



Strategies of personification of the image of London: From binary conflicts to systems

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ABSTRACT

The article is devoted to the city of London as one of the main topoi of British literature. London acquires the status of a central image in the Victorian novel where its anthropomorphism is created by binary conflicts of richness and poverty, splendor and dirt, good and evil, etc. Victorians saw London as a city of contrasts. Contemporary citizens talk about it in terms of diversity and ambiguity. British literature has developed the image of London into complex entangled systems, which reflects the present-day collective sensitivity to subjective attitudinal ambivalence and multiplicity of correct opinions. The article contemplates the images of *the biggest, and the greatest, city on earth in London* by E. Rutherfurd (1997), *London: The Biography* by P. Ackroyd (2000), and *Capital* by J. Lanchester (2012). All the novels proceed from the anthropocentric presuppositions, i.e. from the perspective of the new genre of an urban biography. An urban biography as a genre gives new potency to the axiological dimension of a literary work since it remodels the reader's perception and estranges (defamiliarizes) the object whether it is the history, or politics, or social processes of Great Britain. The British novels under consideration manifest various intentions of their authors, which results in different strategies of estrangement. The article observes a variety of means of constructing anthropomorphic structures of the novels: physiological personification in Ackroyd's, a cultural-historical excursion in Rutherfurd's, and a contemporary social snapshot creating a critical public sphere in Lanchester's narrative. The tendency to transfer topoi into anthropomorphic images is explained by the trend toward general dehumanization in the posthuman era.

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Стратегии персонификации образа Лондона: от бинарного конфликта к сложным системам

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КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА

Лондон
топос
антропоморфизм
персонификация
дегуманизация
культурные контексты
Питер Акройд
Джон Ланкастер
Эдвард Резерфорд

АННОТАЦИЯ

Лондон приобретает статус центрального образа в викторианском романе, где персонификация города создаётся за счёт бинарных конфликтов богатства и бедности, блеска и грязи, добра и зла и т. п. Викторианцам столица империи виделась городом контрастов, сегодняшним лондонцам столица представляется неоднородным противоречивым конгломератом. Британская литература развила образ Лондона как сложной и запутанной системы, что отражает современное состояние коллективной чувствительности с её стремлением к субъективной аксиологической амбивалентности и множественности правильных мнений. В статье рассматриваются антропоморфные образы столицы Великобритании в романах «Лондон» Э. Резерфорда (1997), «Лондон: Биография» П. Акройда (2000) и «Столица» Д. Ланкастера (2012). Жанр этих произведений – биография города – обладает большим потенциалом с перспективы аксиологии художественного произведения, поскольку опосредованность восприятия (писатель всегда говорит о человеке, но в данном случае – через призму городского пространства) приводит к отстранению и позволяют посмотреть свежим взглядом на политические проблемы, исторические коллизии и социальные процессы Великобритании. В зависимости от своих интенций писатели конструируют различные антропоморфные художественные структуры: у Акройда – физиологическая персонификация, у Резерфорда – культурно-исторический экскурс и экономико-социальный срез в нарративах Ланкастера. Тенденция к переводу топосов в антропоморфные образы объясняется стремлением отразить, гиперболизировать и в то же время компенсировать общую дегуманизацию современного общества.

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Introduction

Contemporary anthropomorphic forms continue a long history of using human figures for functional and cultural purposes in architecture, household utensils, robots, furniture, artifacts, etc. This history can be traced back from Viking vessels to contemporary chairs. Anthropomorphic forms can be also found in ideas, starting from individual and collective attributions of anthropomorphic properties to God in three main domains – psychological, biological, and physical. Anthropomorphic structures in literary texts acquire both forms: concrete and abstract, the former being much more thoroughly researched while abstract forms in literary texts are paid much less attention, as they are not easily classified and typified. Nevertheless, the idea of an anthropomorphic city is so powerful in literature, that it has become a standard narrative device and has been widely discussed in literary studies (Toker, 2011; Reed, 2007). Nevertheless, the forms of the city anthropomorphism and the connection between the form and pragmatics in 21st-century literary texts are viewed as relevant and interesting for contemporary literary studies.

A big city is perhaps the most common setting for contemporary novels. It often overcomes the limits of chronotope and turns to be an independent image. The trend can be observed as early as in St. Augustine's *Civitas Dei*, which is both artistic and narrative. St. Augustine does not deal with descriptions but conveys his message through the development of a conflict between the City of God and the Earthly City and drives the narration to the victory for the former (Augustine, 2005).

Binary conflicts in the Victorian novel

What concerns London, it seems to constantly become an independent image in Victorian literature. These works do not just show London as a backdrop but are about the character of the city as if it were a living being. To make it vigorous, lively, and plausible Victorian writers use St. Augustine's approach and create a conflict between contradictory features of the entity. The first British novel Augustan idea refers to is certainly *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens. It works with the misty, mystical though rational and liable to the power of reason London of Sir Conan Doyle, with the lonely clatter of hooves on the paving stones and bustling shopping streets in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson, with the capital of Industrial Revolution, reaping the benefits and suffering the consequences in *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. The juxtapositions are set by the very first moment the image of London is introduced: "It chanced on one of these rambles that their way led them down a by-street in a busy quarter of London. The street was small and what is called quiet, but it drove a thriving trade on the weekdays <...> and with its freshly painted shutters, well-polished brasses, and general cleanliness and gaiety of note, instantly caught and pleased the eye of the passenger. Two doors from one corner, on the left-hand going east the line was broken by the entry of a court; and just at that point a certain sinister block of building thrust forward its gable on the street. It was two stories high; showed no window, nothing but a door on the lower story and a blind forehead of discolored wall on the upper; and bore in every feature, the marks of prolonged and sordid negligence" (Stevenson, 2020, p. 5).

Undoubtedly, the leap in the representation of the capital depends primarily upon economic, social, and cultural contexts. In 1800, its population reached one million

inhabitants. In 1900, it could boast of 6.5 million people. Not all of them lived at St. James Park, Regent, or Oxford streets. Somebody had to survive in the docks. That made London a city of contrasts. As Andrew Sanders notes, “London is the chief character in his work” (Sanders, 2011, p. 7). This paper argues that the liveliness of Dickens’s chief character is created in great plenty due to contrasted descriptions. London was beautiful: “The sun that rises over the quiet streets of London on a bright Sunday morning, shines till his setting, on gay and happy faces” (Dickens, 2010, p. 13). And it was ugly: The ground was covered, nearly ankle-deep, with filth and mire; a thick steam, perpetually rising from the reeking bodies of the cattle, and mingling with the fog, which seemed to rest upon the chimney-tops, hung heavily above” (Dickens, Ch. Oliver Twist). In 1990, Peter Ackroyd while trying to reproduce the atmosphere of Dickensian London almost repeats the phrase: “If a late twentieth-century person were suddenly to find himself in a tavern or house of the period, he would be sick – sick with the smells, sick with the food, sick with the atmosphere around him” (Ackroyd, 2002, p. 10). Thus, the tradition has not been interrupted.

Purpose and methods

The common feature observed is not a coincidence but a reflection of the so-called anthropological turn in socio-humanitarian knowledge. An analysis of the anthropomorphic image of London allows us to understand how an opportunity to develop an anthropomorphic vision, which is necessary for a better mastering of the surrounding reality by man, is mastered in literature. Though anthropomorphism as a literary device has been known from ancient literature, it has not been the focus of interest of specialist literary critics up to the 21st century. In the modern novel, anthropomorphism is no longer perceived as a primitive form of mastering the world but as an instrument, or a form of human appropriation of the world. It makes it closer to what was alien, unfriendly, or incomprehensible for man. Anthropomorphism has recently developed new meanings. It is not just a literary device, or a term in architecture, or a part of modern philosophy, it can be recognized as both a social institution and collective sensibility. Due to the multiplicity of meanings of the notion, the processes of anthropomorphization today are diverse. That is why we can talk about different strategies of anthropomorphization in the novels about London. The question of interest of the research lies directly in how anthropomorphic figurative structures are constructed by the writer.

Complex anthropomorphic structures of the image of London

Peter Ackroyd shows London as a living, breathing organism, developing according to laws similar to biological ones, i.e. living through stages of birth, growth, formation, experiencing wounds and depressions, tightening its belt during bombing and economic recession, living on pirate raids and the stock market, always in motion, changing, never stopping. Ackroyd exposes his writing strategy from the very beginning: «Here might be found the ‘heart of London beating warm’. The byways of the city resemble thin veins and its parks are like lungs. In the mist and rain of an urban autumn, the shining stones and cobbles of the older thoroughfares look as if they are bleeding. When William Harvey, practicing as a surgeon in St Bartholomew’s Hospital, walked through the streets he noticed that the hoses of the fire engines spouted water like blood from a cut artery» (Ackroyd, 2009). Apart from physiological metaphors, the author uses metaphors of

growing up and aging: «Whether we consider London as a young man refreshed and risen from sleep, therefore, or whether we lament its condition as a deformed giant, we must regard it as a human shape with its laws of life and growth. Here, then, is its biography» (Ackroyd, 2009). As Yu. Lotman notes, “The structural approach to a literary work implies that this or that ‘device’ is considered not as a phenomenon in itself, but as a function with two or, more often, many constituents. The artistic effect of a ‘device’ is always a relation (for example, the relation of the text to the reader’s expectations, to the aesthetic norms of the epoch, to the usual plot and other stamps, to genre patterns)” (Lotman, 2023, p. 60). Thus, all the metaphors of the novel can be regarded separately in their expressiveness as well as in their unity as a part of the author’s strategy to create the living creature of London.

From century to century, Ackroyd selects events discretely, their significance determined not by official history but by his love of London: fairs, landmark houses, successive mayors, the sewage system, fires... There are personifications and personifying epithets scattered throughout the novel. London is called “insatiable”, “carnivorous”, “hungry for people, food, goods, and drink”, “greedy”, “consuming” etc. London may not be human but is an anthropomorphic being, a monster, a living creature, with only one difference: the length of its life, its experience, and its many faces are incommensurate with the temporal horizon of the human mind. The chronological arrangement of the events prompts the perspective of the socio-philosophical sense of the dialectical relationship of the past to the present and the present to the future that underlies Brodel’s “la longue durée” and allows us to speak of London-in-time not as a finite temporal length, but as a “longue durée” – the integrity and incompleteness of historical time (Braudel, 1967). This narrative device plays in the author’s hand and represents London not only as a living insatiable creature but as a huge and immortal creature whose name can be as famous as Leviathan. Certainly, Leviathan was the great sea-beast of the Book of Job whom only God could tame and whose power was contrasted by God with Job’s weakness (Job 41; Isaiah 27: 1) and on the metaphorical level of the Bible it is a metaphor of untamed power. However, it is not the Leviathan Ackroyd’s image alludes to but Hobbes’s masterpiece “Leviathan”, the “Bible” of Modernity, the notorious image of strength and power, which “stands for the commonwealth and its sovereign”, while the heart of the commonwealth is London (Mintz, 1989). The beauty of this reversed metaphor rests upon the shared knowledge of arche-texts (the Bible, especially the mostly influential Book of Job, Hobb’s Leviathan), which makes the horrific image of the sea monster closer and simpler than it is in the pretexts.

Edward Rutherford prefers a syntagmatic approach. He unfolds the pages of the history of the city of London from B. C. 54 to 1997. The narrative moves from era to era, highlighting in bright spots curious scenes: the mother of a young counterfeiter throws a bag of gold behind the wall of Londinium, the body of a young man who spied a centurion committed theft falls in the dark waters of the Thames, the merchant wonders whether to sell his thirteen-year-old daughter for debts or not, Servus escapes to town and finds freedom from the landlord. Zoom in – and immediately we see the Danish fleet, about to help the English repel the Norman raid, but never leaving their native shores. Here the lord’s beautiful daughter seduces a knight to run away with him from her rich but ignorant husband – and again a large-scale picture of economic dislocation in the absence of a crusading king. Here the pirate surrenders his looted treasure to a Londoner for safe-keeping, and here the Earl of St. James has already successfully wooed the lovely heiress

and in his joy decides to buy himself a present: “There were many picture dealers in London, but his favorite was a Frenchman, Monsieur Durand-Ruel, whose gallery lay in New Bond Street. The earl had been collecting pictures of the Thames recently; he had no idea why he should have felt so drawn to the river, but he was. He had bought one by the American, Whistker, who lived in London, but Whistler’s prices, stover a hundred guineas, were too stiff. For less, at Durand-Ruel’s he could purchase the work of an unfashionable but wonderful French artist Claude Monet, who often came to stay in London to paint the river. And he had just agreed to buy a new Monet, for a very modest price, before he set out for his rendezvous” (Rutherford, 1997, p. 1040). Thus, Rutherford’s “London” uses the so-called “event history” (“histoire événementielle”). It is a history of brief, abrupt, pulsating fluctuations. Super-sensitive by definition, it registers the slightest changes. Historians metaphorically call such events explosions, news, the rhythm of everyday life, and the foam of history (Lacomb, 2013).

The anthropomorphism of the image of the city in the novel is achieved by shifting the emphasis from the topos to the subject. Rutherford creates vivid characters of Londoners. In each episode, it is easy to identify a protagonist with pronounced physiological, psychological, and social individual traits, with accurate descriptions of their appearances, actions, clothes, and houses.

And yet, the individual fates are too short and therefore not comparable to the fate of London, so the author connects his characters into generations. Thus, the builder of St. Paul’s Cathedral turns out to be a great-great-great... grandson of the Celtic boy from the first chapter. The novel dwells upon half a dozen families, some threads are broken for lack of descendants, while others, on the contrary, are connected through marriage and thrive. The author allows his readers to follow the fates of their representatives over the centuries with the help of such family traits as a birthmark, a big nose a white strand of hair, or a scar. “He was a bright, brave little fellow, dark-haired and blue-eyed, like most of his Centic people. His name was Segovax and he was nine. A closer inspection, however, would have revealed two unusual features in his appearance. On the front of his head, on the forelock, grew a patch of white hair, as though someone had dabbed it with a brush of white dye. Such hereditary marks were to be found amongst several families dwelling in the hamlets along that region of the river. ‘You need not worry’, his mother told him. ‘A lot of women think it’s a sign that you are lucky’” (ibid., p. 6). The abundance of characters, the repetition and cumulateness of motifs, and the same features of appearance and similarity of characters in grandfathers and grandchildren gradually contribute to the merging of their individual images into collective ones, to the de-personalizing of residents and thus to making London a constant in their background. “So who’s a Londoner? – Lady Penny asked. ‘One who lives here. There’s an old Cockney canon: a Londoner is one who was born within earshot of the bells of the Bow Bells. And foreigners’, he added with a chuckle, ‘are those who can no longer hear the bells from their window, whether they are Anglo-Saxon or not’” (ibid., p. 1089).

John Lanchester’s “Capital” is constructed according to the paradigmatic principle. It is a snapshot of urban anthropology in the year 2000, thirteen “Christmas” stories about typical Londoners. It imitates Chaucer’s “Canterbury Tales” as it was Chaucer who showed medieval England through a range of pilgrims (a knight, squire, yeoman, abbess, nun, three chaplains, monk, Carmelite, merchant, student, lawyer, dyer, carpenter, hatter, weaver, upholsterer, cook, skipper, doctor, Bath weaver, priest, plowman, miller, housekeeper, majordom, bailiff and indulgent salesman), and it is John Lanchester who

creates the city of the 21st century through the diversity of its modern residents. Though, not all in a row, only the creative class is represented. But the concept of the latter is misinterpreted a bit not including leading scholars, bohemian artists, arrogant lawyers, glossy journalists, and elegant gallerists (Florida, 2012). Lanchester does not speak about established professionals but prefers to see a creative class in “potential” opinion-makers and a pledge for the future well-being of England. A Polish immigrant is working as a construction worker, a computer genius named Ahmed is arrested on suspicion of terrorism, a Hungarian woman with a perfect education is forced to work as a nanny, a Senegalese soccer player is bought by an English club for a whopping sum of money, a universally hated public transportation controller who turns out to be a political refugee from Zimbabwe with a Ph.D. Social policy, economic conditions, and the psychological climate will determine whether London will allow them to create an agenda in the future.

Roger seems to be a successful man in comparison to the others. He is getting dressed for the job. It is a pivotal day – he will get his year bonus today. Roger expects a million, it was a good year for his department but he is ready to brace himself if his expectations have risen too high. He will play well in front of Max. Max is the head of the compensation committee. Maybe Max is a robot. “Max’s specs had narrow wire technocratic in a way that tried to express personality but he did not. They helped hide his face” (Lanchester, 2013, p. 136). The protocol for the meeting is as sophisticated as a computer algorithm. Roger is an old player. He knows the rules. He opens the envelope. His bonus for the year was £30,000. “Max was just sitting his glasses at him. He had been the person on the other side of the desk and was fully informed of the futility of saying or doing anything in protest” (Lanchester, 2013, p. 140). The author uses two opposite techniques simultaneously: he describes people as machines and represents London as a sentient being. Everyone is supposed to follow the rules. London is unpredictable. So far, people are all doing well, showing wit and not giving up, ready to suffer humiliation and hard work for a better life. “No, he sucked up, took it like a man, and spent the day hiding in his office and pretending to work” (Lanchester, 2013, p. 152). Maybe Roger is a robot too.

Each story is entertaining and didactic, but no more: a part cannot be greater than the whole, which the author remembers perfectly, making the reader shed tears over the fate of one character to immediately laugh at another. London shows different sides to his citizens, showing care, interest, indifference, coldness, a sense of humor, giving a helping hand, sending unexpected luck, forgetting and rewarding, showing his unpredictable and even capricious nature. However, the choice of the characters among the creative class suggests to the reader that London is as dependent on them as they are on it. Today’s outsiders, immigrants, and refugees who show creative thinking and an unconventional approach to routine matters, are the future prosperity of London, its capital. Lanchester lays the foundation for the future of London in a rather paradoxical paradigm, combining a creative and even more broadly humanistic approach with English pragmatism. The author’s conscious approach to the economic discourse is evidenced of td by the title, which can be interpreted and translated in two ways.

Conclusion

Thus, binary oppositions give way to multiple methods of personifying London. This inevitable transformation of methodology is substantiated by the ambivalence of the notion of anthropomorphism. Now it does not imply merely a living being but a complex

compound of aesthetic procedures showing how the individual fits into society through economic, social, psychological, and historical mechanisms. An analysis of anthropomorphism in literature allows us to ask whether there is something in human nature that makes it possible to produce the social in the space of the individual. Therefore, anthropomorphism as a certain type of practical behavior of modernity should not only not be outlived in practical life and philosophical or literary theory, but is necessary as one of the few ways to preserve human nature under the impending uncertainty of the posthuman condition.

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