



The Writer and the City

Andy Jackson

THE POET CHARLES BAUDELAIRE once wrote ‘What strange phenomena we find in a great city; all we need to do is stroll about with our eyes open. Life swarms with innocent monsters.’

I was born in the mid-1960s in Salford, back then a run-down and deprived area of Manchester (although a city in its own right). It’s a place immortalised in the paintings of L. S. Lowry, and was also the blueprint for Tony Warren’s Weatherfield in his urban kitchen-sink drama *Coronation Street*. It was a town swarming with innocent monsters, if ever there was one.

I moved to Scotland in the early 1970s, at which point the City of Salford’s fortunes rose improbably to the point where parts of it have been gentrified out of all recognition. The relocation of the BBC to Media City in Salford a few years ago means you’re now quite likely to find yourself standing next to Gary Lineker or Naga Munchetty in the queue for a quinoa salad box at Pret A Manger.

An inner-city upbringing had certain drawbacks for me as a writer — I still can’t put names to varieties of tree and wildflower. Mostly I can’t tell one species of bird from another. Moreover, I’m aware that many varieties of flower, plant and bird carry symbolic meaning in their own right when used in literature. I’ve been told that these things are things poets ought to know about, but at my age it would require a lengthy course in natural history and classical imagery to acquire that knowledge. I’m a product of the *city*, and consequently that’s where many of my poems are set.



The difference between the city and the countryside for me is that we tolerate imperfection, chaos and even ugliness in urban locations in a way we couldn't in the countryside. The great poets of the ages regularly celebrated the perfection of daffodils and birdsong and the honesty of rustic life. The grime and the grind of the city seem to figure less prominently in their work, but the reality of urban imperfection is *my* reality, and I find *that* reality lived most vividly by the people of the sprawl who embody the noise and light of the city.

For the last few years I've lived in a semi-rural village in Perthshire, midway between the cities of Dundee and Perth. It's really lovely and I'm very lucky to live there, but I still feel the pull of the two cities I live between. I'm primarily interested in people – their behaviours and motivations – and while of course you can observe such things in rural locations, the city is home to people at *all* points on the cultural and behavioural spectrum, and it's this wealth of inspiration which feeds my work.

Cities are places of extremes – the extremely ordinary as well as the extremely extraordinary – and this is where I find things to say in a poem. The human condition is a constant theme for poets, and I like to go where there are plenty of humans in order to observe and hopefully interpret the lives of Baudelaire's teeming millions of 'innocent monsters'.