READING CITY TROPES IN ENGLISH STUDIES

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ABSTRACT
References to cities- imagined and real both, we come across in numerous legends, and classical epics of antiquity denoting positive and negative connotations at a time. In European history Rome, Troy, Babylon, Venice, Florence etc. are taken as the token of human knowledge, creativity, vision, and imagination, but they also connote perversion of aforesaid potentials. Modern cities like London, Paris, New York, even Bombay (now Mumbai) inhere both qualities. Charles Pierre Baudelaire a French scholar coined the term "modernity" to describe the fleeting and ephemeral experiences of life in urban metropolis. And the responsibility of art and artist is to capture and depict those experiences.

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Keywords: City; Ezekiel; Larkin; Eliot.

INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth, William Blake, Baudelaire, T.S. Eliot, Philip Larkin, Nissim Ezekiel are few names to quote here for the practical purposes who were haunted by city landscapes day and night. Among these some reclused and some celebrated cities and their deplorable plights. In fact today city dwellers require Yeatsian therapy. The present article seeks to evaluate opinions of Larkin and Ezekiel etc on urban landscapes. Since issue is contemporary, this study might be interesting. Characterizing life in industrial cities of England Anthony Toyne writes:

The industrial cities were slums. A million miners lived in thousands of rows of black little cottages near the coal-pits of Durham, Yorkshire and South Wales. Thousands of more cottages stretched for miles along the banks of the oily river Tyne near Newcastle factories towered high above the roof-tops in the wool - towns of Leeds . . . . Store - houses were mixed among the dirty mass of cottages in the cotton towns of Bolton . . . . The chimneys of the pottery towns . . . produced great clouds of black and white smoke. The slums here were endless. In all the mid - lands of England, there was dirt, heat and smoke. The roar of factory - fires, the crash of machinery and the clatter of trains and trams, all mixed together and sounded like thunder in a storm (Toyne 324-25).
Wordsworth never favored city life. He refers to his change of abode in his big autobiographical sketch The Prelude (1850) Book I from Bristol and London. He recalls:

A backward glance upon the curling cloud
Of city smoke, by distance ruralised;
Keen as a Truant or a Fugitive,
But as a Pilgrim resolute, I took,
Even with the chance equipment of that hour,
The road that pointed toward the chosen Vale.  (Lines: 88-93)

In his lone drama The Borderers (1842), Wordsworth narrates about the reign of Henry III and the engagement with borders of England and Scotland. Wordsworth finds his countrymen ‘out of joint’. They are enticed to in-human acts. In this thin play, Marmaduke, one of the borderers while talking to another fellow Lacy sheds light on the then condition. He declares:

We look
But at the surfaces of things; we hear
Of towns in flames, fields ravaged, young and old
Driven out in troops to want and nakedness;
Then grasp our swords and rush upon a cure
That flatters us, because it asks not thought:
The deeper malady is better hid;
The world is poisoned at the heart. (emphasis added). (Act II) (Web)

Blake’s poem ‘London’, written in 1792, is a devastating portrait of a society in which all souls and bodies were trapped, exploited and infected. In the poem Blake puts forth the bleak image of the city. In the poem, William Blake describes the very negative figure of London and Londoners caused by the inclination of amassing gold and silver. Here people exist in a dark and oppressive world, undergoing the pangs and consequences of corruption of those in positions of power. The problem is that they do not realize this is happening to them. For this reason, he rejects the idea of an ideological or perfect place to live and he wants people to be aware of the misery surrounding them. No wonderful streets, no pleasant people. Blake sees London as a site of corruption and its cramping effects on common people. All these ideas are represented in one place: London. Though London was not really a factory town, he saw in it engraved seeds of emerging Industrial Revolution’s pollution of the English land and oppression of the common people. ‘London’ is a critique on global capitalism and its effects on all aspects of life. The whole poem is worth to be quoted:

In every cry of every man,
In every infant’s cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forged manacles I hear:

How the chimney-sweeper’s cry
Every blackening church appals,
And the hapless soldier’s sigh
Runs in blood down palace-walls.

But most, through midnight streets I hear
How the youthful harlot’s curse
Blasts the new-born infant’s tear,
And blights with plagues the marriage-hearse. (Web)

In short, Blake found London as a spiritually dead zone.

T.S. Eliot in his two major poems The Waste Land (1922) and Preludes (1915) brings forth candidly the true picture of London life. He finds London and Londoners morally and spiritually callous and dead. They are devoid of generative and constructive fire. Eliot in these two poems engages urban-industrial setting. Modern poetry essentially engages the life of man in the urban, industrial settings with all its dullness, dreariness, and monotony, above all, loneliness and alienation. The Preludes mainly brings to the fore “vignettes of the more steamy, less genteel aspects of modern city life”(...). Out of the four sections of the poem two focus on the urban
landscapes and the remaining two on the people living in cities. The following first section runs so:

The winter evening settles down
With smell of steels in passageways.
Six o’clock,
The burnt-out ends of smoky day;
And now a gusty shower wraps
The grimy scraps
Of withered leaves about your feet
And newspapers from vacant lots;
The showers best on broken blinds and chimney-pots,
And at the corner of the street
A lonely cab - horse steams and stamps.
And then, the lighting of the lamps.

Whereas the final stanza focuses on the imprisonment of men in the urban environments-

His soul stretched tight across the skies
That fades behind a city block,

The poem imaging out the urban landscapes expresses disgust with the rootlessness of modern life. The poem presents us with city scenes which mostly depict ugliness and squalor.

Eliot in his masterpiece poem *The Waste Land* approaches the problem of human depravity, spiritual degeneration, loneliness, boredom, alienation; sexual perversion prevailed in the London society. He finds London unreal:

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.
(The Burial of the Dead) (Web)

In the third section of *The Waste Land* “The Fire Sermon” the poet repeats spiritual vacuum, even gives vent to his helplessness. Morality holds no command. Thames river flows by London city but it only ‘sweats oil and tar’. It seems as if the entire European culture is besotted with material maddening. Eliot writes:

The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends
Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed.
And their friends, the loitering heirs of City directors;
Departed, have left no addresses.
By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept .
Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song,
Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long. (The Fire Sermon) (Web)

Philip Larkin is loosely associated by critics with loose group of poets called ‘movement poets’. As P.R. King denies place to Larkin among ‘movement poets’. He is of the opinion:

But it would be a mistake to see Larkin as one of those. Although he had sympathy with many of the attitudes to poetry represented by the Movement, his work is generally more robust and wider - ranging from most of the poetry of *New Lines* (King 4).

Larkin’s reputation rests chiefly on his five anthologies: *The North Ship* (1945), *The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964), *High Windows* (1974), and *Aubade* (1980). Larkin has been ever sensitive to each and every objects pertaining to art and life. As a spectator he keeps his sharp eyes on the social reality and human life being serene, calm, rational and contemplative. He doesn’t entertain glorification of art and life unnecessarily. He prefers to look upon things in their real contexts. In another sense he is a passive realist. Larkin in his most of the poems aspires for realistic and rational view of life and art. Larkin avoids romanticizing ordinary experiences and keeps himself away from abstractions, and doing experiments with language like Eliot and other modernists. Larkin writes about places and situations which are known to most of the people. Many critics recognize him as a poet of urban and industrialized life. Donald Davie another fellow recognizes him as a poet of ‘wholly urbanized and industrialized society’ (Davie 71). Several of his
poems are essentially concerned with post-war urban landscapes. Larkin’s world is contemporary. His poems engage usually a large town or city, heavily trafficked streets, urban parks filled with mothers and playing children, the hospital in the midst of a business district making much of the British suburbia (Martin B 31-32). Roger Day similarly opines: Many of Larkin’s poems have an urban setting. Larkin writes about places and situations which are familiar to most people.... He writes of English towns, high-street stores and sights familiar to all (Day 11). Larkin is completely at home in urban settings. Modern poets more or less are haunted by urban and industrial landscapes. Unbound urbanization and capitalism encouraged competition among individuals, instead of cooperation, as well as it helped alienate them from the rest of the society.

In the poem ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ Larkin records images and pictures while travelling from Hull city to London by train. He contrasts rural pristine freshness with that of dull and drab sites of urban areas:

...We ran
Behind the backs of houses, crossed street
Of blinding wind screens ,....

(PL 87)

By the phrase ‘blinding wind screens’, the poet means air-tight locked doors and windows of offices. In fact the poet has no complaints against the urban-artificialities. Despite multiple discrepancies, he doesn’t lament the loss of natural beauties in cities as T.S. Eliot and other modernists used to. Here he differs from his predecessors. No doubt, the theme of the poem is marriage but all the same, it is more than that. The poet looks out of the window and just enjoys being all the way neutral, the uncheerful city landscapes:

Wide farms went by, short-shadowed cattle,
and Canals with floatings of industrial froth;
A hothouse flashed uniquely: hedges dipped
And rose: and now and then a smell of grass
Displaced the reek of buttoned carriage-cloth
Until the next town, new and nondescript,
Approached with acres of dismantled cars.

(PL 87)

The images used in the above lines denote the disappearing freshness of the rural world. The sweet smells of flowers and sweet-smelling grasses are not spreading over naturally rather they get interrupted by industrial reeks here and there. The tone of the poem is no way condemnatory. He has just taken rural and city images with all passions spent and calm of mind.

‘The Whitsun Weddings’ and ‘Here’ are twin poems dealing with journey from Hull to London and vice-versa. These two poems are generally called Hull-Poems. The poem ‘Here’ engages city landscapes. It depicts pictures captured while returning from London to his home-town Hull. It discusses an industrial town which has still some remains of nature which survived anyhow the urban industrial onslaughts only in changed transmogrification to our surprises –

Swerving east, from rich industrial shadows
And traffic all night north; swerving through
fields
Too thin and thistled to be called meadows,
And now and then a harsh-named halt, that
shields
Workmen at dawn; swerving to solitude
Of skies and scarecrows, haystacks, hares and
pheasants,
And the widening river’s slow presence,
The piled gold clouds, the shining gull-marked
mud, (emphasis added)

The second stanza tells about few more features of the town:

Here domes and statues, spires and cranes
cluster
Beside grain-scattered streets, barge-
crowded water,
And residents from raw estates, brought
down
The dead straight miles by stealing flat-faced
trolleys,
Push through plate-glass swing doors to their
desires -
Cheap suits, red kitchen-ware, sharp shoes,
iced lollies,
Electric mixers, toasters, washers, driers –

(CP 136)

The speaker in the third stanza describes people’s living in the town. They are ‘residents from raw
estates’. In an industrial town, an individualistic existence cannot sustain and survive. ‘Unfenced existence / Facing the sun’ is ‘unattainable’, and ‘out of reach’(CP 137). The people are ‘a cut - price crowd’. The town maintains division of social classes. The crowd is mechanical and dependent on technology - ‘Electric mixers, toasters, washers, driers’. People are bound to sweat in factories like machines. No room for relatives and relations. The poet writes:

A cut-price crowd, urban yet simple, dwelling

... ... ... ...

Here is unfenced existence:
Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach.

(CP 137)

Nonetheless all negative images of city life and city, the poet along with urban people does not feel ill. He has nothing to do with them. He is happy with his state.

Nissim Ezekiel like Larkin is realist. Like him Ezekiel does not complain against his adopted place. He is entirely opposed to V.S. Naipaul. He is popular as Bombayite poet. He in “Background, Casually” expresses his commitment:

I have made my commitments now.
This is one: to say where I am,

... ... ... ...

My backward place is where I am.

(CP 181)

To sharpen his poetic sensibility he drew on several creative writers. In a letter to Anisur Rahman, he wrote:

In the early stages, there were Eliot, Yeats and Pound, Rilke, modern American poetry from Whitman to William Carlos Williams, the poetry of the 30’s in England, including specially Auden, Spender, Mac Neice and Day Lewis. The later poetry is not under particular influence, because I had begun to resist them. All the poems in The Unfinished Man are obviously in the spirit of the movement poets in England but from The Exact Name onwards, I am on my own again(Rahman 79).

Like Larkin, he in some poems stands out as a city poet. Both initially look for release from conscripting aura of city but later on identify with it and reconcile themselves with feeling ease and comfort. “A Morning Walk” published in the volume The Unfinished Man (1960) deals with Bombay city and its corrupt and disgusting atmosphere. It is one of Ezekiel’s typical realistic poems. In the very first stanza, the city is described as “cold and dim/ where only human hands sell cheap”. It is looking almost like that of a pile of garbage near the roadside. Even sun, sky, and moon make the narrator feel sluggish. The narrator poses question:

Why had it given him no light,
His native place he could not shun,
The marsh where things what they seem?

(CP 119)

The squalor, chaos and dirt are conveyed by the image of ‘marsh’. And the irony in the second line suggests that all possible way-outs are closed up to him. In the third stanza the poet sees the city as a living hell:

Barbaric city sick with slums,
Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,
Its hawkers, beggars, iron-lunged,
Processions led by frantic drums,
A million purgatorial lanes,
And child-like masses, many tongued,
Whose wages are in words and crumbs.

(CP 119)

The above reference suggests utter gloom and poverty prevalent in the city. To the poet trees look like ghosts:

The more he stared the less he saw
Among the individual trees. (CP 119)

And immediately the poet asks himself whether he has done anything of worth and value, or just passed his time and life. According to the poet, the city life constricts man’s personality. Here the will of a man grows weaker like the morning dew; and his past appears as a muddy pool. It all suggests that everything is here dull and insipid. In fact the
entire poem is poet’s sense of frustration representing the whole generation. “In India” published in the volume The Exact Name (1965) presents several pictures of disgust and revulsion adding “upto a haunting urban picture of societal doom and individual depravity”(Nair 123). Ezekiel frankly focuses on poverty, misery, squalor, and the wretchedness suffered by poor people in a city like Bombay:

Here among the beggars, 
Hawkers, pavement sleepers, 
Hutment dwellers, slums, 
Dead souls of men and gods, 
Burnt-out mothers, frightened 
Virgins, wasted child 
And tortured animal, 
All in noisy silence 
Suffering the place and time, 
(CP 131)

In “Island” Ezekiel describes city as an island of ‘slums and skyscrapers’. He finds city burning as passion burns in the heart of lovers. In fact he sees India through eyes of Bombay. People living in cities cannot escape and are bound to stay here alongside all mishaps of life. Ezekiel writes:

Unsuitable for song as well as sense, 
the island flowers into slums 
and skyscrapers reflecting 
precisely the growth of my mind 
I am here to find my way in it 
(CP 182)

In “The Double Horror” Ezekiel argues that the self-centered city people have thrown all human values to the winds, and are engaged in cut-throat competitions of material pursuits. He laments human depravity:

I am corrupted by the world, continually 
Reduced to something less than human by the crowd, 
(CP 7)

Big cities have been frequently evoked in several creative works denoting as the cities of opportunity, and fall of man and mankind. In effect, modern cities are marked by social, cultural, spiritual, moral, economic unrest and degeneration or degradation. Humanity and civilization here seems to be imperiled, and artificiality enjoys whip hand everywhere. This is a short view of hopeless urbanization.

WORKS CITED


Philip Larkin. WWW.PoemHunter.com (In the body of the text the book simply titled Philip Larkin is abridged PL).

