

The Writer and the City

London Transformed: Images of the City in the Eighteenth Century, by Max Byrd, *New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1978. x + 202 pp. \$12.50.*

AS PROFESSOR MAX BYRD reminds us in his Introduction to *London Transformed*, cities are the largest of man-made things. His brief but carefully meditated study of certain literary responses to eighteenth-century London makes it clear that cities are also among the most difficult of subjects for the poet or novelist: made by man and inhabited by men, they nevertheless acquire a kind of independent, supra-human life—sometimes alluring, sometimes menacing—which resists easy treatment by urbanologist and artist alike. Contemplating the “living scene” (Wordsworth’s phrase) presented by the place he calls London, New York, Chicago, or Paris, man may be puzzled, awed, fearful, angry, or entranced (perhaps all at the same time) by the teeming entity of which he finds himself a part, or which he ponders from afar.

Aside from the mystery of its independent life, the city is, of course, complex: it is both one and many (as suggested by Whitman’s superb image, “million-footed Manhattan”). The city is also constantly changing: it grows and diminishes almost visibly, transforming itself even within part of a human lifetime. But most troublesome for the artist, perhaps, is the fact that the city has always been a tantalizing compound of dream and reality. Deep in the human consciousness, and widespread in the literature of the classical past, is the dream or idea of a perfectly ordered and harmonious earthly city. The reality of urban life now and in the past has always fallen considerably short of the dream. In our time we see on one level poverty, squalor, and violence; and on another level, as part of the price we pay for order, we see depersonalization, anonymity, loneliness, and alienation. Mindful of the dream, the artist must inevitably confront the multifarious reality of the city as it is; if he is a great artist—a major writer—the confrontation must just as

inevitably reflect that troublesome tension between dream and reality.

London Transformed deals in succession with five major writers—Defoe, Pope, Johnson, Wordsworth, and Blake—who successively confront the “living scene” of England’s great city during a century when the tension between dream and reality was being heightened by the fiercely expansive energies of colonialism, capitalism, and industrialism. Though these five authors might be characterized simply as eighteenth- (and early nineteenth-) century writers who cope in one way or another with their personal views and experiences of London, Byrd attempts—for thematic purposes—to align them and frame them fairly closely as a group. But only two—Pope and Johnson—are really “Augustan Humanists,” a term Byrd invokes when he first seeks to define what he perceives to be the effort of all five writers to “humanize” an increasingly inhuman and unmanageable London. From Byrd’s perspective, Wordsworth and Blake—when they write about the city, at least—are not Romantic poets but latter-day Augustans whose visions of anarchic London are charged with stern neo-classic moral disapproval. The presence of a stubborn Defoe—neither Augustan Humanist nor Romantic visionary (nor “major” writer, perhaps)—may indicate to what extent Byrd’s alignment of his key figures as moralizing humanists seems arbitrary and theme-serving.

Byrd approaches the city by means of the recurring metaphors his writers employ as they attempt to express the central meaning of London and translate that meaning into human or humanized terms. Though some question might be raised about the effectiveness of image-analysis as an isolated mode of criticism, certainly this method affords the author some degree of control over his materials, which are widely spaced in time and considerably different in kind (ranging from Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* to Wordsworth’s autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*). More important, the analysis of images serves to support and direct the author’s basic inquiry into what he discerns as a significant continuity of eighteenth-century humanist ideas and

values (a continuity I have some difficulty in accepting).

The major image of the city upon which Byrd's argument revolves is that of the human body and its parts; Defoe and Blake, especially, coming to terms with a sprawling, out-sized London, "resort to the oldest possible measurement for comparison: they reduce the unthinkable proportions of the city to the plausible ones of faces and arms and legs." Thus in *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Defoe "presents London as a body torn by fever, a body diseased, plague-ridden, and misshapen." Using the same basic body image, Blake "turns in the opposite direction and offers us the picture of Jerusalem, a woman who is also London and whose beautiful body is its transcendent form." Pursuing interesting thematic continuities and relationships, Byrd does not remind us that Defoe's *Journal* was published in 1722; that it reconstructs events which took place in 1664-65; and that Blake's *Jerusalem* dates from between 1804-20. Yet both Defoe and Blake, as Byrd contends, are responding as "humanists" to the same phenomenon: "As the size and complexity of London reach past the boundaries of humanist understanding, the humanist imagination reworks those boundaries and sometimes, as in the case of Blake, transcends them altogether." Concentrating on thematic continuities and relationships, Byrd tends to overstress the universal and the archetypal, not taking into sufficient account the temporal conditions which constantly alter ideas and images as well as cities. Much transcends the flux of time, but a great deal more is submerged within it; Defoe's London is not Blake's London, just as Whitman's Manhattan is not Hart Crane's.

Though it is a major image of the city, and a rather natural if not inevitable one, the human body (as Byrd goes on to explain) is only one of a number of images employed by writers to describe eighteenth-century London. Pope, Johnson, and Wordsworth use "less spectacular but no less necessary images"—those of theater, river, and language—"images that appear also in Defoe and Blake and dozens of other writers" who are intent upon discovering "enduring moral patterns" within the complex

phenomenon of the growing city. We are given to understand that *London Transformed* is offered as a study of these major images; but as Byrd proceeds with his argument he begins to encounter other equally striking images of the city. We see London as marketplace, as prison, as sink (of corruption), as grave, as madhouse, as forest, as labyrinth, as mother—so many, in fact, that the author's initial conception of "necessary" images becomes as strained and as extended as his gallery of "Augustan Humanists."

The four chapters of *London Transformed* are nominally devoted to Defoe, Pope, Johnson, and Wordsworth (Blake is unaccountably relegated to a "Postscript"), but Byrd manages to glance briefly at a number of other eighteenth- (and early nineteenth-) century authors who have some right to be considered as portrayals of London. Swift, Gay, Boswell, Fielding, Smollett, Lamb, and De Quincey are here, though Cowper of *The Task* (with his image of London, beset by the chronically unemployed, as "a crowded coop") is for some reason not included. I have referred above, perhaps inaccurately, to Byrd's "argument"; but *London Transformed* is not so much argued as ruminated. The four chapters, together with the Postscript, are divided into sections, both long and short, which are sometimes essays in themselves rather than functional parts of a clearly progressing argument. As a consequence, these sections seem to lack forward motion; they begin to revolve around a writer rather than the writer's response to London, or they trail off into intriguing byways, ending unexpectedly at the turn of a page. When these revolving ruminations come to bear on crucial texts, they tend to carry the author much farther than the labor of image-analysis (or even purposive argumentation) would warrant. We doubt, for instance, if Byrd has really done enough to win our assent to his conjunction of Pope's *Dunciad* and Blake's *Jerusalem*, or if Wordsworth's verse description of St. Paul's Cathedral (in a posthumously published notebook passage) bears the conclusive symbolic significance Byrd assigns to it in rounding off his study.

But it would be wrong to give the impression

that *London Transformed* is a gravely flawed or negligible book. For the most part, Byrd is a good critic and a good writer. His study is more intricate and more subtle than my observations might indicate; and his insights, buttressed by an expert knowledge of the eighteenth century, always require our close attention, even though in the end we may not always be fully persuaded by what he says. We must admit that Byrd, in exploring the rich legend of London, has nevertheless made a useful contribution to the study of urban literature in general.

Reviewed by JOHN H. JOHNSTON