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“THE FLOWER OF CITIES ALL”: POETIC CHRONICLES OF LONDON LIFE, DEATH AND RESURRECTION

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Abstract: *A distinctive feature of poetry written in the UK is the attraction to London as the place of infinite possibilities enhancing mental versatility and emotional metamorphosis. Aware of its inimitable diversity, numerous poets have explored their polyvalent relationship with the insular city from the beginnings of ancient Londinium to the 21st-century metropolis. In the 16th century, Scottish poet William Dunbar acknowledged the birth of a global hub, “the flour of Cities all” where urban identity is defined in an exhilarating play of likeness and difference. Five centuries later, Irishman Louis MacNeice reconsidered the metaphor from a negative perspective, contemplating the decay of the unique capital drained by extreme materialism and two worldwide conflicts. As history has established the huge conurbation as a symbol of strength and continuity deriving from its extraordinary capacity of renewal, Jamaican-born poet James Berry praises the multicultural capital and its unrepressed vitality in the Third Millennium.*

A distinctive feature of British poetry is attraction to London, the world city regarded as the epitome of progress and advancement even in times of profound crisis and discord, a site of permanent renewal where individual histories melt into a collective narrative of assimilation. Aware of the insular city’s exceptional destiny from the ancient Londinium to the 21st-century metropolis, numerous poets have imagined their own versions of the indefatigable conurbation, exploring the polyvalent relationship between the individual and the huge conurbation in a variety of discourses and ideologies, from introspective and highly romantic stories to meaningful parables and affective mythologies. They capture the urban rhythm in a mosaic of highly personal imaginary accounts that involve an interdependent connection:

- from outside in – from the city to the poet, i.e. recognising similarities between the individual and the urban environment, and subsequently absorbing the city, submitting the self to the seductive metropolis;

- and from inside out – from the poet to the city, i.e. externalising the self to the city, acknowledging that there is exterior consistency. The devouring metropolis is, in turn, metaphorically consumed, as the subject itself invades the world.

The poets’ intense bond of passion for and possession of the English capital generates works of deep sensorial experience that capture its unique personality, providing highly personal versions of the outstanding metropolis as the ultimate place of inspiration whose unrepressed vitality liberates the creative energy of the spirit.

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Their urban psychogeography generates a particular state of mind nurtured by their personal and imaginary experience of London as assumed destiny.

In the 16th century, Scottish poet William Dunbar acknowledged the birth of a global hub, “the flour of Cities all” where urban identity is defined in an exhilarating play of sameness and otherness. His poem, “In Honour of the City of London”, hails the baffling spiritual and emotional rhythm of the city. His laudatio is directly addressed to the huge setting and its essential qualities perceived in the superlative: “London, thou art of townes *A per se*./Soveraign of cities, seemliest in sight,/Of high renoun, riches, and royaltie...” (Dunbar 1-3).

The poet counts a plethora of remarkable Londoners, making up a list that adds to the distinctive reputation of the place:

Of lordis, barons, and many goodly knyght;
Of most delectable lusty ladies bright;
Of famous prelatis in habitis clericall;
Of merchauntis full of substaunce and of myght (Dunbar 4-7)

and concludes his enumeration with an open declaration of admiration and high esteem: “London, thou art the flour of Cities all” (Dunbar 8).

His enthusiastic acclaim continues in the same eulogistic tone, acknowledging the symbolic nature of the new sovereign capital compared with the ancient city of Troy:

Gladdith anon, thou lusty Troy Novaunt,
Citie that some tyme cleped was New Troy;
In all the erth, imperiall as thou stant,
Pryncesse of townes, of pleasure and of joy (Dunbar 9-12)

The royal stature of the city seems to be given not only by its expanding geographic dimensions but also by what established it as the ultimate site of entertainment, leisure, and distraction – a powerful and mysteriously fascinating place of seduction that generates a particular culture of the senses.

It is interesting to note that the address is directed to a feminised representation of the English capital. In *The Historical Renaissance: New Essays on Tudor and Stuart Literature and Culture*, Heather Dubrow and Richard Strier remarked that English writers almost invariably personified London as a woman: Stephen Batman in *The Golden Booke of the Leaden Gods*, Michael Drayton in *Polyolbion*, Edmund Spenser in *The Faerie Queene*, Thomas Dekker in his *Dramatic Works*. Literary critic Lawrence Manley attempts to provide an explanation for the feminisation of the city in *Literature and Culture in Early Modern London*. According to him, cities in general are personified as feminine because culture “recognises that women are active participants in its special processes, but at the same time sees them as rooted in, as having more direct affinity with, nature” (Manley 141-142), as female identity is located “midway between nature and culture” (Manley 143).

By assigning feminine features to the big city, Dunbar creates a profuse space of excitement and assertion, enlivened by sanguine characters guided by self-

indulgence. It is a spectacular place of fertility and abundance, a mythical scene of natural richness whose vitality and exuberance are captured in a baffling sequence of complex descriptions that seem to explain the special attraction of the place caught between passion and possession, promoting the hedonistic philosophy of “Carpe diem” in its unique manner:

Gemme of all joy, jasper of jocunditie,
Most myghty carbuncle of vertue and valour;
Strong Troy in vigour and in strenuytie;
Of royall cities rose and geraflour;
Empresse of townes, exalt in honour;
In beawtie beryng the crone imperiall;
Swete paradise precelling in pleasure;
London, thou art the flour of Cities all. (Dunbar 17-24)

The incantation of unrepressed energy continues with an appreciative reference to the river Thames, the restless watercourse that impetuously embraces the conurbation, winding about the natural and man-created landscape with its majestic tide almost as sacred as the Egyptian Nile:

Above all ryvers thy Ryver hath renowne,
Whose beryall stremys, pleasaunt and preclare,
Under thy lusty wallys renneth down
Where many a swanne doth swymme with wyngis fair;
Where many a barge doth saile and row with are;
Where many a ship doth rest with toppe-royall. (Dunbar 25-30)

The succession of lines introduced by “where” alludes to the insular relationship with space, translated into the enthusiasm for mobility, progression and progress of the acknowledged nation of seafarers and salt-water imperial colonists that turned London into the “towne of townes! patrone and not compare” (Dunbar 31), “the flour of Cities all” (Dunbar 32).

In the same exhilarating tempo, the poet continues to examine the world of ordinary Londoners whose consistent presence is part of the English capital’s specific features. Urban characters, humans and things altogether, are captured in an almost breathless complex sentence, placing the spectacle of human nature in a bewildering setting:

Strong be thy wallis that about the standis;
Wise be the people that within thee dwellis;
Fresh is thy ryver with his lusty strandis;
Blith be thy chirches, wele sownyng be thy bellis;
Riche be thy merchauntis in substaunce that excellis;
Fair be thy wives, right lovesom, white and small;
Clere be thy virgyns, lusty under kellis (Dunbar 41-47)

The multitude of invisible actors on the everyday metropolitan scene – walls and people, river, churches and bells, merchants, wives and virgins – give shape to the

world of certainties, a libertarian Agora whose synchronous dynamics recommends London as “the flour of Cities all”.

Five centuries later, Irishman Louis MacNeice reconsidered the metaphor from a negative perspective, contemplating the decay of the singular capital drained by extreme materialism and two worldwide conflicts. Dark in spirit, his poem “Goodbye to London” is a chronological recording of an individual voyage that intermingles with definite periods in the history of the English metropolis: “Next to my peering teens she was foreign/Names over winking doors, a kaleidoscope/Of wine and ice, of eyes and emeralds” (MacNeice 11-13).

MacNeice employs a strategic technique to relate the flashes of the past with the disillusionment of the present. The couplet “Nevertheless let the petals fall/Fast from the flower of cities all” (MacNeice 4-5) is repeated at the end of each stanza to deepen the feelings of futility and hopelessness induced by the Second World War and particularly by The Blitz, a series of destructive German air raids that ruined many of the city’s renowned symbols: the British Museum, the Houses of Parliament, and St. James’s Palace. The poet recollects the major historic event of 20th-century London in a series of terms alluding to diminishment, reclusion, and even claustrophobia: “Then came the headshrinking war, the city/Closed in too, the people were fewer/But closer too, we were back in the womb” (MacNeice 21-23).

At the same time, the evocation of the Blitz occasions a tribute to human unity and generosity in times of crisis, an episode often mythologised by the historians of the past century. The Nazi aggression pulled Londoners together in stoic resistance and, under the German attacks, London itself showed its humane, motherly spirit, as her underground shelters (“the womb”) provided safe protection to its citizens. The temporary retreat into the subterranean refuge prompts the memory of the original home, recreating the image of the nurturing mother city in an exclusive relationship with the everlasting forces of femininity.

However, the reality of postwar experience marked a return to inertia and sterility, and the rebirth of the city, predicted by politicians, economists, sociologists, philosophers, etc. (enigmatically referred to as “they” in the poem), is delayed by estranged Londoners: “From which reborn into anticlimax/We endured much litter and apathy hoping/The phoenix would rise, for so they had promised” (MacNeice 26-28).

The concluding stanza allows MacNeice to advance a bitter comment on his contemporary society, withdrawn into extreme privacy and self-centredness, which explains the gradually disintegrating spirit of the capital, the essence of the entire nation:

And nobody rose, only some meaningless
Buildings and the people once more were strangers
At home with no one, sibling or friend.
Which is why now the petals fall
Fast from the flower of cities all. (MacNeice 31-35)

Paradoxically, although the poem is bleak, it is undoubtedly a melancholic love song for London, and MacNeice is an uncompromising loyalist who believes in

the city's power of revival. Like many other generations of writers before him, he knows that the English capital has had ups and down in her millennial history, and somehow she has been able to successfully restore her vigour and verve.

As history has established the huge conurbation as a symbol of strength and continuity deriving from its extraordinary capacity of renewal, Jamaican-born poet James Berry compliments the multicultural capital and its unrepressed vitality in the Third Millennium. His poem "Wanting to Hear Big Ben" appeals to the iconic image, world-famous landmark of London as an unmistakable symbol of urban life and personal freedom:

Another traveller said: Man,
me, miself, I wahn go to Englan
specially — fi stan up unda Big Ben

and hear Big Ben a-strike
and feel it there... (Berry 1-5)

The mental projection of the great bell seems to acquire almost endless significations as the real, geographically recognisable object turns into an imaginary, culturally constructed earthly paradise. Big Ben exerts the mirage of a new realm, the centre of the new world where the individual becomes able to go beyond narcissistic games, and to permeate rigid borders in the desire to discover both the outer self and the inner other.

Through the agency of imagination and perception, the ego becomes hypersensitive, awakening strange emotions pertaining to memory and long concealed aspirations. The particular auditory impression multiplies through the senses, acquiring a hyperbolic dimension that incorporates three of the classical elements of life:

and have me rememba, how
when I was a boy passin a radio
playin in a shop, and a-hear

Big Ben a-strike the time,
gongin and vibratin, like it travel
unda centre of earth

or unda the sea
or fram deep-deep sky (Berry 7-14)

Renowned for its reliability, Big Ben stands as an emblem of tradition and stability at the heart of the metropolis, a loyal keeper of the nation's archive for more than 160 years. Its impartial beats measure the passing of time implacably, as a constant reminder of human impermanence that triggers the need to transform, to change, to develop.

With our hero, the deep sound of the distant tower clock seems to intensify his need to break loose from actual certainty for the sake of adventure and self-

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transformation. It is a mysterious call to transcend the limits of personal destiny, to break any ties with routine and conventions and to re-create personal identity in a new world waiting to be discovered and conquered:

and I did kinda feel strange, that

somehow, this mighty echo come fram
a mystery place call centre of mi worl
which I could not imagine at all. (Berry 15-18)

The persona's obsession with self-positioning close to the clock tower of Westminster Palace is justified by his sense of belonging for the specific purpose of character-building, as the ontological movement from one place to another triggers inevitable changes in personal and social identity, generating a multitude of meanings. The voyage of discovery validates the social self and assigns authority to the individual: with the culture of origin at one extreme and the host culture at the other, identity becomes a continuum, creating a space of self-assurance and stability – in Berry's case, London:

Now — when I get to Landan
I jus wahn to stan-up
unda that striking Big Ben

an man, jus test out
how that vibration work — inside-a-me. (Berry 19-23)

With this “vibration”, the poet echoes the philosophy encoded in the postmodern age of migration according to which dislocation and relocation reshape identity, enhancing mental versatility and emotional metamorphosis. Externalising the self to new places and experiences is testing its limits by developing a journey of discovery outside and beyond personal boundaries in the uncommon surroundings of an extraordinary place: London, the unrivalled city.

In these three examples, personal topological and temporal presentness is strongly connected with the city, the vast setting that concentrates most, if not all, human experiences. London in particular exerts the charm of the best possible world where identity can be defined and redefined, in a constant play of likeness and difference that closely mimic the multiple facets of the city itself. The intriguing and yet irresistible mixture of civility and nonconformity, sophistication and alienation, drudgery and indulgence introduce London as a phenomenon whose livelihood imposes a special pace on all the adventurers who dare approach it – among them, poets.

Transcending the centuries, most poets, natives or foreigners, compete in bringing their homage to London. Aware of the inimitable diversity of “the flower of cities all”, they propose a mosaic of highly personal imaginary accounts based on its multiple places of community and continuity converging into the perception of London as the quintessential locus of cyclical death and rebirth – or as what cultural critic Iain Chambers identified as “the site of the ruins of previous orders in which

diverse histories, languages, memories and traces continually entwine and recombine in the construction of new horizons” (Chambers 112).

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