 The big city is corrupted by vice, prostitution, gambling, drink and smoking. It is violent, often sickly, and suffered several waves of plague. The Black Death killed 40% of Londoners in 1348 and was followed by other especially devastating episodes, in 1528, 1563, 1603 and 1664. Then, the city was consumed by fever and tears. These deadly episodes were followed by the major urban fires. Like Sodom, Rome, Carthage and Troy, London was destroyed by fire. It has burnt once or twice per century since 764; the Great Fire of London, which destroyed five sixths of the city – 460 streets and 13,200 houses – in 1666 was just one of the many devastations faced by the city since its foundation.

6 The analogy established between London and the human body does present, however, certain limitations. The author notes himself that London rebuilt itself after each traumatic episode from its own ruins. The strata accumulated from the Roman era onwards serve as its bed, including the bricks destroyed by the Blitz in the 1940s, in which a third of the city was razed by bombs. Each episode brought with it urban improvements and town planning. London constantly recovers a beauty while the human body grows and then declines. When discussing London’s appetite for the suburban areas, the author moves away from his initial metaphor. London is now considered as a massive organism: “*London moved organically, in other words, always finding the right ecology in which it might exist and flourish*” (Ackroyd, 2000: 727).

7 The metaphor attempted by Ackroyd is also limited by the analysis that can be made of London’s current prosperity. London is rich not only because it has managed to reinvent itself continuously but also because it occupies a privileged

position within the global network of cities, thanks to the massive presence of companies offering services to producers. The primacy accorded to the 19th and at the start of the 20th centuries by the author leads him to neglect this aspect somewhat.

- 8 In reusing an evolutionary approach to the city already taken by Mumford (1961), Ackroyd partakes in a mode of thought which is once again of relevance and which tends to turn the city into a metabolism. In that it is typical of a contemporary understanding of the urban phenomenon, which reinterprets the city in terms of a certain kind of naturalness. Often focussing on ecological cycles, this new way of presenting the question of the urban utilises the vocabulary of the organic and corporal. Not least among the virtues of Ackroyd's work is that it incites us, in a paradoxical way, to examine the construction of the "third city" (Mongin, 1995), a hybrid of nature and culture, an ecosystem "like any other" whose role and functioning should be investigated. Flux, systematic interactions and metabolic exchanges now determine the geography of a new urban individuality, a city as body.

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