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James Barke

Politics, Cinema and Writing Scottish Urban Modernity

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Conclusion

Pulling together the strands of this thesis, the following passage may be cited as exemplifying Barke's political and aesthetic tendencies, but is equally imbued with his sense of urban Glasgow and a cinematic visual consciousness. From its opening episode 'Sunset Over the Second City', *Major Operation's* highly-charged political ideals are signalled, along with the social demarcations of the city. There is also a sense of a cinematic sweep across the cityscape, evoking the drama of the City Symphony film genre and presenting Glasgow in all its grime and grandeur. Dense in its symbolism and mortgaged to adversarial class culture, the opening to the novel, in common with much of his work of the period, is laden with meaning and a litmus test of Barke's aesthetic and political project in the mid-1930s. The author lists the areas of the city inhabited by the downtrodden, banding them together in a revolutionary cadre, then allows the reader to derive the sense that Scotland's institutions of culture and learning are about to be engulfed by the symbolic blood-red tide in the form of his metaphorical sunset: in an anti-Romantic parody, this is equated with the 'natural' sweep of history toward the Socialist revolution.

In Pollockshaws, Partick: Govan and Gorbals: Dennistoun and Dalmuir. [the sunset] gave a revolutionary, end-of-the-world effect to the Great Western Road, where people never think of the end of the world and dread the word revolution. From Park Terrace and Royal Terrace it provided a magnificent backcloth to the Kelvingrove Park, causing the Art Gallery and the University to stand in respectful augustation from Nature's artistic bloodthirstiness. No hint of impending revolution here! With the highest achievement of Scottish learning on the right and a representative collection of the culture (and curios) of the world on the left! Observe how boldly the great Lord Roberts, bronzed by nature and embalmed by art, faced the dying sun! Be British and be brave.¹

It is safe to say that James Barke's novels of the 1930's have a central didactic purpose, are designed to awaken and educate and are highly politicized in nature. Set against this background, the august institutions in this extract remain either unaware of the forces that gather to destroy them or are simply hubristically defiant. This is suggested by the personification of the latter in the statue of Lord Roberts, a symbol of aggressive British imperialism, boldly facing the sun that sets on capitalism. The statue represents an immutable tradition that is unable to adapt to the changing pace of society.

Writing at what I would argue to be the zenith of his literary innovation and political optimism, Barke continues throughout the opening of the novel to develop the sunset both as political metaphor and device of simultaneity. The 'fleeing Moralists' he describes scuttling off to a meeting is only one of a number of people throughout the City who acknowledge the sunset; it is a device akin to Woolf's plane indulging in an aerobatic display seen from various perspectives in *Mrs Dalloway*, or Joyce's vice-regal cavalcade traversing the streets of Dublin in *Ulysses*. In this fleetingly observed character Barke appears to satirise a section of the middle-class intelligentsia: he is said to regard the sunset with 'considerable moral and utilitarian satisfaction.'² The political division of the classes is explored in the sunset. Barke's extended end-of-capitalism metaphor is embodied in the attitude whereby 'the upper and middle-class response to the setting sun was one of polite interest and polite unconcern, observing and dismissing the observation simultaneously.' What may also be derived from this opening episode is that to Barke's chagrin even those of the working class who are not entirely oblivious of it are equally apathetic about this figurative sunset.

On a less politically symbolic level, at least some citizens are shown to

be affected by the grandeur of nature. The young couple, Sarah Cannan and Thomas MacGonachlan, are halted in the course of their courting on Cathkin Braes by Sarah's fear of God aroused in her by the sunset, to the detriment of her (recently over-exercised) libido. This forces a sufficient hiatus for Thomas to focus instead on his view of the City through the 'gathering dusk and smoke' and notice the 'sooted and begrimed blood' that suggests to him a 'touch of hellfire and damnation.'³ MacGonachlan's alienated and impressionistic take on the city chimes with that held by many of its inhabitants and this is a sentiment that cuts across the classes. Such an underlying opinion of the city causes the middle classes to seek respite at Loch Lomond and any other reachable rural location whenever the opportunity presents itself, while the working class long for the Trades' Fair during which they can maybe (in an ironic description) 'stretch a sail' out of the city.

Barke's situating of the Scottish metropolis in the nexus of wider urban modernity, of course, had the dialectic at its core. The problems and possibilities of modern urban life in Scotland are to the fore, and in continuing dynamic tension. The potential of experience entailed in the city of modernity was summarised in the final 'policy' of F.T. Marinetti's 'Manifesto of Futurism' (1909):

We will sing of great crowds excited by work, by pleasure, and by riot: we will sing of the multicoloured, polyphonic tides of revolution in the modern capitals; we will sing of the vibrant nightly fervour of arsenals and shipyards blazing with violent electric moons; greedy railway stations that devour smoke-plumed serpents; factories hung on clouds by crooked lines of their smoke; bridges that stride the rivers like giant gymnasts, flashing in the sun with a glitter of knives; adventurous steamers that sniff the horizon; deep-chested locomotives whose wheels paw the tracks like the hooves of enormous steel horses bridled by tubing; and the sleek flight of planes whose propellers chatter in the wind like

banners and seem to cheer like an enthusiastic crowd.⁴

Here the imagistic animism certainly seems to anticipate (as well as be ironised by) T.S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' (1917). Equally, the modernist explications of city life inform Barke's 1930s fiction; Marinetti's manifesto resonates with Duncan Carmichael's oneiric description in *The World His Pillow* of his first encounter with cinema. Like Marinetti, Carmichael realises his atavistic sensory overload in terms of the fantastic – poisoned blood, slimy serpent and devilish fascination: cinema and city are cognate in their intoxicating effects. The reader is left to speculate that Carmichael's eventual return to the Highland estate will engender an equal and opposite process of re-figuring his sensual perception, as well as a re-calibrating of his body's 'metronome.' It also seems likely that he will continue to pine for the thrill of big screen entertainment.

The only element that is unusual, and arguably unconvincing, in the conclusion of the novel is exactly this return to the countryside. Barke's later novels of the 1930s tend to accept the move from the rural to the urban as an irreversible absolute. Borrowing heavily from his own experience, and with the sole exception of *The World His Pillow*, Barke's fictional depictions reinforce the immutability of the one-way flow entailed in the binary oppositions and drift of Scottish society from country to city. Typically, for instance, in *Land of the Leal* (1939), Barke to some extent reprises his own experience and not only maps his family's move from Galloway, to Kincardine and eventually to Glasgow during his youth but also recreates specific details of his life in the process.⁵ As it was for Barke himself, in *Land of the Leal* city-dwelling is ultimately and inescapably the fate of the Ramsays, and there is neither the

drive, desire nor the opportunity to reverse this process. Furthermore, and contrary to many romanticised portrayals of the bucolic milieu, Barke's farmland of the Rhinns in Galloway, the dairy farm in the Borders and the estate in Kincardine entail constant hardship, frequent brutality, a crypto-feudal system rife with injustice, and life lived in perpetual uncertainty. While his literary expositions of city life in *Land of the Leal* may generally be rather grim, Barke does not advocate the merits of the rural: regardless of location, for those of a certain social class 'life is hard' seems to be the consistent message in this novel. In this, Barke stakes his claim as a 'modern' man of Scottish letters.

Here we arrive at the one of the elemental dichotomies of Barke's writing, and one that seems to reflect a critical debate that can be said to have raged most overtly since H. G Wells and Henry James engaged in a rather public disagreement on the nature of reality and function of literature. The oppositional stances entailed Wells seeing the novel as 'a means towards revolutionising society [...requiring it] convey its political commitment as straightforwardly and explicitly as possible.'⁶ James, however, felt the novel was first and foremost an 'art form, which in skilful hands could enrich awareness of human experience.'⁷ As Deborah Parsons notes, this argument was replicated in lively dialogue between Wells and Dorothy Richardson, Arnold Bennet and Virginia Woolf, and John Galsworthy and D. H. Lawrence.⁸ The Soviet Writers' Congress of 1934 can be held to be merely a formalised continuation of this argument over the character of literary realism and modernism, apparently seeking a lasting divorce to finally establish two independent and substantive (value-laden) aesthetic entities. The conventions of an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century realist model as an authentic

representation of life had been challenged by modernism's self-conscious innovation in subject-matter and focus on the workings of the human mind, with all the abstraction and subjectivity that entails, in pursuit of the revelation of the 'real' experience. The 'realist' mode resurgent in the 1930s was concerned to retain a social conscience while exposing and examining the pressing political and moral dilemmas of the era. Arguably, both strive to address and recreate the 'real,' and it seems in *Major Operation* Barke was at very least acknowledging the idea that these two aesthetic models could be reconciled and were not inherently oppositional positions: to promote a political and social agenda it was not a prerequisite to repudiate literary innovation and subjectivity, both these aspects being able to cohere to represent a sense of the real. While Barke held this apparent conviction that these arguably divergent models for representing the real could be reconciled in the text, from his ancillary writing on the subject it can be seen that he had a harder time coming to terms with the modernism's more elitist and apolitical (sometime right-wing) associations.

What is worthy of note as regards Barke's literature and his seemingly entrenched professed position on various issues is that these were sometimes primarily emphatic rather than being always based on considered judgement. For instance, Barke's views on the shift to the urban seems steeped in his own personal experience rather than a broad overview of the complexities of the composition of Scotland's ever-changing demography. Equally, his often contradictory positions on the Scottish Literary Revival are suspiciously antagonistic, perhaps designed to goad his literary peers as much as promote a steadfast and logically established aesthetic precept. Thus, fitting his expressed arguments with his literary output can be something of a challenge. One of the

examples of this is his sweeping criticism of *Ulysses*, in clear contrast to his emulation of some of its innovative aspects. In attempts to chart Barke's thoughts on the state of Scotland and its culture, it must be recognised that at points his view can be slave to his abrasive tendencies more than a considered survey of the truth of the matter. As with the apparent contradiction in his professed views on *Ulysses* and his discernible appreciation of Joyce's novel, Barke's approach to cinema and modernism as a whole follows a similar pattern; his literature often indicates a particular fondness, where at times his criticism can stray into rather damning rhetoric. Cinema, as has been demonstrated, enlivened his creative writing and remained a passion for the author, in spite of his occasional barbs against it.

As I have argued, in providing a most rounded exploration of the contrasting lives and opportunities across the class divide, *Major Operation* repeatedly implies a correlation between a cinematic consciousness and Glasgow's city space. Both the novel's topography and demography are constructed in literary renditions of cinematic techniques. In this, Barke's novel is another example of what Laura Marcus identifies as the 'literary and filmic "city symphonies" in the 1920s – and there are of course earlier and later examples – [that had] been an important factor in making the connection between literature and cinema.'⁹ From his writing, it seems apparent that the advent of cinema, with its impact on the consciousness and organisation of its psycho-geography, introduced a new and dynamic interface by which the citizenry were able to perceive their city. However, there was an extant tradition of psycho-literary conceptions that preceded and fed into cinema's influence on the city. They ranged from: Balzac's emphasis on 'social intricacy [and]

constant mobility;’ to Dostoievsky’s highlighting of the ‘elements of mystery and strangeness and the loss of connection,’ that was comparable to Dickens’ writing, though ‘drawing on different ultimate responses;’ through to Baudelaire’s urban environment where ‘isolation and loss of connection’ were valued as the causal conditions ‘of a new and lively perception.’¹⁰ Far from rendering Barke’s considerations of city life derivative, these wide-ranging influences feed into the author’s perception of urban modernity and inspire a project to bring the specific atmosphere of Glasgow to life on the page.

Recognising the power of post-Revolutionary Russian cinema and the craft that was entailed – an enthusiasm that also led him to value the more politically-informed Hollywood productions – Barke’s appreciation of the cinematic medium is borne out in much of his personal correspondence. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that he was a member of the Film Society of Glasgow and the films he saw made sufficient impact as to infiltrate his visual imagination, specific scenes even making their way into his novels. The impact of cinema on Barke as a writer cannot be overstated and he is the literary exemplar of Scotland during the 1930s as a cinema-going, city-dwelling nation.

Breaking with what could be contended to be a parochial tradition of Scottish writing, Barke’s influences in the four central aspects I have identified – politics, aesthetics, city and cinema – emanated from around the globe. His political influences were certainly home-grown while clearly formed with one eye on Soviet Russia (and latterly a very wary, critical eye on Nazi Germany), these being transmitted into his fiction itself shaped by the cosmopolitanism and internationalism of Philip Rahv. Barke’s aesthetic principles, which as I have argued were never susceptible to complete detachment from his political ones,

were moulded with reference to Dos Passos and, in the case of *Major Operation*, owed a particular debt of inspiration to James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Finally, this most cinematic of Scottish writers mined a rich seam of international cinema and other cinematically-inspired writing (again, Dos Passos and Joyce being the most prominent influences) to fuel his visual imagination. Barke's professed love of the cinema, evident recognition of the potential for its art and inspiration, I contend, was one of the fundamental driving forces behind his early fiction and should, by rights, situate him as one of Scotland's most innovative and progressive 'moderns' in the milieu of the novel.

Why this is not the case is clearly a matter of speculation, though one explanation could be offered in his 'retreat' into writing his Burns quintet toward the conclusion of the War Years. There is clearly an uncertainty as to 'cause and effect' here, where perhaps his limited literary success pushed him toward writing about Burns. Whatever the precise cause, his despondency and disillusionment at this time seem to have taken the verve out of Barke's political and aesthetic ambitions, these later and rather more thematically conventional novels effectively eclipsing his more contemporary and daring fiction of the 1930s. During this period, Barke subscribed to the view of the writer as an agent of historical transformation, seeking to represent Scotland and Scottish thought. This task was to reflect or even provoke a resurgent Scottish culture and renew the connection between it and the masses. The essentially political nature of his literature may be summed up by restating Barke's assertion that he was 'merely a Left Writer – whatever that may be.' In this pursuit, Barke's use of traditional forms, Modernism and a large dash of social-political criticism to achieve

Ranciere's 'double effect' – readable political signification coupled with sensible or perceptual shock – was the essence of his effectiveness of assertion. This 'higher synthesis of forms' would, he hoped, produce the progressive literature Scotland needed – effective, modern, proletarian.

¹ James Barke, *Major Operation*, p. 13.

² James Barke, *Major Operation*, p. 14.

³ James Barke, *Major Operation*, p. 14.

⁴ F. T. Marinetti, 'The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism' (1909) in *Futurist Manifestos*, ed. and with introduction by Umbro Apollonio (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1973), p. 22.

⁵ Barring a short-lived, unsuccessful hotel-owning venture in Ayrshire, Barke was to remain in Glasgow until shortly before his death in 1958.

⁶ Deborah Parsons, *Theorists of the Modernist Novel: James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf* (London & New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 25.

⁷ Deborah Parsons, p. 25.

⁸ Deborah Parsons, p. 25.

⁹ Laura Marcus, 'A Hymn to Movement': The "City Symphony" of the 1920s and 1930s', *Modernist Cultures*, 5.1, 30–46 (p. 36).

¹⁰ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), p. 234.