AN EXPLORATION OF "THE CITY OF DREADFUL NIGHT"

by

D.B. Moore

Thesis submitted for the degree of Ph.D. in the
University of Leicester, 1973.

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FOREWORD

My thanks are due to the patient librarians of the British Museum (especially of the Manuscript Room); the Bodleian Library; the Library of the University of Leicester; the Newspaper Library at Colindale; Rylands Library and the Central Library at Manchester; and the Librarians of the Textile Institute, who have collected books for me from far and near. I have also valued short periods of study and discussion at St. Deiniol's Residential Library, where I have discovered some very odd books of nineteenth century verse and criticism.

I am deeply appreciative of the help I have received from the General Secretaries of the Rationalist Press Association Limited, and the National Secularist Society, and the Editor of The Freethinker, who have allowed me to search in the Salt, Bradlaugh and other relevant manuscript collections.

The Public Record Office has been particularly helpful about Thomson's military career, and so has the Curator of the Army Education Corps Museum.

I cannot omit mention of a stimulating and useful discussion with Mrs Anne Ridler, who has done so much scholarly work on the MSS of "The City of Dreadful Night". I am grateful also to the Father Prior and the Brothers at the Priory of the Holy Ghost in Oxford, for discussing Thomson's Catholic imagery with me.

My greatest thanks are to my supervisor, Mr G.S. Fraser, who, with kindliness and understanding, has always demanded the highest standards.

ABBREVIATIONS USED IN FOOTNOTES

Hayter = Alethea Hayter, Opium and the Romantic Imagination, University of California Press and London, 1968.

Memoir = Memoir by Bertram Dobell in The Poetical Works of James Thomson (B.V.), 2 vols., ed. Bertram Dobell, 1895.

NR = The National Reformer.

Ridler = Anne Ridler, ed. and introduction, Poems and Some Letters of James Thomson, 1963.

Salt = H.S. Salt, The Life of James Thomson ("B.V."), with a selection of his letters and a study of his writings, 1889.

Salt 1898)
) = subsequent and slightly revised editions of the above work.
Salt 1914)

Schaefer = William David Schaefer, James Thomson (B.V.): Beyond the City, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1965.

Thomson = The Poetical Works of James Thomson (B.V.), 2 vols., ed. Bertram Dobell, 1895.

Vachot = Charles Vachot, James Thomson (1834-1882), Paris, 1964.

CHAPTER ONE - PREPARATION FOR "THE CITY"

i.- Life and influences

There is at least one excellent biography of James Thomson (B.V.) and the circumstances of his life and work are well documented in various collections. The purpose of the present work is to examine in depth his greatest achievement, the long poem he called The City of Dreadful Night, and to do this it is not necessary to examine either his history or his other works in absolute detail. But it is necessary to set out briefly those influences which seem to have led him to the composition of what is in many ways the most remarkable atheistical and pessimistic poem in the English language, and to consider those aspects of his other works and literary interests which had a bearing on it.

James Thomson was from childhood to death a solitary man.[1] Surrounded by friends and acquaintances, he was affectionately regarded, but at no stage did he fully share a life of family relationships. His early years were marred by his father's illness and mental breakdown,[2] and by the hardships this inflicted on his mother. He hardly knew his brother and his sister died when she was little more than a baby.[3] Of other relatives we hear little or nothing until comparatively late in

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[1] G.G. Flaws, "James Thomson: A Study", The Secular Review, 24 June and 1 July 1882.

[2] Salt, pp.2-5; Memoir, vol.I, pp.xii-xiii.

[3] Salt, pp.3, 4.

life, there is some interesting correspondence with his sister-in-law.[4] When still a child, he was sent to the Royal Caledonian Asylum,[5] an excellent establishment for its days, but in effect an orphanage. His holidays were spent with friends,[6] and though the Grays were hospitable and kind, his relationship was that of a dependent, welcome so long as he was 'charming', but gently dissuaded when there was a hint of 'presumption'. When he left for his army service, he was not allowed to write to their elder daughter Helen.[7] He felt this bitterly and on her engagement to someone else, he broke off for ever the relationship with the family.[8] They had rescued him as a schoolboy from homelessness, but they left him solitary.

The same situation developed in his chosen career. He studied to become an army schoolmaster.[9] The occupation and the preparation for it demanded a certain degree of intelligence. We have Thomson's own humorous description of what army schoolmastering was like:

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[4] Salt, pp.3-5, 65-9, 102-3, 118-9, 168-9; Ridler, p.255.

[5] Salt, p.3; Memoir, p.xiii.

[6] Salt, p.3.

[7] Salt, pp.8, 26-42; Memoir, p.xvi.
He was, however, allowed to correspond with their younger daughter Agnes, who must have been about ten years old when Thomson went to Ballincollig in 1852. On her birth certificate her father's occupation is given as 'plumber'. The family lived in Whitechapel, that is, in east London, where Thomson's family had lived before his mother's death. The Grays' home was 19 Wellclose Square, which is quite close to the docks. Thomson's father, it will be recalled, had been a seafaring man.

[8] Salt, pp.40-1.

[9] Salt, pp.6 et seq.; Memoir, pp.xiv et seq.

And if now and then a curse (too intense for this light verse)
Should be gathering in one's spirit when he thinks of how he lives,
With a constant tug and strain knowing well it's all in vain -
Pumping muddy information into unretentive sieves;
Let him stifle back the curse, which but makes the matter worse,
And by tugging on in silence earn his wages if he can;
For the blessed eve and night are his own yet, and he might
Fix sound bottoms in these sieves too were he not so weak a man. [10]

Army schoolmasters were non-commissioned or in the highest rank, warrant officers. Thomson's leisure had to be spent in the sergeants' mess. Its nature, not much altered over the years, can be judged from one of the songs he wrote for it:

With our arms round the waists of the charming girls
Through the galop-sweeps and the swift waltz-whirls,
While our beards are brushed by their dancing curls,
Dance, boys, dance!

. . . . . .

So we'll smoke our pipe, and we'll drink our glass,
And we'll play our game, and we'll hug our lass;
And as for the rest - why the devil's an ass:
Drink, boys, drink! [11]

There is little doubt that, encouraged by the traditional habits of a sergeants' mess, Thomson's perhaps inherited tendency to drink to excess was indulged; it was of course one of the more obvious escape routes for the solitary man.

During his apprenticeship to army schoolmastering he was affectionately welcomed by Mr Barnes, garrison-master at Ballincollig near Cork, and his wife. They recognized his ability and called him by the pet name 'Co', which was short for 'precocious'.[12] That they were people of some

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[10] Memoir, p.xxxiii.

[11] Thomson, Vol.III "A Sergeants' Mess Song".

[12] Salt, p.9.

discrimination we know, for they appreciated the sonnet sequence which Thomson wrote for them and which is competently done.[13] He long held them in regard. It was from the comparative security of their homethat he met and fell in love with, or had some kind of idealistic relationship with Matilda Weller, the daughter of a sergeant-armourer.[14] [15] The relationship was to undergo much symbolic change, for her death while he was finishing his training at the Royal Military Asylum at Chelsea undermined his sense of security and she became a symbol of loss throughout his poetry:

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[13] Memoir, pp.xvii-xxii.

[14] Salt, pp.10-17.

[15] Charles Bradlaugh in "Reviews", NR 9 November 1884 wrote:

> "The armourer-sergeant's daughter (of the 7th Dragoon Guards), who diediin Ireland about 1852, was only a little child, playing with children's toys - a very pretty child, and it was not till long after her death, and in his morbid times, that Thomson, little by little, built the poetical romance about her memory."
>
> Bradlaugh told Salt that Thomson's betrothal to Matilda Weller was purely imaginary, "a poetical invention". But Bradlaugh's memory over the years was not entirely reliable and William Weller (Matilda's brother whom Thomson had taught at Ballincollig) told Salt that while his parents had never spoken of an engagement, his mother, shortly before her death, spoke to his (William Weller's) wife about one. (v. Salt MSS. held by the Rationalist Press Association.)
>
> It would seem, weighing various conflicting accounts against each other, that there was an 'understanding' between the young people who possibly had not taken the parents into their confidence.
>
> I do not think it more than a coincidence that Matilda is the name of the mysterious companion to Beatrice who appears at the end of Purgatorio and the beginning of Paradiso. Thomson knew his Dante, though it would seem that he lingered over the Inferno. If he was aware of the coincidence of names it would serve only to encourage his attitude towards her memory.

And ever since she ceased to be my Guide,
I reel and stumble on life's solemn way;
Ah, ever since her eyes withdrew their light,
I wander lost in blackest stormy night. [16]

It was deeply felt, even if it was a wound that was cherished and kept open.[17]

It was while he was at Ballincollig that he became friendly with Charles Bradlaugh, during Bradaugh's short period of service as a private soldier.[18] Bradlaugh's influence on Thomson was not an unmixed blessing. But initially new horizons of thought must have opened before him. Then for the qualified schoolmaster followed eight and a half years of army service. He was not unhappy. He found here and there a man of some capacity to share his interests. His correspondence with John Grant, another schoolmaster, continued throughout his life.[19]

The incident which led to his dismissal, described by Salt and repeated by Dobell,[20] does not seem in itself grave enough for so severe a punishment.[21] There were two consequences; first, for a man of Thomson's intelligence, the

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[16] Memoir, pp.xviii-xx, "To Joseph and Alice Barnes".

[17] G.W. Foote, in "James Thomson. I - The Man", Progress, April 1884, wrote: "Thomson's bereavement was, in my opinion, only the peg on which he hung his garment of sorrow; and if it had not occurred, some other event would have served the same purpose."

[18] Salt, p.10.

[19] Salt, pp.20-21.

[20] Salt, p.47; Memoir, p.xlviii.

[21] It has been suggested but never proved that it was the culmination of a number of incidents arising from Thomson's excessive drinking, though this was not mentioned in the charges against him at the District Court Martial which led to his demotion from 3rd Class to 4th Class Schoolmaster; but the fact is that within weeks of this sentence, he was listed as "discharged by order of the Commander in Chief" on 30 October 1862.

sense of failure must have been acute, even if unadmitted; secondly, he lost his one home, the Army. He may have found it irksome,[22] but at least it had offered lifelong security and companionship.

The various relationships into which his circumstances had forced him were, inevitably, inhibiting. The discipline and obedience required in a home dependent on a visionary but sternly religious mother and a physically ruined father did not encourage a natural childhood. From his eighth to his twenty-ninth year he lived an institutionalized life with all that this implies. For security he had to pay the price of conformity. There were teachers and superiors who recognized his ability and gave him encouragement to the limit of their vision and experience, and within the scope available to a penniless orphan without influence or patronage. The Army, then even more than now, was little concerned with a man's inner life, but with the efficient performance of his duty and the manner in which he could add to the social pleasure of his comrades and the smooth running of a closed community. He was required to tread a fine line between, for example, drinking for companionship[23] and drunkenness on duty. In all probability he failed.

From sheer goodness of heart, with genuine 'caritas', Bradlaugh came to the rescue and provided home and occupation;

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[22] Ridler, pp.54-8: in "Lines on his Twenty-Third Birthday" he says: "I fret 'neath gnat-stings."

[23] Salt, p.39: in verses addressed to his friend Potterton in May 1860, he describes the effect of a proposed change of station: "O it's then we're on the loose, and the swiping grows profuse,/And we drink rivers, lakes, and seas: . . ."

In a later letter to Potterton (p.43) he says: " . . .the Mess strongly attracts a poor solitary, and plays the deuce with his studies."

The children of the house became devoted to him, and indeed Thomson always loved children and they liked him. But it is from Hypatia Bradlaugh in her biography of her father[25] that we have details of Thomson's drunkenness, to which some say that he later added the habit of opium taking.[26] These habits disrupted the Bradlaugh household. Bradlaugh found him job after job and he failed again and again. Finally Bradlaugh's patience was exhausted by the difficulties of the relationship and in 1866 Thomson was driven from the Bradlaugh home. Once again the family background was taken away from him. He began his endless tour of dingy bed-sitting-rooms, so well known to the inhabitants of New Grub Street. Success eluded him even when his interest and capacity were sufficiently engaged. Sorting out the affairs of a failing company in Central City, Colorado, was an opportunity that, as his letters show,[27] he found exciting and stimulating, but he was cheated of his reward. Other ventures, like the newspaper assignment to the Spanish war,[28] were failures.

Already an alcoholic but seeking intellectual companionship, Thomson had fallen under the blanketing effect of Bradlaugh's strong personality. Bradlaugh's kindness, kindly intended, was sadly a bad influence on him. It was charitable and charity

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[25] Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner, Charles Bradlaugh, a record of his life and works, 1894, vol.I, pp.96, 109.

[26] Salt, pp.109-10.

Bradlaugh told Salt that he and Thomson used to talk about De Quincey when they were living in London and remarked that Thomson made experiments with opium, but there is no evidence that he took it habitually. (v. Salt MSS, Rationalist Press Association.)

[27] Salt, pp.77-95; Memoir, pp.lv-lviii; Ridler, pp.xx.

[28] Salt, pp.98-103; Memoir, pp.lviii-lix.

bites deep, especially when it is essential. The need to repay in terms of good behaviour, in terms of grateful appreciation, conflicts with the artist's need to be free. There are similar histories of constant failure by men of great artistic ability (and of their equally constant contrition). The victim is caged.

The second unfortunate influence was the stifling effect of the Freethought community to which Thomson was introduced. Its limited philosophy, so well described in Benn's book,[29] and its social milieu documented by Warren Sylvester Smith,[30] were in their way as narrow as in Mark Rutherford's circles of dissent.[31] The Holyoakes were men of capacity but Austin, Thomson's particular friend, was capable of producing the banality of the Secularist's Manual.[32] Foote also was of some stature, but bigoted and intractable.[33] The Barrses were kindly but conformist.[34] All were good, solid citizens, as firm in their disbelief as dissenters in their righteousness.[35] Their reasons for disbelief were simple, not philosophical. And the community of unbelief locked itself in battle with suburbia rather than with the Establishment.

There was no communication between Bradlaugh, Thomson and their Freethought companions either as individuals or as a

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[29] A.W. Benn, The History of English Rationalism in the 19th Century, 1906.

[30] Warren Sylvester Smith, The London Heretics 1870-1914, 1967.

[31] Basil Willey, More Nineteenth Century Studies: a Group of Honest Doubters, 1963, Chap.V, "Mark Rutherford" (William Hale White).

[32] The Secularist's Manual of Songs and Ceremonies, 1871.

[33] The London Heretics, op.cit., Chap.II, "The Secularists".

[34] v. Salt and Memoir.

[35] More Nineteenth Century Studies, op.cit., Chap.V.

group with men like Leslie Stephen,[36] Clough or Matthew Arnold, equally concerned with problems of faith and belief. Here was the great gap between men of culture and self-taught men of intelligence.[37] Thomson must have been obscurely aware that somewhere beyond his reach, because there was no one to point the way, there were realms of thought which he was capable of exploring, but to which he was denied entry. His contacts with Meredith, Froude and William Michael Rossetti were mainly through correspondence, although he met all three.[38] His work earned occasional praise from established authors,[39] but his success was not great. Though in later years he won some recognition, he was not warmly welcomed in literary circles, perhaps because of the personal habits he had developed by then.

Thomson was a man with an intellectual capacity above his schooling and above his opportunities. He taught himself to read and write French, German and Italian. His translations of Leopardi and Heine and his letters in French to the Bradlaugh girls[40] show that he reached a high level of expertise in all three languages. He was among the first to appreciate Blake.[41

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[36] In 1882 towards the end of his life, Thomson records that after accepting "The Sleeper" for the Cornhill Magazine, Leslie Stephen, who was then its editor, "writes in a very friendly fashion." (v. Salt, p.174.) This seems to have been the only contact between the two men and by then it was too late.

[37] V. Kitson Clarke, Expanding Society, Cambridge University Press, 1967; Salt, p.55.

[38] v. Salt and Memoir.

[39] Salt: George Eliot, p.111; W.M. Rossetti, pp.70-2; George Meredith, pp.153-4.

[40] Salt, pp.113-5, 120.

[41] Thomson, "The Poems of William Blake," NR, Jan. 14, 21, 28, Feb.4, 1866; written in 1864; included in Biographical and Critical Studies, 1896.

He was familiar with the work of Novalis, of Baudelaire,[42] Heine, Dante(both in the original and in Cary's translation),[43] and of course Leopardi. He was one of themost appreciative of Browning's admirers,[44] yet with all these abilities, all this insight, he did not have the depth and breadth of learning or the training in rigorous thinking to produce many articles much above the level of competent hack work.[45] Because of his limitations, due both to lack of education and lack of the right contacts in adult life, the pages of the more serious literary magazines (of which there were many) were closed to him for most of his life. Froude published him once, and once only, in Fraser's Magazine;[46] towards the end of his life he appeared briefly in Cornhill Magazine[47] and The Fortnightly Review.[48] It is difficult to claim that he was neglected unjustly. Much of his work was just not good enough, and for one who had done so much from so small an opportunity, this must have been a most discouraging experience. He was a true denizen of 'New Grub Street', falling somewhere between Reardon and Biffin.

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[42] v. "Charles Baudelaire on Hasheesh," Cope's Tobacco Plant, October 1875. This is a condensed translation of chapters 3, 4 and 5 of Baudelaire's Les Paradis Artificiels.

[43] Salt, pp.82, 287, 316.

[44] Salt, pp.22, 31-2, 168-9.

[45] For a cool assessment of Thomson's prose works see The Speedy Extinction of Evil and Misery: Selected Prose of James Thomson (B.V.), William Schaefer ed., Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967. Schaefer rightly praises "A Lady of Sorrows". This collection contains, in my view, nearly all the prose that in any way repays reading.

[46] "Sunday Up the River: an Idyll of Cockaigne", published in Fraser's Magazine, October 1869.

[47] "The Sleeper", published in Cornhill Magazine, March 1882.

[48] "A Voice from the Nile," published in Fortnightly Review, July 1882; and "Proem: O Antique Fables", February 1892.

Nor must we underestimate the all-pervasive influence of 'class' in Victorian society.[49] Thomson was not a 'Gentleman'. In the early nineteenth century and even in the early twentieth, many opportunities were closed to all except 'gentlemen', not least the network of mutual help and support that members of the 'right' circles gave to each other.[50] For a man like Thomson there was no hope. He did not have the background; he had the 'wrong' friends; he was a Freethinker a drunkard, a drug taker. No one of importance would 'take him up'. He was saved from obscurity by a book-seller.

As if to justify those who made this class distinction, some of his work that attracted attention before The City of Dreadful Night seemed to assume an identification with small clerks and their girls. "Sunday Up the River" (the piece accepted by Froude) and "Sunday at Hampstead" and the central portion of "Vane's Story" take us back socially to the civilian equivalent of the sergeants' mess. Here is evidence that Thomson found a measure of companionship and some satisfaction in a petit bourgeois milieu in which he knew how to be charming. To think, by comparison, of the social atmosphere of Clough's "Amours de Voyage" is to emphasize the

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[49] An Expanding Society, op.cit., Chap.I.
G. Kitson Clark, The Making of Victorian England, 1962, (University Paper Back, 1969) Chap.V.
Walter E. Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1957, Chap.VIII.

[50] In his introductiontto Thomson's translation of Giacomo Leopardi's Essays, Dialogues and Thoughts (Operette Morali and Pensieri), 1905, Dobell says: ". . .to such men the society of scholars and men of letters of like tastes to their own is little less than a necessity of their existence. But from such intercourse Leopardi, shut up in Recanati, and Thomson, in consequence of his obscure position in life, were equally debarred." p.xviii.

[51] Arthur Hugh Clough, "Amours de Voyage", Atlantic Monthly, February-May 1858.

gulf created by class distinctions. Moreover Thomson had peculiar limitations to his range of interest. He seems to have accepted the social situation as he found it. Comparing himself with Bradlaugh he says in a letter to his sister-in-law:

> I don't think that there's a pin to choose between his opinions as to things in general and my own; only while he considers his opinions of the utmost importance, and is unwearied in the profitable task of trying to convert the world to them, I care very little for mine, and don't believe the world capable of being benefited much by having any opinion whatever preached to it.[52]

As late as 1881 as Schaefer observes,[53] his hope for mankind was contained in the couplet:

> Our creed is simple, All men are one man!
> Our sole commandment, Do what good you can.

He had little concern with politics. He wrote twice in 1870 about the Franco-Prussian war; the Reform Bill, the Crimean was were matters of public concern in his day, but he mentions them only in passing and mainly satirically. His general view of mankind as a political animal he set out clearly twenty years earlier:

> Republicans, despotic in their own circle, liberals intolerant of adverse opinion, infidels as fully persuaded of their infallibility as ever was the Roman pontiff.[54]

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[52] Salt, p.68 and 69. A note at the foot of p.69 says: "An article by Thomson, on Middle Class Education, appeared in the Telegraph for July 19, 1864.

[53] Schaefer, p.11.

[54] "Scrap-book Leaves No.2," NR 22 September 1869.

He says of himself:

> ... I am no politician, care nothing for Reform and about as much for Mr Bright . . .[55]

He writes only once, in 1865, about Gladstone and twice about Disraeli;[56] nor was he interested in the ephemera of day-to-day events. Sent to Spain to report the Carlist war for The New York Herald, he was a dismal failure and was recalled. It was not only that he failed through drinking and possibly sunstroke, he failed for lack of understanding. He could not turn the inertia and incompetence of the two sides of this foreign war into 'news'. He was not interested in details. Equally he did not have the range of imagination, the powers of fancy, to be a creative writer. He could not 'tell a tale'. His only narrative poem "Weddah and Om-el-Bonain" though admired by Rossetti, Swinburne and Meredith,[57] was rightly, but to Thomson's intense disappointment, rejected by Froude.[58]

His literary enthusiasms found expression in a level of critical appreciation above the average of his day. Throughout

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[55] James Thomson, Poems, Essays and Fragments, John M. Robertson ed., (1892) 1905, p.286.

[56] "Mr Gladstone's Edinburgh Address," NR 10 December 1865.

[57] In letters to Dobell written in February and November 1868 he mentions Disraeli.

[57] Salt, p.156.

[58] Salt, p.73.

his life he was devoted to the work of Shelley.[59] His critical approach to Shelley's poetry was only a little short of idolatrous and frequently couched in the overwrought prose of his day. His general approach to critical analysis is well shown in an essay written in 1860.[60] He attempts to answer four questions, and that he poses them shows him to be a man of his time. They were:

> . . . (I) What are the favorite subjects of Shelley's song - great or small? (II) Is his treatment of these great-minded? (III) Is it great-hearted? And, rising to the climax, (IV) Is it such as to entitle him to the epithet Inspired?[61]

His long letters to W.M. Rossetti critically discussing the textual emendations in Rossetti's editions and making his own suggestions, display a detailed, indeed a scholarly knowledge of Shelley's works.[62]

Thomson's essay on Blake was written earlier than Swinburne's better known work. In many ways he has more critical perception about Blake than about any other poet and

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[59] All Thomson's articles and writings on Shelley were collected and published in Shelley, a Poem, with Other Writings Relating to Shelley, by the Late James Thomson ('B.V.'): to which is Added an Essay on The Poems of William Blake by the same author. Printed for private circulation by Charles Whittingham and Co., London, Chiswick Press, 1884.

Several of the essays were also published in other collections of Thomson's works.

[60] Poems, Essays and Fragments, op. cit., p.98.

[61] Ibid., p.99.

[62] Bodleian MS Don. c. 73 fol.120-60 (Holograph); Salt, pp.73-4, 82, 96, 97-8, 105.

could go straight to the point in expressing it. "The essence of the poetry is mysticism" he says, "and the essence of this mysticism is simplicity."[63] And instancing such lines as "A Robin red-breast in a cage/Puts all heaven in a rage", he makes the shrewd comment that

> His object was not to expand a small fact into a universal truth, but to concentrate the full essence of a universal truth into a small fact.[64]

His writing about Blake captures some of Blake's own directness so that it is, perhaps, the best of his critical essays. He concludes it with a poem that is a competent pastiche of Blake:

> He came to the desert of London town,
> Grey miles long;
> He wandered up and he wandered down,
> Singing a quiet song.
>
> He came to the desert of London town,
> Mirk miles broad;
> He wandered up and he wandered down,
> Ever alone with God.
>
> There were thousands and thousands of human kind
> In this desert of brick and stone;
> But some were deaf and some were blind,
> And he was there alone.
>
> At length the good hour came; he died,
> As he had lived, alone:
> We was not missed from the desert wide,
> Perhaps he had found at the Throne. [65]

Browning was a living poet in whose work he took pleasure throughout his life, and in whom he saw something of the same simplicity that he had discovered in Blake. He recognized the difficulties that many contemporaries found in wrestling with Browning's style and with the difficulties of his writing.

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[63] Poems, Essays and Fragments, op.cit., p.137.

[64] Ibid., pp.131-2.

[65] Ibid., pp.146-7.

The strength and masculinity that he admired in Browning and the same capacity to appreciate subtleties of poetic form made Thomson an early admirer of Walt Whitman.[66] But his other real enthusiasm was for Meredith, a writer of an entirely different calibre, in whom he again seems to have found some of the same qualities that he admired in Browning.

So much of Thomson's remaining critical writing is competent hack-work that we can pause to wonder at the enthusiasm revealed in his feeling for the work of two mystics, Shelley and Blake and two realists, Browning and Meredith, who had in common the capacity to embody in their work profound truth derived from the minute observation of man's behaviour. Here perhaps lay something of Thomson's tragedy, for here in both mysticism and realism was achievement that he could respect, indeed revere, but to which he could not aspire. There is no single work of his, not even "Weddah and Om-el-Bonain" or the gay poems of the River and Hampstead Heath, which shows the slightest capacity to display mankind either through their actions or through their natural speech. Perhaps only when he wrote "In the Room" (and even there the human character is 'off stage') did he catch something of Browning's capacity for realism. Even his biographical writing is dull and factual.[67] The gift of realism and indeed the gift of invention[68] being denied him, he turned to phantasy, irony and satire in his prose. As to his poetry, he was a mystic manqué. He understood well enough the necessity to see with

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[66] NR July/September 1874; Poems, Essays and Fragments; and separately published by Dobell in 1910.

[67] e.g. the chapter on Ben Jonson in Thomson's Biographical and Critical Studies, 1896.

[68] In his article in Progress, June 1884, G.W. Foote says that Thomson once told him that he had "no head for plots."

Shelley beyond the veil, but he could rarely do it. In The City of Dreadful Night mysticism is just around the corner, but cannot be attained because the logic of atheism forbids. So he recognized the highest when he saw it, a mysticism or a realism that he could not achieve, or a range and courage that he could not emulate.

Intent on a literary career, and proving by his behaviour his incapacity for any other, Thomson was severely limited in his scope. But as a writer, he had a capacity for hard work of a sporadic and solitary nature. He could produce long biographical pieces of hack research, on the life of Ben Jonson, for example.[69] He was a highly intelligent man who wrote many poems, some long, but nearly all inadequately revised. He was insufficiently equipped as a critic either of his own or other men's work. His reading though surprising in its range, was in fact narrow in its selection. He tended to concentrate on those authors with whose outlook he already agreed: with Spenser in his endless quests; with Shelley from the early "Queen Mab" to the unfinished, Dantesque, pessimistic "Triumph of Life"; with Leopardi in his despair; with Heine in his ironical outlook; with Dante in his tour of hell; with Blake in his mysticism and sense of heaven lost; with Arnold of "La Grande Chartreuse" and "Dover Beach". He did not seek out, nor train his mind to examine deeply those writings that expressed views contrary to his own.

To these disadvantages was added the disease of alcoholism,

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[69] "Ben Jonson", Cope's Tobacco Plant, November 1876 to March 1878.

or dipsomania. Opinion is, even today, divided as to whether this is of physical or mental origin.[70] Maybe it is both, but it certainly makes the victim extremely difficult to deal with in any social context. Thomson was more fortunate than many modern alcoholics in that his friends recognized his drunkenness for the disease it was,[71] but it is a sad tale, for Thomson must have been a man of great charm, since so much was tolerated by those about him. The Bradlaughs looked after him as long as they could. Some of his landladies and their families had affection for him.[72] The Barrses later

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[70] G.W. Foote in his article in Progress, April 1884, is in no doubt about the nature of Thomson's trouble:

> I am satisfied from close observation that Thomson's intemperance was an effect rather than a cause, and that its origin was purely physical. He was not a toper; on the contrary, he was a remarkably temperate man, both in eating and drinking. His intemperate fits came on periodically like other forms of madness; and naturally, as he grew older and weaker, they lasted longer and the lucid intervals became shorter. The fits were invariably preceded by several days of melancholy, which deepened and deepened until it became intolerable. Then he flew to alcohol, so naturally and unconsciously that when he returned to sanity he could seldom remember the circumstances of his collapse.

[71] In the introduction to his edition of Thomson's translations of Leopardi's Essays, Dialogues and Thoughts, op.cit., Bertram Dobell says:

> Thomson was no more ~~than~~ a willing victim to the intemperance which destroyed him than Leopardi was to the many maladies from which he suffered. The craving for alcohol has its origin, no less that fever or consumption, in physiological causes, and is no less a disease than they are. It may be allowed that it is a disease which, under favourable conditions, can be cured; and if the conditions in Thomson's case had been favourable, it is likely enought that he would have triumphed over it. pp.xvi-xvii.

[72] H.S. Salt, in his notes for the Life, says that he found most of his landladies remembered Thomson with affection except for one who refused to give any information, declaring that if Salt wanted to write a biography of a good man, he should do one of her husband!

welcomed him to their home. He was aware of the distress he caused. There are few more painful human documents than the last letter he wrote to Barrs, after a debauch had sent him from Forest Edge:

7 Huntley Street,
Gower Street, W.C.

Friday, April 22, 1882.

Dear Mr Barrs,

I scarcely know how to write to you after my atrocious and disgusting return for the wonderful hospitality and kindness of yourself and Miss Barrs. I can only say that I was mad. In one fit of frenzy I have not only lost more than I yet knew, and half murdered myself (were it not for my debts I sincerely wish it had been wholly), but justly alienated my best and firmest friends, old and new, both in London and Leicester.

As, unfortunately for myself at least, I am left alive, it only remains for me to endeavour my utmost by hard and persistent struggling to repay my mere money debts, for my debts of kindness can never be repaid. If I fail, the failure will but irresistably prove what I have long thoroughly believed, that for myself and others I am much better dead than alive.

As apologies would be worse than useless, I will conclude by simply expressing my deep gratitude for your astonishing undeserved goodness to myself,

and my best wishes for the welfare of you and yours.

In all sincerity,

JAMES THOMSON.[73]

Finally, he staggered round London, like a hunted animal, eluding the friends who tried to find and help him. The correspondence between them and their anxiety during this period is a revelation of human concern.[74] In his last agony, he sought refuge with Philip Bourke Marston, the blind poet, another maimed man, and he died of a haemorrhage brought on by excessive drinking.

Have we now come a little closer to understanding how The City of Dreadful Night came to be written? Its author was a solitary man, though not a lonely one. In The City there are others, but the poet is alone. He could not really interest himself in the daily life, the hopes and fears of his fellow men, but his great poem communicates this failur of communication. He invented or brought together by a kind of symbolic eclecticism, a mythology to describe his prison, encouraged perhaps by the examples of Dante, Blake and Shelley. Denied the union with emotion that religion offers, his crying 'needoef the spirit' had to find other and despairing expression. For Thomson was also unfortunate because his times offered him no language of escape. He had to be an atheist (as Bradlaugh was an atheist) because Huxley had not yet offered to these

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[73] Salt, 1898, pp.164-5. This letter does not appear in the first edition of 1889, possibly out of consideration for the Barrses.

[74] There are many letters and telegrams in the collection in the Bodleian showing how Thomson's friends frantically searched for him and wrote and telegraphed to each other asking for, or sending information of his movements.

who could not accept the Christian myth the useful word 'agnostic'.[75] Psychological studies had not reached the stage of thereapy and could not offer the advice of the social worker as a substitute for consolation at the hands of the priest. In the social, mental and emotional prison in which Thomson found himself, a lesser man might have found content in normal work; a weaker man might have given way totally to drink and drugs or become a sycophantic hanger-on. From the amalgam that was Thomson came, fortunately for us, The City of Dreadful Night.

ii.- Thomson's ether poetry in relation to "The City"

There is no evidence in his poetry (which he seems to have commenced writing seriously in 1852 when he was eighteen years of age) that Thomson was ever a practising Christian. It seems likely that by this early age Bradlaugh, appealing to the lively imagination and considerable intelligence of his young comrade, had brought him to a permanent condition of inability to believe. And from then we have an erratic, never fully thought out progress from regretful doubt to shrill blasphemy and ultimate despair.

The writings of an ill-disciplined mind in the grip of doubt and regret may first be studied in the discursive and badly arranged poem with the long title "Suggested by Mathew

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[75] Although the term 'agnostic' had been suggested by Professor Huxley in 1869 and C.A. Watts published the short-lived Agnostic Journal in 1884, the word was not really established until Leslie Stephens's An Agnostic's Apology in 1893.

Arnold's Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse".[76] One can well see that Thomson was open to the kind of haunting regret that informs Arnold's poem and that he would indeed have been glad to find himself, if he could, still "wandering between two worlds", instead of feeling himself pushed remorselessly in the direction of the darker and less welcoming. So in these stanzas Thomson looks over his shoulder and tries to find once again the comfort and homeliness of the old times, of Church on Sunday and "the quaint dream-memories of childhood".[77] But he is already well into the gloom and despair that later dominated The City. He starts with a "dirge-moan", while his soul is in "brooding quietness". The time is "anguished" and this life is a "wild desert". The "heavy darkness" already rolls "stifling" round us. Such light as we have is "That one pale speck in boundless Night" and "In unprogressive wanderings/ We plod the desert to and fro". Moreover

> Our noblest captains,priests and seers,
> Dark death shall one by one remove,
> For lack of wisdom, faith, or love.

This leave us noe option but to

> endure
> Our sore scarce-intermitted loads
> Of grief and weary pain, imbued
> With sternly passive fortitude:

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[76] In his essay on "Sympathy" (written in 1865 and reprinted in Essays and Phantasies, 1881) he seems to suggest that Arnold wrote this poem either while he was in a bad mood, or unwell, or both:

> There are nevertheless cases in which a dark mood has dominated a whole life, just as there are cases in which toothache is neuralgia: La Grande Chartreuse is the temple-prison of hypochondria. p.241.

Unfortunately he does not expand on this interesting theory.

[77] "Religion in the Rocky Mountains". This was the only essay of Thomson's that Bradlaugh refused to print in its entirety. The first two instalments appeared in The National Reformer in March and April 1873. The entire work appears in Satires and Profanities, G.W. Foote ed., 1884.

And here we are already close to the final invocation to Melencolia at the very end of The City of Dreadful Night.

But he is not yet ready to reach this last conclusion. We have still to account for the unnamed "mighty Dead" who once led "sages,bards, saints, heroes". If 'He' (whoever 'He' might have been) died "as no more fit/To lead the modern march of thought" (Bradlaugh's thought, perhaps?), we are assured that "He was at least Divine". 'At least' is an interesting and commonplace phrase, which conceals a wealth of longing, and we see why this longing should be when we are told that in these days

> God turns to Mammon at our cry;
> Our souls wealth-crushed, dross-stifled lie.

And in the midst of social inequality and exploitation we find that all the faiths "fade ghostlike". Now comes the real cry of hope and despair combined:

> O God in Heaven, hear our prayer!
> We know Thou art, Allwise, Allgood,
> Yet sink in godless misery:
> Oh, teach us how to worship Thee!

So apparently there must be a God, and since his last manifestation (presumably Christ) is dead and ineffectual, we must wait for another "God-illumined One", "That Greater One who shall succeed". Moreover weshould have faith enough to believe that it must be so, that we cannot be left without a guide, that "God never can/So utterly depart from man." So he intones, perhaps 'prays' is the word, except that it seems too much of a concession for Thomson:

> O God revive the seeming Dead:
> Or send Another in His stead!

This comes from the last stanza but one in the poem, and is an attempt at a conclusion. But the real conclusion is at

the end of Part II of this three-part poem:

> Alas for us with blinded sight
> Who dare to cry, There is no light!

Sadly it would be a mistake to call the content of this poem religious thought, or even religious contemplation. It is little more than the melancholy, perhaps self-regarding maunderings of a capable young versifier who has lost his fath and deplores the consequential lack of stablity in his understanding of the world about him, the loss of mental comfort; but he knows that he will never find it again because he cannot or will not deceive himself.

If the "Stanzas" are inconclusive, "The Doom of a City" is a long, ill-organized piece of self-indulgence, with here and there a spark of poetry, and here and there a faint promise of The City of Dreadful Night that was to follow it some fifteen years later. It contains within itself some of the twists and turns by which Thomson hoped to find a degree of reason for the existence of man, to ward off all the mental and spiritual consequences of nihilism. Perhaps he thought the answer lay in Pantheism.

> Can souls be blighted where the mere trees grow?
> Can lives be frozen where the dead stream flow?
> Can Man be prostrate where the fleeting mountains
> Stand up and fling abroad their joyous fountains?
> Could oceans, hills, stars, heavens, those imageries
> And shadows of our sole realities,
> Endure but for a moment undestroyed
> Were we extinct - Eternity left void?
> O truth beyond our sin and death's concealing!
> The ghastliest den, worst Hell of pain and fear,
> Which a spirit can have will, thought, feeling,
> Is to that spirit no unnatural sphere;
> Nor justifies that spirit for the death
> Of firm self-trust, of love and hope and faith.

It is interesting to note where he ends his thought here. He is concerned to guard himself against the loss of love and hope and faith, and it was indeed when all three had been lost that he entered the City of Dreadful Night.

It is not necessary to the present theme to examine the loose structure of this tedious poem in detail. Based on a story from the Arabian Nights and reminiscent of Shelley's "Alastor", it is one more of Thomson's attempts to decide on some guiding religious principle which would save him from the ultimate conclusion to which he felt relentlessly drawn, that there was no God. And in this alone of all the poems in which he touches on this problem, the possibility of complete negation, complete Godlessness, is not explored. But nearly every other possibility short of Christianity is touched on and even Christianity is mentioned, but solely so that the Christian church might be condemned:

> While he lived the noblest of men were wholly devoted to Him,
> The saints, the bards, the heroes, in soul and mind and limb, -
> Who now without a Leader, mournful in silence wait,
> Girding each one himself to his lonely fight with Fate.

The other possibilities explored include a kind of Christianized theism: "Some regelation from the awful throne" he says, "awaits me surely", and

> o dreadful God,
> Thou knowest - only Thou,
> What dismal paths my shuddering feet have trod.

There is an echo of the heaven of his dissenting youth married perhaps to a memory of the writings of the Catholic Apostolic Church and its founder:

> Some burning with the glory of their wings;
> Some golden-crowned and purple-robed like Kings;
> Some clad in white, a palm-branch in the hand;
>
> Some like stern warriors armed with shield and sword;
> Some swaying crystal cups in which the fire
> Of red wine quivered; while a radiant quire
> Striking their harps sang loud with sweet accord.

and

> All stood triumphant, beautiful divine,
> Between the heaven and earth; all stood there bright,
> Informed, transfigured with the holy light
> As crystal cups with sacramental wine.

But then he seems to wish to unite his conception of the world and of God into one image, with echoes of the medieval 'music of the spheres' and of "Queen Mab", or at least of the Notes to Queen Mab:[78]

> The stars for ever sweep through space, surrounding
> Their sun-kings and God's central hidden Throne
> With splendour and deep music far-resounding,
> Though heard by pure celestial ears alone:
> Their music chants His lofty praise for ever,
> Their splendours burn to Him - the Light Divine;
> In their grand uneager motions pausing never,
> They live and sing and shine.

This image of course he developed into the picture of the unfeeling universe that surrounds the City, in Section XVII describing "How the stars throb and glitter as they wheel".

In "The Doom" he seems to want to combine a belief in a kind of Pantheistic universe in which an evangelical Heaven still exists in the background with the possibility that mankind is the victim of Predestination, but may be reincarnated, as a reward for virtue, into a higher and more pleasing state:

> Life <u>is</u> only by perpetual on-flowing;
> Torpid rest is the true life-devouring death;
> Through stern struggles all things ever are upgrowing;
> Sighs and moanings prove a vital-throbbing breath.
> One alone - Eternal, Infinite, All-holy,
> <u>Is</u> in changeless rest; the Perfect grows nor grew:
> Finite souls and all things live by progress solely,
> All <u>are</u> but what they <u>do</u>. [79]

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[78] P.B. Shelley, 'Notes on Queen Mab', Oxford University Press, 1929, p.792:
> Millions and millions of suns are ranged around us, all attended by innumerable worlds, yet calm, regular, and harmonious, all keeping the paths of immutable necessity.

[79] The underlinings (italics?), and capital letters of the quotation on the next page, are all as Thomson passed them for the press.

But he had already said:

> But every being is placed in that sphere, in that crisis, that spot,
> Which alone its own nature demands and asserts for its lot
> As itself from itself its web the spider spins out,
> Doth each all the net of relations which weave it about:

In some way that is unexplained he feels (and in capital letters too) that the soldier who has fought the good fight

> . . . ON THE MORROW MAY RISE UP STRONG
>
> . . .
>
> HEROIC AS BEFORE, -
> BUT WITH A LOFTIER RANK, WITH NOBLER POWER,
> WITH FAR MORE GENEROUS DOWER.

The earth itself he wants to think will improve in the same way:

> This glorious Universe shall live for ever;
> By all decay and death diminished never,
> Nor added to by constant birth and growth;
> But in the balanced interchange of both,
> Ascending slowly by successive stages
> Of nobler Good and Beauty through the Ages . . .

There are other threads of Platonism and Puritanism that may perhaps be found in this impossibly eclectic and unsatisfactory gallimaufry of verse. But the conclusion of the poem is interesting, for it is a kind of curse on London as the epitome of the rich and selfish City, and though it is a declamatory and deistic one, it is full of warnings and the premonition of disaster:

> The final Doom evolveth, burdened with woe on woe,
> Sure as the justice of God while yet by His patience slow:
> For the earth is pervaded wholly, through dense stone and clod,
> With the burning fire of the law of the Truth of the Living God;
> Consuming falsehood, the evil, the pride, the lust, the shame,
> With ever-burning, unrelenting, irresistible flame;
> Until all save the purest spirit, eternal, of truth and love,
> Be altogether consumed away, beneath as well as above.

It would certainly be a mistake to think of this poem as an attempt to deal, by carefully developed thought, with the

religious doubts which now informed Thomson's mind. It is a clumsy and self-indulgent attempt at catharsis and it is ineffectual perhaps because it is undisciplined.

There is, however, a great deal of "The Doom of a City" brought to disciplined expression in Section I of The City of Dreadful Night. "I paced through desert streets beneath the gleam/Of lamps that lit my trembling life alone" he says in Part I, Stanza ii of "The Doom". In Stanza iii he speaks both of the "moonless river" and the "livid marshes wild and bare". In Part II, Stanza i, he describes how

> That mighty City through the breathless air
> Thrilled forth no pulse of sound, no faintest hum
> Of congregated life in street and square . . .

In Part II, Stanza iii, it becomes "That Camp and City of the ancient dead" and in Stanza v he tells us that

> From all her stately mansions, reared apart
> 'Midst lawns and gardens, came no lamplight gleam . . .

All these descriptions are unified in thirty lines of Section I of The City of Dreadful Night. "Waste marshes" we are told "shine and glister to the moon". In the City

> The street lamps burn amidst the baleful glooms
> Amidst the soundless solitudes immense
> Of ranged mansions dark and still as tombs.

And again:

> Yet as in some necropolis you find
> Perchance one mourner to a thousand dead,
> So there; worn faces that look deaf and blind
> Like tragic masks of stone.

There are more echoes of "The Doom" in other sections of The City Stanza iv of Part I uses an image which is sued twice again in an argument equally unresolved in the later poem. "The Doom" has:

> With dull reluctance hard to understand
> Refrains its death-in-life from death's full sleep . . .

This concept is repeated in The City, both in the fourth stanza

of Section III: "Where Death-in-Life is the eternal king", and in the second stanza of Section V: "Can Death-in-Life be brought to life again?" In Part III, Stanza iii of "The Doom", the falling statues remind us of Section XX of The City. Stanza ix finds the poet "prostrate on the ground", as he is at the opening line of The City, and in Part IV, Stanza ii, "the mighty cloud of human breath" reminds us of Section XV of The City, where "no man breathes earth's simple breath".

It is as though he himself recognizes a personal fear of 'death-in-life' when he writes in the "Lines on his Twenty-Third Birthday" (also composed in 1857):

> Oh, for the flushed excitement of keen strife!
> For mountains, gulfs and torrents in my way,
> Withperil, anguish, fear and strugglings rife!
> For friends and foes, for love and hate in fray, -
> And not this lone base flat of torpid life!
> I fret 'neath gnat-stings, an ignoble prey,
> While others with a sword-hilt in their grasp
> Have warm rich blood to feed their latest gasp.

And indeed this hope, this wish, springs from a despair, here based on "sharp self scorn", expressed in 'waste-land' imagery which he uses again in The City of Dreadful Night:

> As one long-tired, who stares forlorn
> Across flat marshland, barren, gloomy, drear;
> Where fields, nor home, nor church, his vision greet
> Which he has toiled through with unsteady feet.

The thought in the rest of the poem is divided between a desire to break away from "this accursed cage wherein I pine", and the contrasting attempt to convince himself that, if he curbs his "strong and passionate impulses", this will in some way prove his strength. The poem, we must remember, was written when he was still under military discipline and while it may embody something of his attempt to be content within the restrictions of his mode of life, it also mirrors some of the forces, some of the rebellion against constraint which doubtless contributed to the circumstances of his discharge.

"The Lord of the Castle of Indolence" (1859) is an envious picture of the hedonist:

> For heaven and earth must vanish like a dream
> Ere such a soul divine can know distress,
> When all the laws of Life conspire to love and bless.

But as if in reaction, 1859 also saw his "Real Vision of Sin", an obvious and reasonably successful attempt to nauseate, written in a mood of petulance with Tennyson.[79] But late in the same year we have a poem which is concerned with the two dominant themes of his poetry, the loss of Matilda and his unbelief. It is his last despairing attempt to hold fast to a faith in an after-life in the hope of reunion there with his beloved. "Mater Tenebrarum" is perhaps one of the half-dozen of Thomson's poems that deserve to be remembered alongside The City. Basically anapaestic, though with a good deal of iambic substitution, the lines of six feet move with a strongly liturgical effect. And there is no temporizing with the sentiment:

> In the endless nights, from my bed, where sleepless in frenzy I lie,
> I cleave through the crushing gloom with a bitter and deadly cry:
> Oh! where have they taken my Love from our Eden of bliss on this earth,
> Which now is a frozen waste of sepulchral and horrible dearth?

"Sepulchral and horrible dearth" is both over-emphatic and verging on the banal, but we already have here Thomson's attempt to express in verse the feeling of desolation and despair which can overwhelm the human being. And the conclusion is a painful but emotionally logical one. Hope gave a little strength (but a strength that was drained before he began The City):

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[79] Bodleian MS.Don. e.39, dated Fri. 4.3.59. On the manuscript Thomson wrote in pencil: "Written in disgust at Tennyson's, which is very pretty and clever and silly and truthless." As Dobell points out, on the MS. that Thomson seems to have had in mind Tennyson's "Two Voices".

No hope in this worn-out world, no hope beyond the tomb;
No living and loving God, but blind and stony Doom.
Anguish and grief and sin, terror, disease and despair:
Why throw not off this life, this garment of torture I wear,
And go down to sleep in the grave in everlasting rest?
What keeps me yet in this life, what spark in my frozen breast?
A fire of dread, a light of hope, kindled, O Love, by thee;
For thy pure and gentle and beautiful soul, it must immortal be.

Anne Ridler assigns "The MELENCOLIA of Albrecht Dürer" to a period between 1860 and 1864, and although its interest lies mainly in its later adaptation as the last Section of The City, it gives also an indication of the general direction of his thought. He was beginning to recognize his inherent melancholy, and in some degree to recognize its fascination for him as well as its inevitability. There is also a hint of the defiant strength of the figure that finally broods over the City, combined with a suggestion that Fate ('Necessity' in The City) is all that man can look to in the Universe:

Lo! she has set herself with fierce intent
  Of never-quailing will and desperate pride,
Alike unloving and unreverent,
  To clutch the inmost mysteries that hide
In Nature's being and God's government;
  And she has found but Fate - God petrified -
And not a single word or sign can wring
From the tremendous, dumb, blind, crushing Thing. [80]

And this indeed is his mood in the 1860s, especially if we can rely in Dobell's dating of the sonnet, first published by Anne Ridler and beginning "Through foulest fogs of my own sluggish soul". If Dobell is right, then it would seem to

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[80] Thomson uses the phrase "Fate - God petrified" in "A Lady of Sorrow, part III, 'The Shadow'", first published in eight issues of the National Reformer in 1867, but written during the period 1862 - 1864 (see p.17 of Essays and Phantasies). Since the phrase was in his mind and repeated in "The Melencolia", it would seem that the poem belongs to the same period.

make a trilogy with the "Two Sonnets" which were posthumously published in the first volume of The Poetical Works of James Thomson (B.V.). "Why" he asks himself, "are your songs all wild and bitter sad?" And his answer is an interesting analysis of his source of inspiration and one which was probably valid throughout his life:

> My friend, I have no power to rule my voice:
> A spirit lifts me when I lie alone,
> And thrills me into song by its own laws;
> That which I feel, but seldom know, indeed
> Tempering the melody it could not cause.
> The bleeding heart cannot for ever bleed
> Inward solely: on the wan lips too
> Dark blood will bubble ghastly into view.

and the reason for his bleeding heart is to be found in the third sonnet, unpublished in his lifetime:

> I gaze and seek with ever-longing eyes
> For God, the Love-Supreme, all-wise, all-good:
> Alas! in vain; for over all the skies
> A dark and awful shadow seems to brood,
> A numbing, infinite, eternal gloom:
> I tremble in the consciuusness of Doom.

But there is yet one more interesting comment in these three sonnets and one to which we shall return when we come to consider those 'sports' in his poetry, "Sunday Up the River" and "Sunday at Hampstead":

> My mirth can laugh and talk, but cannot sing;
> My grief finds harmonies in everything.

It is impossible to consider the poem "To Our Ladies of Death", written in 1861 and published in 1863, apart from the prose "A Lady of Sorrow" which we are told he wrote over a period from 1862 to 1864 and which was first published in 1867.[81] Both owe something of their inspiration to De Quincey's

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[81] In the interim he translated Novalis's Hymns to Night, transcribed by Dobell and dated by him 14/6/65 which is now in the Bodleian (MS. Don. e. 48 fol.1916). The earlier hymns would be completely sympathetic to Thomson and would encourgge him in his fantasies, but he could not foloow Novalis into his mystical Christianity.

"Suspiria de Profundis". Each is concerned with three visions or three aspects of the same vision. In the poem they are the vision of the Death which transforms, which contains the promise of Heaven, the "Lady of Beatitudes", "Our Lady of Annihilation" who "scourgest down to Night and utter Death,/Or penal spheres of retribution just". And finally "Our Lady of Oblivion" who will take the "weak, the weary, and the desolate" and "lay them, shrouded in eternal rest" in a "hidden Dreamland hushed and deep". And at this point Thomson is still playing with the idea of reincarnation. "Take me" he says "and lull me into perfect sleep". But he still hopes that when he has

> drunk my inmost fill
> Of perfect peace, I may arise renewed;
> In soul and body, intellect and will,
> Equal to cope with Life whate'er its mood . . .

Doubts have, however, arisen about the feasibility of this type of resurrection or reincarnation. If this cannot be, he will look forward to "resolving into union with the Whole".

> One part of me shall feed a little worm,
> And it a bird on which a man may feed;
> One lime the mould, one nourish insect-sperm;
> One thrill sweet grass, one pulse in bitter weed;
> This swell a fruit, and that evelve in air;
> Another trickle to a springlet's lair,
> Another paint a daisy on the mead . . .

and it is possibly not Thomson's fault that the solemnity of this thought is sadly mitigated by irreverent recollections of "On Ilkley Moor ba't 'at", a pantheistic folk song, if ever there was one! It is perhaps possible to recover from this passing thought in time to enjoy the striking and musical final stanza which points sufficiently clearly along the road which leads to the City of Dreadful Night:

> Weary of living isolated life,
> Weary of hoping hopes for ever vain,
> Weary of struggling in all-sterile strife,
> Weary of thought which maketh nothing plain,
> I close my eyes, and hush my panting breath,
> And yearn for Thee, divinely tranquil Death,
> To come and soothe away my bitter pain.

Before he plunges into the prose phantasy of "A Lady of Sorrow", Thomson embeds one or two interesting aphorisms in his introduction. "There is truth of winter and black night, there is truth of summer and dazzling noonday" he says, and it is an immediate comment on his own experiences and outlook and an exercise in self-justification when he adds "literature as a rule is the refuge of the miserable", and "the happy seldom write for writing's sake, they are fully employed in living".

The phantasy itself is written in no bad version of the poetic prose which Thomson admired in De Quincey; though in reading it one frequently wonders if he did not struggle to extend his medium beyond its content, so that from time to time it sounds hollow and repetitive. In the prose poem, Thomson in his character as 'Vane', describes three aspects of the Lady of Sorrow who is his constant companion. As we begin to read, we are reminded of the Matilda episode in Thomson's life, but we are soon caught up into a wider vision into which the memory of the dead love has provided the means of entry, but to which it soon becomes less relevant. The Lady of Sorrow is manifested three times in ways which correspond closely to the three aspects in the poem; there is first the Angel of Sorrow, and we learn what it was that Thomson felt himself to have lost, for he says that she taught him "beyond all after forgetting that there is a perfect interfusion of soul with soul, when the pure fire of love has utterly consumed matter and space and time". Then the world becomes to him "a great theatre" for the "inextinguishable laughter" of "supreme Fate" and fairly quickly he is on the slope towards loss of both faith and hope. She next becomes the Lady of Annihilation and the visions that he shares with her are the horrors of the opium

dream. Worse, with hope and faith already in danger, he learns that "Love, her mother, was dying". And his vision fades here in "thoughts of horror and feelings of putrefaction". In the third section of the Phantasy we are made to realize that for Thomson there is always one and only one inevitable conclusion. For we are once again with the Lady of Oblivion. She sings that "All Life's continual moving/Moves only for Death". Moreover the "beautiful and innocent sleep of Death" shall be everlasting.

For the Lady of Oblivion Love, her own mother, is already dead; so now all is lost. Faith, hope and love are gone, and the stage is set for complete depair. But not without some effort for, strangely, it is in this section that he explores once again the alternative to complete despair and unbelief in a sustained argument for and against the hereafter. And after a reference to Darwinism that shows that, after his unfortunate review in the National Reformer of Harrison's Meaning of History[82] he had at least read some of the articles in that magazine about the new scientific approach to creation and the age of the world,[83] he is forced back to the inevitable conclusion that

> Nature has no care for individuals; and races and times are but individuals in broader genera and longer times, and these again in yet broader and longer; and Oblivion must cover all . . .

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[82] Frederic Harrison, The Meaning of History and Other Historical Pieces, 1863.

[83] At the time of this review, 3 January 1863, Thomson apparently believed that 'our first fathers descended "from the empyrean"'. After a letter in the National Reformer objecting to his review, he seems to have studied the subject. He had ample opportunity to do so both in Bradlaugh's private library, the British Museum and the columns of the National Reformer.

So, some six years or more before he began to write The City, Thomson could already contemplate the probable loss of Faith and Hope and Love and already knew something of the forlornness that the loss would bring, and indeed this comes out clearly in the little poem "The Fire That Filled My Heart of Old", written in 1874, the same year as "Vane's Story" and probably preceding it. The fire that once filled his heart he now finds is "only ashes grey and cold" and that he has

> No love, no hate, no hope, no fear,
> No anguish and no mirth;
> Thus life extends from year to year,
> A flat of sullen dearth.

In the same year we have the totally unsatisfactory poem "Vane's Story" which may owe something to the half-serious, half-mocking technique of Heine. The lost love who comes back to visit him is mysteriously no longer the same as when she was alive (perhaps a psychological device to disguise an infidelity, of thought if not in fact). Maybe he describes her in this way because, if we identify Thomson with Vane, as I think we must, he is at last admitting to himself that not even Matilda returned to earth could restore the faith that he has now lost. He cannot bear to destroy totally the source of the melancholy he has cherished for so long, and so he changes her to something rich and strange which he can both welcome and attack.

The poem divides itself into three equally unlikely, unconvincing and displeasing sections. In the first, in spite of the reappearance of his love from the Other World, and in spite of her radiant appearance, Vane vents on her all the force of his resentment at "'The wounds bequeathed by so much strife,/The hopelessness of present life.'" And indeed resentment plays a very large part in the poem:

'But I am working out God's will
Alike when active and when still;
And work we good or work we ill,
We never work against His will, . . .

This is followed by a long condemnation of the God that made a world in which the saints

'had just one goal,
And just one modest little prize,
A wicket-gate in Paradise,
A sneaking-in there through the wall
To bliss eternal; that was all.'

and whose bliss could then

'Be spiced by the contrasting view
Of Hell beneath them surging crammed
With all the tortures of the damned.'

Thomson's hatred of the whole concept of an unforgiving God is clearly and forcefully expressed in

'Then I give God my scorn and hate,
And turning back from Heaven's gate
(Suppose me got there!) bow, Adieu!
Almighty Devil, damn me too!'

At this point there is a change of mood in the poem, so sudden as to be like a change of gear. We pass from scorn and argument to a statement of his mental fatigue and lassitude which has at least the merit of clarity of expression:

'For I am infinitely tired
With this old sphere we once admired,
With this old earth we loved too well;
Disgusted more than words can tell,
And would not mind a change of Hell.
The same old stolid hills and leas,
The same old stupid patient trees,
The same old ocean blue and green,
The same sky cloudy or serene;
The old two-dozen hours to run
Between the settings of the sun,
The old three hundred sixty-five
Dull days to every year alive;
Old stingy measure, weight and rule,
No margin left to play the fool;
The same old way of getting born
Into it naked and forlorn,
The same old way of creeping out
Through death's low door for lean and stout . . .'

and his suggestion is that his heavenly visitor shall petition Shelley's 'Demogorgon', that Our Lady of Oblivious Death shall

bear them both

'to her deepest cave
Under the Sea without a wave,
Where the eternal shadows brood
In the Eternal Solitude,
Stirring never, breathing never,
Silent for ever and for ever;
And side by side and face to face,
And linked as in a death-embrace,
Leave us absorbing thus the balm
Of most divinely perfect calm . . .'[84]

But this is not enough. There must be a resurrection so that

'We may wake young and pure at last,
And both together recommence
The life of passion, thought and sense,
Of fear and hope, of woe and bliss; -
But in another world than this.'

The vision agrees to undertake this mission and kisses him, and we then have one more of the Fate/Sphinx images that haunt him, but here only momentarily, because he is united with his love, he is its master:

'And Fate the marble Sphinx, dumb, stern,
Terror of Beauty cold, shall yearn
And melt to flesh, and blood shall thrill
The stony heart, and life shall fill
The statue: it shall follow him
Submissive to his every whim,
Ev'n as the lion of the wild
Followed pure Una, meek and mild.'

but immediately, as though the concession is too much, we have yet another and more violent change of gear, and in a passage

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[84] This conception of blissful union with the lost love was a theme of some of his earliest poetry. In 1856 in "Tasso and Leonora" he says:

Then in silent darkness deep
Comes the everlasting sleep,
Comes the inexpressive bliss
Of our union's perfectness!

Time's loud turbid stream shall flow,
With its perils, strife and woe,
Far from where our Soul then lies
Tranced in still Eternities:

Tho', soft breathed from far away,
Its dim soothing murmurs may
Lull us to profounder rest,
Swaying with the Ocean's breast.

of little credibility and worse taste, almost as though he wished to tear down the very edifice of hope which was so tenuously built, Vane and his vision go off to the local 'hop' (after she has entertained him by singing one of Heine's poems as a lied to the tune of "Greenland's Icy Mountains").

The conclusion to "Vane's Story" would be yet more peculiar and indeed unaccountable if it were not succeeded by some of Thomson's 'cheerful' poetry. Some sections of "Sunday at Hampstead", published in 1865, appear to have been written as early as 1863, so that their composition would overlap with the writings of "Vane's Story". "Sunday Up the River", "Aquatics at Kew" and "Low Life as Overheard in the Train" were all published in 1865. They are very unequal in execution, but they seem to point to the possibility that at this period in his life Thomson, still a young man in his early thirties, had found congenial company, even if he was amongst folk simpler than he might have wished. He describes "Sunday at Hampstead" as "An Idle Idyll by a Very Humble Member of the Great and Noble London Mob." His friends appear to have been clerks and shopgirls, though we must remember in saying this that the lack of opportunities for education and preferment kept many young men and women in Thomson's day in a 'state of Life' below their potential, so that his companions might well be intelligent, though half-educated. The point however is that for a period we have poems (or perhaps 'verses' would be a more appropriate word) that show an intimate knowledge of the simple pleasures, modes of thought, and forms of speech of the 'respectable poor'.

Anthologies of Victorian poetry have usually selected from these two sections one which strikes me as being false and irrelevant, and which begins "Give a man a horse he can ride"

("Sunday Up the River", Section XV) and the other, "As we rush, as we rush in the train" ("Sunday at Hampstead", Section X), which seems to have the contemporary merit of original observation in the first stanza, but little else. And critics studying Thomson's thought have pointed to Section XVII of "Sunday Up the River" as an indication that his whole philosophy had altered because he could say: "Thank God for Life".[85] This is not the place to consider the poetic value of these poems. Some are atrocious (the eighth and ninth sections of "Sunday Up the River", for example[86]) and some very tolerable as light verse (and we have noted he knew that his "mirth can laugh and talk but cannot sing"). But one section stands out as a lyric of great charm:

> "Oh, what are you waiting for here, young man?
> What are you looking for over the bridge?"
> A little straw hat with the streaming blue ribbons
> Is soon to come dancing over the bridge.

---

[85] Surely Thomson himself offers a truer and more human explanation for the natural variations in the atmosphere of his poetry: in "Sympathy"(Essays and Phantasies) he says:

> . . . in two moods of two several hours not a day asunder, a man's relations to the most serious problems of life, may be and often are essentially opposite; that the one may burn with hope and faith, and the other lour black with doubt and despair . . .

[86] All other spirits are vile resorts,
Except its own Scotch first cousin;
And as for your Clarets and Sherries and Ports,
A naggin in worth a dozen.
(Sunday Up the River", Section VIII, v.3)

Like violets pale i' the Spring o' the year
Came my Love's sad eyes to my youth;
Wan and dim with many a tear,
But the sweeter for that in sooth:
Wet and dim,
Tender and true,
Violet eyes
Of the sweetest blue.
("Sunday Up the River", Section IX, v.1)

Her heart beats the measure that keeps her feet dancing,
  Dancing along like a wave o' the sea;
Her heart pours the sunshine with which her eyes glancing
  Light up strange faces in looking for me.

The strange faces brighten in meeting her glances;
  The strangers all bless her, pure, lovely, and free:
She fancies she walks, but her walk skips and dances,
  Her heart makes such music in coming to me.
("Sunddy Up the River", Section II, vv.1-3)

These verses and perhaps those that close "Sunday at Hampstead":

O mellow moonlight warm,
Weave round my Love a charm;
O countless starry eyes,
Watch from the holy skies;
O ever-solemn Night,
Shield her within thy might:
  Watch her, my little one!
  Shield her, my darling!

How my heart shrinks with fear,
Nightly to leave thee, dear;
Lonely and pure within
Vast glooms of woe and sin:
Our wealth of love and bliss
Too heavenly-perfect is:
  Good night, my little one!
  God keep thee, darling!

could have been written only by a man who thought himself in love. Of the truth of this supposition we are unlikely now to find any external evidence, since it probably perished in the fatal bonfire that he made of his papers in 1869. But it seems likely that he was happy enough during this period to attempt light verse, to write one excellent love lyric and to feel, for a moment, that he can say "Thank God for You", and "Thank God for Love", and therefore "Thank God for Life".

But while all this was going on, and it may have lasted for several years (until the mood of "In the Room" in 1867), Thomson was producing his most atheistical and indeed blasphemous prose. Whoever his love may have been, she did nothing for his faith (and this may go some way towards explaining the last section of "Vane's Story"). 1865 was the year in which "The Story of a Famous Old Firm" (later to become

"The Story of a Famous Old Jewish Firm") and "Christmas Eve in the Upper Circles" were both published in the National Reformer. Whatever else may be said about them, they are, for a Christian society, blasphemous, and for an Agnostic one, in execrable taste. In the same year the unbelieving "Sayings of Sigvat" were published, cynical, banal, but wrily amusing. The following year, 1866, saw the essay on "The Poems of William Blake" published in the National Reformer. For our purpose (though we must notice Thomson's critical perception) the most important aspect, which we have already noticed,* is Thomson's poem "He came to the desert of London Town" at the conclusion of the article. Here we have a primary sense of identification with The City of Dreadful Night. The City is coincident with the desert; it is grey miles long and mirk miles broad; within the mass of humankind Blake, like Thomson, was alone; when he died he was not missed. But Blake, unlike Thomson, had God, and he might "perhaps" have attained "The Throne".

Notwithstanding this ray of hope on Blake's behalf, 1866 saw the beginning of the return to despair. In "Philosophy" we have perhaps the comment on the end of his love affair:

> A hope sprang from his breast, and fluttered far
> On rainbow wings; beyond the cloudy bar,
> Though very much beneath the nearest star.
>
> His eyes drew back their beams to kindle fire
> In his own heart; whose masterful desire
> Scorned all beyond its aim, lower or higher.
>
> This fire flung lustre upon grace and bloom,
> Gave warmth and brightness to a little room,
> Burned Thought to ashes in its fight with gloom.

And in the same poem he answers his own momentary "live life" philosophy with

> Life liveth but in Life, and doth not roam
> To other realms if all be well at home:
> 'Solid as ocean-foam,' quoth ocean-foam.

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* Page 17 of thesis.

If Midge will pine and curse its hours away
Because Midge is not Everything For-aye,
Poor Midge thus loses its one summer day;
Loses its all - and winneth what, I pray?

And if he looks to escape in the legend of a golden age ("The Naked Goddess"), it is only for a moment, a little moment before the dreadful loneliness of "In the Room" comes flooding in. No one who has ever been alone in unsympathetic lodgings can deny the force of this most despairing, nostalgically despairing of all poems of loneliness. Only the inanimate objects that belong to no one and to everyone have life. Man is dead:

It lay, the lowest thing there lulled
  Sweet-sleep-like in corruption's truce;
The form whose purpose was annulled,
  While all the other shapes meant use.
It lay, the he become now it,
  Unconscious of the deep disgrace,
Unanxious how its parts might flit
  Through what new forms in time and space.

Pessimism and despair have taken possession of him once again, and his poetry of this period comes effectively to a halt with "A Song of Sighing", a fitting preface to The City of Dreadful Night:

Would some little joy to-day
  Visit us, heart!
Could it but a moment stay,
  Then depart,
With the flutter of its wings
Stirring sense of brighter things.

Like a butterfly astray
  In a dark room;
Telling:- Outside there is day,
  Sweet flowers in bloom,
Birds are singing, trees are green,
Runnels ripple silver sheen.

Heart! we now have been so long
  Sad without change,
Shut in deep from shine and song,
  Nor can range;
It would do us good to know
That the world is not all woe.

Would some little joy to-day
  Visit us, heart!
Could it but a moment stay,
  Then depart,
With the lustre of its wings
Lighting dreams of happy things,
  Oh sad my heart!

And as if in preparation for the greatest of all denials in the English language, he had been studying Leopardi. In 1867 his translations of Leopardi's Operette Morali first appeared in the National Reformer and in 1869 his biographical study began to appear in the same paper, but ended suddenly after the eleventh instalment in February 1870.

It is not surprising therefore to find The City of Dreadful Night at the apogee of this experience of unbelief and despair, and as the inevitable climax of his literary work at this point in his life and thought. Nor is it surprising that, once achieved, it was followed by "seven songless years".[87] And when those years were over, we find in his work, though momentarily, something of the same dichotomy that we have just examined. When he was welcomed and made happy at Forest Edge, when he could perhaps delude himself with thoughts of falling in love with Miss Barrs, we have some happy poetry of no great merit, echoing the archness of the two 'Sunday' poems. But they are as islands above his continued loss of hope. In the poem first published by Anne Ridler under the title "Lines, 1878", so little known and perhaps in consequence not sufficiently appreciated, we have an agonizing expression of hopelessness taken to the point where he rejects the very thought of hope:

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[87] Salt, p.128: "For seven years after the publication of the 'City of Dreadful Night' - 'seven songless years', as he himself described them - Thomson ceased to produce poetry . . ."

Yea, now that I have learnt by grievous thought
  Something of Life and Death;
And how the one is like the other, naught,
  Except for painful breath;
And now that I have learnt with infinite toil
To know myself, involved in such a coil:

Why, if there were a living God indeed,
  And I should hear His Voice:
'Her death shall be abolished for thy need,
  That ye may both rejoice;
She shall come back as young as when she died
To thee as young, fit bridegroom for such bride:

And ye shall live together man and wife
  Unto a reverend age;
And love shall be your balm in grief and strife
  Whatever wars may rage;
And young ones fill your home with tender cheer
And keep your name green when yourselves are sere.'

I would reply: 'Lord of the Universe!
  Pity and pardon now!
I shudder from this blessing as a curse;
  Down to the dust I bow,
And from my inmost spirit supplicate
Thou wilt be pleased to alter not our fate.

For she has perfect and eternal rest,
  She is not evermore,
Save as an image graven on my breast;
  And I am near the shore
Of that Dead Sea where we find end of woes
Unconsciousness, oblivion, full repose.

"A Voice from the Nile",[88] a competant work, develops his pessimistic view of man, but introduces an unusual note of compassion without self-pity:

For Man, this alien in my family,
Is alien most in this, to cherish dreams
And brood on visions of eternity,
And build religions in this brooding brain
And in the dark depths awe-full of his soul.

---

[88] It has not been previously noted that "A Voice from the Nile", 1881 (an unusual subject for Thomson) bears a close relationship to the first part of Chapter I of Winwood Reade's book The Martyrdom of Man, first published in 1872. Salt says (though I have not discovered on what authority) that Thomson first projected this poem in 1872 (v. Salt, p.318). There is a holograph notebook in the Bodleian, (Don. c.73.g.fol.280) with detailed notes about the Nile taken from the Encyclopaedia Brittanica and mentioning the French Egyptologist, Champollion. It is undated.

My other children live their little lives,
Are born and reach their prime and slowly fail,
And all their little lives are self-fulfilled;
They die and are no more, content with age
And weary with infirmity. But Man
Has fear and hope and phantasy and awe,
And wistful yearnings and unsated loves,
That strain beyond the limits of his life,
And therefore Gods and Demons, Heaven and Hell:
This Man, the admirable, the pitiable.

This was in 1881. A year later came "The Poet and His Muse", expressing realization that his Muse died as his inspiration was drained away in the concept of Dreadful Night:

'We tell no tales more, we whose tale is told;
As your brain withered and your heart grew chill
My heart and brain were turned to churchyard mould,
Wherefore my singing voice sank ever still;
And I, all heart and brain and voice, am dead;
It is my phantom here beside your bed
That speaketh to you now;
Though you exist still, a mere form inurning
The ashes of dead fires of thought and yearning,
Dead faith, dead love, dead hope, in hollow breast and brow.'

"Dead faith, dead love, dead hope", the nemesis that had haunted him for so long, had overtaken him again. And the final poem of any stature in 1882, the year of his death, was "Insomnia", perhaps the most effective and forbidding of all records of sleeplessness:

I let my lids fall, sick of thought and sense,
But felt that Shadow heavy on my heart;
And saw the night before me an immense
Black waste of ridge-walls, hour by hour apart,
Dividing deep ravines: from ridge to ridge
Sleep's flying hour was an aërial bridge;
But I, whose hours stood fast,
Must climb down painfully each steep side hither,
And climb more painfully each steep side thither,
And so make one hour's span for years of travail last.

But for our purpose it is enough to note that its suffering found him still in the City:

I paced the silent and deserted streets
In cold dark shade and chillier moonlight grey;
Pondering a dolorous series of defeats
And black disasters from life's opening day,
Invested with the shadow of a doom
That filled the Spring and Summer with a gloom
Most wintry bleak and drear;

Gloom from within as from a sulphurous censer
Making the glooms without for ever denser,
To blight the buds and flowers and fruitage of my year.

And he finished the poem with the line: "Our poor vast petty life is one dark maze of dreams," Then in a maze of drunken dreams, of alcoholic nightmares, he left at last this petty life for the oblivion he had so long desired.

iii. Prosody and Vocabulary of "The City"

Most perceptive readers have felt the power and mastery of The City of Dreadful Night. Some have attempted to describe the reasons for its fascination and its effectiveness. In most cases Thomson's life has been considered as central to the poem's existence. There is perhaps a chance to contribute to the understanding of both the man and the poem if we consider the poem as central to the man's life.

The City of Dreadful Night stands as far to one end of the spectrum of Victorian thought as Newman's "Apologia" and Hopkins's verse stand to the other. It could be claimed that it more accurately limns the emotional despair of an intelligent man than any other poem in the English language; and since both believer and unbeliever have tasted this most bitter of life's experiences, in this surrender lies its greatness. The first question is what technical devices help to achieve this. When this is answered, we may feel impelled to examine its provenance.

The immediate and also the most obvious reason for the appeal of The City is its discipline. The poet has succeeded in the first task of all artists: he has imposed order on what, in the living, has been chaos. As Paul Elmer More says in his

essay on Thomson,[89] "The whole poem is like the phantasmagoria of a fever subdued to mathematical restraint, or the clamour of mad grief trained into remorseless logic", and he speaks of the grave andgeometric simplicity of the stanzas.

Let us see how Thomson caged his tiger. We may well begin by examining the bars of his cage, because they have something unique about them. The verse form, the structure of the stanzas of much of The City is original. The framework of the poem, the descriptions of the City, its environs and its inhabitants, is written in a seven-line stanza:

A - Seven-line stanza. Descriptions of the City and its environs.	
Section	First phrase of first verse (Thomson's references in British Museum MS. in brackets)
Proem	Lo, thus as prostrate (Why and for whom written)
I	The City is of Night (The City)
III	Although lamps burn
V	How he arrives there
VII	Some say that phantoms
IX	It is full strange
XI	What men are they
XIII	Of all things human (Strange that men complain of the shortness of time)
XV	Wherever men are gathered (The air infected with sighs)
XVII	How the moon triumphs (The moon and stars shining)
XIX	The mighty river flowing (River of Suicides)
XXI	Anear the centre (Melencolia)

[89] Paul Elmer More, "James Thomson", Shelburne Essays, Vol.V, 1908, pp.170-95

Thomson himself[90] claims that the verse form used is an adaptation of Browning's "Guardian Angel". The lines are regular iambic pentameters rhyming ababccb. The fifth and sixth rhymes arealways double, frequently with a feminine ending. They are indeed comparable to Browning's stanzas which also have seven lines, but which rhyme ababcca (with cc still a double rhyme). It is too much to say with More that by shifting the arrangements of the stanza "Thomson reduced eccentric formlessness to form". Browning's stanzas are appropriate enough to their purpose and convey the intended impression that the poet is thinking aloud. In Thomson's poem however More is aware of "a different use of the metrical pauses", which, he says, is "immediately felt by the reader but not easily described". He is probably sensing the different pattern of stress in the two poems. Browning's poem is conversational, epistolatory and may be scanned as follows (using G.S. Fraser's system of four degrees of stress: / highest stress; \ second highest; × second lowest; and o lowest.[91]):

How soon | all worldly wrong | would be | repaired!
I think | how I | should view | the earth | and skies
And sea, | when once | again | my brow | was bared
After | thy healing, with | such different eyes.
O, World, | as God | has made | it. All | is beauty:
And knowing this, | is love, | and love | is duty.
What further may | be sought | for or | declared?

---

[90] NR Vol.4, 28 February 1863, p.146. In the introduction to a poem in this seven-line stanza (but without the double rhyme in the fifth and sixth lines) entitled "To the Youngest of our Ladies of Death", (in Thomson, Vol.I p.112 it was entitled "To Our Ladies of Death") he says: "The stanza was moulded under the influence of "The Guardian Angel".

[91] G.S. Fraser, Metre, Rhyme and Free Verse, 1970.

If we compare this with one of Thomson's stanzas, we get:

Because a cold rage seizes one at whiles
To show the bitter old and wrinkled truth
Stripped naked of all vesture that beguiles,
False dreams, false hopes, false masks and modes of youth;
Because it gives some sense of power and passion
In helpless impotence to try to fashion
Our woe in living words howe'er uncouth.

If we now concentrate on the major stresses in these two examples we find that the metrical and rhetorical emphases correspond very closely. Omitting all but the major stresses we find that sense stress is very close to scansion:

How soon all worldly wrong would be repaired!
I think how I should view the earth and skies
And sea, when once again my brow was bared
After thy healing, with such different eyes.
O; world, as God has made it. All is beauty:
And knowing this, is love, and love is duty.
What further may be sought for or declared?

In Browning's easy philosophizing before the picture, we have three major semantic stresses. If we now turn to Thomson's stanza, we are immediately aware that the movement of the verse is slower, heavier, more portentous, more impressive. Again we find that the metrical and semantic stresses have a direct relationship:

Because a cold rage seizes one at whiles
To show the bitter old and wrinkled truth
Stripped naked of all vesture that beguiles,
False dreams, false hopes, false masks and modes of youth;
Because it gives some sense of power and passion

> In helpless impotence to try to fashion
> Our woe in living words howe'er uncouth.

Here we have four major rhetorical stresses to each line; but in addition we have three strong stresses (and therefore one spondee) together in the first line, and three near-spondees ("False dreams, false hopes, false masks") in the fourth. Due credit must be given to Thomson for his new and original adaptation of Browning's metres, for these are stanzas that demonstrate the need for strict metrical discipline to control emphatic statement, but which allow the statement to emerge strongly by means of stress. It is these four stresses in the lines and the flexibility with which they are used, which add, I suspect in More's words, "to the heavy brooding quality of the rhythm". Edmund Blunden describes it well in one of the few perceptive comments in the introduction to his edition of The City:[92]

> This recurrent, slow-coiling, backward-coiling stanza, with the overhanging rhymes toward the close only suggesting a freedom of movement in order that the close may be more ironically definite, is the pulse of the City.

These strongly disciplined, heavily stressed stanzas, metrically regular but not boring to the ear, are devoted to the description of the City and its inhabitants. They convey the atmosphere, the ambience of the poem.

The stanzas that after Section I alternate with the seven-line sections, while constructed with equal care, are more varied and more flexible. In all cases they begin with a six-line stanza which Anne Ridler identifies as the

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[92] Edmund Blunden, Preface to The City of Dreadful Night and Other Poems, 1932.

Shakespearean sonnet sestet, and some are entirely in this measure. In general terms these sections are allegorical in nature and contain discussion, complaint or incantation, as we can see:

B - Six-line Stanza (Shakespearean Sonnet sestet) - Allegorical		Others - complaint, conversation, incantation
II	Because he seemed to walk (Dead faith, dead love, dead hope)	
IV	v.1 only He stood alone (As I came through the desert)	vv.2-12 - unique 9-line stanza As I came through
VI	vv.2 and 3 only I sat forlornly (Refused entrance to Hell)	vv.3-19 - triplets
VIII	v.1 only While still I lingered (The conversation)	Conversation in quatrains abba and triplets
X	vv.1-7, 15 The mansion stood apart (The festival of light)	vv.8-14 tercets, no rhyme pattern, repetition.
XII	vv.1, 2, 13 Our isolated units (Whence come you)	3-12 - quatrain aabb
XIV	Large glooms were gathered (The cathedral service)	
XVI	vv.1, 11 and 12 Our shadowy congregation (Lament this one chance of happy life lost	2-10 - quatrains abab
XVIII	I wandered in a suburb (Search for the broken clue)	
XX	I sat me weary (Sphinx and Angel)	

The iambic pentameters of the sestets are as heavily stressed as the seven-line stanzas, and made solemn and foreboding by the vocabulary. The man who "slowly onward went" does so "unswervingly", "regardless", and "step for step with lonely sounding feet" on a "drear pilgrimage to ruined shrines". In the mansion there may well be "solemnities of silence" and "mysterious rites of dolour and despair". We may also note the alliteration of the letters 'l', 's' and 'w' in these examples, and throughout the sestets, as in the verse describing the Lady worshipped in the mansion of light:

> The Lady of the images: supine,
> Deathstill, lifesweet, with folded palms she lay:
> And kneeling there as at a sacred shrine
> A young man wan and worn who seemed to pray:
> A crucifix of dim and ghostly white
> Surmounted the large altar left in night:--

The unrhymed tercets that follow the sestets in Section X are wrought with more than usual subtlety. The substitution of repetition, or near-repetition for rhyme: "black with grief eternal for thy sake"; the uses of assonance: "The inmost oratory of my soul"; the employment again of alliteration: "I kneel beside thee and I clasp the cross,/With eyes for ever fixed upon that face" overcome the occasional clumsy line: "And I alive feel turning into stone".

In Section VIII Thomson employs after the introductory sestets, quatrains rhyming abba to distinguish the voice of emotional despair, alternating with triplets for that of reasoned pessimism, and in the course of it achieves perhaps one of the worst three-line stanzas in English verse:

> This all-too humble soul would arrogate
> Unto itself some signalising hate
> From the supreme indifference of Fate!

Section VI is mainly in triplets, usually undistinguished.

In Section XII after two introductory sestets, he

undertakes the not inconsiderable feat of nine quatrains rhyming abab, each concluding with the same line "I wake from daydreams to this real night", achieving I believe a sense of inevitability without falling into monotony. And in Section XVI he employs the quatrains rhyming abab in an unexpected pastiche of Gray. But the most original and outstanding of his verse forms, contributing to what is perhaps the highest moment of his poetry, is that of Section IV. After a lame opening of one sestet, he breaks into the tremendous refrain of

> As I came through the desert thus it was,
> As I came through the desert: . . .

a refrain with which he opens each of the remaining eleven stanzas, once more creating by a kind of incantation an atmosphere of inevitability and brooding menace, again without monotony. The first line is not rhymed, but is integrated by the repetition alone. The stanzas have nine lines (except the last, which has ten) and after the opening incantatory line, the lines rhyme in couplets. Seven lines are iambic pentameters, and the last two, again repetitive in nature, each have three iambic feet. The whole effect is heightened by attention to the marriage of sound and sense. "The air so thick it clotted in my throat", by a subtle and alliterative combination of 't' and 'r' sounds, is guttural and choking in itself. The same technique, aided by assonance, slows down the line: "The hoarse and heavy and carnivorous breath/Was hot upon me", so that it exudes menace. The combination of sound and movement in "White foambelts seethed there, wan spray swept and flew", exactly fulfils his purpose. It has to be admitted that in the second half of the sequence, some of the verse is laboured, as in lines such as: "And watched the other stark in swoon and her" or "When the tide/Swept up to her

there kneeling by my side". The picture however is so vividly painted that attention is still held by the desperate chant of the verse so well matched to its subject.

Faced with the difficulty of conveying a sense of frustrated despair,without at the same time inducing either boredom or somnolence, Thomson solved the problem by adopting strict yet flexible verse forms, unusual for the most part, but adapted to his need. And in the special stanza that he developed for Section IV, his technique rose to meet the highest level of his inspiration.

His other problem of how to treat a single major subject at considerable length with an adequately varied vocabulary he did not solve so successfully. The constant repetition of the word 'night' is perhaps acceptable, but there are other repetitions. The word 'black' (together with 'blacker' and 'blackness') oaccurs twenty-five times; and 'gloom/s' at least thirteen, rhyming when it ends the line either with 'doom/s' or 'tomb/s'. Other words of sadness, such as 'dearth', 'dolour', 'dolorous' and 'dolent', occur far too frequently, as does the word 'austere'. He has moreover an unfortunate prediliction for archaic or petical words such as 'fane', 'bale', 'ruth', 'travail' (with the adjective 'sore'). 'Tenebrous', 'teen', 'threen' and 'coeval' are all to be found in the last section. He is not above using 'Lo' two or three times, on occasions to do little more than fill out the line. Thomson might, of course, have defended his repetitions on the basis that they underlined his main theme of monotony and despair, and his use of archaisms, common enough in the writing of the period, as adding distance and dignity to the picture he was painting. And there might be some justice in such a defence, though it seems to me that he pushed both practices somewhat beyond acceptable limits.

He was well aware of the difficulties that arose from reliance on a personal vocabulary. He says himself:

> Every man living in seclusion and developing an intense interior life, gradually comes to give a quite peculiar significance to certain words and phrases and emblems.[93]

If Thomson did not "live in seclusion", he was as we have seen a solitary man, and the comment he makes about Blake is more than a little applicable to himself. Nor was his problem of a vocabulary for The City of Dreadful Night a particularly new one. "The Doom of a City" written in 1857 contains five or six examples of the use of the word 'doom' rhyming either with 'tomb' or 'gloom', and at least one example of 'tomb' and 'gloom' rhyming together. He also employs in it many of the words he later used to emphasize the misery of his City of Dreadful Night, words such as 'lorn', 'austere', 'lone' and 'desolation' are examples. And who would be able to say without reference or without an encyclopaedic knowledge of his work from which of the two poems came the line and phrase: "I paced through desert streets, beneath the gleam/Of Lamps".[94]

It would be unfair and wrong to leave the question of Thomson's semantic range at this point. If it is true, as we shall suggest later, that Thomson was writing an extended metaphor, we cannot expect to find this also packed with subsidiary metaphors. But there are some very striking and original images and phrases. He describes the gown that Melencolia wears as "a shell of burnished metal frigid".[95] He describes the sky

[93] James Thomson, "The Poems of William Blake" in Biographical and Critical Studies, 1896, p.258.

[94] "The Doom of a City", Part I, canto ii. There are yet more examples in "Lines on His Twenty-third Birthday", also written in 1857.

[95] A far cry from "In fortitude of glowing bronze far-towering" which describes the "massive walls" in "The Doom of a City", I.xii.

in Section XVII as a "blue vault obdurate as steel". In Section XII he can invoke nights "that are as aeons of slow pain". He can speak in more philosophical vein of "life's pleasant veil of various error" (Section XI). He can describe the City as "that builded desolation". He can see the sunrise as a "bleeding eyeless socket" (Section IV). He can mourn the loss of "the lucid morning's fragrant breath" (Section I) - and 'lucid' is a lovely word in that context. And he can introduce us to the thought of letting loose so many spectres of his inevitable "black night" by asking why we should "break the seals of mute despair". These are striking and harmonious phrases, and there are many more.

The poet of The City of Dreadful Night had his difficulties, not least the problem of sustained melancholy. The measure of his success is that he overcame most of them - to overcome them all would have been to command a range, an educated vocabulary and a genius to which he could not, in the nature of things, pretend.

iv. MSS. of "The City". Dates and methods of composition

Three manuscripts of The City of Dreadful Night are known to exist: two, which were sold to the British Museum by Mr H.W. Barrs[96] consist of fifteen sections of The City substantially in the version we now have, one copy written in pencil and the

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[96] British Museum MSS. Add. 38532-38535. Four volumes, including two early drafts of The City, a final copy of "Weddah" and proofs for "Sunday Up the River", with J.A. Froude's comments and Thomson's corrections. Two small memorandum books contain miscellaneous notations and drafts and fragments of various poems, in pencil, from the 1860s.

second in ink; the third copy is now in the Pierpoint Morgan Library, New York, and thanks to Anne Ridler, a microfilm of it is deposited in the Bodleian Library.[97]

An examination of Thomson's notebooks and manuscripts shows him to be compulsively neat and in search of order and accuracy, so that in each of the three MSS a date is entered against each section of the poem. And once entered, presumably in the first instance into the pencil draft, it is never varied. One can only presume that the first MS is the one in pencil where there is no date later than 1870 because the ink version, which follows it in the notebook as bound, contains interpolations and additions of 1873. It is, however, of some importance to try and decide what the relationship may be between the deates as entered and the dates of composition.

It is quite clear that the manuscripts that we have were entered up at two quite different times. Both the pencil and the ink MSS have only fifteen sections; the Pierpoint Morgan has the fully twentytwo. Eleven of the sections have dates of the year 1870 and eleven are dated in the year 1873; and the dates remain constant, though the order of the sections is quite different in the Pierpoint Morgan MS. There is no record of how the earlier copies came into the possession of Mr Barrs, though it would not be surprising if Thomson gave them to him as some small appreciation of the kindness he had shown and the hospitality he offered Thomson at Forest Edge. The copy now in the Pierpoint Morgan Library was given by Thomson to G.G. Flaws.[98]

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[97] Pierpoint Morgan MS. MA.676; Bodleian microfilm MS.Film 577.

[98] Although Thomson knew Flaws only during the closing years of his life, apparently their friendship was very close and Thomson gave him the MS copy of The City in its final form.

Flaws emigrated to the U.S.A. and sold the MS when he was in need.[99]

Why should there be such a gap between 1870 and 1873? It seems fairly clear that during the intervening period Thomson was fully occupied in keeping body and soul together; Bradlaugh had given up the paint business in which Thomson was employed and he then became secretary to three different companies, as ephemeral it would seem as their secretary.[100] Then in April 1872 he went to Central City, Colorado in the U.S.A. as Secretary of the Champion Gold and Silver Mines Company, and he remained there until December of that year. On his return to the United Kingdom he must have resumed work on The City, for we have fair copies dated May and June 1873. Then came his ill-fated excursion into journalism as a correspondent of The New York World. Bradlaugh had obtained for him a commission to 'cover' the Carlist war in Spain, a commission that he fulfilled inadequately, but during which he suffered from sunstroke.[101] We know however from his correspondence[102] that he worked on The City while he was there. He was in Spain from 22 July to 23 September (both dates inclusive) 1873. Immediately after

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[99] Flaws sold this copy to W.C. Stedman and it was bought by the Pierpoint Morgan Library in 1911.

[100] Salt, p.67: Thomson writes to his sister-in-law, Mrs John Thomson, on 1 January 1872: ". . . I then became secretary pro tem. to one of the thousand companies which came into being last year, and in some very hard commercial campaigning have already had two companies killed under me. I am at present astride a third."

[101] Salt, p.101: ". . . as we learn from a pencilled notebook Thomson was prostrated by a sunstroke, being laid up for three days at San Esteban."
In an account book in the Bodleian (Don.f.17.fol5) Thomson records "Three days ill at Alsasua" as costing 20 pesetas on 6 September, and on 18 September that "Ten days illness at San Esteban" had cost him 60 pesetas.

[102] Salt 1914, p.91: "During this prostration as he afterward told a friend he worked out in his mind a portion of the City of Dreadful Night."

his return we have fair copies of Sections XII, XV, XVII and XXI, all dated October 1873. Since we know that he was working on his poem while he was in Spain and since it is reasonable to deduce that by the word 'working' he would mean 'composing', we must ask ourselves what is the exact significance of the dates in the MSS.

It does not seem likely that these dates were the actual dates of composition, though Schaefer seems to make this assumption.[103] It does however seem reasonable to assume that they are the dates of the first fair copy and as such bear some, but not necessarily complete relationship to the order of composition. That they are fair copies is reinforced by the comparitively few corrections and amendments introduced between the first and last of these MSS, the pencil one in the British Museum and the final one in the Pierpoint Morgan Library.

In his "The Two Cities of Dreadful Night" paper, Schaefer take the position that there are two poems combined into one because they were composed at dates so far apart that we can clearly see a division in Thomson's thinking, and that "the 1870 'City' and the 1873 'City' are unquestionably two very different poems in concept and intention." This is a very far-reaching statement and probably not defensible on the basis of Thomson's own words. Thomson said of The City of Dreadful Night:[104]

> About half of it, not the first half as it now stands, was written in 1870; and then it was not touched till 1873, when I roughly finished it, licking the whole into shape at the beginning of the present year (1874)."

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[103] William Schaefer, "The Two Cities of Dreadful Night," Publications of the Modern Language Association of America, Vol. LXXVII, 1962.

[104] Salt, p.109

The phrase 'licking it into shape' is perhaps misleading, but it need not be so, for the MSS give ample opportunity to study the care and thought which Thomson gave to doing this.

It seems to be dangerous in the face of the evidence of Thomson's methods of working to insist on a too definite relationship between the dates which Thomson entered into his MSS after each section and the dates of original composition. If there were a direct relationship, then he must have had a most outstanding facility for original writing, as we can see by examining the chart in Appendix I of this thesis. Two verses of Section IV, the whole of Section V and the whole of Sections VII and XI were entered in the MSS as belonging to the period 26 to 28 August 1870. This would have been a remarkable output for three days, even if they had fallen upon a week-end. It seems more likely, and I think more usual, that these verses were composed at various times before August 1870, corrected at various times before the 26th and fair-copied on loose MSS when they were finished, and given this and later dates when transferred to the notebooks.[105] If this is so, then it is not safe to assume that rough drafts of later sections were not

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[105] Salt says on pp.317-9:

> This mention of dates leads naturally to the subject of Thomson's method of composition and publication. It was not his habit to write down anything, either in the shape of verse or prose,until it had been to some extent shaped and perfected in his mind, and the work once written underwent but few corrections, some of the original manuscripts being almost untouched.

It is not clear from the context whether Salt based this on any fact other than his own examination of the MSS. Personally I find it difficult to believe that even Thomson's sometimes fatal facility was managed without an initial rough copy. Even if Salt was well informed, we must on the basis of his statement allow Thomson more mental planning and revision of his work than Schaefer's theory implies. In "A Strange Book", Liberal, 1879, Thomson describes, presumably from experience, "deep and concentrated writing" as being "slow and painful".

in existence before any sections of The City were fair-copied. It seems to me likely, from the handwriting, that the pencil MS in the British Museum and the ink MS there, were each written up at one sitting on different occasions. To this extent Schaefer's suggestion that when he began to write, Thomson did not have the image of a city in mind, must be suspect, though this by no means invalidates his analysis of the likelihood that Thomson was at about the same period much influenced by his study of Dante, and when looking for a framework in which to set his work, would at least find encouragement for his conception of The City of Dreadful Night from Dante's Città Dolente. To Schaefer the break between the dates in the fair copies results in two separate poems.[106] The 1870 City is, he thinks, "a gathering place for unhappy men who have suffered personal misfortune and live within the dreadful night of their own bleak minds."[107] This is a subjective or internal poetic expression of a psychological state. The 1873 City, Schaefer believes, is a meeting place, a rallying point for those who have mastered their geology, evolution and Bible criticism, and take an admittedly morbid, but highly enthusiastic delight in pointing out the absence of God. In making this observation Schaefer infers that there is an element of chance in the success of the poem as a whole. "That the poem succeeds as well as it does," he says, "is really not surprising, since the 1870 sections actually provide rather effective documentation for the pessimism Thomson expresses

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[106] W.D. Schaefer, "The Two Cities of Dreadful Night", op.cit. pp. 609-15.
Schaefer, pp.73-81 et al.

[107] "The Two Cities of Dreadful Night", ibid.

in the 1873 manifesto." This is a remarkable statement and amounts to saying that, by chance, Thomson wrote the poetic illustrations to his negative philosophy without intending to fit them into the complete artistic whole; that when he wrote them he had no such unity in mind. He goes further and suggests that in July 1870 "Thomson found himself with three completed sections for a Dantesque [sic] allegory," but that since he could not believe in Heaven, Hell or Purgatory, he was obliged to create the City of Dreadful Night. Since there is a physical break of such magnitude during the composition of the poem, there must be a great deal of truth in Schaefer's view that each section has its own ethos. It would be mentally, indeed almost physically impossible for it to be otherwise, since both the mood and the philosophy of the poet, as of any man, must be modified by time. It does not follow that the poem as finally assembled lacks artistic unity because of the differing times of its composition, nor is it necessarily true that from its very beginning it was not conceived as an artistic whole. To suggest that in July 1870 Thomson, finding himself with three completed sections for a Dante-esque allegory, had to 'create' the City of Dreadful Night is a neat hypothesis, but one which ignores the fact that this was by no means Thomson's first approach to the image of a 'City'. It is surely reasonable to think that when he began to consider a poetic framework for the emotional and intellectual despair that stemmed from atheism and pessimism, he should from the beginning have remembered his first attempt and borne in mind some of the images from it. This left him free to begin where he would, since the general image of the City in which he would ultimately enfold the whole sequence would be to a considerable degree, if not entirely, clear in his mind. If this is so we are presented with an

explanation of the rather strange first lines of each of the first three Sections to be written, which are all unusual, though Schaefer does not note them. Each first line assumes in the reader some knowledge of what had gone before, or where the story was taking place. Since at the date on the MSS. nothing had, apparently, gone before, we might be justified in assuming that Thomson knew what he intended to write. Section II begins: "Because he seemed to walk with an intent/I followed him . . ." Who followed whom, and where? The poet followed someone whom he had found in the City. This is clear from the Proem and Section I. Without them it is puzzling; yet Thomson (if we accept Schaefer's and Anne Ridler's chronology) wrote the line first. Section XVIII begins: "I wandered in a suburb of the north". Suburbs cannot exist without cities and Thomson's imaginary suburb was within the City that had already captured his imagination. Finally, Section XX begins: "I sate me weary on a pillar's base", and places it beneath "the great catherdral's western front". The cathedral exists in "The Doom of a City" and it is possible to believe that when he wrote this stanza Thomson was already clearly aware of its possible importance in <u>The City of Dreadful Night</u> to which he now introduces us.

Moreover in examining these first three sections, Schaefer may well be misled by the distinction between American and English speech. He suggests that a rural rather than an urban setting is dominant in the verses. He is surely mistaking a suburban description for a rural one. Villas still gleam beyond dense foliage in the suburbs of our towns, and did so more frequently in Victorian times. The poet follows down "many a long dim silent street", and 'street' is an urban, not a rural word. The black mass of the church tower, and the

"old God's acre now corruption's sty" are city images and bear little relation to the country churchyard. At least we must agree with Anne Ridler that "the form of the 'City of Dreadful Night' developed from the much more diffuse shape of the 'Doom'".[108]

It is in fact an interesting exercise to arrange The City in the order of the dates of the fair-copies, and to read it in that order, though I do not then get the same impression from it that Schaefer does. It is clear as we read in this order that there is real development of thought. Thomson seems in a sense to 'grow up', to increase in stature, to develop from a situation in which he is emotionally lost, and wandering to one in which he accepts with some resignation and dignity his unfortunate fate. But there is by no means the break between the sections carrying the earlier dates and the sections carrying the later ones that Schaefer would have us believe. In fact it is not true to say that Section VIII, which bears the earliest date in 1873, "is written by a poet with a completely different attitude and purpose",[109] for Section VIII takes up so closely the theme of Section VI, which carries the latest date (14-20 October) of 1870, that it is impossible to believe that it was not written with the previous section well in mind, and with the obvious intention to develop its thought.

In further considering Scahefer's theory that The City of Dreadful Night is "a synthesis of two separate poems written at two different periods with far different intention",[110]

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[108] Ridler, p.xxxix.

[109] W.D. Schaefer, "The Two Cities of Dreadful Night," op.cit. p. 613.

[110] Ibid., p. 614.

I am faced with the additional difficulty that I do not agree with his interpretation of some sections of the poem, and with his judgements upon them. Section XII, as will be seen, I regard as referring to many diverse aspects of Thomson himself, and to that extent retaining the atmosphere of nightmare, of surrealism, which Schaefer would deny it. Nor can I agree that the sections that were given the latest dates when copied into the MS (Sections XVII, XV, XIII, XVI, and XXI) were "hurried, uninspired, anticlimactic" and written primarily as fillers. Section XVII contains some of the most lyrical description in the poem:

> How the moon triumphs through the endless nights!
> How the stars throb and glitter as they wheel
> Their thick processions of supernal lights
> Around the blue vault obdurate as steel!

Section XV ends on lines which are patterns of despair.

Section XIII contains some fine lines:

> This Time which crawleth like a monstrous snake,
> Wounded and slow and very venomous . . .

and:

> O length of the intolerable hours,
> O nights that are as aeons of slow pain,
> O Time, too ample for our vital powers,
> O Life, whose woeful vanities remain . . .

Section XVI contains a clever pastiche of Gray's "Elegy"; and Section XXI is a clever reworking of a poem written earlier, probably in the 1860s.[111] There is no hasty, substandard work here. Schaefer's comment is unjustified, and it underlines once again the probable difference between the date of composition, an exercise which may well have stretched over a long period, and the dates entered into the MSS to signify when

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[111] "The Melencolia of Albrecht Dürer" was first published in Ridler. From internal evidence Anne Ridler concludes it was written in the early 1860s.

the poet was reasonably satisfied with his work. And the remarkably few amendments that Thomson makes to the verses in any of the MSS point to his feeling when he copied them up that he had succeeded as nearly as he could to catching his inspiration in words. But Anne Ridler's comment (Ridler p.270) that Thomson first copied into his notebooks whole blokks of The City which were in the same measure, is still valid. For example, the sections carrying dates from 16 January to 9 July 1870 are all in the ababcc of the Shakespearean Sonnet Sestet. Similarly from 10 July to 28 August 1870, from 6 June to 13 June 1873 and 1 to 29 October 1873 the dates on the fair copies relate to his "characteristic seven line stanza". The remaining variations (and Section IV which is unique) fit in between these periods. We cannot be sure however, whether Thomson composed in these 'blocks' of the same prosodic structure, or whether he revised them at the same time before copying them up. The latter seems the more likely hypothesis.[112]

Certainly before Thomson commenced The City he had written "The Doom of a City" (1857) and the prose "A Lady of Sorrow" (1867). The idea of a City as the all-encompassing atmosphere of his distress had therefore been with him for a long time. And in particular in the section of "A Lady" which he calls 'The Shadow' we have the first picture of "the vast Metropolis which was to become as a vast Necropolis". It is impossible to believe, as Schaefer appears to do, that when he began to write the poem that ultimately became The City he did not have this

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[112] An interesting light on Thomson's method of dating may be seen on pages 99/100 of British Museum Add. MS 38535. On p.99, vv.124 and 125 of "Weddah" are written, with slight amendments and marginal notes, and struck out with a pencil line down the centre. At the foot he writes "The End". He dates this "Easter Monday 29/3/69" and he notes "Begun Saturday 27/6/68" and underneath he adds "nine months". On p.110 verses 124 and 125 are fair-copied and dated "Sunday 4/4/69". The subscription is "B.V.1868-9".

same picture in his mind. But it is of course reasonable to believe that he did not have the complete and final concept clear before him.[113] It inevitably expanded and developed as he worked and as his own thinking became clearer, more definite and more despairing. It is known that Tennyson wrote the various sections of "In Memoriam" as the mood seized him, and only later did he see the pattern into which it fell, and which enabled him to rearrange it into a series that seems to the reader to unfold naturally and inevitably. This does not seem to be an unusual poetic experience and so it was, to some extent, with Thomson. His intention was clear to him, the poem grew as he worked, and he thought much about its final arrangement. In both the pencil and ink versions in the British Museum are listings showing tentative arrangements of the sections, tentative arrangements that must have been entered in the notebooks after most of the sections were clear in his mind, if not fair-copied, since the lists contain references to sections that are not otherwise included there. Indeed, on the last page of the pencil version, and between vv. 4 and 5 of what is now the Proem, he wrote:

The River of the Suicides
Whence came they
The horses and vehicles of what merchandise
(Last) When and How written and for whom.
The Cathedral service
The moon and Stars shining.

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[113] "Whatever may have been the importance of the city in Thomson's mind as he wrote these early sections it seems fairly obvious that originally the city was not intended to be the unifying element in the poem." v. Schaefer, "The Two .Cities of Dreadful Night", op.cit.

The date allocated to the Proem was 11 June 1873 and the remainder of these sections, at this point unnumbered, were finally given dates between June and October of the same year. They must therefore all have been in draft at the time the Proem was copied, and we can have no idea how long they had been in gestation. But it is possible the note was written before he went to Spain, and that he worked on at least one of these sections ("How the Moon triumphed) while he was there.

However, by October 1873 all the sections were fair-copied and arranged in the order of the Pierpoint Morgan MS. In March, April and May 1874 it was published in its final order in The National Reformer and in this sequence with one stanza added to Section XIV in the edition of 1880 and in all subsequent editions.[114]

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[114] Appendix III shows the dates of the fair copy for each section, Thomson's arrangement in the various MSS, his thoughts about the final sequence (as noted in the British Museum MSS), the arrangement in the first printed version (NR, 1874) and the final arrangement in the first published volume of his poetry.

CHAPTER TWO - THE POEM. AN EXPLICATION

1.- The threshold of the City

Before we enter the City, Thomson gives us fair warning of its nature. He prefaces his work with three epigraphs, the first from Dante and the other two, as we might expect, from Leopardi, whose work was then so much in his thoughts. "Through me" he says, quoting the first line of "The Inferno", Canto III, "you pass into the City of Woe",[1] while the two Leopardi quotations translate respectively as:

> In so much using then, so much movement of every celestial and earthly thing, circling without rest to return whence they were moved, I can see neither use nor profit.[2]

and:

> In thee O death, who in the universe are alone eternal, to whom all created things turn, our naked nature reposes. Not happy, but safe from the old suffering. For Fate denies blessedness both to the living and the dead.[3]

It was obviously a matter of concern to Thomson to discover and to use fitting signposts for the reader, and I suspect that he did so not only to give fair warning but to have, as it were, the blessing of established figures on an enterprise

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[1] Although there are other excellent translations of Dante's works, I am using Cary's translation since we know Thomson possessed it.

[2] Ridler, p.271, trs. Leopardi, Canto XXIII, "Canto Notturno di un Pastore errante dell'Asia".

[3] Ridler, p.271, trs. Leopardi, "Coro di Morti".

so unusual. Although he seems always to have had the quotation from Dante in mind, since it appears in both the British Museum ink copy and the Pierpoint Morgan copy, as well as in the final version, he considered and discarded several others before selecting those from Leopardi. In the earlier British Museum ink version he was proposing these quotations:

> A land of darkness, as darkness itself; and of the shadow of death, without any order, and where the light is as darkness.[4]

and:

> And others mournfully within the gloom
> Of their own shadows walked and called it death. [5]

and the lines from Titus Andronicus which he subsequently incorporated into the first stanza of the Proem.

The Pierpoint Morgan MS. in addition to the Dante, also has the same Job quotation as the British Museum MS and in addition it has:

> Can man by no means creep out of himself
> And leave the slough of viperous grief behind? [6]

and:

> And evermore shall the burthen of the agony of thy present evil wear thee down; for he that shall (can?) deliver thee exists not in nature. [7]

His final choice of epigraphs to sanctify his excursion into the City of Dreadful Night in the form we have them now he first used in The National Reformer version, except for the

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[4] Job, X,22. Thomson incorporates this quotation (without acknowledgement) in the last speech of 'The Shadow' in "A Lady of Sorrow".

[5] Shelley, Triumph of Life.

[6] John Marston, Antonio and Mellida, I,i, 5-6.

[7] Aeschylus, Prometheus Bound, 26-7.

omission of the last two lines from Leopardi;"Però ch'esser beato/Nega ai mortali e nega a'morti il fate." The words of Dante are a warning only, exactly as Dante used them. But the quotations from Leopardi set out clearly enough that we are to enter a world where a mechanistic universe has no place for the individual soul, where Death alone offers repose, and Fate is indifferent to all.

ii. - The Proem - Cold Rage

Bearing these thoughts in mind, let us now examine in detail The City of Dreadful Night. The Proem was written, as we have seen, about half-way through the period during which the work was composed. This was surely a reasonable point, with so much already written, for Thomson to pause and consider what he was doing, and why. Stanza I asks the question "Why?", but asks it in a laboured and contrived manner. Stanza II begins to give the answer.

Thomson starts with the most artificial of all devices, the quotation from a poem within another poem. That he chose Shakespeare is surprising, for he was no Shakespeare scholar; nor can we feel that the quotation sprang naturally to his mind. It seems more likely that he searched the canon for one as apposite as those from Dante and Leopardi that he used as epigraphs. He found what he wanted in, of all places, Titus Andronicus, III, i, 12/13. Suitable as he may have considered the quotation to be verbally, it is not totally appropriate if its context is taken into account. Having chosen it, he found he must wrestle with it to fit his verse, and in consequence the opening line of Thomson's poem has an air of contrivance. "Lo"

is a villainous device to provide an opening syllable; "Thus" means nothing and the phrase "as prostrate" is ambiguous. Perhaps he was attracted to the quotation because it reminded him of Shelley's "dust of creeds outworn".[8] Whatever led him to use it, it is not really until the third line of the stanza that we come to the point. Even here there is something of a difficulty. He asks, why should we

> evoke the spectres of black night
> To blot the sunshine of exultant years?

Did he imagine that there were so many other, more fortunate beings, who enjoyed exultant years that he was in danger of spoiling their satisfaction by recounting his woes? And his next question leaves us equally unsatisfied: "Why disinter dead faith from mouldering hidden?" By 'dead faith' does he refer to the faith which men like himself once had, but for whom it no longer has a meaning? Or is he recalling from his early knowledge of the gospels that "faith without works is dead"[9] and is he thus implicitly deploring his lack of achievement and in consequence, of faith? Moreover is faith 'hidden' to prevent it from mouldering, or has it been hidden because it is mouldering, or is it mouldering because it has been hidden? These questions arise from the struggle the poet is having with so contrived a beginning. The imagery may be a little clearer if we recall his poem "Philosophy"[10] and the lines "The corpse is hid, that Death may work its vile/ Corruption in black secrecy . . .". Thomson returns to the imagery of this and of the next stanza of <u>The City</u> in "The Poet

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[8] Shelley, "Prometheus Unbound", I, 697.

[9] <u>James</u>, II, 20.

[10] 1866.

and His Muse"[11] when he writes (the Muse speaking): "My vesture mouldering with deep death's disgrace". The use of the word 'disgrace' may cast some light on his earlier thinking about 'dead faith'. In the last two lines he comes to the pith and purpose of the stanza when he asks;"Why break the seals of mute despair unbidden,/And wail life's discords into careless ears?" Perhaps the 'careless ears' (ears of those who are both free from care and careless of the woes of others) belong to those who enjoy the 'exultant years'? It is a clever phrase, for the essence of despair is surrender to the knowledge that no one will stay to understand. Strangely these lines remind one of the lines of a young man some ten years Thomson's junior, who was dealing with the same difficulties of belief from a diametrically opposite approach and who was fighting back from the same intellectual temptations with the words

> Not, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee
> Not untwist - slack they may be - these last strands of man
> In me or, most weary, cry I can no more. I can;
> Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be. [12]

For Thomson there is not even an attempt at escape; he seeks only to justify his imprisonment in despair and when we reach the second stanza we are in a totally different emotional climate. As he answers his own questions we can feel Thomson shaking with frustration. He must break the seals of 'mute' despair

> Because a cold rage seizes one at whiles
> To show the bitter old and wrinkled truth . . .

Here we have a true poetic development of Leopardi's "l'acerbo

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[11] 1882.

[12] Gerard Manley Hopkins, "Carrion Comfort".

vero",[13] personified as bitter, old and wrinkled, like an apple that has long withered in the attic, like a woman whose beauty has long passed. Whatever the descriptive element of the imagery, we have here a 'truth' very different from most poetic 'truth'. Here in contrast to nearly every reference to truth in our literature, we have a description of it that is without any ethical implication and divorces it from nobility, beauty and virtue. This is not the 'beauty' which is truth for Keats,[14] or the spiritual truth of Donne that stands on a "huge hill/Craggy and steep".[15] Nor is it the truth that offered to Milton its "bright countenance".[16] We have indeed a unique description of truth that reminds us of those evocations of Macbeth's guilty conscience, the "secret, black and midnight hags". This thought makes all the more forceful the line that follows: "Stripped naked of all vesture that beguiles". 'Vesture' is a biblical word, a word of the psalms and of Revelations,[17] and Shakespeare uses it of the body itself when he calls it "the muddy vesture of decay".[18] Thomson perhaps had the biblical aspect of truth in mind in speaking of the "vesture that beguiles". We do not need to look further than the dictionary to accept the full force of this last word. It means "to overreach with guile", to cheat or disappoint, to charm, or to while (or 'wile') away. How, in

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[13] Lyman A. Cotten in his article "Leopardi and The City of Dreadful Night", Studies in Philology, XLIII, July 1945, points out the similarity between this and Leopardi's statement that his aim is to investigate the bitter truth - "l'acerbo vero".

[14] Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn".

[15] Donne, "Satyre III".

[16] Milton, Preface, Reason of Church Government.

[17] Psalm CII, 26; Revelations, XIX, 16; et al.

[18] Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice, V, i.

Thomson's view, did this 'vesture' beguile? By consisting of "False dreams, false hopes". This was Thomson's view of religion. In consequence 'vesture', as a religious word, had its special meaning for him. The "false masks and modes of youth" are by no means so obvious. The 'modes' are perhaps Browning's "various modes of man's belief",[19] modes which Thomson had clearly left behind him in his youth. Or if the word here means 'fashion', or even 'way of life', then the emphasis is on the masquerade we all play when we are young and which he finds no longer 'beguiles'.

So Thomson offers as the first reason for writing about the City the "cold rage" with which he is seized and which compels him to describe what he conceives to be the truth. He was "stung" by a similar "cold rage" when some years later, at the end of "Insomnia" he contemplated what he had written.[20] It was his phrase for the total frustration he felt when trying to convey his sense of helplessness; but he also offers us a second reason in the same stanza, and an extremely revealing one it is. He is writing, he says

> Because it gives some sense of power and passion
> In helpless impotence to try to fashion
> Our woe in living words howe'er uncouth.

This is self-awareness. He is writing for self-satisfaction; he is writing to satisfy to some degree his natural vanity and to obtain some sense of meaning in his life. Hoxie Fairchild[21]

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[19] Browning, "Christmas Eve".

[20] "Insomnia", ll.288-90:

> I look back on the words already written,
> And writhe by cold rage stung, be self-scorn smitten,
> They are so weak and vain and infinitely inane. . . .[sic

[21] Hoxie Neale Fairchild, Religious Trends in English Poetry, New York, 1957.

says of these lines:

> If he was to externalise his deepest self in authentic poetry he must affirm despair, not seek to suppress it. He had reached the point where he could satisfy the romantic desire for power only through a powerful expression of the impossibility of being romantic . . .

There is a little confidence here also, since he believes the words are 'living' and so presumably will live.[22] Though the second half of this stanza has force, and carries some conviction, it was a few years later (and in the poem which he did not wish to have published) that Thomson really expressed his feeling for the therapeutic value of artistic expression:

> How strange! we can confront the direst grief
> Erect, and scarcely quail,
> If we can only have the poor relief
> Of uttering our bale,
> In music, sculpture, painting, verse or prose,
> Who else were crushed beneath the heavy woes. [23]

The third stanza which with the first four lines of the fourth stanza continues his answer to the question he has posed in the first, makes it clear that Thomson knew that many people would find his poetry quite unacceptable, even incomprehensible. They could not "read the writing if they deigned to try". 'Deign' is an unkind word, that taunts the narrow and self-righteous dissenters and Chadbands of this world. Such were surely the "pious spirits with a God above them,/To sanctify and glorify and love them . . . [24] Nevertheless he

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[22] Thomson rejected an alternative version of this line, "Our woe in words as sharp and void of ruth", which appears in the British Museum MSS.

[23] Published by Anne Ridler under the heading "Lines, 1878". The first line of the poem is: "I had a love, it was so long ago."

[24] Thomson originally wrote "pious creatures", v. British Museum MS.

Nor does he write for sages like Edward Irving (whose portrait was in his earliest home) and who foresaw "a heaven on earth". Thomson's list begins more charitably with "the hopeful young" and "those who deem their happiness of worth", and there is in these three phrases no implied criticism, for he had himself been both. Then he turns to those who "pasture and grow fat among/ The shows of life". The word 'pasture' has a biblical connotation, though strangely enough it is not often used in the scriptures as an intransitive verb. "The shows of life" must remind us of Spenser's "Hymn to Heavenly Beauty" (and there is irony in the recollection) and of "The hearts of men, which fondly here admire/Fair seeming shows". So Thomson excludes from those who will understand his poem a fair section of humanity ranging from the youth he does not criticize and whose hopes he once shared, to those more fortunate and older, or more stupid and older, who "feel nor doubt nor dearth". He ends his thoughts about them with a wry benediction:

> So may they flourish, in their due degrees,
> On our sweet earth and in their unplaced sky.

We must pause here to note the lack of malice in Thomson's vision of hopelessness. He never at any time proselytises or wishes to drag into his shadows those who have escaped. The City is for him, and those like him, who have found their own way there. The little gain he gets from describing it, his "sense of power and passion". comes from the helplessness and impotent despair of ever conveying to those who do not already know it the horror of being an inhabitant of the City. It is interesting that he speaks of 'our' sweet earth, and by implicitly sharing in its sweetness, he makes its loss more poignant to those who become prisoners in the City. But if it is 'our' sweet earth, and we share it with them, it is 'their' unplaced

unplaced sky.[25] The "unplaced sky" is, I take it, the heaven of the believer; and it is 'unplaced' because it no longer fits into the scientific understanding of the cosmos; there is in fact no place for it there. Since we have come to understand something of the infinite spaces of the universe, it does not seem possible even to speak of 'heaven above'.

The next two and a half stanzas introduce the dichotomy which one senses throughout the poem; the feeling which Thomson never resolves, that the citizen of the City is both solitary, and also one of many who share the distress of this experience. After dismissing those who could not understand him, even if they would, he enquires who will listen to his "weak words". As he answers his own question, he describes those whose sufferings have brought them, as his own have brought him, to this "city of tremendous night". They are "weary wanderers", "Whose faith and hope are dead, and who would die". To the end of his life Thomson was concerned with the importance of faith and hope and the inconsolable nature of its loss, and it is the theme of Section II of his poem. He returns to it in 1882 in "The Poet and His Muse" and significantly, when he came to write his last hopeful poem, he concludes with a picture of "The Sleeper" (perhaps his last and his most hopeless love) awakening:

> Refreshed as one who hath partaken
> New strength, new hope, new love, new faith.

The words and concepts of faith and hope had for Thomson the most intense emotional and, in a sense, religious significance. To be denied faith and hope, even more than to be denied love, though it was the third of his Trinity, was to be condemned to The City of Dreadful Night.

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[25] Thomson rejected "or in their Heaven on high" and substituted "unplaced sky", v. Pierpoint Morgan MS and Ridler, p.272.

So he defined those who could understand his words as those who, like himself, had lost both faith and hope. But the dichotomy comes with the next phrase: they will, he says, "feel a stir/Of fellowship in all-disastrous fight".[26] This is just less than utter desolation. If there is even a stir of fellowship, if there is any fight left, disaster must be less than complete. There is some mitigation of suffering "mute and lonely" when a brother, by no means mute, can "lift up his voice". But, he goes on to say (and it is no explanation of the inconsistency) he is not disclosing any secrets, for only those whose forebodings already expose the mysteries of the "sad Fraternity" will even be able to understand him. Thomson here, one cannot help but feel, was struggling with a state of mind which recognized its own distress, could diagnose it in others, and yet was powerless to help itself or them. He knows that although others experience the City, nobody shares it. The most anyone can hope for is to hear a voice raised

> to let me know a brother
> Travels the same wild paths . . .

Only the initiates will understand what the voice has to say, and then only as individuals. Here Thomson puts his finger on the sore spot of atheism. The atheist, in the true sense of the word, and therefore excluding the agnostic with his humanist

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[26] This echoes what Thomson says on the same theme in "Sayings of Sigvat", NR, 1866 and included in Essays and Phantasies, 1881:

> . . . my word may bring cheer and comfort and self-knowledge to others who are more or less like myself, and who may be to them a friendly voice revealing that they have a brother in the world, and may thus hearten them to put trust in themselves and keep true to themselves, nor succomb to the amiable cowardice of seeking to pretend to believe otherwise than they really do believe, for the sake of fellowship and communion. For the real brothers on this earth are seldom gathered around one family hearth, but are in general widely scattered throughout the kingdoms and nations, and yet more widely scattered throughout the centuries.

circles and secular chapels, the true atheist is always alone and conscious of the contrast of his situation with that of men bound together by faith, or by the hope of faith, united in understanding, or even the pretence of understanding.

iii.- Section I - In the City

The apologia over, we enter the City of Dreadful Night and so begin a carefully planned sequence of experiences that involve us alternately in the Waste Land and the Quest. We are faced immediately with the main inconsistency in the visualization. After the stifling introductory description of a city which, if not of death, is certainly of night and which is both airless and sunless, we are suddenly told that it disappears in the light of the day. This is an interesting aspect of Thomson's City: it was not always there. Even in the fifth section, after we have become familiar with it as a place almost of refuge, we learn that escape, for a time, is sometimes possible; and as we begin by learning that it can be insubstantial: "For it dissolveth in the daylight fair./ Dissolveth like a dream of night away", we are reminded of Prospero's speech in the fourth act of The Tempest:

> The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palanes,
> The solemn temples, the great globe iself,
> Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
> And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
> Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
> As dreams are made on . . .

At first, and for a time only, escape is possible from the City of Dreadful Night. But as time passes, as it becomes the accustomed habitation for Thomson and his fellows, as its influence predominates, the City itself becomes more substantial

more realistic. We hear no more of happy periods spent outside it and finally, as we shall see, escape is possible only by suicide, or by the "iron endurance" necessary to wait for death.

As Thomson describes his "deadly weariness of heart" we hear echoes of Keats:

> . . . dissolve, and quite forget
> What thou among the leaves hast never known,
> The weariness, the fevers, and the fret . . .

Indeed there is more than just an echo of the "Ode to a Nightingale" in the thought of these stanzas, for although the City dissolves away in the daylight fair, it remains present, a louring influence "in distempered gloom of thought".

The sense of loss (as in Keats's poem) is nevertheless made acute by the nostalgia for the "lucid morning's fragrant breath", for "the dewy dawning's cold grey air". Both are clear, neat evocations, marred only by the artificiality of "dewy". And as though turning his back regretfully on these realities, Thomson sinks in the third stanza into the hypnotic ambience of his City. "For life is but a dream" he says, and we are still on Prospero's island; from that 'dream' it is the 'shapes' that return, "some by night/And some by day, some night and day". Whether he is referring here to the outline of the dream itself, or using the word 'shape' in the sense of phantom and is speaking of the phantoms that night after night haunt our dreams, he is in either case describing an obsessive reiterated dream and asking: "can any/Discern that dream from real life in aught?". So, very early in the poem, we are made aware of an important element in the poet's inspiration, a special kind of dreaming. We have met it before, fuller, more fantastic, livelier but equally repetitive, in the prose of De Quincey. We have met it equally louring and menacing in the prose and poetry of Edgar Allen Poe. We have

this type of dream explicitly described for us by Crabbe. From these recollections, even without our knowledge of Thomson's life, we might well begin to sense the effects of alcoholism and of opium taking.

It may be appropriate to deal here with the question of Thomson and opium. He was primarily an alcoholic, like Poe, and like him was "kept out of the full grip of opium by the grasp which alcoholism had on them".[27] But that he took opium occasionally there can be no doubt. The self-satisfied journalist, W.E. Adams,[28] tells us that Thomson "included among his excesses the frequent use of opium". Adams had met Thomson in 1863 in circumstances which inspired his dislike and envy and he gives a description at variance with that of nearly all Thomson's friends, so he may well have exaggerated. Hypatia Bradlaugh-Bonner says that during the last eight or nine years of his life, which she describes as "decidedly the worst years", "the craving for alcohol drinking and opium eating had so grown upon him that he had lost all power of resisting it, and from an occasional vice it had become a chronic disease."[29] Hypatia does not distinguish between alcohol and opium and we cannot tell which, in her opinion, became chronic. Eight years before his death would have been 1874, by which year he had just finished The City of Dreadful Night, but the evidence seems certain that both before and during its composition Thomson took opium occasionally, just as he probably more frequently

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[27] Alethea Hayter, Opium and the Romantic Imagination, University of California Press, and London, 1968, p.300.

[28] W.E. Adams, Memoirs of a Social Atom, 1903.

[29] Hypatia Bradlaugh-Bonner, "Childish Recollections of James Thomson ("B.V."), Our Corner, VIII, August 1886.

drank to excess.[30] Salt, speaking of "the spirit of deliberate, measured and relentless despondency which inspired 'The City of Dreadful Night'", goes on to say:[31]

> It has been called an opium poem, and on the strength of this assertion some writers have spoken of Thomson as an habitual opium-eater. This, I believe, is a mistake; for, though there is some evidence that he had now and then taken opium,[1] it seems certain that he did this only by way of an occasional experiment, and that the practice never obtained a hold on him. There is, moreover, a solidity of grasp and firmness of outline about "The City of Dreadful Night" which does not seem to warrant the idea that it owed any part of its origin to the use of opium.
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> 1 Mr Bradlaugh told me this. On the other hand, Mr Foote is confident that Thomson did not take opium during the period of their friendship.

This is, to a degree, a perceptive comment; but opium taking, even opium addiction, does not necessarily rob a writer of "solidity of grasp and firmness of outline". These are indeed qualities that Crabbe, an opium addict, had in abundance. Even his splendid poem "The World of Dreams", a clear description of his drug-stimulated dream-world, has grasp and firmness of

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[30] Thomson seemed to have retained his interest in opium, for in the article "Ben Jonson" first published in Cope's Tobacco Plant, 1876-8, he admits to having read Opium and the Opium Habit by Alonzo Calkins, M.P., Philadelphia, 1871. In the Bodleian (Don.c.73, k.fol.386) are his notes from The Seven Sisters of Sleep, by M.C. Cooke, 1860. He dates them 18/11/78 and was presumably making them for an article in Cope's since the book deals with tobacco, as well as opium and other drugs. His notes display his interest in the details of the use of opium.

[31] Salt 1914, pp.78-9. The first edition of 1889 does not carry the footnote, but in the position where the figure 1 appears above, there is a phrase reading; "both before and after he left the Army,".

purpose. Alethea Hayter says;

> Opium, then cannot give the power of vivid dreaming to those who have not got it already, and to those who have, the dreams and rêveries that it brings will be mixed from the paints already on the palettes of their minds - there will be no colours entirely new, beyond the spectrum. But opium can cause the dreamer to select certain elements among the powers and experiences given to him, and to blend, deepen, heighten some and ignore or distort others. The effects of opium make these visions, even when they are experiences in waking rêverie and not in dreams of sleep, not such a fully voluntary activity as the day-dreams or ordinary imagination.[32]

It is probably true that The City was not an "opium poem" in the sense that it was written during a period of sustained stimulation by the drug, but it certainly owed "part of its origin" to the use of opium. We have here the recollection of opium-induced experiences combined with alcohol-induced depression and natural despair marshalling his imagery in a manner not unlike the 'involutes' De Quincey describes in Suspiria De Profundis.[33] Although he admired, knew and openly plagiarized De Qincey,[34] there is no evidence that he

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[32] Hayter, pp.46-7.

[33] Thomas De Quincey, "Suspiria De Profundis", Blackwoods, March-July, 1845.

[34] In the Introductory Note to "A Lady of Sorrow", the MS of which Thomson pretends to have received from "my friend Vane", he says: "The triune Lady of Sorrow must have derived from De Quincey, whose influence is obvious in other respects." (Essays and Phantasies, 1881, p.3.) It is of course possible that the phrase "in other respects" refers to the effects of opium.

experimented under the influence of De Qincey's writings. It is more likely that in common with many of his time, he first took opium as a specific, perhaps for a hangover, or even occasionally as being cheaper than alcohol.[35] Hayter thinks that his later poem "Insomnia" is a description of the symptoms of withdrawal from the drug.[36] Since this was written about the time Thomson was visiting his friends, the Barrses, at Forest Edge,[37] this hypothesis is quite likely. Certainly he made a very considerable effort to shake off his alcoholism under their persuasion,[38] so he may well have tried to cure himself of any addiction to opium. The details are certainly those of withdrawal, especially the inability to sleep for any period of time, and the endless extension of time.[39] It is strange, however, that Hayter does not mention "The Doom of a City", written twentyfive years earlier, and full of the imagery which as she points out, it typical of the opium addict. These lines from the seventh stanza of Part I, for example:

> My boat and I with dizzy swiftness sped,
> In strange salvation from the certain doom,
> Along the urgent ridges over-reeling
> And gathering up their ruins as they fled;
> And down into the depths of scooped-out gloom
> Whose crystal walls glowed black in the revealing
> Of lightning-kindled foam; and up again,
> Perched on the giddy balance of two waves
> Which fiercely countering mingle with the shock,

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[35] Hayter

[36] Hayter, pp.300-301.

[37] "Insomnia" bears the dates Feb.23-Mar.8, 1882. Thomson was with the barrses from February to the end of April.

[38] v. J.W. Barrs's account of all that he and his sister tried to do for Thomson, together with Percy Holyoake's letters to Barrs about Thomson's affliction, in the Bodleian.

[39] Hayter, p.57:
> In the first stages of withdrawal the addict cannot sleep, he cannot stay still, he cannot concentrate or think of anything but his misery. Time seems endlessly extended, an hour lasts three months, and the ticking of a clock is unendurable - but when it is stopped, the succeeding silence is still more terrible.

And rush aloft confused, and tower and rock
Foaming with wild convulsion . . .

though these lines must also remind us a little of Shelley's "Alastor".[40] Again we may look to the eighth stanza for typical opium imagery:

. . . it seemed like some celestial flower
Unfolding perfect petals to its prime,
And feeling in its secret soul of bliss
Each leaf a loveliness for many an hour,
With amaranthine queenship over time.
It grew: its purple splendours flecked and starred
With golden fire spread floating up the steep
Until they sole possessed the mighty sweep
Of crystal lucent aether . . .

or the tenth:

Cold glossy gulfs, each like an evil eye
Of serpent-malice which is dead and blank
To every sight but woe and agony.
The fascination of their wan green glance
Was fixed upon the hills, which, at the foot
Of that stern wall of mountain lifted proud
Above the firmament of level cloud . . .

While in Part II, stanza xx, we have the utter silence

But this is solitude, O dreadful Lord!
My spirit starves in this abysmal air -
Of every human word,
Of sigh and moan, of music and of prayer,
Of passionate heart-beats felt though never heard,
So utterly stript bare . . .

that Baudelaire described in "Rêve Parisien": [41]

Et sur ces mouvantes merveilles
Planait (terrible nouveauté!
Tout pour l'oeil, rien pour les oreilles!)
Un silence d'éternité.

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[40] Shelley, a vegetarian and a water drinker, was not, of course, addicted to opium. But it seems clear that he used it at various times for its pain-killing or medicinal effect (v. Hayter, p.31).

[41] Charles Baudelaire, Les Fleurs du Mal, Paris, 1857. Thomson was familiar with Baudelaire's experiments and in Cope's Tobacco Plant in October 1875, published under the title of "Charles Baudelaire on Hasheesh" a condensed translation of chapters 3, 4 and 5 of Baudelaire's Les Paradis Artificiels. The issue in the following month contained "Théophile Gautier as Hasheesh-Eater", which was translations of two articles by Gautier, "Les Club des Haschichins" and "La Pipe d'Opium".

or Crabbe in "The World of Dreams":

> I sail the sea, I walk the land;
> In all the world I am alone!
> Silent I pace the sea-worn sand,
> Silent I view the princely throne;
> I listen heartless for the tone
> Of wind and waters, but in vain;
> Creation dies without a groan!
> And I without a hope remain!

On the whole The City does not have the echoing corridors and high chambers of the opium addict (Coleridge's "caverns measureless to man") and but little of the architecture of Piranesi. But we must bear in mind that opium dreams, according to Hayter, are extensions of the dreams that the writer is likely to have in any circumstances, and we must admit that those critics who see in The City of Dreadful Night an echo of Thomson's nocturnal walking round London may to this extent be justified. He had insomnia because of opium; he took opium because of alcohol; he dreamed of the City because its imagery came naturally to him as a result of his restless wanderings in London; and he was in a state of depression because of alcohol. No one can say exactly, but it is possible, indeed likely, that such a combination of factors contributed to his despair and stimulated the poetic description of his mental anguish. Maybe the all-consuming hopelessness that stemmed from atheism is the directing force of the poem as a whole; but the remorse of alcoholism and the experience of opium eating nourished the imagery of the poem too.

To sum up, Thomson was an opium taker. It is reflected in his poetry, and its influence on his life and work was combined with that of his alcoholism. But the effect of the drug seems to be limited and, as we see from the examples of Coleridge, De Quincey and Crabbe, it did not affect the capacity to work. But another effect of opium is to restrict

the range of imagination, as we can see from its effect on De Quincey and on, for example, Wilkie Collins. In Thomson's case it may well help to account for the "seven songless years" and for the continuing sense of despair and desolation that informed his two final poems of any stature ("Insomnia" and "I Had a Love"), as they inform The City.[42] Indeed until the final debauch, until quite close to the deliberate and final abandonment to alcoholism, he retained a sense of purpose and dignity.[43] As we turn back to the third stanza of this first section, we see him assert his command over the 'involutes' of his dreams, as Crabbe did, or as did De Quincey. Of the 'shapes' in his dreams, he says:

> In their recurrence with recurrent changes
> A certain seeming order; where this ranges
> We count things real; such is memory's might.

Then suddenly the City is a place. Up to this moment it has been something between a vision and a dream, certainly somewhere from which escape should be possible, although it remains always, and subjectively, "present in distempered gloom of thought". Now we are actually within in and seeing it. It stands in a landscape that Thomson had been making real to himself over many years. We have already seen that there were premonitions of it in "The Doom of a City". There are equally striking similarities in the imagery of the "Lines on His Twenty-third Birthday", written about the same period as "The Doom". In this poem, which Dobell did not include in the collected edition in deference to the poet's wishes (though

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[42] Hayter, Chap.X and pp.269-70.

[43] "Lines, 1878" (Ridler, p.54) "Insomnia" (1882) and Thomson's letter to Barrs, 22 April 1882, two months before his death, already quoted on p.21.

he quoted extensively from it in his memoir) he turns away from the actual and charming landscape in which he finds himself (and at which he is looking on a "lucid morning") to a mental landscape which is the projection of his despair. It is at the Waste Land that he stares "forlorn/Across flat marshland, barren, gloomy, drear"; while before him "The pathless waste outstretches flat and bare". Similarly around the City we have waste marshes that "Shine and glister to the moon" and a trackless wilderness that

> rolls north and west,
> Savannahs, savage woods, enormous mountains,
> Bleak uplands, black ravines with torrent fountains . . .

It is the City of the Waste Land that forms in the imagination of a man who is losing his way among the great myths of life and death. It is only by chance that Childe Roland never found the City, and both Browning and Eliot were familiar with its surrounding landscape. The City itself is described as though he saw it complete, like a panorama in an old engraving (perhaps Dürer's projection of Venice,[44] since he knew Dürer's work), lying upon an "easy slope" below a long curved crest, with the river on two sides of it, and the wilderness beyond. Or it might be the Aztec capital where

> Great piers and causeways, many noble bridges,
> Connect the town and islet suburbs strewn. [45]

It is less like the architecture of Piranesi in which, according to Hayter, De Quincey said that he recognized "the same power of endless growth and self-reproduction that the buildings in

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[44] cf. the woodcut of Venice c. 1500 by Jacopo de Barbari assisted by Dürer; and v. Section IX, stanza i: "this Venice of the Black Sea."

[45] Prescott's The History of the Conquest of Mexico had been published in 1843.

his own opium visions possessed."[46] There always seems to me that there is an affinity with Max Ernst's moon-struck landscape "La Ville Pétrifiée", although there is no reason to think that there is any direct connection between them except a similarity of artistic imagination (Ernst was born in 1891). Just as Ernst's painting projects an irresistible image of a silent city, so here we have "soundless solitudes" and "rangèd mansions dark and still as tombs". This is "The silence which benumbs or strains the sense", and which may well be the silence in which the opium eater experiences his visions, and which distances him from humanity. Another interesting aspect of Thomson's description of the City may well remind us of Fuseli rather than Piranesi or Ernst. Although the City is not ruinous, within its "precincts vast" are found

> Great ruins of an unremembered past,
> With others of a few short years ago . . .

Here we may wonder whether we do not indeed have another of De Quincey's 'involutes'. The City of London in which Thomson wandered had great ruins, as it always does: some are historic and others "of a few short years ago" caused by man the developer. The picture of these ruins is there to be caught up in his imagery. But why should the past be "unremembered"? Perhaps because, although he is speaking of the City and it has associations in his mind with London, he is actually thinking of his own past, which lay in ruins about him, and which forces itself on his imagination although he did not wish to remember.

The element in the description of the City which makes a deep impression on the imagination is first found in these verses and then repeated at intervals through the poem. "The street lamps always burn", he says, and there is nothing which

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[46] Hayter, p.95.

contributes more than this to the impression of a City of Night. "The street lamps burn amidst the baleful glooms", and even the artificiality of 'glooms' and the theatricality of 'baleful' cannot diminish the impression of brooding darkness.[47] The gas lamps of the eighteen-seventies and eighties were still novelties in London and even less common in the provinces. Moreover gaslight had a romantic aura of its own. There may be, of course, some difficulty for the younger reader, since there is a considerable difference between the mysterious and frequently romantic effect of gas-light and the harsher effect of neon and sodium lighting. Because of this change, an effort of imagination may be called for, greater than that demanded of Thomson's first readers. By comparison with the street lamps "scarce a casement . . ./ Doth glow". 'Casement' was a favourite word of Keats's, but here we have the antithesis of his "magic casements opening on the foam/Of perilous seas in faery lands".[48] Perhaps not the complete antithesis, for we must remember that he ends the line with the word 'forlorn', and for Keats, as for Thomson, "the very word is like a bell".

At this point Thomson changes from sight to hearing. From the apprehension of the City beneath the light of the street-lamps he turns to its impact on the senses, perhaps its invasion of the senses through hearing. On the one hand "The silence which benumbs or strains the sense"; on the other hand, those who move through the City "look deaf and blind"

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[47] Cf. "A Lady of Sorrow", Pt.III:

> . . . lamp beyond lamp and far clusters of lamps burn yellow above the paler cross shimmer from brilliant shops, or funereally measure the long vistas of still streets, or portentously surround the black gulphs of squares and graveyards silent . . .

[48] "Ode to a Nightingale".

("Like tragic masks of stone"). They are wrapt in their own doom; they are desolate and sleepless. Mostly they are, as was Thomson himself, mature men and there is rarely a woman. Horribly, he tells us, there is the occasional child, and many biographers and autobiographers stress the nightmares, some explicable, some not, of imaginative children. Men, women, children, they share in common an inward brooding grief which they scorn to inflict on others, or if they do, it is to seek some almost physical release, to be paid for by listening in turn to another who "must rave". Thomson emphasizes that there is little enough respite for the dwellers in the City; sweet sleep is not for them. They must bear the "dreadful strain/Of thought and consciousness". And it is a city which feels for ever half empty because "Myriads . . . are ever sleeping/Or dead, or fled from nameless pestilence".

In Thomson's description of those who dwell in the City, we have an almost classic picture of distancing of man from man, of alienation, whatever may be its cause, whether drugs, or alcohol, or the sheer inability to accept reality. One is reminded of Part III of "A Lady of Sorrow" where he says:

> And I wandered about the City, the vast Metropolis which was become as a vast Necropolis, desolate as a Pariah; burdened in all places and at all times with the vision of wrath and hatred that might dye the green earth blood-red, lust that might pollute all the seas, ignorance and guilt and despair that might shroud the noonday sun with eclipse.[49] Desolate indeed I was, although ever and anon, here and there, in wan

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[49] v. Macbeth, II,ii,61.

> haggard faces, in wrinkled brows, in thin compressed lips, in drooping frames, in tremulous gestures, in glassy hopeless eyes, I detected the tokens of brotherhood, I recognised my brethren in the great Freemasonry of Sorrow. [50]

He describes with painful clarity the intense self-absorption, the introspective hopelessness and above all, the total inability to communicate of those who find themselves in the City, in fact the loss of all desire even to try:

> . . . they speak
> To one another seldom, for their woe
> Broods maddening inwardly . . .

One is reminded of Hayter's description of Crabbe:

> Though he never lost his perception of the wants and miseries of his fellow creatures, he did become insulated from the possibility of helping them. . . . he could not give them sympathy; he could listen, but he could not respond. [51]

The stanza that comes between the descriptions of the inhabitants of the City that we have just looked at, is not easy to account for. He says that in the City there is "now and then a child" and he compares the distress of finding one "erring in that homeless wild" to that felt on seeing a little one "from birth defiled". Thomson, we learn, both from Agnes Gray[52] and from Hypatia,[53] loved children and his concern would therefore be natural. But in what sense did he conceive

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[50] Thomson, "A Lady of Sorrow".

[51] Hayter, p.188. This view of Crabbe does not entirely correspond with the picture of him painted in his son's biography. The filial piety of one author must be weighed against the desire of another to support an hypothesis.

[52] Salt, p.8.

[53] Hypatia Bonner-Bradlaugh, "Childish Recollections of James Thomson ("B.V."), 1886, op.cit.

of children inhabiting a city which, aprt from this one stanza, seems reserved for those whose despair is derived from experience? There are three possible explanations: one is the influence on Thomson of his early religious experiences; one explanation which is purely hypothetical; and the third reflects the literary influences on his poetry and especially on The City. He may well be recalling the despair that can affect an intelligent child frustrated by enforced conformity to impossible beliefs and customs, and so early in life cast into doubt and maybe disbelief. Or he may have had in mind the effect on young children of the 'vitriol gin'[54] which was the solace of the poor, or even of the easily obtained laudanum given either as a specific or a sedative to children by nurses and parents ignorant of possible addiction. The literary influence giving rise to this stanza may well, once again, be that of De Quincey and may mirror the profound effect on his imagination of that part of "Suspiria de Profundis" which De Quincey calls "The Affliction of Childhood" and which paints a picture of deprivation and desolation sufficient to make a child a citizen of Thomson's City. In spite of Hypatia's assurance that it was after 1874 that Thomson really became addicted, there is in the next stanza of this first section of The City sufficient similarity of expression to the long poem "Insomnia" to leave one reasonably convinced that, even as early as this (and the section was written in July 1870) he was familiar with some of the drug withdrawal symptoms. Here the tortures of insomnia are described so vividly, "A night seems termless hell", that we can truly believe it makes "wretches" in the City "insane". So he makes it clear that this City

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[54] "A Real Vision of Sin", Thomson, vol.ii, p.397.

which "is of Night" is "not of Sleep", and that "they leave all hope behind who enter here". Immediately we are in Dante's "Inferno", a work that Thomson knew well[55] and with a famous line of Dante's poetry. He echoes Dante's "Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch'entrate", which Cary, whose translation Thomson was familiar with,[56] renders: "All Hope abandon, ye who enter here". Then he goes on to say that one certainty ("certitude") they cannot leave, the absolute certainty that Death, "divinely tender"

> . . . waits with outstretched hand to promptly render
> That draught whose slumber nothing can bereave.

And as though he was himself aware of the ineptness of the construction of these two lines, with their split infinitive and the verb 'bereave' so clumsily used, he appends a footnote in poetic prose which Anne Ridler regards as his own composition:

> Though the Garden of thy Life be wholly waste, the sweet flowers withered, the fruit-trees barren, over its wall hang ever the rich dark clusters of the Vine of Death, within easy reach of thy hand, which may pluck of them when it will.[57]

iv.- Section II - Dead Faith, dead Love, dead Hope

Now we have had our first experiences of the Waste Land in its guise as the City of Dreadful Night, and its deolation is overpowering. We turn almost with relief to the first of the 'quest' sections, and in doing so we must recognize something

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[55] Salt 1914, pp.156 and 163.

[56] v. letter to W.M. Rossetti, Salt, p.82.

[57] Ridler, p.272, note I, 84.

of the skill of the arrangement of the poem. We shall turn from 'Quest' to 'City', from 'City' to 'Quest', each time with relief, each time for the relief to thwarted. It is this construction, variety combined with the subtlety of constantly reintroduced despair, constantly dashed hope, that makes this monolithic poem both compelling and relentlessly pessimistic. By this means, by this skilful introduction of variety in the contemplation of despair, Thomson escapes from the criticism which Arnold levelled at his own poem, "Empedocles on Etna". Arnold asked:

> What then are the situations, from the representation of which, though accurate, no poetical enjoyment can be derived?

His answer is that

> They are those in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done. In such situations there is inevitably something morbid, in the description of them something monotonous.[58]

This second section of The City has attracted less critical attention than it deserves[59] and this is odd for at least two reasons. First, it is important to an understanding of the intellectual and emotional dilemma in which Thomson found himself. Secondly, it was the first section of The City to be fair-copied, and one which must have been

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[58] This is what Northrop Frye would regard as the Ironic Mode. v. Glossary in his Anatomy of Criticism, Princeton, 1957.

[59] Blunden in his Introduction to The City (1932) so completely misunderstood this section as to suggest it may be a study of Shelley!

composed, if not first, at least during the earlier period of inspiration.

We have already pointed out that we now enter upon one of the 'quest' sequences of the poem. The poet sees and follows a "solitary animal" (in MacNeice's phrase)[60] who "shadowlike and frail" leads him upon a pathetic, and at the same time fruitless and repetitive circumambulation round three shrines. The visitation is a kind of ritual expiation for the final abandonment of Faith, Love and Hope; and the first thing we must do is to note the significance of the arrangement of these three terms, for the passage may be regarded as an allegorical representation of Thomson's own progress through life to this point.

We must realize in saying this that we are thinking of the subjective element of his existence. We must not attempt to equate the lines too closely with actual events of emotional importance, or with the dates of events. We are concerned first with his spiritual pilgrimage, so well documented by his own poetry. The pantheistic phase is described in "To Our Ladies of Death" (1861) and the final stages of this pilgrimage in the last chapter of "A Lady of Sorrow" (1864). His logical intelligence toyed with thoughts of reincarnation, and of Nirvana, but it brought him remorselessly and against the grain of his fundamentally spiritual nature to uttermost belief in Nothing. In his unbelieving, Thomson is utterly sincere; he has the integrity of unbelief. Intellectually he arrived at the absolute conviction that there is no life after death; emotionally he tried to reach the same conclusion. In this, rather than in denial of the existence of any supreme power, lay his atheism. For a man of his time it was a terrible

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[60] Louis MacNeice, Varieties of Parable, Cambridge, 1965, chap.I

conclusion, but having reached it he faced, as few have faced, the full range of its horror, greater perhaps in his time than we can easily imagine today.

The sequence begins with Thomson following what Professor Lowes[61] refers to as a "guilt haunted wanderer" to "Some old God's-acre now corruption's sty". It is not going too far to compare the 'he'

> who, shadowlike and frail,
> Unswervingly though slowly onward went
> Regardless, wrapt in thought as in a veil . . .

with the Ancient Mariner. The compulsion is there. It is the Wandering Jew Syndrome, but Thomson adds a new element that is the image of final despair, and awakens in us the recognition of a horror that might enfold us. There is a special significance in the choice of a churchyard, "Some old God's-acre" as the place appropriate for the death of Faith. It was the loss of all hope in an after-life that was for some Victorians the supreme sacrifice that the attack of established religion demanded of them. We may find in The National Reformer itself[62] the agonies this caused a convinced rationalist, Edward H. Guillaume, who says: "The distruction of belief in a future life would render this one insupportable to me" and "On the passion of Love alone, I believe, is the great doctrine of a future life, destined ultimately to be settled and secured." The comment of the editor (then J. Watts) was: "We entirely dissent." Tennyson said: "If I ceased to believe in any chance of another life . . . I'd go immediately and jump off Richmond Bridge."[62] There had to be something. But for Thomson there

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[61] John Livingstone Lowes, The Road to Xanadu, 1927, p.278.

[62] NR, 16 July 1864.

[63] v. footnote in Fairchild's Religious Trends, op.cit., p.114.

was nothing. It is this which makes the sequence so important as a representation of the wilderness of despair which he had reached at this point. He had begun life with every possible discouragement to belief in the Christian religion. His mother had been an Irvingite. Thomson said[64] that some of Irving's books of prophecy were in the house when he was a boy and that he used to read them for the imagery. This seems unlikely, for most of Irving's written work is diffuse and wordy, and is probably an attempt to recreate and preserve the powerful effect of his extempore semons. The imagery is lost in a maze of words, not clear and terrifying as in Revelations. Possibly Thomson mistook some other book for Irving's work. His second experience of religion was, when still a small boy, to accompany his father to local conventicles in which glossalalia was practised by ignorant and emotionally disturbed artisans.[65] At the Caledonian schools religion was conventional, as it surely was in the army. Then he met Bradlaugh who, in spite of other virtues was an intellectually arrogant and certainly an overbearing man. Like Thomson he lacked the deeper and broader resources that frequently comes from a more cultivated background, and so for the most part did those who foregathered in his house. So Thomson found himself in a milieu in which he was battered into disbelief. Brought up from his earliest years in a puritanical atmosphere of hell and salvation, the final sacrifice of his belief brought with it, as Dobell saw,[66] an unending sense of

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[64] Thomson's letter to his sister-in-law, Salt, p.4.

[65] Idem.

[66] Memoir, p.xlv.

of sin. Since 'sin' is only valid if the existence of an authoritarian God is recognized, and since Thomson's final outlook admits that Necessity is supreme, even Thomson's atheism is not absolute. Thomson became an unbeliever in a personal God offering hope in the life to come, but never quite sacrificed emotionally the background thought that there was something greater than humanity.

In Section II he is led to recognize that Faith has died at the graveside, at the very point where the believer, the true believer cannot but rejoice at being on the threshold of the life to come. Without this belief the graveyard is but "corruption's sty"[67] and Faith is therefore "poisoned by this charnel air". This was the point that Thomson had reached in 1870. It was the point to which all his thinking on religion was perpetually drawn.

This is only one aspect of the despair which Thomson seeks to convey in this simply drawn picture of the unknown wanderer whom he follows round the streets of the City. Next we are allowed a glimpse, and it is an almost sentimentalized glimpse through "a low wall's open door" of a villa which "gleamed" like a beacon "beyond the foliage dense". And in this stanza we have one of the must puzzling statements in the whole poem, yet one which has been almost entirely ignored by the critics. "Here" he tells us,"Love died stabbed by its own worshipped pair". We must ask what is meant by the phrase "worshipped pair", and how had they "stabbed" Love?

If the wording has been considered at all, it seems to have been assumed that we have here one more reference to the Matilda affair. This business of the pure young girl whom he

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[67] In "Philosophy" (1866) he wrote: "The corpse is hid, that Death may work its vile/Corruption in black secrecy . . ."

loved and/who died, has been used by critics and by Thomson himself as a convenient explanation of much of his distress, perhaps of some of his obscurities. It has in all probability been over-emphasized, though as we shall see later, this aspect of the Thomson legend has its place in his poetry. Here it seems singularly inappropriate.[68] In what sense were the two people "worshipped", and by whom? How did they jointly come to murder love? What kind of love did they kill? Perhaps it is possible that the "worshipped pair" (and the sonnet sequence addressed to them shows that he held them in high esteem) were Joseph and Alice Barnes, from whom he probably learned of Matilda's death, and who with the sad message "stabbed Love". On the other hand it is probably too wild a theory to imagine that Matilda died in childbirth and that mother and child, possibly Thomson's child, were the "worshipped pair". Certainly the possibility would do something towards explaining both the devotion to Matilda's memory and the somewhat guilty attitude to her which found expression in a compulsion to remain true to her memory. Or, and it is a common sense rather than an imaginative suggestion, were the "worshipped pair" Matilda, who inconsiderately died and Helen Gray, who preferred another? Thomson was buried, as he was said to have wished, with a lock

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[68] Schaefer, p.73, suggests that this may be an allusion to the unsatisfactory outcome of his affection for Helen Gray (see Salt, pp.8, 40-1). It is difficult to find any evidence in the relationship that would fit the words of the poem. Schaefer goes on to suggest that it "may refer to one of the unknown romances of Thomson's middle years" of which the relationship suggested here with Mrs Bradlaugh may well have been one. Schaefer is however convinced (see note 39, p.161) that it "quite definitely . . . does not refer to Matilda Weller, as nothing in the myth would suggest that the relationship with Thomson, whatever it might have been, concluded through being 'stabbed by its own worshipped pair.'"

of hair from the one, and a purse made for him by the other.[69] But it may be that the true interpretation can be found by giving a wider, though permissible, meaning to the word 'love' and consider it here as the kind of love that a man has for his fellows, for his parents perhaps, or for his close friends or those with whom he has a life of intimate understanding. The proximity of the three words, Faith, Love and Hope, inevitably recalls the first book of Corinthians, xiii, 11, where 'love' is 'caritas', the deep charity of neighbourly love and understanding Thomson found two or three times in his lifetime. He found it first in the few months of happiness with the Barnes family in his first army days and at the end of his life with the Barrses in Leicestershire. More importantly, it was extended to him by Bradlaugh and his wife in the period between his dismissal from the army and his dismissal(for that is really not too strong a word) from their household. In 1866 Thomson was asked to find lodgings elsewhere. There is little doubt that the primary cause was the trouble of dealing with his bouts of alcoholism.[70] It may not have been the sole cause. We know from Hypatia that at this time Bradlaugh was gravely troubled about his wife, who was already on the way to becoming an alcoholic herself, and was being encouraged by "thoughtless, good-natured evil-doers and intentional malice".[71] Perhaps Thomson, a fellow-drinker, was one of the "good-natured evil-doers".

I believe that Thomson was genuinely happy in the Bradlaugh

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[69] Salt 1914, p.142; and Bodleian MS.Don.d.109, fol.531.

[70] David Tribe in his President Charles Bradlaugh, M.P., 1971, p.91, says that in 1866 Bradlaugh was dangerously embarrassed financially and adds: "One liability vanished when 'B.V.' moved into lodgings in Pimlico".

[71] Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner and J.M. Robertson, Charles Bradlaugh: A Record of his Life and Work, 1895, Vol.I, p.49.

household, where he was not only cared for, but where he found congenial company, where he believed his weaknesses were understood and where moreover his friend found him employment. It is easy to believe that he could from "good nature" encourage Mrs Bradlaugh to indulge the weakness that they had in common. It is not difficult to understand that he would have some affection for her, and that this might have been more obvious than Bradlaugh cared for. If this was the situation, then perhaps the 'Love' in this stanza was the love both he and Mrs Bradlaugh felt for Bradlaugh himself which they had believed to be reciprocated to each one individually and which Thomson had the integrity to see that the association between them had now killed.

Since there is no Bradlaugh/Thomson correspondence in existence, or since none that deals with this period has been found, we may never know for certain where the truth lies. It may well be (and this is yet another alternative explanation) that the "worshipped pair" are Mr Bradlaugh and his wife, whom it would be natural for Thomson to worship, since they had provided him with a home and work. If this were so, then the 'Love' that was stabbed would be the 'caritas' they had shown, the affection that he felt they had borne to him, because of which they sheltered him, and which they killed when they sent him from their house. Against this hypothesis we must account for the fact that he never quarrelled with Mrs Bradlaugh; indeed he spent the New Year of 1874 with her and the girls,[72]

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[72] Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner, Our Corner, 1 August 1886 and Salt, p.105. Salt says that according to Thomson's own diary, he spent the first fortnight of 1874 in Midhurst. In a letter dated 23 December 1873 and printed in a later edition of Our Corner, Thomson wrote apologizing for not being able to join them for Christmas.

and he remained on good terms with Bradlaugh until 1875[73] and so long as the columns of The National Reformer were open to him.

One of the factors which leads me to prefer the theory that Thomson and Mrs Bradlaugh had destroyed her husband's affection for each of them is to be found in the next stanza. Here we are dealing with the death of Hope. We are in Gissing's territory now, where poverty and meanness of spirit are associated.[74] Hope has died in some squalid house, a house which could well have inside it "The Room" of the suicide. Hope has died for Thomson with his exile into the world of common lodging houses that shelter impecunious writers. This is understandable and clear. It comes last in the "drear pilgrimage to ruined shrines" because a man may tolerate many things and yet retain hope, even in the face of death itself, if he is sustained by faith and love. Without them, as Gissing well knew, the strongest spirit quails in the face of poverty and squalor. But what is especially odd about the stanza is the Freudian image in the approach to this third station in the pilgrimage. It is "on stooping through a narrow arch" that he stands before the "squalid house", and in the realm of dreams this would be interpreted as a reference to the sexual act itself. If this act led to the hovel in which Hope died, then perhaps there may have been a more definite reason for his dismissal from the Bradlaugh household than appears from the existing correspondence.

In all that I have said hitherto, I have assumed what I

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[73] v. letters from Thomson printed in Our Corner.

[74] The Letters of George Gissing to Edouard Bertz, 1887-1903, ed. Arthur C. Young, 1961, p.122.

believe to be true, that Thomson himself occupies a double role in this, as in other sections of the poem, where he is both the observer and the observed. This enables him to recreate the position of an intelligent man who is in a state of emotional distress which he is yet able intellectually to analyse. So now as observer he intrudes upon his other self, his shadow-like and frail projection, but he does not demand an explanation of the cruel and all-absorbing maze in which he moves. His question is the one which recurs throughout The City, if Faith and Hope and Love are dead, what possible purpose can there be in Life itself? This time the answer is entirely mechanistic, in a metaphor of considerable power:

> . . . Take a watch, erase
> The signs and figures of the circling hours,
> Detach the hands, remove the dial-face;
> The works proceed until run down; although
> Bereft of purpose, void of use, still go. [75]

The use of an instrument that measures time as a metaphor for a life which continues without rational explanation is particularly telling, since Time itself can have no value in a world without hope. After this pronouncement, for it is not an explanation, the intent walker is seen to be covering the same ground, repeating the same rituals in the same three places. Here we have some of the elements of nightmare, that awful trap that closes over the sleeper and which forces him to repeat over and over again the same sequence of events in his dream. Crabbe, another opium addict, knew this experience, and knew it moreover

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[75] Thomson had already expressed this outlook in more human terms in "Sayings of Sigvat" (1865 and Essays and Phantasies)

> One works, one cannot but work, as his being ordains, exercising the faculties and attempting to gratify the desires thereof, whether he thinks that such exercise will produce what other people call good or ill, that such gratification implies what other people call happiness or misery. If one is a musket, he will shoot, and is right to shoot; if one is a dirk, he will stab, and is right to stab. (p.215, Essays and Phantasies)

within his own "wicked city":

> Where am I now? and what to meet?
> Where I have been entrapt before:
> The wicked city's vilest street, -
> I know what I must now explore.
> The dark-brow'd throng more near and more,
> With murderous looks are on me thrust,
> And Lo! they ope the accursed door,
> And I must go - I know I must! [76]

But Thomson breaks away from the wanderer because "the knot of doubt/Was severed sharply with a cruel knife". What exactly does he mean by this? The "knot of doubt", in the religious sense, had already been severed when Faith died; unless the doubt was some faint and residual hope that belief could be recovered, a belief that must disappear in the face of this "perpetual recurrence in the scope/Of but three terms, dead Faith, dead Love, dead Hope"? Thomson's footnote:

$$\text{Life divided by that persistent three} = \frac{\text{LXX}}{333} = \cdot 210\ldots$$

adds nothing to the image, though it may reflect in its futility the kind of pseudo-prophetic device of men like Irving, and to that extent may be interesting as showing how a man's mind clings to its earliest concepts.[77] I take it that the LXX represents man's three score years and ten, that 333 represents Faith, Love and Hope, arranged in the three different possible sequences, and that Thomson is suggesting in a quasi-mystical way, with some faint recollection of numerology, that the division inevitably gives a recurring decimal whose digits add up to 3, and which can be taken to represent the coming together of man and woman ("necessary

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[76] George Crabbe, "The World of Dreams", stanza V.

[77] Kenneth Hugh Byron, in The Pessimism of James Thomson (B.V.) in Relation to His Times, The Hague, 1965, p.104, note 48, misquotes Thomson's footnote and infers that his arithmetic was at fault! Vachot, p.414, deduces from it Thomson's continuing interest in mathematics.

conjunction") to produce the third unit of the family. There must also be an oblique reference to the Trinity, a theological conception that owes much to the observation of the tripartite nature of man. Love in its carnal sense, Hope in its intellectual sense, and Faith in the spiritual sense, may be abstractions of these three aspects. Thomson is pointing out on a numerical basis their absolute necessity for a complete life, and the destruction of meaningful life where they are absent. The persistency of the 3 is emphasized if we divide the LXX by ·211, an exercise which gives us ·3 recurring![78] But this kind of speculation can invent its own terms of reference and go on for ever.

One thing is certain, the death of Faith, Hope and also Love, haunted Thomson throughout his poetical career. In "Our Ladies of Death" (1861) his hope and faith have been "long dead". In the brief revival of his poetic powers shortly before his death, he describes himself as

> . . . a mere form inurning
> The ashes of dead fires of thought and yearning,
> Dead faith, dead love, dead hope, in hollow breast and brow.

("The Poet and His Muse, 1882) and in the unsuccessful and, in its context, tragically misconceived poem, "The Sleeper" (also 1882) he begs that the girl he is watching with such misplaced hopes, while she sleeps, will wake "Refreshed as one who hath partaken/New strength, new hope, new love, new faith." Faith, hope and love were for Thomson the summum bonum, the definition of the Good Life. This section of The City, this picture of the condemned wanderer on the endless useless quest, strikes the keynote of despair accepted, because these three

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[78] See also R.A. Forsyth in "Evolutionism and the Pessimism of James Thomson (B.V.)", Essays in Criticism, Vol.Xii, 1962.

qualities were irrevocably lost. From this point on, the sections of the poem with even numbers mourn dead Love, dead Hope, dead Faith.[79]

v.- Section III - Shadow and Spectre

In the first stanza of Section III there is a description of a city at night which we can all recognize with a not unpleasant *frisson*. What city urchin has not, especially in the era of gas lamps, learned that "Even when moonlight silvers empty squares" (and what a neat, concise description that is) "The dark holds countless lanes and close retreats". Notice Thomson's use of the word 'holds' which gives an active rôle to the dark, while he has used 'even' to introduce this comparatively romantic vision of darkness - not too daunting, for 'lanes' and 'retreats' are comfortable words - only to heighten the contrast with the forbidding night, when Shelley's "silver sphere",[80] the moon, is not there to lighten it, and which therefore wears its "sphereless mantle". Milton's "silver mantle"[81] is transmuted to a cloak of darkness. There is enough in these lines to make us remember both Shelley and Milton; and by comparison Thomson's "gloom abysmal", turning its back on the

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	Sections		
Dead Love	IV	X	XVI
Dead Hope	VI	XII	XVIII
Dead Faith	VIII	XIV	XX

[80] Shelley, "Ode to a Skylark".

[81] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Bk.IV.

poetic moonlight, is all the darker. The lanes that once were only "held" by the dark, have now become fearsome "subterranean lairs" in which dangers lurk and above which the "Sombre mansions loom immense and dismal". Thomson was fond of the word 'mansions' perhaps because he had little experience of real mansions in his city life until long after this poem was written. They represented what was unattainable to him ("In my Father's house are many mansions", St. John, xiv,2) and were therefore to some extent frightening. Nor must we forget that the word echoes Section I where the 'ranged' mansions [82] were "dark and still as tombs" and so continues the graveyard imagery of the previous section. Perhaps he recalled that to Gray, in his country churchyard, the 'mansion' was the body itself,[83] while to Timon, his "everlasting mansion" is his grave.[84]

The whole of this section of The City of Dreadful Night is directly related to the City which Thomson shared with the third apparition, 'The Shadow' in "A Lady of Sorrow". It is part précis and part development of his 'phantasy'. The stanza which has just been examined is almost completely sketched out there. This prose work, which owes a great deal, as Thomson admits, to De Quincey, is either an opium induced vision, or is in deliberate imitation of an opium dream. And although it is, in my view, overwrought and a type of prose writing to which I personally am antipathetic, it must be admitted that as one reads it, one is caught up in the rush of words and willy-nilly

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[82] This may well refer to the blocks of buildings which in London were called 'Mansions' but were, in effect, terrace houses and flats.

[83] Gray, "Elegy in a Country Churchyard".

[84] Shakespeare, Timon of Athens, V,i.

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submitted to the forces of a personal hallucination. And it must also be admitted that in this section the attempt to create the same impression in verse breaks down;

> Then she, the Shadow, interweaves herself more wonderfully about me and within me; so that seeing I may see not and hearing I may hear not, so that not seeing I may see and not hearing I may hear.[85]

and:

> . . . the night itself grows very dark, yet wherever I gaze I can discern, seeing by darkness as commonly we see by light; the houses recede and swell into black rock-walls and shapeless mounds of gloom . . .[85]

are translated into two stanzas that are far from clear, and by no means as impressive. For now we are merely told that although the night remains as dark as ever, the eye learns "A strange new vision" and

> Perceives a shade in shadow not obscurely,
> Pursues a stir of black in blackness surely,
> Sees spectres also in the gloom intense.

And this third 'Lady of Sorrow', the Shadow, has diminished indeed to become a mere spectre. While the vision of the population of the world which, as we read "A Lady of Sorrow" recalls the great procession in "The Triumph of Life", is now diminished to:

> . . . breathings as of hidden life asleep,
> And muffled throbs as of pent passions wild . . .

This passage in "A Lady of Sorrow" continues with a description of the "image colossal" (which at the end of the poem is absorbed in the vision of Melencolia). Here "The image and

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[85] Thomson, "A Lady of Sorrow", Essays and Phantasies, op.cit.

concentration of the whole blackness of night", and "the vast black shape dwarfing the cyclopean rock-wall behind it" reminds us of the figure of Shelley's Prometheus bound to his 'precipice'. But in the poem we are only "Where Death-in-Life is the eternal king". And Death-in-Life (a figure from Heine's Confessions and not to be confused with, though surely blood-brother to Coleridge's Life-in-Death[86]) though it may be more appropriate to the streets of the City on this calm dark night, is a diminished figure by the side of the Titan in the prose passage.

Had there been any doubt in my mind that Thomson actually had this part of his prose phantasy in his mind when he was writing Section III of The City, it would be dispelled by the way in which echoes of it are carried over into Section IV. For the legions that he is watching traverse

> a vast desert moorland, above which hover gross yellow meteors, upon which swell endless ranges of rock-wall and immense gloomy mounds ...[87]

and though we are now to be concerned with one lonely figure, it also travelled through a vast desert where the meteors "crossed their javelins on the black sky-span".

[86] In the "Miscellanies" copied by Dobell from a MS. book lent to him by Foote, we read:

> "In the midst of life we are in death." This sentence is usually graven on tombstones and otherwise quoted as if meaning "in the midst of life we are in death." Whence should be inferred that the real sphere of life - what Plato called the World of Ideas - pervades infinity; but that our phantasmal sphere of death - which we call matter - floats in this vital aether like a spnge in water (the simile used by St Augustine). The laws and powers of Life do indeed in some measure obtain and penetrate throughout our material world, as the water penetrates and its currents sway the immersed sponge; but still the sponge is not water, nor is our carnal existence Life - but at the least Death-in-Life. [Vachot, p.487.]

[87] Thomson, "A Lady of Sorrow", op.cit.

vi.- Section IV - On Dover beach

Section IV of The City has attracted more comment than almost any other section of the poem, and perhaps insufficient critical attention. Most commentators have been content with admiration and vague generalities. But the section is arresting. It is full of compelling imagery. It has closely wrought verse, strongly marked by repeated refrains, and is highly original in its construction. It is one of the Waste Land sequences, with something of the desolate finality of "Childe Roland", and it repays close attention. It starts with "He . . ."; and we are surely entitled to ask who is this man. Certainly before the sequence is ended Thomson's identification with the narrator is complete; and as we shall show when we consider Section XII, this type of phantasy-living was by no means unusual to him; psychologically it was probably necessary to him to compensate for the inadequacies of a life in which he was conscious of both moral and practical failure.

If we pause a moment to visualize the speaker described in the first stanza, the first identification is reasonably clear. He stood, like any open-air orator, upon "a grassy mound" within a spacious square. He was someone accustomed to taking up a position to address a crowd. He was "A stalwart shape". His gestures were "full of might". This is surely a description of Bradlaugh, who was in fact a particularly impressive platform figure. Thomson himself describes him in a letter dated 28 October 1871, addressed to Mrs Bradlaugh:

> He appeared as though he could have supped off a creature the size of me, and not have been troubled with indigestion if he had eaten it all.[88]

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[88] Salt, p.63.

There have been many word pictures of Bradlaugh in action, and they would all conform to the description, even to the final line "the glances burning with unnatural light",[85] though I believe that at this point in the stanza we have a change of thought. The "glances" I think are also recollections of the third book of "The Inferno", and the shape is now a memory of Charon as a "demoniac form,/With eyes of burning coal".[86] If we accept (and it is surely the conflict from which the whole poem arises) that Thomson's atheism, complete though it was, carried with it from the hell-fire days of his early Christianity a sense of eternal sin, and therefore eternal damnation, then this identification of Charon with Bradlaugh is not far-fetched. He saw in Bradlaugh the instrument of his spiritual damnation, an attitude that is reflected in the final bitterness between them.

The second stanza, we recognize immediately, is Thomson speaking. The "I" that came through the desert can be no other. The emphasis is on darkness: "All was black,/In heaven no single star, on earth no track". If we see in this a reflection of the "black despair" which Hayter believes to be "the cause, not the result, of his indulgence in both alcohol and opium,"[87

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[85] David Tribe in <u>President Charles Bradlaugh, M.P.</u> (1971) p.58, says:

> "But, as with most great orators, the most striking things about him were the eyes: "large, protuberant, of that grey-blue colour which is most expressive, and they had depths of brilliancy, of passion, of menace that were calculated to somehow or other make you feel as if they could freeze your blood with terror."

He is quoting T.P. O'Connor writing in <u>John O'London's Weekly,</u> 21 October 1933, and adds in a footnote:

> At least two of his opponents in debate, Dr Brindley and Brewin Grant, are recorded as imploring him not to look at them as he denounced their matter and their manners.

[86] Dante, "The Inferno", Canto III, 101-2.

[87] <u>Hayter</u>, p.301.

we are all the more easily led by the silence and claustrophobia to an identification of the next two lines with the experiences of an opium dream.

At the same time, this Waste Land is the Noia of Leopardi, to which Thomson so sympathetically responded. As Lyman Cotten says:

> The experience shared by the two poets is so central in their lives that parallels in their writings inevitably result from it. One of its characteristics is a condition of both body and mind which has been given many names: the medieval acedia, Ecclesiasters' "vanity and vexation of the spirit," taedium vitae, William James' "anhedonia," the German Weltschmerz, and Leopardi's noia. As is demonstrated by such a work as The Dark Night of the Soul by Saint John of the Cross, Christian mystic and atheist pessimist describe this condition in remarkably similar terms, usually in metaphors dealing with darkness and aridity. So overpowering is the feeling of impotence and futility that it absorbs every other sensation and reduces the sufferer to a sort of vacant and objectless despair. The vital springs seem to dry up; thought becomes barren; existence is conceived as a desert. . . . Leopardi, like other melancholics, finds desert the inevitable term to characterize the world under the aspect of noia, and Thomson, viewing life with like despair, repeats the word with almost monotonous frequency in his poetry from the early Doom of a City to the later Insomnia.[88]

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[88] Lyman A. Cotten, "Leopardi and the City of Dreadful Night", Studies in Philology, XLIII, July 1945, p.681.

This is a most interesting analysis of the comparatively rare experience of total despair, of total disbelief, and in so far as it draws attention to the similarity of metaphors with which the experience of world-weariness, of denial of all spiritual hope, necessarily employs, it is of considerable value. But when it mentions the work of Saint John of the Cross, it is on dangerous ground. It is indeed tempting to compare the experience that Thomson describes in The City with The Dark Night of the Soul because the titles of the two works seem to hint at a similarity of experience. But even a superficial study of the work of Saint John[89] shows that the comparison will not hold. For the dark night of the soul is, for the religious mystic, an experience that is only just short of the most ecstatic faith, and the certainty of reaching the final ecstacy is implicit in the experience, and is indeed its cause. It has as little to do with Thomson's darkness as of night within the city as the Crystal Mansions of Saint John's contemporary, Saint Teresa, have to do with the mansion in which the dead girl is worshipped in Thomson's poem. And in the casual mention of "The Dark Night of the Soul" Cotten is misleading the reader as to the essential difference between the despair of disbelief and the agony of striving for total identification with God.

Thomson, it has often said, was profoundly influenced by Leopardi. It may be wondered to what extent the word 'influence' is appropriate. Certainly .Thomson found in the work of Leopardi, not entirely unknown in England,[90] an outlook

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[89] E. Allison Peers, Saint John of the Cross, 1946.

[90] "Works and Life of Giacomo Leopardi", The Quarterly Review, Vol.LXXXVI, No.clxxii, March 1850. This is a long, unsigned review (of a number of Leopardi's publications) ascribed to William Ewart Gladstone.

a philosophy, entirely in sympathy with his own.
As Singh[91] so perceptively says;

> The most convincing proof, however, of Thomson's philosophical bend of mind is, of course, his translation of Leopardi's Operette Morali, to which he was attracted chiefly because he found in Leopardi's philosophy as expounded in these essays a concrete picture of his own ideas about life and the Universe. . . And even if Thomson did not actually borrow his ideas from Leopardi, he certainly derived from his philosophical works a corroboration of his own views, "a confirmation of the old despair".

It was not so much that Thomson was influenced by Leopardi: he found in him a fellow spirit. He was encouraged by what he found in Leopardi's work, rather than influenced by it, but it seems likely that he would still have been a poet of pessimism even if his remarkable capacity for modern languages had not opened up to him the pages of the Italian poet.

In this section the relationship is closer than usual and in the final refrain of each stanza we have, as Walker notes,[92] a rendering of Leopardi: "Where is no hope is no place for inquietude"[93] becomes

> But I strode on austere;
> No hope could have no fear.

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[91] G. Singh, M.A., Ph.D., "Leopardi in England - the reception of his writings and their influence on nineteenth-century Englihs poetry", thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Birkbeck College, University of London, 1963-4.

[92] Imogene Walker, James Thomson (B.V.): a Critical Study, O.U.P., 1950, p.38, n.100.

[93] This is Thomson's translation in his Memoir of Leopardi. It comes from a letter from Leopardi to Giordani written in December 1819. It may be found on p.17 of Dobell's collected edition of this Memoir and Thomson's translations.

It is the dichotomy in this particular episode, between the apparent courage of unbelief on the one hand and the innate religiosity of the imagery on the other, that makes it of such absorbing interest. We step immediately into the world of Revelations. There is every indication that Thomson was especially familiar with Revelations, since upon this book Irving based the language and imagery of his so-called prophecies. Perhaps indeed Revelations was the book in his mother's house that Thomson "read for the imagery" and not Irving's work? In chapter IX, vv.6-9 of Revelations, the locusts that came during the days in which "men shall seek death, and shall in no wise find it; and they shall desire to die, and death fleeth from them" were such that the "sound of their wings was as the sound of chariots, of many horses rushing to war" - Thomson's "clanking wings", in fact. (He may also have had in mind Coleridge's "owlet Atheism,/Sailing on obscene wings".) The traveller through the desert is surrounded by "eyes of fire". We find these in Revelations, I, v.14: "his eyes were as a flame of fire"; later, in II, v.18, we have a description of the Son of God "who hath his eyes like a flame of fire". And it may not be without significance to our consideration of Thomson's relationship with Mrs Bradlaugh that the reference in Revelations is to adultery, and that the eyes therefore glared on Thomson "with a starved desire". The "hoarse and heavy and carnivorous breath" which the poet now finds hot upon him from the "deep jaws of death" may owe their inspiration either to Revelations, IX, v.17, or to the fourth canto in "The Inferno" that deals with lustful sinners. The "sharp claws, swift talons, fleshless fingers cold" may either derive from the eagles of Revelations, VIII, v.13, or perhaps are more directly related to Dürer's woodcuts of the Apocalypse, which as

Adey suggests[94] may have had an influence on this section of The City. It is reasonable to assume that Thomson was familiar with them, since we know to what extent he was fascinated by the woodcut of the Melencolia. The identification is made a little more probable by the next line which describes how the claws, talons and fingers "plucked at me from the bushes". Though it is possible to take logic too far in considering the imagery of a poem, one is entitled to wonder how the bushes came to be in the desert. Perhaps they came from the rural landscape that decorate the foot of Dürer's woodcuts, particularly if we are accepting Hayter's theory that imagery from an opium dream subsequently recreated in poetry, must have been present in the mind of the poet before the opium transformed it into its strange and subsequently poetic form; here we may have the 'inspiration, opium, recreation' sequence in action. Indeed in the next stanza we have a similar mixture of bibilical and opium-induced imagery: the "hillocks burning with a brazen glare" is both in Revelations[95] and in Exodus.[96] There is a multitude of such recollections in the mind of anyone who has been subjected to regular Bible readings during his childhood. In the evangelical circles in which Thomson's early

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[94] Lionel Adey, "James Thomson: Religious Rationalist", M.A. Thesis, University of Birmingham, 1953, p.118.

[95] Revelations, VIII, v.8: "A great mountain burning with fire."

[96] Exodus, III, v.2 (a text with which he must surely have been familiar and which would have a word-association with the previous stanza): "And the Angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed." It will be remembered that Mount Sinai, while the Children of Israel were themselves in the desert (Exodus, XIX, v.18) "was altogether on a smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly."

religious instruction took place, the books of the Old Testament and the Revelation of Saint John the Divine were the happy hunting-grounds of the visionary, and pseudo-visionary hell-fire preachers, and remained so until well into the twentieth century, as I personally can remember.

There is no cause for surprise that in a poem of unbelief there should be so much reference to a sacred book. Without knowledge of a religion, or of religions, the only possible attitudes are of indifference or of superstition. Unbelief must always have a centre of religious reference, and it is usually as subject to doubt as religion itself. The agony that arises from doubt can be compared only to the agonies of martyrdom. It is perhaps sufficient for our purpose to recall one more favourite 'burning mountain' image from the Bible,[97] but it seems especially apt if we cast our eye ahead to the next stanza of this fourth section of The City. Suddenly "Those . . . dusky flames" which "writhed and hissed" become serpents, that also writhe and hiss. They are heaped "pell mell" and so remind us of the "slimy things that crawl with legs/Upon the slimy sea"[98] and which in their turn become the "death-fires" which "in reel and rout" "danced at night". The poetic imaginations of Coleridge and Thomson, both opium takers,[99] turn fires to serpents, and serpents to fire. So we have "a Sabbath of the Serpents", and we are reminded that the Serpent as the Devil is peculiar to Hebrew and Christian mythology, and that it is in western folklores that we find horror of the profanation of the Sabbath by witches and others

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[97] Deuteronomy, IV, v.11: "And ye came near and stood under the mountain; and the mountain burned with fires unto the midst of heaven, with darkness, clouds, and thick darkness."

[98] Coleridge,"The Ancient Mariner".

[99] v. Elizabeth Schneider, Coleridge, Opium and Kubla Khan, University of Chigago Press, 1953.

of the devil's brood.

The journey through the desert has now taken Thomson through three well-defined stages that correspond to the stages of emotional despair on the journey to unbelief. First the utter unfeeling vacuum, that is at one and the same time a product of opium and of intellectual fatigue. Secondly the threat of a personal hell heightened by images etched into the mind by opium dreams. Thirdly the recollection of wickedness personified which would have been the fate of a true believer who had fallen from grace. And on each occasion there is the assertion of the final couplet:

> . . . I strode on austere;
> No hope could have no fear.

Its very repetition, its use as a refrain, underlines the basic insecurity of unbelief, and the need, as in belief itself, for the constant reassurance of reiteration that finds expression in ritual and prayer.

The journey is not over, but the dangers now take on a less subjective, or less personally oriented, aspect. The meteors, although they may still owe their inspiration to Revelations,[100] are more universal, more remote, like the meteors at the back of the Dürer woodcut. The dreadful thunderbolts were called down by Lear.[101] The gulf of flame and waves of fire were encountered by Dante in his journey through the Inferno, and like Dante, Thomson was "unsubmerged".[102] Finally, through these "waves of fire" he emerges into a

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[100] Revelations, Vi, v.13: "and the stars of heaven fell unto the earth . . ."; VIII, v.10: "and there fell from heaven a great star, burning as a torch . . ."; IX, v.2: . . . and there arose a smoke out of the pit, as the smoke of a great furnace; and the sun and the air were darkened by reason of the smoke of the pit."

[101] King Lear, III,ii.

[102] Dante, "The Inferno", Book X.

recognizable landscape. We are on Dover Beach!

Arnold's poem was published some three years before Thomson began to write The City. Although there is no direct reference to "Dover Beach" in Thomson's writings, we know that he was familiar with Arnold's work from the time he wrote the poem, "Suggested by Matthew Arnold's Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse", first published in 1855, until his attack on "Literature and Dogma" in The National Reformer in 1874. Moreover "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse" were republished in 1867 in the volume that Arnold called New Poems, and it is in this volume that "Dover Beach" first appeared. It is not only likely that Thomson knew the poem, but it is possible, in view of its subject, that it made a sufficiently deep impression on him for it to be in his mind when he was writing his projection of the mental waste land to which unbelief had brought him. He merges from his desert upon "a wild sea shore" and the "enormous cliffs " that "arose on either hand" may well be the cliffs of Arnold's poem that stand "glimmering and vast". But there is a difference, and it reflects the difference in the characters and experiences of the two poets. Arnold's bay is tranquil. In Thomson's

> The deep tide thundered up a league-broad strand;
> White foambelts seethed there, wan spray swept and flew..

Here we have the pathetic fallacy. For Thomson the scene is the turmoil in his own mind. For Arnold it is a parable that stands for the ebb and flow of faith and doubt, and it is a more contemplative vision. Thomson's despair is the shriller, for he had not Arnold's resources of culture or his background of learning. By comparison Arnold's despair is more restrained, more gentlemanly, and perhaps more resigned.

Now with Thomson, we come to the end of the world, the

very threshold of the City. It is also the very threshold of the Dark Tower. For Childe Roland "the dying sunset kindled through a cleft". For Thomson, or for his pilgrim through the desert, "The sun arose and crowned a broad crag cleft", but then immediately died

> and burned out black, except a rim,
> A bleeding eyeless socket, red and dim . . .

This is an image that had haunted Thomson since in "Ronald and Helen", six or more years previously, he had written: "O sun, thou large and lidless eye of fire". We are inevitably reminded of "The Ancient Mariner":

> All in a hot and copper sky,
> The bloody Sun, at noon,
> Right up above the mast did stand,
> No bigger than the Moon.

And with the moon, which in Thomson's poem follows so quickly on the sun, we are back with "Childe Roland" and with "Nought in the distance but the evening". It is the critical moment in the section because in the light of the moon, that now "stood above the right hand cliffs at rest", we see with Thomson the most disturbing vision of the poem.

The first thing we must do is to consider this vision in the light of the Matilda, or as Schaefer calls it, the 'Girl-Angel' aspect of Thomson's life. Had Schaefer used the phrase 'Angel child', and being an American, he may well not have realized the danger, he would have exposed the element of false sentimentality that has been allowed to cover, like a mist, this aspect of Thomson's work. Certainly Thomson endowed her, as many young men have endowed their early loves,

with a purity little short of holy.[103] At the same time, he began his journey into atheism under the tutelage of another comrade, Bradlaugh. As he advanced deeper into unbelief on the spiritual plane, and into alcoholism and opium addiction on the physical plane, he inevitably sought to find some moment in his life which had it been otherwise, would have saved him. There was only one such moment open to him: the moment when his youthful dreams were shattered by the sudden and probably unexpected death of Matilda Weller. From then on all misfortunes, all lack of success, all unbelief, all mental suffering, had for him a cause and explanation. Imagery derived from his loss occurs again and again in his poetry, from the cynical, ill-disciplined "Vane's Story" to his nostalgic, despairing, but melodious and profoundly moving poem of 1878, which begins "I had a love". But in this later poem, one of his finest, the secret is half-revealed. He has, he says, struggled on alone because Art has urged him on to "perpetual strife with Death". But for Thomson the strife was unsuccessful. His failure was his own fault, but no man can admit this to himself. So he was obliged to build up his personal tragedy to

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[103] The Victorian fondness for lingering over the loss of a loved one may seem sentimental, even unhealthy, to modern thought, and in consequence there is a tendency to doubt its sincerity. But it was not hypocritical. Even a convention can be sincere. It is well described by Winwood Reade in The Martyrdom of Man, 1872, p.136:

> When a loved one has been taken, she haunts the memory of him who weeps till the image imprinted on the heart is reflected on the curtain of the eye. Her vision appears; not when he is quite asleep, as in an ordinary dream, but as he is passing into sleep. He meets her in the twilight land which divides the world of darkness from the world of day. He sees her form distinctly; he clasps it in his arms; he hears the accents of her sweet and gentle voice; he feels the pressure of her lips upon his own. He awakes, and the illusion is dispelled; yet with some it is so complete that they firmly believe it was a spirit whom they saw.

account for it; and for Thomson, all 'woe', to use one of his favourite words, began with Matilda's death.

The result has been for students of his poetry to see in every difficult line that has the image of a woman in it a reference to Matilda Weller, but this may well be taking the identification too far. Certainly in the stanza we are considering it can be only a contributory element to a most involved and far-reaching picture which, even if it echoes his desire that the Angel Child should fetch him to join her in some other life and time, had a great deal more to do with religious mysticism. For coming towards him from out of the moonlight (as in Dürer's woodcut the woman comes out of the sun) is a shape. It emerges as a woman with a red lamp in her hand. There may well be significance in the red lamp, because, bare-headed and bare-footed, she is both desolation and anguish, the ravished virgin. She is like Shelley's "love in desolation masked", which itself is like a "dying lamp", and on whose cheek "the life can burn in blood".[104] Now the refrain has changed. The austerity, the detachment, is lost. Hope is awakened again but "travails with such fear".

In the next stanza we have the clue to the whole sequence. We have a picture of the tragic impotence of the divided self, a division induced by the intellectual conclusion he has reached about faith, and about the absolute hopelessness of any belief in the life to come, in conflict with the fear of the emotional aridity that this brings in its train. The speaker, the poet, is approached by the woman who represents the woman he wants, the understanding from which he is cut off, the need he feels

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[104] Shelley, "Adonais".

(but which is denied him) to have an object of worship, at the very centre of mythology, like the Christian faith, here perhaps in its aspect of woman-worship, the special veneration of the Virgin Mary. He had already and consciously toyed with this thought when he wrote in a volume of Swedenborg's Divine Love and Wisdom:

> We cannot believe in this God-man without the correlative God-woman. The Papists fill up the gap with the Virgin Mary.[105]

Matilda, or the memory of Matilda, became an object of worship, a substitute Mother of God. Or at the very least a screen behind which he could hide this deeply felt desire for an ikon in female form and which he could neither admit to himself in the face of his intellectual misgivings, nor confess to his free-thought friends for fear of ridicule. His grief at first genuine and deep, he kept alive longer than is natural to man and cherished Matilda's memory as a sort of surrogate divinity to satisfy this need of the spirit which he could never bring himself to admit. At the same time, he must see her in the romantic aspect of woman suffering and sacrificing. Since he cannot have the satisfaction of belief, of ethereal love (and here we must admit the translation of the Matilda myth into something more universal) she can only come to him in a sacrificial state. He sees her with a large black sign on her breast, a breast that is "bowed", perhaps in the prayer whose possibility was denied him. She had a "broad black band" that "ran down her snow-white shroud". Immediately a nun-like figure comes to mind, and when we learn in the next line that the "lamp she held was her own burning heart", we think of

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[105] Vachot, p.58.

the Order of the Sacred Heart (admittedly the heart of Christ, but as an object of worship identified and developed by a woman), Or we think of the mediaeval Order of the Bleeding Heart, which was the heart of Mary pierced by sorrow, for the lamp is not only burning, but also bleeding so that the "blood drops trickled step by step apart".[106]

It is only a short step from these imaginings to the kind of religious despair that we find in Baudelaire who, in "La Destruction" (Fleurs du Mal) finds himself, as Thomson did,

> . . . loin du regard de Dieu,
> Haletant et brisé de fatigue, au milieu
> Des plaines de l'Ennui, profondes et désertes . . .

and who also could not escape the impact of Christian mythology:

> Et jette dans mes yeux pleins de confusion
> Des vêtements souillés, des blessures ouvertes,
> Et l'appareil sanglant de la Destruction!

Nor is it difficult to see in Thomson's 'shape' a similiarity to:

> D'autres, comme des soeurs, marchent lentes et graves
> A travers les rochers pleins d'apparitions . . . [107]

Thomson suffered to the end of his days that dichotomy which we have already noticed, between his emotional longing for the faith that was now denied him, and the inescapable logic of his atheistic reasoning; inescapable, since he had neither the emotional equipment (perhaps dissipated in alcohol and drugs), or the natural intellectual ability, to build for himself, or to adopt, a transcendental philosophy. So he finds "split in twain", "Two selves distinct that cannot join again". They cannot join because he recognizes his own, partially self-imposed limitations. So the vision advances "between

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[106] v. also the section on "Courtly Love and Amoret" in chapter III of this thesis.

[107] Charles Baudelaire, "Femmes Damnées", Fleurs du Mal, Paris, 1857.

such sun and moon and roaring tide". She kneels above that part of himself that he has left behind "in swoon" and no longer capable of human response. "Those lamp drops" - lamp drops of blood - "fell" he says, "upon my white brow there". What images from the Christian religion we have here! Here is the baptism of blood. Here is recollection of the "Wash me in the blood of the Lamb" type of evangelicalism of the Moodies and Sankeys that he criticized so fiercely.[108] By contrast, here is also the most pagan of tribal initiations: the myth of sacrificed virginity and the identification with the loved one through the mingling of blood. Then the image changes and the woman becomes the Magdalene[109] and "tries to cleanse" him "with her tears and hair".

In the meantime the refrain has changed again. As she came near him, his soul had become "mad with fear" and then when he had seen the lamp in her hand "The mystery was clear;/Mad rage had swallowed fear." Why should his soul become "mad with fear"? Indeed why should one who has "strode on austere", without hope or fear, claim to have a soul? Again we are at the centre of Thomson's personal dilemma. He could not emotionally conceive of a human being without a soul; in his heart there was always a spiritual side to human nature. On the other hand he could find no logical reason to support the idea that a soul existed, and the trend of the times, with the impact of the Darwinian

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[108] "The Sankey Hymns", NR, 2 May 1875; "Mr Moody's Addresses", NR, 16 May 1875. In "A Strange Book", The Liberal, 1879 and in Biographical and Critical Studies, ed. Dobell, 1896, Thomson speaks of "the popular (and idiotic) Moody and Sankey heaven."

[109] Luke, VII, 38: "And stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment."

theory of evolution on the one hand, and the scholarly attack upon the divine inspiration of the Bible on the other, had left him defenceless. So his soul, and this is his farewell to this aspect of the human personality, grew "mad with fear" because it could no longer resist for him the sacrifice of one half of himself. The final response to a universe that allowed intelligent apprehension, but nothing more, was first fear and then, when his soul was seen as no longer being immortal, rage that so little was offered in life. So mad rage had followed fear. Since the immortal soul was no longer endangered, because it did not exist, all that remained was rage against whatever powers there be that permit the existence of conscious, but soulless, man.

So the one aspect of the split personality must stand to one side, mad with rage and fear, while the other aspect, the emotional, believing aspect, slips away to some unrecognized Nirvana:

> When the tide
> Swept up to her there kneeling by my side,
> She clasped that corpse-like me, and they were borne
> Away, and this vile me was left forlorn;
> I know the whole sea cannot quench that heart,
> Or cleanse that brow, or wash those two apart . . . [110]

[11)] R.A. Foakes, The Romantic Assertion: a Study in the Language of Nineteenth Century Poetry, 1958, p.175:

> There is a ghastly parody of the Romantic vision of unity in the union of two corpse-like figures floating out on that ocean which only seems to be an extension of the desert. Their "doom is drear", and it is a union of death not life, an incomplete one at that, for it leaves the viler self, of those two selves "distinct that cannot joing again" into which the voyager is divided, to continue his terrible aimless journey to the city.

It will be recalled that in "Vane's Story" Thomson's prayer to Demogorgon was to be with his beloved "side by side and face to face/And linked as in a death-embrace". But then he demanded a resurrection in ten years' time "in another world than this".

This is an extraordinary conclusion. It is, in the very middle of a poem of unbelief, a statement of faith. Although the imagery is that of the Pieta,[111] it is not an avowal of Christian faith, or of much faith, but nevertheless, of faith. "I know" he says, "that the whole sea cannot . . . wash those two apart". It is this "knowing" and this knowing alone, that provides the answer to the question why James Thomson did not commit suicide, the question that he asked himself again and again and never truly answered. In the last recesses of his human heart he believed, and the word requires emphasis, he <u>believed</u> that somewhere, somehow, "the whole sea cannot quench that heart". And we must remember that it is not merely the heart of Matilda Weller, but the heart of the Christian universe, the heart, the bleeding, masochistic, sadistic heart of mankind itself. Nor can the sea finally "cleanse that brow". Sin must be the inevitable lot of mankind. Once stained with the blood, there is no escape. But also the sea cannot wash "those two apart". So that there is still somewhere some sort of refuge achieved perhaps by the sacrifice of blood, by a bleeding heart, by the eternal sacrifice of one for another - "We must be true to one another". What is the achievement that comes from this union in sacrifice? "They love; their doom is drear,/Yet [note the word 'yet'] they nor hope nor fear". They have reached their eternal rest which is something to achieve if they are together, even if at best it is eternal forgetfulness. But for the alcoholic, opium-drenched Thomson, lost in the despair of a divided self, this is but a dream. He is the "vile me" that is

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[111] Adey, op.cit. (p.120) identifies this with the figure of St. Mary Magdalene in Dürer's engraving of "The Great Passion".

"left forlorn", and that had been "stone bound" as his better self was carried away. For a moment he shares the fate of the inhabitants of that petrified City of whose "Doom" he had written so many years before. And this section of the poem finishes with the everlasting question of the dwellers in the City - his question, since he has lost all else: "But I, what do I here?"

vii.- Section V - Calm after the Storm

With the turmoil of the fourth section of the poem, the fifth is both linked and contrasted. To the question: "But I, what do I here?" there is an answer that would be almost banal if the quietness of the verse did not make so effective a contrast. It is meditation after emotion, surrender after struggle. But it is the surrender of opium. To reach the City, one voyages compulsively over "immense wild tracts", upon a "vast sea-flow" or down "boiling cataracts". This is the type of imagery we have already encountered in "The Doom of a City" and which has echoes of "Alastor":

> On every side
> More horribly the multitudinous streams
> Of ocean's mountainous waste to mutual war
> Rushed in dark tumult thundering, as to mock
> The calm and spangled sky. The little boat
> Still fled before the storm; still fled, like foam
> Down the steep cataract of a wintry river . . . [102]

And to underline the opium origin of his experience, we have the withdrawal symptoms described as so intensely painful as to drown all conscious recollection:

> To reach it is as dying fever-stricken;
> To leave it, slow faint birth intense pangs quicken;
> And memory swoons in both the tragic acts.

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[102] Shelley, "Alastor or the Spirit of Solitude", ll.340-6.

Both acts are tragic, and in saying this Thomson outlines once again the dilemma of the addict. It is as painful to escape as to return, perhaps more painful. It is like birth, the nearer to delivery the more frequent, the more intense, the more severe are the pangs. He may have recalled De Quincey's note:

> Lord Bacon conjectures that it may be as painful to be born as to die. That seems probable; and, during the whole period of diminishing the opium, I had the torments of a man pasing out of one mode of existence into another, and liable to the mixed or the alternate pains of birth and death. [103]

But the dilemma lies here. To escape from the City is good, but brings evil in its train, since return is inevitable. The inevitability of return does nothing to relieve its tragedy.

The second stanza begins with a bald statement: "But being there one feels a citizen". 'Citizen' is a word full of responsibility and is a strange word to use where there is, by the nature of things, irresponsibility. Even if it is not the irresponsibility of alcohol or of opium, it is the irresponsibility of despair. 'Citizen' here is a word of evasion, an attempt to paint an air of respectability over the sad business of surrendering to "Death-in-Life". [104] To make the hopelessness

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[103] De Quincey, Confessions of an English Opium Eater, (1822 O.U.P. World's Classics, 1934, pp.267-8.

[104] Thomson, "On Suicides", (1875), Poems, Essays and Fragments, 1892:

> . . . modern Christians . . . will submit to vile doctor's stuff for years and years to keep them in quasi-life or death-in-life . . .

And in the article on "Pascal and Leopardi" in Dobell's collection of his Leopardi writings, Thomson says:

> . . . for Pascal and Leopardi there was scarcely any life of true childhood, no life at all of swift youth and strong manhood; only a miserable death-in-life of disease and weakness, languor and hypochondira, infinite weariness . . .

v. also Section III of The City of Dreadful Night.

complete, even for a Citizen of the City, there is occasional release. He is woken "so sweetly" from sleeping that "all the world in changed for him completely". One is again reminded of De Quincey's description near the end of his Confessions:

> . . . and instantly I awoke; it was broad noon, and my children were standing, hand in hand, at my bedside, come to show me their coloured shoes, or new frocks, or to let me see them dressed for going out. No experience was so awful to me, and at the same time so pathetic, as this abrupt translation from the darkness of the infinite to the gaudy summer air of highest noon . . .[105]

Indeed it may well be that Thomson had this in mind, for in the succeeding stanzas he draws a picture of home life that is implicit in De Quincey's passage. And as De Quincey found these experiences "so awful" and at the same time "so pathetic", so does Thomson's escapee from the City "weep" in a way that was impossible to him "while accurst", while in fact he was and felt himself to be "a citizen", and when weeping was useless.

Thomson knew that for one who had been in the City there was to be no final escape, but the way he chooses to underline this has a macabre intensity. He sketches briefly the blessings of a happy home, but he says that even if a citizen of the City possesses them and "loves them more than death or happy life", he will return. Crabbe too knew this sense of inevitability: "And I must go - I know I must."[106] This is the fate the drug addict and dipsomaniac cannot avoid.

But perhaps the saddest comment is hidden in the third line of the last stanza, when the poor wretch's love for wife and home, children and friends, is measured in terms of his

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[105] De Quincey, Confessions of an Opium Eater, loc.cit. p.262.

[106] George Crabbe, "The World of Dreams", V, l.8.

love being greater only than his desire for death and its antithesis, 'happy life'. This is no escape. He carries always with him the desire for extinction (though even this is ambivalent, as we shall see in the next section). So there is no hope for the denizen of the City. He must go back to the "builded desolation" of Piranesi, and into the chasms and sunless abysses that De Quincey, Coleridge and Crabbe each from time to time explored.

viii.- Section VI - The Gate of Hell

Section VI of The City opens with one of Thomson's lyrical verses, spoilt perhaps by the use of the overworked adverb 'forlornly', but essentially a simple description of what one feels was a repeated experience, that of sitting at night beside the river: [107]

> I sat forlornly by the river-side,
> And watched the bridge-lamps glow like golden stars
> Above the blackness of the swelling tide,
> Down which they struck rough gold in ruddier bars;
> And heard the heave and plashing of the flow
> Against the wall a dozen feet below.

But the lyricism is not sustained into the second stanza, for we move rather clumsily into the description of how the poet overhears a discussion between two inhabitants of the City. That there are two is irrelevant, except as a device for one of them to recount his journey to the gates of hell, where, as did Dante, he saw the inscription: "All hope abandon, ye who enter here". He would, he says, have passed in "gratified to

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[107] G.W. Foote, in his article "James Thomson: the Poet", Progress, June 1884, mentions himself and Thomson sitting on the Thames Embankment at Chelsea on a summer's evening discussing Thomson's philosophy and pessimism.

to gain/That positive eternity of pain" (a memory here perhaps of Cary's translation of the Inferno: "Through me you pass into eternal pain"), and at the same time to escape from "this insufferable inane". He is using "inane" perhaps in the sense of 'empty and meaningless', rather than in the Shelleyan sense of 'awe-inspiring'. We now learn that the "voice" was prevented from passing through the gate even into the limbo reserved for those of Dante's dead who, through no fault of their own, were not admitted to the true Christian church, and so were for ever (if unjustly) lost. It is reasonable to believe that Thomson recalled this aspect of the road to hell. It could not have been a feature of religious belief with which he can have felt sympathy. But he uses the concept here to underline the horror of this world's boredom, since escape from it into an eternity of suffering can seem preferable. Moreover Thomson has invented his own mythology, or at the least embroidered on both that of the Christian religion and Greek myth. A "demon warder" stands by the gate of hell to collect the toll, and to demand that hope be cast into "Pandora's box".[108]

Here Pandora's Box, from which all evils originally came and from which even hope escaped, is used to collect the hopes of those who enter hell, but they are, he says, so few that it can never be filled. The speaker has no hope to give:

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[108] In Poems, Essays and Fragments, [op.cit., p.15 of thesis] p.264, Thomson says:

> I have never rightly understood the fable of Pandora. All the ills flew from the box and spread among mankind; Hope alone remained at the bottom of the box. This would appear to mean that Hope was not diffused among us. Yet it is always taken to mean (as is roughly the fact, and as doubtless the fable was intended) that we all have Hope tempering our multitudinous ills. Is the contradiction the fault of the fable, or due to my own misreading? Surely the hope is there where are the evils, not imprisoned while they roam? (1875.)

> You cannot count for hope, with all your wit,
> This bleak despair that drives me to the Pit:
> How could I seek to enter void of it?

Significantly, since it implicitly admits the existence of the soul, he is refused admission as a "thing" that "apes a soul". The section then regains some poetic strength in the verses that describe the spirits that enter into hell:

> When one casts off a load he springs upright,
> Squares back his shoulders, breathes with all his might,
> And briskly paces forward strong and light:
>
> But these, as if they took some burden, bowed;
> The whole frame sank; however strong and proud
> Before, they crept in quite infirm and cowed.

The speaker goes on to describe how he begged from each one a morsel of his hope with which to pay the entrance fee, but was rejected with mockery, even though each one knew that all was lost to him. There is perhaps a hint here of the theology of predestination which we find at the beginning of "The Inferno":

> Those who die subject to the wrath of God
> All here together come from every clime,
> And to o'erpass the river are not loth:
> For so heaven's justice goads them on, that fear
> Is turn'd into desire.

In fact the surprise of the whole section is the degree to which it is imbued with dogmatism. The speaker tells his companion that "in this Limbo we must ever dwell/Shut out alike from Heaven and Earth and Hell". This leads to a strange, and strangely theological conclusion. His companion suggests that somewhere in this Limbo which is, presumably, the City, they may find some minute lost hope to use between them in spite of "fiends so jealous of gross sin". This is the first and, I think, the only time that sin is mentioned in the poem. Sin is a religious concept impossible without a soul, and both are admitted into this section. The implication seems to be that since despair comes from loss of hope, and hope is lost

along with belief, then unbelief is sinful and punished by exclusion from eternity, even from eternity in the shape of hell.[109] And in the assumption that this is better than nothing, we have a dogmatic judgment.

Section VI of The City has presented particular difficulty to commentators, because it would appear at first sight to be confused. If it is intended to be a development of Thomson's own thinking, a statement of his own final position, then it would indeed be puzzling. But we must take note of the device he uses. He takes care to emphasize his position as observer (not for the first or the last time in the poem). We can surely accept that he is capable of observing the position and outlook of others in the City beside himself, in them recreating and recollecting a position that he has once assumed and then outgrown. In my view he is here examining the outlook of those who believe themselves to have become total unbelievers, total atheists, but who are still so imbued with the elements of Christian mythology combined with Christian habits of thought, that they cannot effectively shake free of them.

Our two voices are the victims of a conflict of emotion and intellect. The argument set out in their dialogue, if that is what it may be called, seems to be that only complete despair would drive a man to hell. At that point hell is more bearable than life, because it promises immortality, even though it is an immortality of suffering. This however is better than

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[109] William Cowper had already experienced this ultimate despair through loss of faith. Compare his

> Man disavows, and Deity disowns me,
> Hell might afford my miseries a shelter;
> Therefore Hell keeps her every-hungry mouths all
> Bolted against me. (from "Lines Written during a Period of Insanity", 1774.)

this "insufferable inane", combined with the certainty of complete annihilation, the absolute certainty of oblivion, which is all they have now. But, as Dante tells us, the entrance price to hell has to be paid at hell-gate. Thomson extends this logically to the thought that the being who is in complete despair has no hope. But from the unbeliever's viewpoint, from the normal emotional viewpoint, since any hope is enviable, no man with the faintest ray of hope in his heart would be prepared to go to hell. Hope by its nature offers more routes to immortality than the primrose path to the everlasting bonfire.

Section VI is not the illogical, confused and self-pitying plaint which might at first be thought, but a critical analysis of the thinking of those who from their loss of faith alone find themselves in the City, but are so imbued with Christian thinking that the loss of faith and with it, the loss of hope, still carries with it a sense of sin. An eternity in hell therefore, since hell is there by God's grace, is perhaps subconsciously, preferable to the endless boredom of a hopeless life, and the certainty of annihilation.

ix.- Section VII - Skeletons and Flesh-and-blood Ghosts

The seventh section of The City has appeared to many critics not only as among the least satisfactory of the sections, but indeed as introducing a jarring note in the steady flow of metaphor for a despairing existence. One must ask why Thomson should here, and so suddenly, introduce "phantoms" in his City[110]

[110] cf. Blake, "Jerusalem" [56] 11.8-9: "The World is all a Cradle for the erred wandering Phantom/Rock'd by Year, Month, Day and Hour . . ."

when up to this point, he had been concerned only with the sufferings of a select number of mankind; those who denied faith, and therefore hope, and without love, found themselves within an enclosing world of black despair. The imagery is sharp enough; why introduce Gothic excrescences? For here we have the contrast between "skeletons" and "flesh-and-blood ghosts" of the Gothic novel, of which Coleridge was somewhat contemptuously critical in chapter XXIII of Biographia Literaria, but which he used to such good effect in "The Ancient Mariner".

Thomson begins this section with "Some say . . ." Who are the people, and why should we pay attention to what they say? Can the explanation be that Thomson is looking backward into the history of Waste Land literature, remembering perhaps the phantasies of Spenser's "Faerie Queen", and suggesting that there are those who dare accept the existence of the City only on the level of magic, and of witchcraft, who can explain mankind's constant departures from the paths of virtue only by the intervention of unnatural forces in the ordered world of God. These are surely the phantoms that we meet frequently in romantic literature who "tell of ancient woes and black defeats/And murmur mysteries in the grave enshrined". Nor does this conflict with the following lines:

> But others think them visions of illusion
> Or even men gone far in self-confusion;
> No man there being wholly sane in mind . . .

since there has always been a kind of 'sane' reaction to these romantic fears, even when that reaction can offer only the idea of madness as an alternative explanation.

In the second stanza Thomson takes us back among the men of Section V who "haunt" the "builded desolation". But men cannot be 'phantoms', for even a madman, however much he raves and declares his own guilt, his own 'fall' (a word

which implies a sense of sin) retains some inmost secret. He still has some hope, or at least the hope of discovering some vestige of hope. This is the "inmost secret, good or bad" which can be retained even in madness. There is inherent in this thought that it is necessary to find some sort of excuse for the kind of man who, like Thomson himself, had entered the City in the depths of despair. Perhaps such a man is mad! To be mad he must be at least a man, not a "phantom". In a striking simile he says, in effect, that so long as man exists, he carries within himself the sense of shame: "The nudity of flesh will blush though tameless". Here is a very Christian ethic. Providing mankind still recognizes the bare possibility of repentance, providing the nudity of flesh can still blush, however much desire may be untamed, so long shall it preserve "some inmost secret". It is only in the grave itself that there can be no hope of religious salvation. The unsexed skeletons, the bare arrangement of bones cannot be redeemed by the trappings of religion, by "shroud or pall". Thomson passes from a theological regret full of inconsistencies to a third stanza that does nothing to resolve the confusion in his or in the reader's mind, but almost deliberately increases it. Now, he admits, that he has himself caught a glimpse in the City of phantoms that were like men, and men like phantoms. Once more here is the Gothic confusion, the world of werewolves and vampires, zombies, doppelgangers and night-walkers. And they are, moreover, sinful. Once again there is an ethical, a religious judgment. The intrusion of man into the City might seem 'unlawful', because it is, he implies, either against nature, since it brings him into the world of the unnatural, or against the Hebraic religion, since it brings him within the very scent of "Dead Sea foam", an image to which I can find no exact

parallel, but which summons up all the biblical imprecations of the Old Testament.

This may be reading a great deal into three not very impressive verses which do not give any very logical analysis of the atheist position, or express very forcefully the persistence of religious doubt, though I believe that is what they are about; and they show that still, very faintly, in the unbeliever's nostrils lingers the brimstone of hell fires. It is as though Thomson found himself from time to time obliged to consider the possibility that allowing oneself to be swallowed up into the City was as though one allowed oneself, in despite of one's beliefs or disbeliefs, to be bewitched. He felt that in some way this was wrong from both the religious and intellectual points of view, and that in consequence one felt a sense of shame. To admit that it was 'sinful' was impossible, since sin is relative only to belief, but the fear lingers on. In the almost deliberate attempt to avoid Christian imagery, there is a mirror image of the refusal to approach belief. The imagery that has to do instead brings us to The Castle of Otranto on the one hand, and the land of the trolls on the other.

x.- Section VIII - The Two Voices

Section VIII of The City has often been compared with Tennyson's "Two Voices". But there is an immediate and obvious

difference. Tennyson's poem is oil and vinegar.[111] The two are contrasted, and then mixed, and finally spiced to be applied to the salad of Victorian observances. But Thomson's two voices are gall and wormwood; they are both voices of despair. But one is the voice of emotional desperation; the other the voice of logical hopelessness. They are the two voices of the poet himself.

The introduction reminds us that we are in the same part of the City as in Section VI. The poet is still on the river bank in the same gloom, and the sequence continues the exploration of the emotions or attitudes that come from disbelief, for he now overhears two more speakers who are sitting against an "elm bole" (and the inevitable recollection of Browning's "Elm-tree bole"[112] adds an element of the incongruous to the effect). They are gazing into the stream which now in addition to being sombre, has become "profound". He distinguishes between his two speakers by giving each a distinctive verse form (and it certainly lends a clarity to the dialogue which is missing, perhaps deliberately, from Tennyson's poem). The first of Thomson's voices speaks in quatrains rhyming a b b a, and the second (as in "Two Voices") in triplets.

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[111] J.M. Robertson (the editor of Thomson's Poems, Essays and Fragments, op.cit.) had a pungent criticism of the "Two Voices" which distinguishes it clearly from this section of The City. Coupling it with "The Palace of Art" and "In Memoriam", he says:

> Any careful reader who will take the trouble to analyse these productions for their didactic significance will find that they only group loosely a number of quasi-philosophical reflections of a sufficiently familiar order, and that the poet has really no connected system of thought of his own. (J.M. Robertson, "The Art of Tennyson", Essays Towards a Critical Method, 1889, pp.233-82. This is included in The Critical Heritage: Tennyson, ed. John D. Jump, 1967, p.436.

[112] From contemporary sources (v. The Book of the Thames, by Mr and Mrs S.C. Hall, London, c.1860) there were elm trees on the riverside by Chelsea Hospital and in Cheyne Walk in Thomson's day.

Both the quatrains and the triplets in Thomson's poem are ten syllables of five iambic feet, in contrast to Tennyson's triplets of four feet.

The quatrains are used for the emotional speaker. He has four verses interrupted by somewhat discouraging and indeed cynical remarks from his companion. He begins by complaining that no one else has ever suffered a life of such sorrow as his. He describes it as "unmitigated dearth". It is an unusual but effective phrase, though "unmitigated" is not a lovely word and is not much used in poetry. Here its association with its antonym 'mitigated' in its legal sense, has some weight. Dearth in its dictionary sense is associated with famine, but here it reaches oddly enough into the realm of the 'soul'. Shakespeare's Sonnet 146 uses it in this sense: "Poor soul . . . /Why dost thou pine within and suffer dearth . . ." Thomson's first voice is sharply reminded by the second speaker that we cannot judge if our own woes are greater than those of others which we rarely see. The second voice uses the metaphor of boats upon the river, for we see only those that sail serenely by, not those that have already sunk. The complainant continues to wallow in his self-pity and self-justification. He has asked for little, he says, not wealth, fame, rank or power, and for power he uses the unusual and effective word 'sway' (Shakespeare's "sceptred sway"[113]). But (and here we return to the image that haunts Thomson from time to time, as we saw in Section V), he wished only for "homely love" and of course, for the one thing constantly denied, "nightly sleep". The comment on this is not only dampening in the extreme, it is delivered in excruciating verse:

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[113] Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice, IV,i.

"This all-too humble soul would arrogate
Unto itself some signalising hate
From the supreme indifference of Fate!"

The emotion, however, seems to be provoked to further heights by this reproof, and the first of the two voices now rails on God in terms at least as old as the Book of Job: "Wherefore then hast thou brought me forth out of the womb?"[114] Indeed it is the fact that the voice actually addresses God that is the most interesting and important aspect of this part of the poem. God is blamed for making creatures as miserable as man. He is called malignant and implacable. He is the Creator of all woe and sin, and the vilest of all vile things. This is pretty strong and hysterical stuff and reintroduces the dilemma of this kind of atheism, since such emotional denial of the goodness of God implicitly admits the possibility of there being a God, and since He is accused of failing in godliness, admits that there could be a God of grace and salvation. So Thomson brings into immediate contrast the other voice personifying the logical, scientific, pragmatic type of secularism. The argument is now that it is ridiculous to believe that any being could exist to produce men when he could refrain.[115] The universe is mechanistic. "The world rolls round for ever like a mill", a line that reminds one not only of FitzGerald's

And that inverted Bowl we call the sky
Whereunder crawling coop't we live and die,
Lift not thy hands to It for help--for It
Rolls impotently on as Thou or I . . .

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[114] Job, X,18.

[115] Thomson's mind was very much on this problem. At the time he was writing this (May 1873) he notes:

> There may or may not be beings superior to us. But I cannot think so ill of any possible supreme being as to accuse him of the guilt and folly of the voluntary creation of such a world and of such lives as ours. I cannot accuse a possible Devil of thi, much less a possible God. (Poems, Essays and Fragments, op.cit.p.262.

but of many sad sentimental and despairing songs.

It had been, of course, the development of scientific understanding in the early nineteenth century that had given impetus to doubt and although both of the reactions that Thomson portrays in this section are over-simplified, there is no doubt that as mankind realized the implications of the expanding universe, the problem of the individual relationship to it became more and more difficult. But the lack of intellectual depth in Thomson's attitude comes out clearly if we recall the verse from the "Two Voices" that deals with the same problem and in essence from the same pessimistic point of view:

> 'Foremun thy peers, thy time, and let
> Thy feet, millenniums hence, be set
> In midst of knowledge, dream'd not yet.
>
> 'Thou hast not gain'd a real height,
> Nor art thou nearer to the light,
> Because the scale is infinite.
>
> ''Twere better not to breathe or speak,
> Than cry for strength, remaining weak,
> And seem to find, but still to seek.

It would, however, be a mistake to doubt the sincerity of Thomson's position. It veered from one to other of his two voices according to the mood, the emotion of the moment. The circumstances that made him irrevocably an inhabitant of the City we have already exmmined. Here he explores two aspects of his experience, emotional and logical, which seem to him to offer at one and the same time some justification for being there, and some explanation of its inevitability.

xi.- Section IX - City Traffic

It would be very easy to seek in the imagery of this section of The City for an elaborate psychological explanation of the great Wain that rumbles through the streets at night. The mind plays naturally and acceptably with the religious implications of juggernauts on the one hand, and with recollections of De Quincey's stage-coach sequences on the other. Do we have here either religious symbolism or opium induced imagery? Certainly we have, in the first two verses, a recollection of a normal experience in a great city. If we accept the description alone and ignore for a moment the attempt to give it a deeper meaning, then it has for a townsman at least an immediate and strong appeal. Thomson is wandering at night in a "city of the stars" add in some deserted street hears a large and overburdened "wain" approaching. It is preceded by its "thunder", the sounds of the horses and the harness. It looms up, it overshadows, its attendants are "three parts asleep", it passes, and is gone. One wonders what its purpose could be, where it was going and why. This is a very understandable experience to any citizen and, translated into the modern idiom of lorries and their trailers, can occur today to anyone who wanders about a city at night. To one who remembers even the last vestiges of the age of horse-drawn vehicles, the experience has in it something more of awe and mystery than the petrol age can provide. To me this is Thomson describing in very acceptable verse a common experience not without an element of magic and mystery.

The third and last stanza compares the wagon to "a fate-appointed hearse" carrying away to Limbo "all things good that should have been our portions". But again, and perhaps uncon-

sciously, Thomson cannot consign all man's hopes to complete nothingness. He can think of them as going to a mysterious tomb or to a 'Limbo', but both tomb (not 'grave') and Limbo have to have some sort of existence, so Thomson places them in a "scornful universe". In doing this, he personalizes the universe. Because it can be "scornful" in its attitude to man, it becomes in itself an aspect of God; an unfriendly, unloving, uncompassionate God, but a being capable of divine capacity of 'scorn'.

This is one of the least satisfactory of the 'City' sections of the poem; it has an air of contrivance. While the description of the great cart is clear, vivid and realistic, the attempt to give it a meaning, to make a parable out of it by a final stanza of explanation is, to me, unconvincing.

xii.- Section X - Necropolis

It is very tempting to see the Matilda legend as the inspiration of Section X of The City and to imagine that the young man in the mansion of the shrines is Thomson mourning his lost love. It may indeed by part of the explanation; it may have offered Thomson himself a convenient logic for something psychologically more complicated and which in consequence he could feel, but not analyse. Maybe it is an expression of the dominance in Thomson of that feminine aspect which is said to reside in all men, and which occasionally predominates and causes mental problems. In all biographies of Thomson, in all the various papers that he left behind and that were written about him by his contemporaries and friends, there is no suggestion of any prolonged physical relationship with a woman. If, as has been

suggested earlier, he became more intimate with Mrs Bradlaugh than Bradlaugh himself could tolerate, there is no evidence that the intimacy continued or developed. Even his poems to Helen Gray and to Miss Barrs (two of the women with whom he thought himself in love) are of a worshipping nature, even if the worship contains latent sexuality:

> Yet still that longing almost swayeth me,--
> That we should sink down deep,
> And side by side, from life's sore burthen free,
> Sleep death's eternal sleep. [116]

This is not, in itself, an invitation likely to attract a lively young woman and the final stanza of "The Sleeper":

> Sweet sleep; no hope, no fear, no strife;
> The solemn sanctity of death,
> With all the loveliest bloom of life;
> Eternal peace in mortal breath:
> Pure sleep from which she will awaken
> Refreshed as one who hath partaken
> New strength, new hope, new love, new faith.

offers not so much the thought of physical association as the hope that through such purity Thomson may recover what he had mourned throughout The City of Dreadful Night, the loss of those three props to life itself. In other words, Thomson, so gay and charming in the presence of pretty women, so full of romantic visions of their purity and beauty, may indeed have had a surplus of femininity in him which finds expression here.[117]

But this is not the only provenance of this section alternative to the Mätilda legend. There are at least two other partial explanations; partial because it seems unlikely that it is the product of any single influence, but of a combination of influences, few of them clearly understood at

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[116] Thomson, Vol.II, p.423, "Meeting Again", 1860.

[117] David Tribe, in his President Charles Bradlaugh, M.P., op.cit., p.34, suggests that Thomson "was probably a repressed homosexual."

the time. There is first of all a fairly obvious element of necrophilia,[118] of the desire for sexual intercourse with the dead, and this would fit in well with the assumption, inherent in an overtly 'worshipping' attitude to women, that Thomson was, in fact, afraid of them, afraid of loving them, or at least afraid of the outcome of close physical relationship with them, and preferred to sublimate this in the thought of the dead, unresisting body.[119] This would merge naturally into the Roman Catholic type of ritual to which, as we have suggested in analysing Section IV, he was susceptible. For the mansion is itself a religious image: "In my Father's house are many mansions",[120] and the minute we enter into it, we are in a Roman Catholic cathedral with its many shrines and side chapels, here all dedicated to (can it be?) the Virgin Mary. Or if not to the Virgin herself, then he has borrowed the trappings of her adoration for the mysterious figure:

> A woman very young and very fair;
> Beloved by bounteous life and joy and youth,
> And loving these sweet lovers, so that care
> And age and death seemed not for her in sooth;
> Alike as stars, all beautiful and bright,
> These shapes lit up that mausoléan night.

The young man is "Intent upon that uncorrupted face"; and the uncorrupted face of a corpse is a sure sign of Christian sainthood. We note that she is surrounded with imagery usually allotted to Mary, the unsullied Mother of Jesus, even to the

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[118] cf. "A Lady of Sorrow", op.cit., p.324: "And I wandered about the City, the vast Metropolis which was become as a vast Necropolis, desolate as a Pariah; burdened in all places and at all times with the vision of wrath and hatred that might dye the green earth blood-red, lust that might pollute all the seas, ignorance and guilt and despair that might shroud the noonday sun with eclipse."

[119] cf. also "An Old Dream", (1859):". . . a sculptured lady lay/Upon a white stone tomb/Beprent with blood. . ."

[120] St. John, XIV, 2.

stars about her. Moreover she lies in the Christian posture "Deathstill, lifesweet, with folded palms" on a low bed, with burning tapers at the head and foot, but the altar, with its crucifix, is left unlighted:

> A crucifix of dim and ghostly white
> Surmounted the large altar left in night . . .

The Christianity of the imagery here breaks free of all disguise. Why a crucifix, except that in Thomson's mind it had a very special religious significance, and what significance has it, as a religious image, outside the Christian religion? There can be little doubt that Thomson could never cast off the emotional reaction to the religion in which he had been brought up and which was ingrained into his being, as it is into the consciousness of Western man. It seems possible that he was a Roman Catholic manqué. Certainly while he was in Ireland during his army service, he must have observed the Roman Church, though perhaps in one of its bleaker and more limited forms. I have searched his notebooks of the period for any indication that he could have been attracted to it in a particular sense, to see if there was any indication that he had sought instruction. But there is nothing obvious, only a description of nuns walking out together, which does little more than indicate that he noticed them and wondered at their way of life. Nevertheless, the Roman Catholic type imagery, especially that associated with the figure of Mary, occurs sufficiently often to make us realize that Thomson, like many agnostics, could see as the alternative to disbelief only that complete faith which the Roman Catholic Church expects of its members, and it seems likely that he felt the attraction of surrender.

So I would suggest that this particular section, and it is one where the verse, the expression, has a particular clarity, is an amalgam of many influences, resolving for Thomson a number

of parallel semi-religious, semi-sexual confusions in his own mind; and it is, at the same time, one more exploration of the mental state that brings men to the City. There is the obvious but not totally convincing association with the lost Girl-Angel of his youth. There is the romantic and literary approach to love of woman that echoes something of his reading of Spenser and that we find again in "Tasso to Leonora" and "Bertram to the Most Noble and Beautiful Lady Geraldine". There is an unpleasant atmosphere of necrophilia, reminiscent of De Quincey's Suspiria de Profundis. There is a very distinct re-creation of the worship of the Virgin Mary with all the paraphenalia of conventional Roman Christianity. This is resolved into a unity which retains some of the elements of an opium dream and is again reminiscent of Crabbe:

> So! all is quiet, calm, serene;
> I walk a noble mansion round -
> From room to room, from scene to scene,
> I breathless pass, in gloom profound:
> No human shape, no mortal sound -
> I feel an awe, I own a dread,
> And still proceed! - nor stop nor bound -
> And all is silent, all is dead. [121]

It is also a continuation of his exploration into the world of lost love, lost faith, lost hope, that he is developing in the even-numbered sections of his poem.

The verse of this section is as we have already noted, particularly clear, and marred only occasionally by the vocabulary which he found necessary to bring home to his reader the overpowering sense of gloom in the City.

The mansion stood alone in its own grounds, like the mansions of the great industrialists on the outskirts of the Victorian cities. But unlike the countless bulks of solid

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[121] George Crabbe, "The World of Dreams", stanza vii.

gloom that surrounded it, this mansion shed light,[122] just as religious belief was thought to shed light "amid the encircling gloom", so that even before we enter, we expect some special meaning to attach to it, even though it is deadly still and silent, as so often are the images of the opium dream. But Thomson can imagine that it contains "solemnities of silence", and with these in mind, he takes us into the mansion, which immediately assumes Piranesian proportions:

> The hall was noble, and its aspect awed,
> Hung round with heavy black from dome to floor;
> And ample stairways rose to left and right
> Whose balustrades were also draped with night.

Indeed, it is a maze. Suddenly it becomes a series of side-chapels, each with its image, picture, bust or statue surrounded, as in a church, by burning tapers. The image is that of a woman, young and fair, but (and this is as though Thomson had become aware of the nature of the deification in which he was engaged) she is nevertheless a "fair form of dust". But the proviso does not last long, nor carry much weight, for we are taken into an oratory and we are indeed now to hear an invocation or prayer conducted with all the ritual of censers, tapers, sacred shrines, altars and crucifixes, conducted moreover upon the knees in the traditional attitude of prayer.[123]

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[122] R.A. Foakes, in The Romantic Assertion, op.cit., p.175. points out that this is

> an inversion of another common Romantic image, that of light representing the achievement of love, the one mansion in all the city that is flooded with light is the house of death and separation.

[123] Salt, pp.234-5, suggests that this description

> . . . is borrowed from a passage in that story in the "Arabian Nights" which has already been mentioned as the original of the "Doom of a City:"* "About midnight I heard a voice, like that of a man, reading the Alcoran, after the same manner and in the same tone as we read it in our Mosques . . . . Looking through a window, I found it to be an oratory. I saw a little carpet laid down, and a comely young man sat upon this carpet, reading the Alcoran, which lay before him on a desk, with great devotion."

And it is a fine prayer. The verse form chosen is that of unrhymed tercets, but the handling of the vowel sounds, the assonance and alliteration, and the occasional repetitions are all evocative of the liturgy. The first verse (eighth of the section):

> The chambers of the mansion of my heart
> In every one whereof thine image dwells,
> Are black with grief eternal for thy sake . . .

with its long 'a' sounds, the slowing down by the clogging 'm's in 'chambers', 'mansions', 'image', and the long-drawn-out sound of "grief eternal", creates an immediate effect of incantation. This is carried on by the long 'o' sounds of the first line of the next stanza, the slowing effect of "Ever dwelleth" in the second line, brought to a ritualistic conclusion when the last line repeats the last line of the previous stanza. As though the formal part of the prayer ends here, the young man kneeling by the altar, the young priest at this shrine of hopeless devotion, is now allowed to continue with his private meditations. He continues "clasping the cross" in adoration. This is like the self-centred and, at the same time, self-immolating sacrifice of an enclosed order, concerned with eternal contemplation of the divine image. Moreover, it is associated with thoughts of eternity, though very confused ones, since Thomson cannot admit the possibility that eternity can exist for the individual soul. So we pass through a rather weaker stanza, "For something tells me thou wilt never wake", to the thought that death will be an end to grief, but that it would also destroy the sights of the object of worship. So there is a struggle taking place within the poet's mind, a struggle which perhaps gives particular force and poignancy to the verse. He wants to stay in contemplation of his lost love for even. Living, he has already lost her and dying he may

lose even the sight of her. In his heart he cannot believe this, and so we come to a verse of most Christian sacrifice:

> But I renounce all choice of life or death,
> For either shall be ever at thy side,
> And thus in bliss or woe be ever well.

And so Thomson glided with hushed footsteps from that place, leaving the young man murmuring "thus and thus in monotone".

The young man does not have to be Thomson himself. In fact we are told he is not. It is one more inhabitant of the City, fixed forever in his striking ritual. But we can be sure that he is, as are all the figures in the City, one aspect, or a combination of aspects of Thomson's own feelings and experiences which, dwelt on and reconsidered, seem in his view to have contributed to his entry into the City, but which never in total impact give him a convincing reason for his citizenship, but leave that as mysterious to him as ever.

xiii.- Section XI - Life's Pleasant Veil

Section XI is central to The City, since it is an analysis of the state of mind of those who find themselves in it. It is an analysis and not an explanation, still less is it a justification. It begins by referring back to Section VII, with its picture of phantoms, and Section V, with its "builded desolation", and it considers and describes those who haunt the streets of the City in which the habitations are "tombs". There is a dichotomy here. The sighs they are to breathe, and which will fill their mouths with the "dust of death" are eternal sighs. Yet man's breath is mortal. Thomson puts his finger on the very crux of the matter. The inhabitants are, he says, those who "pierce life's pleasant veil of various error". This is the

dilemma. If one remains a believer, one is safe from entry into the City. On the other hand, it is difficult not to see belief as part of "life's veil of error", of self-delusion. The implication here is that error must be overcome. In the early nineteenth century the great advance of scientific thinking was the belief that truth could and should be discovered. So if there is a pleasant mode of self-deception, based upon error, it must be broken, no matter what the consequence. The result for those who do pierce the veil is that they find themselves in a "void of darkness and old terror". Notice the word "old". Why should it be "old" terror? Perhaps because there still lingered round the desertion of faith, especially faith wrapped up in the various errors of dogma, the ancient threat of an eternity of expiation; not expiation of any sin, but expiation for not believing, or not believing in the right way. And it is a "void of darkness" because in it faith and hope both die. Faith dies through the recognition of error; hope dies because without faith there is no future life, and therefore nothing to hope for.

There is here a perceptive appreciation of those who "pierce life's veil of error" only to find themselves trapped in the "void of darkness" which is the City. First "they have much wisdom, but they are not wise". Presumably they have the wisdom that is necessary to pierce the veil; they have the capacity for vision, but they are not "wise" - and here I feel Thomson is using the word in the sense of 'worldly-wise'. He is thinking of those who, like Bunyan's Mr Worldly Wiseman, have the capacity to live within the world as they find it, and the desire to do just that. Perhaps he was thinking of Arnold, who in "Dover Beach" approaches very close indeed to Thomson's position, as we saw when we considered Section IV.

The clear and terrible vision of that poem would be in Thomson's view 'wisdom', it would "pierce the veil". It rejects, as Thomson rejected, the hypothesis that mankind is infinitely perfectible. The world is a place and will always remain one "where ignorant armies clash by night". But as Thomson was well aware, there was another side to Arnold's thinking, a 'wordly wise' side. In Literature and Dogma, Arnold, finding that within man which makes for righteousness, feels it better for the world at large that the spirit of Rugby Chapel, the forms and ceremonies of traditional religion should be preserved, while those who know the truth work quietly from within the Church towards the elimination of superstition. Arnold lived a busy, practical and public spirited life, which allied to his perception of the need to temporize, enabled him, in spite of the clear vision of the gulf that doubt opened at his feet, to compromise with his conscience, to live within the world as it exists, and escape the "void of darkness". Of "old terror" he does not seem to have been in danger, if we interpret it to mean the terror that springs from a realization that there is no life after death, for there is no evidence that Arnold found this a matter of great import to him. Those who, like Arnold, have wisdom and are also wise, avoid the City.

The second group is those who "have much goodness yet they do not well". It is essential to remind ourselves that although Thomson may have had the experiences of others in mind, or may have had in mind his observation of other people, he was still applying his comments to himself, or at least to those extensions of himself who made up the inhabitants of the City.

Gradually, as we read on into these stanzas, we find that Thomson becomes more specific. Dismissing the fools who can find Paradise (presumably because they are on the safe side of

the veil of error) and the wicked, who strangely enough, still have in Thomson's atheistic universe "their proper hell", we reach men of strength, patience and valour, men indeed like Thomson himself (who had been a soldier) who are broken by "some spell". Here surely we meet the mental situation in which the victim of a neurosis, such as alcoholism or drug addiction, gives way to the irrationality of his craving. Whatever may be the deeper cause of it, he can only offer in explanation to himself and to others, the existence of some outward and malign force equivalent to, and as irrational as witchcraft. For Thomson then goes on to describe in a stanza of considerable power, the mental situation in which he finds himself:

> They are most rational and yet insane:
> An outward madness not to be controlled;
> A perfect reason in the central brain,
> Which has no power, but sitteth wan and cold,
> And sees the madness, and foresses as plainly
> The ruin in its path, and trieth vainly
> To cheat itself refusing to behold.

This is an eloquent description of a disturbed personality. A "perfect reason in the central brain" is how it appears to the sufferer. He is always right, there is nothing wrong with his appreciation of the world around him, except that the world itself has become a City of Dreadful Night. This is a madness which the controlling "persona" can see quite clearly, and which it can realize, equally clearly, offers no hope of escape, but which it can simultaneously pretend not to see. Anyone who has treid to deal with a neurotic personality will be aware of the way in which it encloses itself in an impenetrable globe of circular thinking of which this verse is an accurate and tragic description.

In the last stanza Thomson seems to be making some unjustified observations about the status of those who find

themselves in the City. There is in fact no indication in any of his writings that he was aware that the City had more than a personal application. It seems reasonable to assume that others will have had a similar experience, but Thomson could not point to anyone who had specifically shared his disaster. So I prefer to think of this stanza as being designed to lead us into the next section, where we can examine Thomson in all his various aspects.

xiv.- Section XII - Day's Dream or Daydream

The next section opens "in the great cathedral's cloistered square", a place that plays a large part in the second half of the poem, and is the most substantial new aspect of the City introduced there. Although this section is dated 1873 in the existing manuscripts of the poem, the Cathedral existed in Thomson's picture of the City from early in his thinking, for we find it in Section XX, which carries an 1870 date in the fair copies. This to some extent counters Schaefer's contention[124] that there are two poems, since it fits so naturally into the development. It is only to be expected that there are great squares in the City and we are not surprised that it is there; it is suited to it. It is also a natural continuation of the Christian imagery. A cathedral is a Christian place of worship. It is another of the many mansions and it follows both on the mysterious house of many shrines of Section X and in the other aspect of its content, on the analysis of those who "haunt these glooms" of the preceding section. There is then a

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[124] W.D. Schaefer, "The Two Cities of Dreadful Night", PMLA, LXXVII, December 1962, pp.609-15.

clearly established sequence, although the fair copies of both sections X and XI are dated nearly three years previously.

The introduction is clumsy. He needs some excuse for considering the various kinds of man, or more truly, the various aspects of one man that come together in the City. So from curiosity, from a pretended intention to find out if there is any chance of combined action "to some common end", he follows, he says, "a long loose line" of men into the porch of the Cathedral, where a shrouded figure in a blank white hood, like one of the penitents in a Spanish religious procession,[125] examines the congregation as it enters.

It would be possible to put a hypothetical name from history or literature to each of those who enter the Cathedral, and who give a description of themselves to the porter at the gate. But, I suggest, this would throw no light at all on Thomson's intention in the section. To say, for example that it was Milton who wrote "a great work with patient plan/To justify the ways of God to man" inevitably leads to the conclusion that Thomson would expect to find Milton in the City of Dreadful Night and would, moreover, expect us to believe that in the nature of things, we should find him there. Whatever Milton's disabilities, however claustrophobic his existence, his natural strength of character, fortified by his Puritan outlook and absolute conviction of grace, make him a most unlikely candidate. No, Thomson's intention is not that we should believe that a series of men ranging from great to mean are to be found within the City, but that the potential of

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[125] As the date 3/7/73 is assigned to the whole of this section in the Pierpoint Morgan MS, and Thomson did not go to Spain until July of that year, one cannot assume any direct influence. But Spain might well have been much in his mind in anticipation, in early July.

one man either for good or evil comes to nothing in the despair which ends in dreadful night. There is colour added to this when we examine the amendments in the Pierpoint Morgan MS, where the last line of each of the quatrains reads: "I wake from day's dream to this real night". A MS note against stanza 3 amends it to "'daydreams' throughout" and in consequence, in proof form it was altered to the much more euphonious, yet more banal, more cliché ridden: "I wake from day dreams to this real night". The alteration shows clearly enough what Thomson intended. He meant to imply that every man, himself included, felt within himself a wide range of potential development as a human being and dreamt of possible achievements. These dreams could range widely, from the highest of ambitions to the most tawdry of experiences. This was not his first exercise in identification. In "A Happy Poet" (1857-9), after describing a number of noble souls, he says: "All, all are mine, are Me". He goes on to say:

> I gaze upon the actors great and mean
> With reverent love, with unaccusing thought;
> Their wails and curses are mine own no less
> Than their most tranquil strains of nobleness.

But, because entry to the City was an unavoidable fate once faith, hope and love were irrecoverably lost, what might have been is an irrelevancy. He imagines himself therefore a tribune of the people, like Karl Marx, like his friend Bradlaugh, "pleading in a senate of rich lords"; or as an opium addict as gifted as De Quincey or Coleridge; he imagines himself an entertainer (perhaps this was easy, for he had a reputation as a drawing-room charmer); or by contrast as a hermit, and here we might pause to admire the breadth of his religious understanding, since he can sincerely imagine the penitential approach to an ecstasy ineffable, "Of love and adoration and delight". He can imagine himself as a king, or as a preacher like Irving, or a

writer like Milton. He knows what it might have been to be a Garibaldi. He knew what it was to "drink fiery poison". So the line of men passes in and Thomson alone is left to give his countersign, his password, and enter the mighty 'fane'. But what his password is, he does not say, for this he cannot do without repeating all that has gone before.[126]

xv.- Section XIII - Time's Winged Chariot

When Thomson ends this section of the poem with:

> We yearn for speedy death in full fruition,
> Dateless oblivion and divine repose. . .

however unsatisfactory we find this conclusion, we are instantly reminded of Spenser's lines:

> Sleepe after toyle, port after stormie seas, [127]
> Ease after warre, death after life does greatly please.

and, speaking as an inhabitant of the City, Thomson is indeed deploying arguments not unlike those of Despayre. With more than a little justice, he complains of the ambivalent attitude

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[126] But Thomson really did have a pessimistic view of the real motivation of mankind. In "A Lady of Sorrow", op.cit., he says:

> The sages studies a new science to escape an overwhelm-sorrow, 'or haply by abstruse research to steal from his own nature all the natural man'; the soldier plunges into battle-blood-drunkenness to forget an unavailing love; the statesman weaves his mind into the subtle webs of policy that so he may stifle some fierce passion; the poet chants victories he cannot fight to win, and beautiful happiness that can never be his lot; those most lavishly endowed by nature and by fortune are exactly those who suffer most from life-weariness.

This anticipates more recent psychological theories that achievement, especially in the arts, springs from human furstrations.

[127] Edmund Spenser, The Faerie Queene, Bk.I, Canto ix, v.40.

of mankind to the passing of time.[128] On the other hand, men constantly complain that time is fleeting (it is not a new complaint!):

> But at my back I always hear
> Time's winged chariot hurrying near,
> And yonder all before us lie
> Deserts of vast eternity. [129]

They realize that the great world spins "for ever down the ringing grooves of change".[130] But man is inconsistent; he constantly complains that it is difficult to endure the burden of the hours, days, months. Thomson is setting out in detail the ambiguity that lies in Milton's thought on Time:

> Fly, envious Time, till thou run out thy race;
> Call on the lazy leaden-stepping Hours,
> Whose speed is but the heavy plummet's pace .. . [131]

But for Milton's conclusion:

> Then long Eternity shall greet our bliss
> With an individual kiss . . . [131]

Thomson has nothing but contempt. He sees in it only man's claim to make good in eternity the time that has been wasted "in weary undelight" here on earth. For Thomson time was, and became more vividly as the opium and alcohol habits increased their hold on him, a synonym for suffering. This is most clearly expressed in his poem "Insomnia", where it is Sleep

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[128] The argument of the poem he had already summarized in "A Lady of Sorrow", op.cit., p.340:

> Again and again you wish to be dead for a time, to sleep unconscious until some wished-for moment has come and gone, and you are once more disappointed, you would die again for another period; and so again and again; wishing for sleep and unconsciousness for a limited time, that is, wishing for short and imperfect death; and yet with the miraculous and incredible inconsistency of man, abhoring with wild fear the one true and perfect death.

[129] Andrew Marvell, "To His Coy Mistress".

[130] Alfred Tennyson, "Locksley Hall".

[131] John Milton, "On Time".

(not death as here in the City) that offers and gives to others, but not to him, "divine oblivion and repose". For him it offers only "utter despair" that

> . . . foresees no termination,
> But feels itself of infinite duration;
> The smallest fragment instant comprehends the whole.
>
> The absolute of torture as of bliss
> Is timeless . . .

Of time itself, Thomson has a magnificent description that strangely enough reminds one of Pope's "needless Alexandrine" "That, like a wounded snake, drags its slow length along".[132] Thomson describes

> This Time which crawleth like a monstrous snake,
> Wounded and slow and very venomous;
>
> Which creeps blindwormlike round the earth and ocean . .

Here are three impressive lines which convey with economy of image (snake, blindworm) and with a mastery of prosody that might, indeed, have been learned from Pope, the agonies of the passing of time from which he suffered. It was this suffering that inspired the invocation of the penultimate stanza:

> O length of the intolerable hours,
> O nights that are as aeons of slow pain,
> O Time, too ample for our vital powers,
> O Life, whose woeful vanities remain . . .

Here Thomson is at one with the Shelley he regarded so highly:

> O world! O life! O time!
> On whose last steps I climb,
> Trembling at that where I had stood before;
> When will return the glory of your prime?
> No more--Oh, never more!
>
> Out of the day and night
> A joy has taken flight!
> Fresh spring, and summer, and winter hoar,
> Move my faint heart with grief, but with delight
> No more--Oh, never more! [133]

It is unfortunate that its last stanza does not bring this

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[132] Alexander Pope, "Essay on Criticism", 1711, 1.250.

[133] Shelley, "A Lament", 1821.

section to the close it deserves. The first two lines of it are effective:

> We do not ask a longer term of strife,
> Weakness and weariness and nameless woes . . .

especially in the clever ;use of alliteration. But what can we say of the line: "An everlasting conscious inanition!" except to wish that it had not been written? Nor is it possible to feel that "full fruition" is an appropriate description for death; in fact it leads the mind to unpleasant speculation. "Dateless oblivion" is tautological, while the use of the word "divine" to describe the repose that comes to those who do not expect to live again in heaven exposes the difficulty of thinking in superlatives without the sanction of a divinity. How much better Swinburne brought the same thoughts to the same conclusion:

> Then star nor sun shall waken,
> Nor any change of light:
> Nor sound of waters shaken,
> Nor any sound or sight:
> Nor wintry leaves nor vernal,
> Nor days nor things diurnal;
> Only the sleep eternal
> In an eternal night. [134]

Swinburne is not truly prepared to face complete annihilation; his expectation is of an eternity of sleep. Nor does Thomson push his unbelief to its extremes. Death for him is "dateless oblivion". Why "dateless"? Does he have some faint residual hope that at some undefined moment in eternity, there will be a resurrection? If he does, then death may well be "a sleep and a forgetting", or, in his words, "divine repose".

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[134] Algernon Swinburne, "The Garden of Proserpine".

xvi.- Section XIV - Eclectic Atheism

The fourteenth section of The City is, in the form of a sermon, an extended denial of the existence of God. In spite of, maybe because of, the emphatic style of the assertion, the insecure foundation of Thomson's atheism is implicit. It is a kind of conglomeration of reasons for disbelief; an essay in atheist eclecticism. But while the attentive reader can sense the diverse forces acting upon the poet, often without his full awareness, the emotional background or tone of the verse leaves no room to doubt the sincerity of what he was trying to say in this long poem, or the mental suffering from which it sprang.

It is striking that it is once again within an ambience of religious symbolism that he stages this confession of non-faith. And though it may be thought that this is deliberately sacriligious, as though to underline the completeness of unbelief, the atmosphere is strangely reverent, and the language is religious and restrained. When we remember the excesses of blasphemy of which Thomson was capable, for example in "The Story of a Famous Old Firm",[135] we must accept that this control reflects the respect a man must have for the observances which spring from those religious concepts he has thought about deeply before rejecting them.

We are conducted into the "fane", a word of which Thomson was perhaps unduly fond, which casts our minds back to his earlier poem, "The Approach to St Paul's",[136] and reminds us of

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[135] NR, 24, 31 December 1865, and published as a pamphlet in 1876 under the slightly amended title, The Story of a Famous Old Jewish Firm. It is included by W.D. Schaefer in his The Speedy Extinction of Evil and Misery: Selected Prose of James Thomson (B.V.), Berkeley and Los Angeles, U.S.A., 1967.

[136] Ridler, p.4.

the change in his outlook since he wrote, twenty years before The City, "thus Religion towers/Above this sordid, restless life of ours." In the "fane" in the City we are aware of the bleaker aspect of disbelief, since there is no ritual and the high altar space, as in Section X, is "unillumed". This is worth a little thought. Is there an element of regret here? Is it the description that occurs to one who would prefer there to be light? Certainly there is no scorn, no attempt at profanity. It is a simple and sad symbol of the fact that he, and those like him, are shut out from what he still regards, perhaps unconsciously, as the 'light' of religion.

Never throughout the whole of this section are we allowed to forget that we are in a church. He is himself among the "rooted Congregation". They are addressed from the pulpit by a presence that might well be Savanorola as described by Geroge Eliot,[137] and whose eyes "which burned as never eyes burned yet", remind us of the speaker who declaimed in Section IV with "glances burning with unnatural light". He calls his hearers "brothers", a biblical appelation mainly from the Gospel of St. John, and much beloved as a mode of address by dissenting ministers. They are "battling in black floods" and they are helpless because, unlike Noah, they have no God-commanded ark in which to save themselves. They are described as "spectral wanderers" (a phrase that reminds us of the "phantoms" of Section VII) and they are in "Unholy Night".

The next six lines are some of the most startling in the poem:

> My soul hath bled for you these sunless years,
> With bitter blood-drops running down like tears:
> Oh, dark, dark, dark, withdrawn from joy and light![138

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[137] Romola, 1863.

[138] cf. Milton,"Samson Agonistes".

> My heart is sick with anguish for your bale;
> Your woe hath been my anguish; yea, I quail
> And perish in your perishing unblest.

Here is the .Christ image with a vengeance. The preacher has a "soul" which is capable of bleeding, just as Jesus bled for men. "The bitter blood-drops running down like tears" is a constant motif in Papist art. The anguish of the preacher's heart for their "woe and bale" is like the suffering of Christ for mankind. And the final line is the very sacrifice itself. If one is here reminded of St John: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." There is a temptation to read on and remember the verse that contrasts so strongly with Thomson's plight:

> He that believeth on him is not condemned; but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.[139]

And as Thomson wrote the word "perish", he would also be thinking of the Athanasian Creed, with which he was perfectly familiar, since he had mocked it in The National Reformer ten years previously.[140] That he had it in mind is clear from

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[139] St John, III, 16, 18-21.

[140] "The Athanasian Creed", NR, 1 January 1865; reprinted in Satires and Profanities, 1884.

his use of the word 'person' two verses later. But for Thomson atheism is synonymous with fear and suffering. The beliefs and prohibitions of his boyhood hung round the grown man. The words of the psalmist: "Let the ungodly perish" were ever in his ears. And so his reaction in this verse is more intense, more uncontrolled, more like his blasphemous prose than usual. Mocking the words of the carol (and getting them slightly wrong) he sets out his "good tidings of great joy", and these are that

> There is no God; no Fiend with names divine
> Made us and tortures us; if we must pine
> It is to satiate no Being's gall . . .

and in a fine alliterative line he says: "It was the dark delusion of a dream".

Now he is denying the existence of the "Person" who in the Athanasian Creed symbolizes all aspects of the Trinity, "one altogether not by confusion of substance but by Unity of Person" and who is therefore both "conscious and supreme". There is no God, he says, who has deliberately cursed us with life. To curse him because the life which he gave us is immortal is pointless, because it is not. This "little life is all we must endure" the preacher, the poet says, in a line that reminds us of Young's "Man wants but little, nor that little long".[141] But even at this point he cannot break free from the religious imagery. He describes death as "The grave's most holy peace". One knows at once that the word "holy" has emotional overtones of utter completeness, that seemed appropriate to him and is appropriate poetically and it is ironical that he must use this word. I do not feel the irony to be intentional.

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[141] Edward Young, The Complaint: or Night Thoughts on Life, Death and Immortality, 1742-5, "Night", iv.

The Christian imagery of the poem to this point has been the first evasion. Now comes the second- of complete nothingness:

> Nothing is of us but the mouldering flesh,
> Whose elements dissolve and merge afresh
> In earth, air, water, plants, and other men. [142]

This is pantheism, though a long way from the comforting pantheism of Shelley's "Adonais";[143] and omitting the next verse (which was a later insertion to which we will return), we next have confused thinking. The universe, he says, is indifferent to man. But he is compelled to attempt an explanation of man's natural reactions to the world in which he lives. If there really is indifference on the part of the universe, on the part of whatever powers have placed man here on earth (the "Fate" perhaps of the last line), how is it that man reacts with instinctive value judgments to different aspects of the creatures that surround him? Why should toads and vultures be obscene to sight? Why (with Blake in his mind) "if tigers burn with beauty and with might" should we react so that we are obliged to ask: "Is it by favour or by wrath of Fate?" and he spells "Fate" with a capital letter, so that we are reminded of the Fates, the Furies, the Erinnyes and the Norns of mythology, and glimpse that aspect of man's mind that, as

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[142] cf. "Sayings of Sigvat" (1865; and Essays and Phantasies When I die, Nature seizes on my effects, administers my estate, duly distributing the property. I who am dead as this Sigvat still continue my interest in the general life by every particle of my being thus distributed, and by the enduring existence of all that I have ever rayed forth - from attraction of gravity, attraction and repulsion electrical, to thought and emotion of humanity. Nothing is lost, though the walls of the Ego have given way and let in the floods of the universe. It is quite right to call death dissolution; it may be also solution, resolution, evolution.

[143] Shelley, "Adonais", vv.xlii, iliii.

Jung postulates, ever creates and re-creates similar imagery, similar explanations, similar superstitions to account for what is unaccountable in the universe around him.

The next stanza presents us with a mixture of ideas drawn from many sources:

> All substance lives and struggles evermore
> Through countless shapes continually at war,
> By countless interactions interknit . . .

and one is reminded of Fitzgerald's

> Then said another - 'Surely not in vain
> My Substance from the common Earth was ta'en,
> That He who subtly wrought me into Shape
> Should stamp me back to common Earth again.' [144]

There is interwoven with this a faint echo of the scientific law of the indestructability of matter. Superimposed is the oriental philosophy of reincarnation, which reminds us that Thomson found Buddhism attractive.[145] The fatalistic lines that follow:

> If one is born a certain day on earth,
> All times and forces tended to that birth,
> Not all the world could change or hinder it . . .

carry the implication of astrological determinism. The intention is to convey the utter impossibility of individual man being able to claim that he is under divine care. There is a strange, but inbuilt, contradiction in the argument. This fatalism, this determinism, implies a system, and the consequence that man has some part to play within it, and that he has therefore some meaning, however small and however unsatisfying to his ego that part may be. And the dichotomy is continued in the thought of the next stanza where Fate has become "Necessity".

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[144] Omar Khayyàm, ed.1, lxi.

[145] Salt, pp.309-10: "In an essay on Schopenhauer . . . he refers to Buddhism as 'the venerable, the august, the benign, so tender, so mystic, so profound, so solemnly supernal!'"

When we consider this verse, we remember that to Plato Necessity was not subject to God's power, and indeed Thomson may well have had Plato in mind, since he describes mankind (in the last line) as being "the flitting shadow of a dream". But if we remember that the sermon is essentially a sermon of despair, we need feel no surprise that the same thoughts are also to be found mouthed by Despayre himself in the Faerie Queene:[146]

> Is not his deed, what ever thing is donne,
> In heaven and earth? did not he all create
> To die againe? all ends that was begonne.
> Their times in his eternall book of fate
> Are written sure, and have their certaine date.
> Who then can strive with strong necessitie,
> That holds the world in his still chaunging state,
> When houre of death is come, let none aske whence, nor why.

There is no finality in what the preacher says any more than there is finality in what Despayre says. Necessity may be supreme and may be bleak and daunting, but it is surrounded, we are told, with "infinite Mystery". This is Mystery, with a capital 'M', and the religious implication, especially as it involved divine revelation, cannot be overlooked. This Mystery is, he says, "Abysmal, dark" for us, because we are "the flitting shadows of a dream", no longer the "substance" of the previous verse. So he leave us to wonder whether the infinite Mystery being admitted, being there, it contains the possibility of a purpose for the Universe, which it has withheld from him.[147]

Then comes the peroration, and it is a weak one. As there is no hope and nothing to expect, it seems that this weakness

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[146] Faerie Queene, opcit., Book I, Canto ix, v.42. Thomson quotes v.40 in the Litany of Death in "A Lady of Sorrow".

[147] Thomson wrote an amusing essay on "Liberty and Necessity" published in the NR in May 1866 and reprinted in Essays and Phantasies, 1881. In this he exposes the illogical nature of the Necessitarian 'belief'.

is inevitable, though we can later examine how Thomson dealt with this problem on a larger scale when he brought the whole poem to a conclusion. Now all that can be offered to those within the City is death, death the end of the natural course of this short life or, since there is no fear of waking after death and of divine vengeance for self-murder, of death by suicide. Thomson contemplated the enigma of man's clinging to life on more than one occasion. His clearest statement is in the essay "On Suicide":[148]

> But further, if a man is simply weary of life, if it brings him less pleasure than pain, if old age with all its infirmities is stealing on him, then, if none who have just claims on him will suffer by his death, he has undoubtedly the right, as he has the power, to put an end to himself. We get such a life as befalls us from Nature, to use absolutely as we will or can in our circumstances. . . . My life is as a sum of money with which I am endowed, and which I claim the right to spend as I will for my pleasure and profit, not feeling bound to refuse myself nearly all things expensive in order to make it last as long as possible. The main object should be not so to spend it as to suffer one's self to be reduced to dependence on others.

In the light of his life and of his death this has a poignancy all its own; though, since the question must occur to us, we must admit the shrewdness of the article (thought to be written by G.W. Foote)[149] "Why James Thomson did not kill himself":

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[148] Written 1875 and published in Poems, Essays & Fragments, 1892.

[149] Anonymous article in The Spectator, 23 March 1889.

> There, as we would venture to suggest, is his secret, and that of all the European fatalists who hold this world to be under immutable law, and yet a place of woe alone. Their conviction of Destiny is not perfect. They all complain, they all rebel, they all appeal - sometimes with sobs, like Leopardi: sometimes with screams, like Shelley in "Queen Mab"; sometimes with ironic laughter, like Heine; sometimes with heart-breaking sighs, like James Thomson - to the Something which they feel, but do not believe, could make even Destiny deflect from its inevitable course. An inner sense that his songs were an appeal - for if a dirge is not an appeal, a dirge is a misery uselessly inflicted on fellow-victims - kept James Thomson alive, in spite of the logic which, as he admits, said to him inexorably, - "Make an end." He would not, he said, make an end, because he felt the impulse to sing; and all his song was protest, useless and feeble unless addressed, consciously or unconsciously, to Something that could hear.

So this section closes with the cathedral imagery again dominant. The voice that now ceased was "organ like". The aisles were "vaulted". The sermon had been like a "requiem lay". And it was still a "congregation" that rested to think over the final words "end it when you will".

But Thomson wrote another verse for this section and added it when he was preparing The City for publication in the 1880 edition of his poems. Of verse 10, Schaefer says:[150]

> The theory of evolution made a tremendous impression upon Thomson, and, from at least 1865 on, his work is

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[150] Schaefer, p.159, note 20.

> filled with allusions to it. That the fascination actually grew with the years is indicated by the fact that when preparing "The City" for publication in 1880, the only important change made from the 1874 published version was the addition of stanza 10 in Section XIV . . In 1874, in fact, Thomson wrote in his essay on Mill (apparently forgetting about his Harrison review) that "the theory of Natural Selection, of Evolution . . . appeared to me the only true doctrine of the development of Nature, years before it had been formulated, vindicated, and so splendidly illustrated by our leading contemporary philosophers."

But I am not too happy that this is the correct interpretation of Thomson's poetic attitude. I am inclined to think that though Thomson appreciated the theories of Darwin, Harrison and Lyell intellectually, they served to underline the bewilderment and despair of his atheism, and that they did little or nothing either to confirm or reinforce it. The fact that this verse is indeed a later addition to the section, gives rise to some doubt as to its emotional force within the context of Thomson's struggle to come to terms with, or at least to explain to himself the relationship between his loss of belief and the utter despair which brought him to the City. It is the consciousness of the infinite size of the universe that was the outcome of scientific investigations that, it seems to me, made the deepest impression on him poetically. And it is when he looks out to other worlds than ours (in Section XVII, for example) that we feel he has been emotionally moved by the discoveries of scientists, rather than when he is contemplating the "infinite aeons" - "infinite aeons after the last man/Has joined the mammoth in earth's tomb and womb" - poetically a

villainous conclusion!

The apparent purpose of this section was to prove the inevitability of disbelief, not only in any God as such, but of any purpose in the universe. The difficulty that faces the man who cannot believe in any divinity presented to him for his worship, yet who by his very nature, questioning, seeking, reasoning, must attempt to explain his final attitude to existence has rarely been more clearly, if unintentionally, expressed. There are in this section the starting points for a number of religious attitudes; there is numbed incapacity of the poet's mind to follow any one of these paths. He is, in fact, an agnostic.

xvii.- Section XV - The World's Slow Stain

> All substance lives and struggles evermore
> Through countless shapes continually at war,
> By countless interactions interknit . . .

This is the text, from the twelfth verse of the previous portion of the poem, for this the fifteenth section. Here slowly, slowly, over two stanzas the poem moves from a subjective experience of the real world to a bleak description of the poisonous contribution that each denizen of the City makes to its atmosphere. And here surely we can accept the word 'atmosphere' as being a deliberate ambiguity referring to both air and ambience. He begins by describing, but in more detail, what is surely Shelley's "Contagion of the World's slow stain". And indeed, as Edmund Blunden points out,[151] the whole of this section owes a direct debt to the last three stanzas of

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[151] Edmund Blunden, Shelley: A Life Story, 1946, chap.xiv.

Part III of "Peter Bell the Third":

> Thus, as in a town, plague-stricken,
> Each man be he sound or no
> Must indifferently sicken;
> As when day begins to thicken,
> None know a pigeon from a crow, -
>
> So good and bad, sane and mad,
> The oppressor and the oppressed;
> Those who weep to see what others
> Smile to inflict upon their brothers;
> Lovers, haters, worst and best;
>
> All are damned - they breathe an air,
> Thick, infected, joy-dispelling;
> Each pursues what seems most fair,
> Mining like moles, through mind, and there
> Scoop palace-caverns vast, where Care
> In throned state is ever dwelling.

Bysshe Vanolis, Blunden says; "caught up and reverberated" this "note of doom".

Though most people, and many poets have felt from time to time that the "World is too much with us", few have described quite so vehemently, as Thomson does in this section, the sense that the very air is overcharged with the feelings, the thoughts, the curses, the prayers of men. The neurotic and over-sensitive temperament suffers because life is burdened with the frustrations and with the unspoken thoughts, with the overbearing emotions of other people, conveying an intolerable sense of the responsibility that each man must accept for his fellows. Everyone is inevitably affected by both the good and evil that others do:

> So that no man there breathes earth's simple breath,
> As if alone on mountains or wide seas;
> But nourishes warm life or hastens death
> With joys and sorrows, health and foul disease . . .

("No man" said Donne, "is an island entire of itself . . . And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee."[152] There is in Thomson's lines, I think, at

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[152] John Donne, "Devotions".

least by implication, the guilty admission that the pressure upon him of the "hungry generations" is greater than man can bear; it follows from this that his failure to measure up to the responsibilities of this burden plays its part in the many processes of feeling and of thought that combine to send a man into the City of Dreadful Night. Once there indeed his plight is similar, but infinitely worse; for if the press of men in the cities of the plain hastens death, it also "nourishes warm life". Within the City there is no warmth:

> That City's atmosphere is dark and dense,
> Although not many exiles wander there,
> With many a potent evil influence,
> Each adding poison to the poisoned air . . .

This is surely true. Once a man is committed to the path that leads to Despair, whether it is described by Spenser or by Bunyan, or by the psychiatrists, the one thing that is quite certain is that every contact with another human being is most likely to underline his utter isolation, and emphasize the difficulty of turning back. The subjective side of this is nowhere better described in our literature than in the closing lines of Thomson's final stanza to this short section. They pile upon one another superlatives of hopelessness. By some apt magic they convey a sense of finality, a sense of imprisonment within the City that yet befits the brooding of the "shadowy congregation" still in the cathedral. Here we have

> Infections of unutterable sadness,
> Infections of incalculable madness,
> Infections of incurable despair.

xviii. - Section XVI - Elegy for Life

After the cold passion of Section XIV, the hysterical reaction of Section XVI is something of an anti-climax, a repetition on

a lower note. We are still in the cathedral, the same congregation is still "musing" on the permission to "end it when you will", but with an understandable air of waiting as though for some more hopeful conclusion. But none is offered. Instead we have a lamentable outburst:

> The man speaks sooth, alas! the man speaks sooth:
> We have no personal life beyond the grave . . .

The surprising and important word here is "personal", surprising because it is the mortality of personality that is being mourned, a mortality which finds no comfort in the cconcept that "All substance lives". The "vehement voice" that is crying out against the remorseless dictates of fate, as described by the preacher, really wants this life, this human, social life to go on for ever. Life alone, one solitary human lifetime, is apparently not enough. The shrill outcry, lacking in human dignity as it is, contrasts with Thomson's verse of a mere eight years previously:

> Let my voice ring out and over the earth,
> Through all the grief and strife,
> With a golden joy in a silver mirth:
> Thank God for Life! [153]

The speaker's argument appears to run as follows: I have but one life. I have never had it before. I shall never have it again. It has many pleasures, much that I love. But, because the "infinite to come" is blank, because there is no personally concerned God, no God at all, except Fate (a semantic evasion, surely) and because all being will end with death, this one opportunity is a delusion and therefore

> Our life's a cheat, our death a black abyss:
> Hush and be mute envisaging despair.--

If Thomson had been an educated disbeliever, he might have been concerned because he was deserting God. As it was he

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[153] "Sunday Up the River", Thomson, Vol.I.

felt, like the "vehement voice", that God had been taken from him. It is difficult now to conceive that the conclusion in this section follows naturally from the argument. It is difficult to remember that many of Thomson's contemporaries still based their whole society, and their whole concept of the organisation of the universe, of the purpose of existence, on the proposition that God loves each one of us as an individual, and therefore that he holds out to us in return for good behaviour, and above all in return for belief in Him, the reward of an eternal personal life.[154] It is even difficult to feel that such a reward is desirable or indeed a reward at all. But in Thomson's time there were many who sang the hymns of Sankey and Moody, who, like Christina Rossetti, attended the church presided over by Trollopian clergy, or who sought comfort with Newman or Hopkins in the Church of Rome and for whom the thought of an eternal bliss freed from earthly cares and spent among those one had loved on earth, was the sole reason for living a life of reasonable conformity, fair play and virtue. The attack of science upon the superficial theology of the Victorian church and chapel was cruel indeed and sudden, so that the earlier Victorian unbelievers (and this is their fascination in an age when belief is difficult from childhood onwards) were deeply troubled emotionally at the thought that there was no future life. The withdrawal of its promise was a "loss supreme".

But Thomson, if a well-read man, and a self-taught man, was not an educated man, not a man of culture. Nor had he any normal home background to offer him stability and hope. We see this clearly in the unreality of his description of "gracious

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[154] Walter E. Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind, (Yale University Press, 1957) New Haven and London, 1967, p.21, note 77.

human life", though this unreality is not, I think, solely attributable to idealisation and nostalgia, but to the fusion of them in a verse form and vocabulary that conjures up memories of Gray sentimentalizing over a pastoral existence:

> The splendours of the intellect's advance,
> The sweetness of the home with babes and wife;
>
> The social pleasures with their genial wit;
> The fascination of the worlds of art,
> The glories of the worlds of nature, lit
> By large imagination's glowing heart;
>
> The rapture of mere being, full of health;
> The careless childhood and the ardent youth,
> The strenuous manhood winning various wealth,
> The reverend age serene with life's long truth:
>
> All the sublime prerogatives of Man;
> The storied memories of the times of old . . .

There is indeed some similarity of diction ("genial", "storied") to the "Elegy Written in a Country Church-yard", and both poets, each in his own way, conjure up what they had never experienced, "The sweetness of the home with babes and wife".[156] But Gray's conclusion underlines Thomson's dilemma. In the "Elegy" the poet feels that Melancholy has "marked him for her own", but it is an enjoyable and contemplative melancholy, far removed from Thomson's sad despair; for Gray was sure that "the Hoary-headed swain" who might describe his fate to one who asked about it, could in all sincerity say of him that he would rest in "The bosom of his Father and his God". For Thomson and those in the City with him "this sole chance was frustrate from my birth". We can arrive at some measurement of the despair that this line seeks to convey if we remember Cowper's description

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[156] cf. John Ruskin, Sesame and Lilies, on 'home': "It is the place of Peace; the shelter . . . from all terror, doubt and division."

of "Frustrate hope" which is "severer than despair".[157] As a result, his "wine of Life",[158] he says, "is poison mixed with gall", and his "noonday passes in a nightmare dream", which is ofcourse the dream which is his personal reality, the reality of The City of Dreadful Night.

Having described what has been lost from life with the denial of God's existence, the voice ends with the injunction "Speak not of comfort where no comfort is". But that is precisely what the "pulpit speaker" (and there may be some irony in this description of him) must do:

> My Brother, my poor Brothers, it is thus;
> This life itself holds nothing good for us,
> But it ends soon and nevermore can be;
> And we knew nothing of it ere our birth,
> And shall know nothing when consigned to earth;
> I ponder these thoughts and they comfort me.

Anti-climax though this Section may be, it is, as we have seen, not without interest. It is designed to fit into the structure of The City as he conceived it, for each of the Sections after the first, illustrates some aspect of the deaths of Faith, of Love and of Hope, in that order (and we shall examine this structure more fully elsewhere). Section XVI illustrates an aspect of the death of Love, but until this section the death of Love has been the death of all possibility of possessing a special being, an idealized woman translated and sanctified by memory. Here for a moment, and for a moment only, he remembers the possibilities of a wider love, the love of others and the love of life itself. Love for others, love above all for mankind, Thomson, the solitary man, did not find easy. So there is in this section an air of contrivance, of artifi-

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[157] William Cowper, "Hope, Like the Short-Liv'd Ray".

[158] cf. Macbeth, II, iii,98.

ciality (mirrored by the choice of the verse form of the "Elegy"). A new and more appropriate form for this concept did not suggest itself to him. He was led to adopt a device that had the appearance of repetition, and his presentation has a certain imitative insincerity and a certain air of sentimentality.

xix.- Section XVII - Stars in their Courses

Until recently Thomson was usually represented in anthologies by an extract from "Sunday at Hampstead" beginning: "As we rush, as we rush in the train",[159] which had little except the novelty of the experience at the time of writing to recommend it. Victorian Verse [160] includes, not unfairly, "In the Room". It is, however, surprising that no-one has seen fit to represent Thomson's work by including Section XVII of The City in a selection of the verse of his period. It sets out with great clarity the position of early nineteenth-century man, brought up to believe that he moved always in the eye of the Beloved Father, who in some mysterious way looked down upon him and weighed up the value of his little life from somewhere among the stars. He shared with primitive man, and classic authors, a sense that the stars themselves played their part, involved with human beings and their fates. No longer deceived by alchemy and divination, he still more than half believed in astrology. Indeed we have seen how in Section XIV

[159] e.g. Palgrave's Golden Treasury.

[160] "Victorian Verse", ed. George Macbeth, Penguin, 1969.

Thomson himself acknowledged the possibility that our fate was settled by the stars from the moment of our birth. The advent of the new sciences placed the earth more accurately in geological time, dwelt upon the infinite size of the universe and broadened the perspective of the natural order of the heavens. The facts of science denied man contact with a personal and all-seeing God, who resided in the heavens, and whose stars smiled or frowned upon him from his birth and controlled or responded to his feelings. Thomson is repeating here what Tennyson had already said in "The Two Voices":

> This truth within thy mind rehearse,
> That in a boundless universe
> Is boundless better, boundless worse.
>
> Think you this mould of hopes and fears
> Could find no statelier than his peers
> In yonder hundred million spheres?

and in "Maud":

> Innumerable, pitiless, passionless eyes,
> Cold fires, yet with power to burn and brand
> His nothingness into man.

Although he shares this new view of the universe, Thomson's verse takes wing almost as though he finds a sense of satisfaction in turning from the pathetic fallacy of man's relation to the stars,[161] as though he is not particularly disturbed because "The empyréan is a void abyss". Indeed the verse sings as though this understanding of the scientific aspect of the universe was a lyrical moment in his life. There is none of

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[161] Thomson had changed completely from the poet who wrote in "The Doom of the City":

> The stars for ever sweep through space, surrounding
> Their sun-kings and God's central hidden Throne
> With splendour and deep music far-resounding,
> Though heard by pure celestial ears alone:
> Their music chants His lofty praise for ever,
> Their splendours burn to Him--the Light Divine;
> In their grand uneager motions pausing never,
> They live and sing and shine.

the distress which is obvious in those sections where Faith, Hope and Love are dead, or in which he describes the City as, in effect, the outward projection of the morbid imagination.

The lyrical aspect of Thomson's thinking in this section is emphasized by his use of river imagery. In Sections VI and VIII he had sate forlornly by the river side

> And watched the bridge-lamps glow like golden stars
> Above the blackness of the swelling tide,
> Down which they struck rough gold in ruddier bars . . .

or "watched the tide as black as our black doom". But here

> Boats gliding like dark shadows of a dream,
> Are glorified from vision as they pass
> The quivering moonbridge on the deep black stream . . .

and the black surface is illumined as the surface of his mind is, perhaps too briefly, illumined by the vision of all that science might, properly understood, have offered him.

We end with a verse that in the light of modern developments might aomost be considered prophetic. He could not have known that a century after his verse was written, man would indeed be nearer to the stars, and there are surely manyttoday who wonder with Thomson whether we shall

> find them worlds as sad as this,
> Or suns all self-consuming like our own
> Enringed by planet worlds as much amiss.

This section gives point to Heath-Stubbs's perceptive comment:[162]

> Thomson's imaginative vision, like that of his master, Shelley, transcends the crude rationalism which is his intellectual starting-point. Like his own traveller, he strides austere, having neither hope nor fear. Although he does not know it, with his courage he has all but traversed the Darkling Plain. He is within reach of gaining a new intelligible vision of the

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[162] John Heath-Stubbs, The Darkling Plain, 1950, p.121.

universe, for which the images of the faith he had abandoned will once more provide a relevant symbolism.

xx.- Section XVIII - Oedipus and the Virgin Mary

In the eighteenth section of The City Thomson contemplates with the compassion of a man who has almost shared the same fate, the condition of an inhabitant of the City committed irrevocably to the hopeless effort to return to the womb. It is not surprising, indeed in the light of possible interpretations of his personality by modern psychology, not unnatural that Thomson should be aware of this temptation,[163] which is almost inevitably the subconscious wish of those who have early been robbed of a mother's love. Thomson's mother died when he was young, and though perhaps his famous Matilda fixation might be considered as a sublimation of the Oedipus complex, we have here an overt, indeed almost clinical analysis of it.

He wandered, he says, "in a suburb of the north", and we remember from the first description of the City that this places us on the verge of "a trackless wilderness". Immediately we are deep in a Freudian image. The three tracks, three close lanes at the junction of which he finds himself, need no explanation; and the image is complete, at least subjectively, by the description of the thick hedgerows and trees around the junction, the misty light above, and the vague blur of white beneath. It is indeed a most interesting stanza, where we see, I believe, the imagery of sex influencing a poet who was genuinely unaware of the detail that he was providing.

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[163] v. "Vane's Story", (1864) Ridler p.98, ll.427-31.

Of the three lanes, the poet chose, he says, the left hand one, the sinister one. This he treads with heavy languor that he ascribes to "infinite sleepless weariness", but which somehow reminds us (for nowhere in the City is there the slightest sign of any vice other than lack of belief) of Swinburne's "lilies and languors of Virtue". He takes a hundred steps along it (and one searches in vain for any meaning to the hundred other than the biblical meaning of 'many'), and discovers something that, on looking more closely, he finds "had been a man". The wounded creature was "prostrate",[164] and this one word would seem to dispose of the theory, a totally unnecessary one, that the man in this section is based on Blake's "Nebuchadnezzar", which can be examined in the Tate Gallery. Blake's figure is on all-fours and his righthand and left knee are advanced. He is, in fact, moving like the animal he is being caused to imitate, and is not leaning on his hands. His hair is not matted; he is distraught, but not unkempt. The nails of his hands and feet are noticeably elongated like claws, and his body is covered in hair. Whereas Thomson's figure, stretched flat upon the ground: "The hind limbs stretched to push; the fore limbs then/To drag" and inching his way along in a true crawling motion and "befouled with mire", leans, when it stops to speak, "upon its right". Then Thomson gives us a convincing picture of the reaction of such a regressive personality to the intrusion of someone else.

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[164] This seems to dispose of George Harper's theory (Studies in Philology, January 1953) that the man in this section is based on Blake's colour print "Nebuchadnezzar". Not all Harper's ingenious argument can make Blake's figure 'prostrate', but this does not detract from the value of exploring Thomson's debt, as a poet, to Blake.

First there is the threat of attack, bolstered with imaginary resources, "this poisoned blade", the "phial" that would shrivel the intruder up "like grass". Then almost immediately follows the appeal to sympathy and pity, for the agony that has already been endured in exploring all the lanes that might lead to the discovery of the clue (and here Thomson permits himself a metaphysical conceit, a pun, for he uses the word "clue" in one line to mean both "trace" and "thread": "Such clue I left who sought my clue in vain".)

Thomson's attitude in this section of the poem has in addition to the compassion which we noted, a certain clinical detachment. Here is the last resource, other than death, for escaping from the City. He knows that some will try to take it, but for him the possibility does not really exist. So he asks: "Whereunto leadest this lost thread of gold?"[165] and in the answer he diagnoses the pitiful chimera of the Oedipus complex for "this infamy for manhood to behold", who has like the preacher in Section IV also come to the City through "the deserts which have else no track,/And through vast wastes of horror-haunted time", and describes exactly what the damaged personality seeking reassurance really wants:

> And I become a nursling soft and pure,
> An infant cradled on its mother's knee,
> Without a past, love-cherished and secure;
> Which if it saw this loathsome present Me,
> Would plunge its face into the pillowing breast,
> And scream abhorrence hard to lull to rest.

Then follows one of the most unusual aspects of the Section. Thomson, the narrator, leaves the man and says "and I retiring brushed/Thin shreds of gossamer from off my face." Why this description at this point in the poem? One might argue that it is not unusual when wandering "beneath thick trees and hedgerows

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[165] cf. Blake, "Jerusalem", f.77.

winding forth" to feel gossamer upon one's face. On the other hand, gossamer is an autumn phenomenon and we have no trace of the seasons in the City; but in some strange way it seems appropriate at this point in the poem. And then one recalls the legend that gossamer is the ravelling of the Virgin Mary's winding sheet, which fell to earth on her ascension to heaven.[166] And we remember the "desolation moving with such grace" of Section IV and "The Lady of the images: supine,/Deathstill, lifesweet" of Section X. Once again we wonder if Thomson had not, consciously or unconsciously, sublimated his thwarted feelings, not only for Matilda Weller but for Mother Love he had not fully experienced, by an implied devotion to the notion of a female god and emotionally responded to the part that the adoration of the Virgin plays in Roman Catholic worship. The lowering figure of Bradlaugh stood between Thomson and the Roman church, for which he seems to have felt a natural but suppressed affinity. He might have been another Hopkins. He could perhaps have become a Roman Catholic poet like his namesake.

Thomson's conclusion to this section is at first sight banal, as is perhaps inevitable, for after hovering on the brink of revelation, he must finish with a pragmatic comment:

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[166] Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable says;

> According to legend, this delicate thread is the ravelling of the Virgin Mary's winding-sheet, which fell to earth on her ascension to heaven. It is said to be God's seam, i.e. God's thread. Actually, the name is from M.E. gossomer, literally goose-summer, or St. Martin's summer (mid-November), when geese are eaten and gossamer prevalent.

The Encyclopaedia Brittanica of 1919, however, gives the derivation as being 'gaze à Marie', i.e. gauze of Mary, But the legend is most clearly echoed in the French word for gossamer, 'les fils de la .Vièrge'.

For this is law, if law there be in Fate:
What never has been, yet may have its when;
The thing which has been, never is again.

And yet, if we look at it more closely, there is in these lines more hope for the future than Thomson perhaps intended. For if "What never has been, yet may have its when", then we have the other side of infinity, the infinitely possible, including the possibility of infinite life.

xxi.- Section XIX - "End it when you will"

Thomson was fascinated by the thought that it lay within the power of disappointed man to end this little life when he chose to do so. He wrote a perfectly calm and logical essay on the subject of "Suicide", first published in 1875.[167] The arguments in favour of permitting a rational man to end unnecessary suffering were to Thomson intontrovertible. The question then becomes: "Why is it that mankind, which has the capacity to 'end it when you will', so rarely (comparatively) chooses to do so?"

In Section XIX we are presented with a picture of the River of Suicides, the same river that "girds the city west and north", beside which he had "sat forlornly", on the bank of which he had "lingered", and which was the deep black stream that carried the "quivering moon bridge".[168] Now it is a mighty river, like the Thames that plays its part, sometimes as a River of Suicides, in so many of Dickens's novels. Thomson

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[167] Reprinted by J.M. Robertson in Poems, Essays and Fragments, 1892.

[168] Sections I, VI, VIII and XVII respectively.

describes the various ways in which it may offer an end to this life of despair and convinces us that he had thought deeply about it. Death may be sought in "sudden frenzy", or "slow with purpose set", or "with dreamlike motion". Here in the City no one will interfere, for each will be thinking of the moment when he himself will seek peace, perfect peace.

Then comes the dilemma. Having said this, having made it clear that life is so unbearable that death is both easy and preferable, how can Thomson explain mankind's obvious reluctance, a reluctance that he shared, to "shuffle off this mortal coil"?[169] Here in this section Thomson does not explain it, or at least does not explain it in any way convincingly. He suggests we linger on just to see what will happen next, or not to grieve our friends, or because the time that remains to us cannot in any case be overlong before we enter the last and most perfect sleep from which there is no resurrection. As we have seen, Thomson himself resolved the dichotomy with perfect clarity in the poemswhich Anne Ridler reprints under the title "Lines 1878".[170]

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[169] In "The Speedy Extinction of Evil and Misery" (1868 and in Essays and Phantasies, 1881) Thomson argues, satirically, the need for universal suicide, and adds:

> . . . individual suicides can do little or no good, save to the individuals themselves. Thus true philsophers may rationally and generously deny themselves the luxury of self-murder, because their death must leave the human average still worse than it is; and, besides, death's coming is so certain and (at farthest) so near, that it is scarcely worth while to put one's self out of breath hastening to meet him.

[170] Thomson has a cynical comment in "How The Bible Warns Against Authorship" (NR, 1870 and Poems, Essays and Fragments, 1892):

> Suicide would be much more common, were it not that by the time one has learnt the vanity of life he has acquired the bad habit of living.

xxii.- Section XX - Inscrutable Archetype

Section XX is among the better known sections of The City of Dreadful Night and it has received a fair amount of critical comment. But I find it curiously unconvincing. Here the poet is less the creator of an "Anti-Promethean Myth"[171] than the carpenter of what is, at first acquaintance, a somewhat wooden allegory. Yet it repays a closer examination. The poet is in a state of Romantic weariness. He regards the two large figures facing each other with the "drowsy numbness" and with the "leaden eyed despair" of Keats. And he is in a typically Romantic, indeed Gothic situation, sitting on the base of a pillar in peaceful moonlight and, significantly, in the Christian ambience and the cloistered aspect of the great Cathedral - presumably the Cathedral that we have already encountered in Sections XII, XIV and XV. In front of the fane and opposite to where he sits, are two mighty and symbolic figures. The first is a "couchant sphinx"[172] gazing steadfastly ahead, changeless, cold and majestic. There is little

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[171] v. Jerome J. McGann, "James Thomson (B.V.): The Woven Hymns of Night and Day", Studies in English Literature, III Autumn 1963.

[172] The image of inexorable fate in the form of a sphinx had been with Thomson for a long time. As early as 1859 he wrote:

> Fate stands impassive - a sphinx in the desert of life. The rigid lips will not wreath into smiles for all your abounding humor; the stark blind eyes will not moisten with tears for all your lamentable dirges; the stony heart will never throb responsive to your yearnings, your passion, your enthusiasm. However rich in gifts, and graces, you shall not front this fate unvanquishable, unless they be grounded on a stony prudence, armed with an iron resolution, fortified with an adamantine self-control. Once it was very different - the men of old had a God; but we, like Burns, are shut out from his presence. ("Robert Burns", part of an essay "A Few Words About Burns", The Investigator, 1859, reprinted in Poems, Essays and Fragments, 1892, op.cit.

doubt that Thomson intended this figure to represent the remorseless and disinterested attitude of the universe to mankind, enigmatic, detabhed. He describes the Sphinx in detail in "A Lady of Sorrow":[173]

> With awe and secret shuddering terror, I felt crushing me down the omnipotence of Fate; Fate the Sphynx in the desert of Life, whose enigma is destruction to all who cannot interpret, and a doom more horrible before destruction to him who does interpret; Fate which weaves lives only too real in the loom of destiny so mysterious, uncompassionate of their agonies in the process; Fate, God petrified; the dumb, blind, soulless deification of Matter. And still I felt myself no nearer to a union of sympathy and common thought with my fellow-men.

It is interesting to speculate on whether he knew that in Egyptian mythology the Sphinx was symbolic of resurrection.[174] If he was aware of it, there is then a meaning for the shadow which covered the lower half of the Sphinx, and which, presumably, fell on it from the great Cathedral's western front. In place of the certitude of resurrection, the shadow introduces doubt, a doubt that follows naturally from the rejection of a religion in which Thomson can no longer believe, and which must in its turn make the meaningfulness of other and more ancient religions uncertain. In place of any symbol of religious hope, he gives usdan unresponsive but universal figure, already enigmatic, but here in shadow too.

Facing the Sphinx is a typically Christian symbol. The

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[173] "A Lady of Sorrow", op.cit., Part III.

[174] v. Larousse, Dictionary of Mythology, 1959.

angel stands in the full moonlight. There can be no doubt of its provenance. It represents the outward aspect of the religion which adopted angels for its own, and it is not a satisfactorily conceived symbol. The Angel's hands are upon the cross-hilt of its sword, as if "prompt to strike", which is not really possible! But it is a winged figure, and it reminds us of Milton's "angel girt with golden wings" that represents "pure eyed Faith, white handed Hope". And there is some support for the suggestion that Thomson could have had these lines in mind, so appropriate to his general theme of the loss of Faith and Hope, if we remember that the following line refers to the type of love which he had also lost - "thou unblemished form of Chastity", and that a few lines previously we have what might well be a poetic description of the whole of his poem:

> . . . A thousand fantasies
> Begin to throng into my memory,
> Of calling shapes, and beckoning shadows dire,
> And airy tongues that syllable men's names
> On sands and shores and desert wildernesses. [175]

All these elements are of interest, but the allegory itself is crude. The Angel, representing Christian belief, stands before the Sphinx, representing the uninterested impassive answer to mankind's questioning. Before its monolithic aspect, and its unwavering gaze, faith is defeated. First the wings that made contact with heaven possible, fall away. A warrior leaning on his sword is left to stand as symbol for undaunted man prepared to fight his way to an understanding of the world in which he finds himself, symbol perhaps of the philosopher using his intellect as a sword. But this too is useless, and the sword falls, leaving man alone and unarmed to face the riddle of

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[175] Milton, Comus, 11.205-9.

meaning in life. Before the unanswering gaze of the monster, he, too, falls, and his head rests symbolically "between the Monster's large quiescent paws." Before nothingness man has no recourse.[176]

But there is a final mystery to this section. The moon has moved round and the Sphinx, with the wreck of the man-angel lying between its paws, is now in full moonlight. If there was meaning in the shadow that first hid the Sphinx, there must be meaning in the light that now falls upon it. It can only be that Thomson is not left in total despair. He is left "pondering" the cold majestic face, "whose vision seemed of infinite void space". The force of the sentence lies in "seemed". It is not certain that empty infinity is indeed the vision of the Sphinx. Might it not be contemplating resurrection after all? And here may lie the reason for the lack of feeling, the unconvincingness of this section. What Thomson intended to be a simple allegorical representation of a situation offering neither faith nor hope, and symbolizing the gradual breakdown of belief and intellectual curiosity before the total lack of meaning in human existence, has been complicated by the poet's choice, as his symbol of inscrutability, of one which has come from mankind's subconscious mind, and to which men have given, over many centuries, a variety of meaning. And Thomson, too, is vaguely aware of the inconclusive nature of his imagery, and senses that he is not facing up to the

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[176] Hoxie Fairchild in Vol.IV of his Religious Trends in English Poetry, New York, 1957, sees this section as a satire on Comtian positivism. He is presumably referring to Comte's "Law of the Three States" and regards the Angel as representing the theological phase of knowledge, the Warrior the metaphysical phase, and the man as representing the positive. All come to nothing before the onslaught of Fate. The parallel is possible, but I feel too specific to be likely.

problem of godless mankind either emotionally or intellectually. And so he leaves himself a loophole. Perhaps there is something in the regard of the Sphinx other than "infinite void space". Perhaps that is why the "temple front" (and note the word "temple" with its historic connotation) has become "a mystic dream".

xxiii.- Section XXI - Prometheus Bound

There are many invocations to Melencolia in the history of English Literature and a respectable tradition of pensive contemplation in her name.[177] It is doubtful whether she has ever been invoked in quite such a tone of hopelessness as that which Thomson used in the last section of his City. But it was no sudden decision to use her image; it was one on which he had long brooded, for there is another version of this part of the poem which Dobell believed to be "a quite early composition".[178] The evidence of the British Museum MS is sufficient to show that he had slowly worked his way towards it as the coda of his poem.[179] It seems likely that Thomson had in his mind for a long time this conception of a brooding figure of Melencolia presiding over the City before he was ready to use it as the last section of his

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[177] v. E.M. Sickels, The Gloomy Egoist, Columbia University Press, New York, 1932.

[178] First published in Ridler, p.66, where its provenance is well annotated; and it is thought to have been written in the early eighteen sixties.

[179] In British Museum 38532. He has two outlines of the final arrangement of the poem. The most complete concludes with "XXI Melencolia", which is not in either of the two fair copies of the poem in the British Museum. (v. Appendices.)

poem.[180] Thomson's imagination was stirred by the figure of Melencolia in Dürer's famous engraving, one more compliment to the power of this remarkable work, already three hundred and sixty years old by the time he wrote about it. The various interpretations to which it has lent itself are well documented by Waetzoldt,[181] who truly says:

> Around . . . Dürer's 'Melencholia' more interpretations and explanations have accumulated than round any other German work of literature or art.

Thomson had in his possession (as he told William Rossetti in a letter of 30 January 1874) a copy of it by Johan Wiricx, and this was, I believe, unfortunate, poetically speaking. The trouble into which it led him is well set out in the letter to William Rossetti quoted here:

> Though knowing nothing of art, I have long been profoundly impressed by the "Melancholy" of Dürer, and my sole engraving is a copy of that work signed Johan Wiricx, 1602, which, I am glad to find, Scott describes as admirable. Wishing to bring this great figure into a poem, and rapidly enumerating the accessories which help to identify it, I find myself bothered by the animal prone at her feet. Ruskin[182] in one place terms this a wolf, and in another a sleeping wolf-hound. Scott does not characterize it, I think.

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[180] cf. "A Lady of Sorrow", op.cit., Pt. III: "a colossal image of black marble, the Image and the concentration of the blackness of Night, as of a Woman seated, veiled from head to foot . . ."

[181] Wilhelm Waetzoldt, Dürer, trs. R.H. Boothroyd, 1955.

[182] John Ruskin, Modern Painters, Vol.IV, April 1856, 6/64, Note. Also in a letter to Mrs Carlyle thought to have been written in December 1859; and in an undated letter to Rev. W. Kingsley.

> For myself, I have been used to consider it probably a sheep, and as dead, not sleeping; in fact, a creature awaiting dissection, and suggesting anatomy as among the pursuits of the labouring and studious Titaness.
>
> Can you, who are an art-adept, resolve the question, and tranquilize my agitated mind?[183] [Thomson then quotes his stanza, giving as the final line: "With the prone creature for dissection brought."] Must I, as Ruskin dictates, change this last into "With the keen wolf-hound, sleeping undistraught" - (a villainous makeshift)?[184]

In fact, the detailed description of the "bronze colossus" of verse 1, which he develops in the following four verses, comes as near to bathos as it is possible to do. If, as has been suggested, he had Shelley's "Lines on the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery" in mind, then it can hardly be claimed that it was a totally successful model and in any case, the poem is incomplete. Shelley's work and Thomson's are sufficiently parallel to justify the suggestion that

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[183] Salt seems to have thought that Thomson was pulling Rossetti's leg. In Company I have Kept, 1930, Salt writes:

> That he had real, if somewhat saturnine humour, is shown by many things recorded of him, not least in that letter of his to Mr. W.M. Rossetti (who was not overburthened with the quality), in which he gravely asked whether "the keen wolfhound", in Dürer's picture of the Melencolia, was to be regarded as a dog or a sheep, and successfully "drew" the art critic with the question.

I can find no record of any reply from Rossetti, but Thomson seems to have felt obliged to use his "villainous makeshift".

[184] See Ridler, p.273, note 21.

Thomson had studied his master. Thomson's Melencolia

gazes
With full set eyes, but wandering in thick mazes
Of sombre thought beholds no outward sight.

(a description which conflicts with the "sublimity" of her gaze in the penultimate stanza). Upon the lips and eyelids of Shelley's Medusa

seems to lie
Loveliness like a shadow, from which shine,
Fiery and lurid, struggling underneath,
The agonies of anguish and of death.

Both personifications are set upon a height and gaze down. Medusa has attendant upon her a "poisonous eft" and "a ghastly bat", while Melencolia has "a snaky imp, dog-headed". In the background of the one, "the midnight sky flares", and behind the other is "The comet hanging over dark waste seas" and "The massy rainbow curved in front of it". But Shelley's poem, incomplete though it is, has the true ring of poetic understanding. It is not a mere description; it is an attempt to impart the feeling aroused by the painting in the mind of the poet, who contemplates the contrast of beauty, terror and death, and at the same time tries to convey the picture's appeal. And though I do not doubt that this was what Thomson too intended, he made the mistake of trying to describe in detail what he saw. Although as Professor Calvin S. Brown points out,[185] this particular engraving offers the advantage that "it is essentially a collection of separable objects", this has the consequent disadvantage of reducing the verse to a list of items:

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[185] Calvin S. Brown, "Thomson and D'Annunzio on Dürer's Melancholia", Journal of Aesthetics, 1960, 19.

Low-seated she leans forward massively,
  With cheek on clenched left hand, the forearm's might
Erect, its elbow on her rounded knee;
  Across a clasped book in her lap the right
Upholds a pair of compasses . . .

. . . .

The instruments of carpentry and science
Scattered about her feet, in strange alliance
  With the keen wolf-hound sleeping undistraught;

Scales, hour-glass, bell and magic-square above;
  The grave and solid infant perched beside . . .

. . . .

The comet hanging o'er the waste dark seas,
  The massy rainbow curved in front of it
Beyond the village with the masts and trees;
  The snaky imp, dog-headed, from the Pit
Bearing upon its batlike leathern pinions
Her name unfolded in the sun's dominions,
  The 'MELENCOLIA' that transcends all wit. [186]

In consequence the picture he really wanted to convey, that of a presiding figure, disillusioned, despairing, hopeless but undefeated, is blurred and diminished by his meticulous description. And if we look at another poem with which we know Thomson was familiar, since he claimed to have formed the versification of The City upon it, if we consider Browning's poem, "The Guardian Angel, a picture at Fano", we shall see that Browning's description is more successful than Thomson's. This again is because Browning gives us the impression that he is personally involved in the painting. He does not describe it minutely as Thomson does. The nature of the picture is conveyed by means of its effect upon the poet, through the ideas which it stimulates in his mind. It is a long way from Browning's angel to Thomson's "winged woman".

It is perhaps worth a comment that there is a resemblance between Thomson's Melencolia - "the knotted frown/Of forehead charged with baleful thoughts and dreams" and that of Coleridge's

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[186] "The 'MELENCOLIA' that transcends all wit." Victor B. Neuburg, in the Freethinker, 18 November 1934, suggests this is a reference to alcoholism.

"bent forehead work'd with troubled thought/Strange was the dream--".[187] We can only regret that Coleridge never properly completed his fragment "Melancholy", for he might well have provided us with the link between romantic melancholy and atheistic melancholy, the terrors of which only Burton seems fully to have foreseen in his diagnosis of "monstrosam melancholiam":[188]

> The part affected is the whole soul, and all the faculties of it; there is a privation of joy, hope, trust, confidence, of present and future good, and in their place succeed fear, sorrow, etc., as in the Symptoms shall be showed. The heart is grieved, the conscience wounded, the mind eclipsed with black fumes arising from those perpetual terrors.

It is only when Thomson has finished his description of Dürer's work that we have some indication of why he introduced the figure of Melencolia at all into this final section, for this was to be a last invocation to whatever unknown and unfeeling power exercised a malign influence (or, since he was an atheist, presided without influence, either good or bad) over mankind. But it is not possible to have an invocation without a listener, without a central and unifying addressee. And the problem for Thomson, as it would have been for any poet, was how to establish a central figure to be invoked without in fact implying that he, it, has super-human power. So Thomson falls back upon a romantic device and addresses Melencolia. But it must be admitted that this is

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[187] I cannot believe that the four additional lines for The Morning Chronicle and Sibylline Leaves and quoted in E.H. Coleridge's Oxford University Press edition, 1931, were anything but an inadequate afterthought.

[188] Robert Burton, The Anatomy of Melancholy, Third Partition, Section IV, Mem. 2, Subs.1.

far from the 'Romantic' melancholy, and though there is a certain amount of enjoyment in the description, there is little or nothing of the relaxed, leisurely and scholarly pleasure that informed, in its various ways, both "Il Penseroso" and the "Elegy".

The description finished, we begin to get some indication of what it is that Thomson wished to say as his concluding comment on the City. It comes, in spite of all the flirting with Roman Catholic imagery that we have noted as one major aspect of the poem, from the very essence of Thomson's puritan Scottish and evangelical background. For what in fact he is saying is that we must all carry on as best we may, that we must all do our best, that we must find courage from somewhere and never flinch however hard the way:[189]

> Sustained by her indomitable will;
> The hands shall fashion and the brain shall pore,
> And all her sorrow shall be turned to labour . . .

Thomson's interpretation of the Dürer figure as the patron saint of those who have no hope for the future but find in work a solace and an anodyne is not, in my view, justified by

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[189] cf. A.H. Clough's "Say not the Struggle Nought Availeth"; and Walter E. Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870, Yale University Press, 1957, p.251:

> As the difficulties of belief increased, the essence of religion for Christians - and for agnostics the meaning of life - came more and more to lie in strenuous labor for the good of society. That was not only a rational alternative to fruitless speculation but also a practical means of exorcizing the mood of ennui and despair which so often accompanied the loss of faith.

a study of the original engraving.[190] Again Professor Brown has a perceptive comment. He compares Thomson's use of Dürer's engraving with the use made of it by D'Annunzio in his novel, Il Fuoco, and he points out that each writer saw in the picture what he wished to see at that moment. For D'Annunzio the central figure (a male angel, in his interpretation)

> is a personification of genius, of creativity, seen in a moment of repose as he collects his faculties for a new achievement.

This could hardly be more different from Thomson's interpretation. What Thomson has done, in effect, is to try and create a presiding deity appropriate for the City. This subjective interpretation of Dürer's picture gives him a goddess "fronting the dreadful mysteries of time". It is "undaunted", "unvanquished"; it is "sustained by indomitable will".

And then come two magnificent verses in which Thomson reads into the aspect and into the mind of his goddess (as men have done to their deities throughout the ages) his own reaction to the universe as he has come to suffer it:

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[190] In "Indolence: A Moral Essay" (Essays and Phantasies, op.cit.) which Thomson dated 1867, he describes, in humourous vein, "idlers by faith". One paragraph singled out for comment by Salt (p.271), seems to me an appropriate epigraph for the engraving, and this appreciation of the relationship, between inertia and despair, is clearly depicted in the seated figure:

> Let me note that the faith which is the root of indolence in this class may be of despair instead of assurance, of pessimism instead of optimism. It may be a profound and immutable belief in the absolute tyranny of blind Fate, in the utter vanity of all efforts to assuage or divert the operation of the inexorable laws of the universe. The difference, however, as regards our subject, is intellectual merely, not essential. The spiritual root is the same in both, though the one bears blossoms of mystical ravishment under the heaven of Providence, and the other dark leave of oracular Stoicism under the iron vault of Destiny.

But as if blacker night could dawn on night,
  With tenfold gloom on moonless night unstarred,
A sense more tragic than defeat and blight,
  More desperate than strife with hope debarred,
More fatal than the adamantine Never
Encompassing her passionate endeavour,
  Dawns glooming in her tenebrous regard:

The sense that every struggle brings defeat
  Because Fate holds no prize to crown success;
That all the oracles are dumb or cheat
  Because they have no secret to express;
That none can pierce the vast black veil uncertain
Because there is no light beyond the curtain;
  That all is vanity and nothingness.

Thomson's poem arrives, metaphysically speaking, at the opposite pole of understanding from Shelley's "Prometheus Unbound", and though I think even this comparison is granting Thomson a range of poetic imagination that he did not possess, the contrast first pointed out by Salt[191] is admissible. Certain it is that both poets were concerned with the relationship of the real and the ideal, with the crucial proviso that for Thomson the ideal did not exist. For when he is convinced that

none can pierce the vast black veil uncertain
Because there is no light beyond the curtain,
  That all is vanity and nothingness . . .

there is no doubt that he stands at a brink of thought and feeling which Shelley oversoared. The 'veil' image must have been familiar enough to Thomson from Shelley's verse, but this was not its first appearance in The City. Already, in Section XI, he had peopled the City with those who were able

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[191] Salt, p.238:
Thus Thomson's great poem characteristically ends with the word "despair" as Shelley's with the word "victory." The "City of Dreadful Night" is in many ways the exact antithesis of the "Prometheus Unbound;" yet it has also its points of similarity, for nowhere else in recent English literature do we note so clearly that tone of tender gravity and profound compassion for suffering humanity which is so essentially a Shelleyan attribute.

to "pierce life's pleasant veil of various error". And Shelley knew well enough what happened to those who did:

> Lift not the painted veil which those who live
> Call Life: though unreal shapes be pictured there,
> And it but mimic all we would believe
> With colours idly spread, - behind, lurk Fear
> And Hope, twin Destinies; whoever weave
> Their shadows, o'er the chasm, sightless and drear.

When Thomson uses the 'veil' image again in this, the last section, the contrast is even more complete. For him there is "no light beyond the curtain". Shelley, in the invocation to Asia, sees the moment when reality and the ideal fuse through the veil so that they become indistinguishable:

> Child of Light! thy limbs are burning
> Through the vest which seems to hide them;
> As the radiant lines of morning
> Through the clouds ere they divide them . . . [192]

For Thomson the "vast black veil", that moment between life and death, conceals nothing but "vanity and nothingness".[193] For Shelley "Death is the veil which those who live call life;/ They sleep, and it is lifted".[194] Though both are in the Christian sense atheists, Thomson lacked the spiritual capacity to reach a metaphysical conclusion as Shelley did.

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[192] Shelley, "Prometheus Unbound", Act II, v, 54-9.

[193] In 1866 Thomson used the 'veil' image in a less metaphysical and more optimistic way:

> I am conscious of a veil between myself and nature which sense and spirit vainly strive to pierce, and behind which they divine manifold beauties and mysteries. Could they pierce this veil, they would doubtless find another, still as much hidden, still no more revealed, for the increment of knowledge is as zero to the infinite unknown. When you have been brought to see through one of these veils, it is for you as if it had never been; you cannot perceive, or even remember, what hindered your vision. (H.S. Salt, "Some Extracts from James Thomson's Notebooks", Scottish Art Review, II, August 1889.)

As he thought more profoundly, he became more pessimistic.

[194] Shelley, "Prometheus Unbound", Act III, iii, 113-4.

Yet he was only a pace away from:

> The One remains, the many change and pass;
> Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly;
> Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
> Stains the white radiance of Eternity . . . [195]

But the ebullience, the love of life, and the belief that its meaning and truth was to be experienced somewhere beyond the veil that divided the appearance of things in this world from the reality that mankind could only imagine, and which infused Shelley's poetry, was denied to Thomson, who had learnt only that "every struggle brings defeat".

So Thomson was left to clutch at the mere skirts of an ideal. To do this he erected, in despite of his avowed nihilism, a "sombre patroness and queen" to preside over his City of affliction (teen) and of lamentation (threne). Faced with the desolation of unbelief, he is obliged to grant her a "bronze sublimity", but even that transcends mere earthliness. And then he recollects the other moment in his poem when he stood upon the verge of universal understanding, and we have an echo of Section XVII:

> The moving moon and stars from east to west
> Circle before her in the sea of air;
> Shadows and gleams glide round her solemn rest.

But he cannot look up to the "bright radiance of eternity" and leaves us in the deepest glooms of Calvinism:[196]

> Her subjects often gaze up to her there;
> The strong to drink new strength of iron endurance,
> The weak new terrors; all, renewed assurance
> And confirmation of the old despair.

So James Thomson, brought up in the shadow of revelation among a nation of Puritans, with the instinct and imagination that could have led him to the Church of Rome, with imagination

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[195] Shelley, "Adonais", LII.

[196] cf. Dobell, The Laureate of Pessimism, 1910, pp.59-60.

enough to feel the truth of Shelley's dreams, concludes his great Atheist poem by erecting a new Goddess from whom her subjects could refresh themselves with the Puritan virtues of "iron endurance", from whom they could weakly find "new terrors" to replace the fires of hell, or from whom they could, hand in hand with those who favoured predestination, obtain "confirmation of the old despair".

W.H. Auden would find the choice of Goddess entirely appropriate for an isolated Ishmael of the Modern City. "The grand exploratory image of this condition" he says

> is of course Dürer's Melancholia. She sits unable to sleep and yet unable to work, surrounded by unfinished works and unused tools, the potential fragments of the city which she has the knowledge but not the will to build, tormented by a batlike creature with a board, bearing figures, and, behind her, a dark sea, a rainbow and a comet.
>
> What is the cause of her suffering? That, surrounded by every possibility, she cannot find within herself or without the necessity to realize one rather than another. Urban society is, like the desert, a place without limits. The city walls of tradition, mythos and cultus have crumbled. There is no direction in which Ishmael is forbidden or forcibly prevented from moving. The only outside 'necessities' are the random winds of fashion or the lifeless chains of a meaningless job, which, so long as he remains an individual, he can and will reject.[197]

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[197] W.H. Auden, The Enchafèd Flood: or The Romantic Iconography of the Sea, 1951, pp.40-1.

CHAPTER THREE - THE PLACE OF "THE CITY OF DREADFUL NIGHT" IN ENGLISH POETRY

W.H. Auden has said that every genuine poet however minor is unique, a member of a class of one. Without pausing to classify him as either minor or major, an exercise that Auden himself implicitly deplores, this obiter dictum is certainly true of Thomson. Equally no poet, and indeed no poem, is an island. However unusual a poem may be, if it has merit at all it will have been affected. either consciously or unconsciously, by all that is relevant to it, all that has something in common with it in genre, in thought, in imagery, in structure, in language.

There are four major strands in The City of Dreadful Night: there is the plaint of the loss of the loved one and her consequent worship; there is invocation of Night, the desolation of the Waste Land, and the melancholy that reaches the lowest depths of despair; there is the imprisonment of the poet in the City; and there is the strand of unbelief, spun against the very grain of faith. These strands are woven skilfully together to make this a poem which stands alone in English Literature expressing the despair that comes from absolute loss of faith, and it detracts in no measure from the poem's individuality and stature to say that each strand is a recognizable element in the continuing story of our literature. Sometimes we can find one element alone which we may think has contributed to the development of The City, sometimes one or two in combination. But all four come together in a manner to produce the early frisson, the steady emotional frustration, the final hollow emptiness.

i.- Courtly Love and Amoret

In the story of B.V.'s life nothing more intrigued his friends, as we have seen, than the mystery of his relationship with Matilda, and his apparent lifelong devotion to her memory. Fascinating as the subject may be, we must not linger here to examine the psychological details of this part of his troubled life, but to consider its literary genesis and effect. When we read the tenth section of The City of Dreadful Night, the inspired description of the house of shrines and altars in which the dead girl is adored, it may be a little repulsive, but we accept it without demur as something we can understand. We feel instinctively that, unusual as it is, there is about it something familiar, if not easily identified, some echo from the poetry of the past which gives it strength and supports it. In the same way the nun-like figure in the fourth section carries meanings from our literary history, meanings that add many implications to its explicit value, echoes that add depth to the imagery as we first read it, and which we analyse only later.

The dominant element in Thomson's attitude to the memory of Matilda is his worhip of her unblemished chastity, and his anguished cry for what is forever unattainable. This is something more than the superficial Victorian attitude to the sanctity of womanhood (more honoured in the breach than the observance). Here, surely, we have one more echo of the extraordinary ideal of courtly love that developed so surprisingly in twelfth century Provence,[1] probably as a half-conscious and ironical reaction from a high ideal of religious love, and

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[1] C.S. Lewis, The Allegory of Love, 1936.

an implied revenge upon society after the Albigensian massacres.[2] Strangely, if this is an acceptable hypothesis for a most extraordinary literary episode, it may be thought to have its echoes in Thomson's own life-story, and so to give him his poetic revenge on a faith ravished from him.

Whatever its origin, (and there are other theories) the literature of courtly love profoundly affected European society and letters, and itself was modified by racial myth and national genius. But for the Provençal development, Spenser must have found some other form for his allegory, Malory's tales would have been of Celtic heroes, and perhaps less vitally we should have lost the "Idylls of the King". And Thomson, who knew his Spenser well, was surrounded by all the idealized chivalry of the Pre-Raphaelites, whose skirts he brushed as a fellow-writer, and he saw the success of the Poet Laureate's serialization of the story of Arthur. He too attempted to write of chivalric knighthood devoted hopelessly to fair lady, and allowed himself to the full the sentimental latitude of the convention in "Tasso to Leonora" and "Bertram to the Most Noble and Beautiful Lady Geraldine".

In both the fourth and tenth sections of The City the image of the dead love has echoes of the worship of the Virgin, and we can recognize here something of the history of the poetry of courtly love. Lewis sees it as

> spreading out in two directions from the land of its birth. One stream flows down into Italy and, through the poets of the Dolce Stil Nuovo, goes to swell the great sea of the Divine Comedy; and there, at least, the quarrel between Christianity and the love religion

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[2] Denis de Rougement, Passion and Society, (trans.) 1940.

> was made up. Another stream fround its way northward to mingle with the Ovidian tradition which already existed there, and so to produce the French poetry of the twelfth century.

Moreoever he sees the Romantic Movement as "baffling":

> . . . if we choose to neglect the noble viaduct on which the love of chivalry and 'fine fabling' travelled straight across form the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century.

As far as Thomson's City was concerned, the encouragement to linger over lost and hopeless love came across the centuries from the original literary practice of courtly love,through Dante, Spenser and Novalis, and perhaps Baudelaire. And it was no discouragement to the indulgence of this emotion, nostalgic and frustrate, that he was surrounded by Pre-Raphaelites, worshipping their large, fey and langorous women, a worship that reached its sentimental zenith in "The Blessed Damozel".

Another underground stream from the same mediaeval source surfaced once more, but briefly, in the Gothic Novel, and though the nun-like figure, with its burning, bleeding heart in the Desert episode merges into the final picture of the pietà, as we have seen, it is the more easily accepted in the atmosphere of bleeding nuns and ghostlike emanations that 'Monk' Lewis and his successors had led the Victorian reading public to accept, indeed to expect, and which had its most poetical expression in Keats.[3]

Together with Dante, Spenser, a 'romantic', an allegorist, a true son of the Provençal tradition, a great English poet,

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[3] Mario Praz, The Romantic Agony, trs. Angus Davidson, 1970 (first pub'd in English 1933) v. chap. IV, "La Belle Dame sans Merci".

and one for whom Thomson had admiration and whose work he knew well,[4] is a dominant influence on the lost love theme of The City. And indeed Thomson has one outstanding similarity to Spenser, in that both set out plainly, and almost without comment, the pictures of their allegorical episodes. And in this one picture from Section IV of The City:

> O desolation moving with such grace!
> O anguish with such beauty in thy face!
>
> . . .
>
> That lamp she held was her own burning heart,
> Whose blood drops trickled step by step apart . . .

we have all the threads of European art, of religious thought, of sacrifice, of frustrated sexuality, of worshipped chastity, that are also united and distilled in Spenser's Amoret:

> She dolefull Lady, like a dreary Spright,
> Cald by strong charmes out of eternall night,
> Had deathes owne image figurd in her face,
> Full of sad signes, fearefull to liuing grace,
> And with her feeble feet did moue a comely pace.
>
> Her brest all naked, as net iuory,
> Without adorne of gold or siluer bright,
> Wherewith the Craftesman wonts it beautify,
> Of her dew honour was despoyled quight,
> Amd a wide wound therein (O ruefull sight)
> Entrenched deepe with knife accursed keene,
> Yet freshly bleeding forth her fainting spright,
> (The worke of cruell hand) was to be seene,
> That dyde in sanguine red her skin all snowy cleene.
>
> At that wide orifice her trembling hart
> Was drawne forth, and in siluer basin layd,
> Quite through transfixed with a deadly dart,
> And in her bloud yet steeming fresh embayd . . .[5]

We are reminded by Schaefer how integral to Victorian thinking was the image of the dead girl. He reminds us of "Little Nell, Evelyn Hope, Pompilia, Lucy Desborough, Maggie

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[4] Thomson, "An Evening with Spenser", NR, 26 November 1865; and "Spenser - by R.W. Church", a review, Cope's Tobacco Plant, January 1880.

[5] Edmund Spenser, The Faery Queene, Bk.III, Canto xii, vv.19-21.

Tulliver, and Dora Spenlow";[6] and Mario Praz,[7] although lingering lovingly over the sadistic aspect of the love of the fatal woman, begins with "La Belle Dame sans Merci" of Keats; and Keats, too, has lost and mourns his love, whatever may have been the outcome had he not awoken from his dream; but he awakes to the same Waste Land that Thomson must inhabit:

> And this is why I sojourn here
> Alone and palely loitering,
> Though the sedge is wither'd from the lake,
> And no birds sing. [8]

Here is the same loneliness, the same desolation, and the same silence. Thomson's Matilda is in the tradition of women in our literature who, dead or alive, for love or perversion, held their men "in thrall".

ii.- Melancholy Night

Sir Leslie Stephen knew the word 'agnostic' and was spared, possibly in consequence, more probably because he was the cultured and civilized man that Thomson was not, the agonies that Thomson suffered by the complete loss of his faith. But Stephen made one comment that, a little adapted, is apposite. He pointed out that "We are not melancholy because we believe in Hell, but we believe in Hell because we are melancholy." Thomson, we cannot but feel, was trapped within his City because he was in despair, not in despair because he was in the City of Dreadful Night, and the crucial word is 'despair'.

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[6] Schaefer, p.20.

[7] Mario Praz, The Romantic Agony, op.cit., chap.X.

[8] John Keats, "La Belle Dame sans Merci", v.xii.

The poetry of melancholy has in English a long and respectable history. There has for example been much inspiration from brooding over death:

> No longer mourn for me when I am dead
> Than you shall hear the surly sullen bell
> Give warning to the world, that I am fled
> From this vile world, with vilest worms to dwell . . [9].

And this is the essence of romantic melancholy. It is indulged in for its own sweet sake.

In the same vein, but at a higher and more scholarly level, is Milton's invocation of divinest Melancholy in "Il Penseroso". Here there is moreover a premonition of the Melencolia that Thomson describes from Dürer's drawing in the last section of The City:

> Come, pensive Nun, devout and pure,
> Sober, steadfast, and demure,
> All in a robe of darkest grain,
> Flowing with majestic train,
> And sable stole of cypress lawn
> Over thy decent shoulders drawn.
> Come; but keep thy wonted state,
> With even step, and musing gait,
> And looks commercing with the skies,
> Thy wrapt soul sitting in thine eyes:
> There, held in holy passion still,
> Forget thyself to marble, till
> With a sad leaden downward cast
> Thou fix them on the earth as fast. [10]

But of course it is of the pleasures, the civilized pleasures of melancholy that Milton sings; this is what Fletcher is describing in "Nothing's so dainty sweet as lovely melancholy". [11] And so we come down the years to the moral nostalgia of Gray: [12]

> Smiles on past Misfortune's brow
> Soft Reflection's hand can trace,
> And o'er the cheek of Sorrow throw
> A melancholy grace:

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[9] Shakespeare, Sonnet 71.

[10] Milton, "Il Penseroso", 11.31-44.

[11] John Fletcher, The New Valour, Song, III, iii.

[12] Gray, "Ode on the Pleasure Arising from Vicissitude", 11.25-32.

While Hope prolongs our happier hour,
Or deepest shades, that dimly lour
And blacken round our weary way,
Gilds with a gleam of distant day. . . .

which underlines the contrast between this type of contemplative melancholy and the frenetic despair of Thomson. Nothing was there with which he could "gild the distant day". He was, though he would not himself have recognized it, closer in experience to those of whom Gray said

But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page
  Rich with the spoils of time, did ne'er unroll;
Chill Penury repress'd their noble rage,
  And froze the genial current of the soul. [13]

And it is Gray's famous "Elegy" that is the apogee of the genre of melancholy poems, and which Thomson recalls, as we have already noted, not only in the prosody, but also in the very words and atmosphere in Section XVI, where he and others in the City are bereft of

The social pleasures with their genial wit;
  The fascination of the worlds of art,
The glories of the worlds of nature, lit
  By large imagination's glowing heart . . .

We must also remember that for Thomson, his

wine of life is poison mixed with gall,
My noonday passes in a nightmare dream . . .

which brings him nearer to Shelley's expression of melancholy than to that of Keats, for it could not be said of him that he was among those who could "burst Joy's grapes against his palate fine". He was at one with the fourth stanza of Shelley's "Stanzas written in Dejection near Naples":[14]

Yet now despair itself is mild,
  Even as the winds and waters are;
I could lie down like a tired child,
  And weep away the life of care
  Which I have borne and yet must bear,

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[13] Thomas Gray, "Elegy", 11.49-52.

[14] P.B. Shelley, "Stanzas written in Dejection, near Naples", published in Posthumous Poems, 1824, 11.28-36.

Till death like sleep might steal on me,
And I might feel in the warm air
My cheek grow cold, and hear the sea
Breathe o'er my dying brain its last monotony.

Thomson's melancholy makes him a prisoner in his City of Night. "The sable throne" of "night primeval"[15] is an accepted poetic symbol of melancholy and despair. Mankind has an atavistic fear of darkness, and associated it with death, so that it seems fitting and appropriate to us that the curfew tolling "the knell of parting day" should usher in the "Elegy in a Country Churchyard". We are not surprised that Arnold, lost in uncertainty, should choose images of night both to open and to close the pensive despair of "Dover Beach": "The sea is calm to-night" is his beginning, a quiet and matter-of-fact statement that nevertheless has its undertone of melancholy. His conclusion, full of magnificent foreboding, is equally sombre equating night with ignorance and fear. Arnold uses the pathetic fallacy, with 'night' as the natural image, to heighten the sadness of "Rugby Chapel" and to underline the nostalgia in its opening lines:"Coldly, sadly descends/The autumn-evening". The Chapel itself is "Solemn, unlighted, austere/Through the gathering darkness".

Compared with Thomson's use of night as a projection of the black hopelessness within him, both Gray and Arnold used the image of night to produce an atmosphere of sadness and melancholy verging on the sentimental in their contemplative verse. Edward Young,[16] however, nearly a century before, thought of Night as the image of a state of mind not unlike that of Thomson's. For Young, as for Thomson, Night was a

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[15] Alexander Pope, "The Dunciad".

[16] Edward Young, "The Complaint; or, Night Thoughts", op.cit.

proper image for the world in which we live; but, unlike Thomson, Young was an optimist and his Day was the world into which we shall be born after death. From this point of view, earthly existence is equally dreary (though for contrasting reasons) for both Young and Thomson. At the beginning of his "Night I", Young can say:

> . . . and night,
> Ev'n in the zenith of her dark domain,
> Is sunshine to the colour of my fate.

He can say this because

> This is the desart, this the solitude:
> How populous, how vital, is the grave!
> This is creation's melancholy vault,
> The vale funereal, the sad cypress gloom;
> The land of apparitions, empty shades!

But the great difference between Young and Thomson lies in the next two lines:

> All, all on earth is shadow, all beyond
> Is substance; the reverse is folly's creed . . .

Because of this, Young can breakaway from

> . . . night, and all of awful, night presents
> To thought, or sense . . .
> ["Night IX"]

and in another mood say instead:

> . . . Auspicious midnight! hail!
> The world excluded, ev'ry passion hush'd,
> And open'd a calm intercourse with heaven,
> Here the soul sits in council; ponders past,
> Predestines future action; sees, not feels,
> Tumultuous life, and reasons with the storm;
> All her lies answers, and thinks down her charms.
> What awful joy! what mental liberty!
> I am not pent in darkness; rather say
> (If not too bold) in darkness I'm embower'd.
> Delightful gloom! the clust'ring thoughts around
> Spontaneious rise, and blossom in the shade;
> But droop by day, and sicken in the sun . . .
> ["Night V"]

In a few verses of Thomas Cooper's "<u>The Purgatory of</u>

Suicides[17] we perhaps find something of the same intensity of emotional response to night that we find in Thomson's poem. Since The Purgatory of Suicides is not easily available, it may be permissible to quote from it extensively. There are ten books of The Purgatory and the whole poem runs to more than 350 pages. Its third edition was published in 1853, seventeen years before Thomson began The City. It is in the first and early stanzas of Book V that Cooper calls upon night to hide the social crimes against which he battled, both physically and in his poetry, in terms as fraught with feeling as any of Thomson's invocations:

> Hail eldest Night! Mother of human fear!
> Vague solitude where infant Man first felt
> His native helplessness! Beneath whose drear
> And solemn coverture he, trembling, knelt
> To what in thy vast womb of darkness dwelt
> Unseen, unknown! . . . [Bk.V, i.]
>
> Hail starless darkness! - sterile silence hail!
> Would that o'er Chaos thy wide rule had been
> Perpetual, and reptile Man's birth-wail
> Had ne'er been heard; or, over huge, obscene,
> And monstrous births of ocean or terrene
> For ever thou hadst brooded; so that Light
> Had ne'er mocked mortals, nor the morning sheen
> Broke thy stern sigil to give baleful sight
> To Man - whose look upon his fellow is a blight!
>
> Season of sepulchred and secret sin!
> Beneath thy pall what vileness doth Man hide,
> From age to age, - the moral Harlequin
> Who dons the saint to play the fratricide.
> Villany's jubilee! - Crime's revel-tide! -
> Whose archives opened would yon judge proclaim
> More criminal than the thief he lately tried, -
> Yon priest an atheist, - and hold up to shame
> Myriads of knaves writ 'honest' in the roll of Fame!
> [Bk.V, ii and iii.]

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[17] Thomas Cooper, the Chartist, The Purgatory of Suicides: A Prison Rhyme, 1845, 1853 (3rd ed.) Thomson must have been in Cooper's company at least once. Bradlaugh, in the first of a series of articles commencing 13 February 1864 in NR. says that "B.V." was present on the first day of his three-day debate with Cooper on Monday, 1 February 1864, and wrote the poem now known as "Versification of Thomas Cooper's Argument" that night and gave it to Bradlaugh. The poem now appears in Thomson, Vol.II.

And, were thy pall, dim Night, asunder torn
And ugliest portraits thou conceal'st laid bare,
For worship men would soon exchange their scorn.
With flagrant front do not Day's vices glare,
And men that they are virtues sleekly swear?
Darkness! still hold thy provident control
O'er half man's life, that some thy cloak may wear
To sin with shame: more seemly 'tis than stole
Of sanctity that hides, by day, the filthy soul.
[Bk.V, viii.]

Thomas Cooper's visions of night were not less horrific than those of Thomson, but they were different. He was socially conscious, concerned with the improvement of social conditions for his fellow man, and he was moreover a moralist. Thomson was neither of these. He remained forever in Young's world, which was always in night, and he had forfeited the promise of Young's real day, which came after death. So awful was this situation to him that he had no time to concern himself with the betterment of man on earth. As a result Thomson brings the whole meaning of melancholy poetry, especially as symbolized by the image of night, to a new and more hopeless level of despair. For him life could only be

But as if blacker night could dawn on night,
With tenfold gloom on moonless night unstarred,
A sense more tragic than defeat and blight
More desperate than strife with hope debarred. . .
. . . .
The sense that every struggle brings defeat
Because Fate holds no prize to crown success;
That all the oracles are dumb or cheat
Because they have no secret to express . . .

'Melancholy' had for long been a catharsis for its devotees among the poets. It was sought, it was relished, it was expressed, it passed. For Thomson there was no catharsis. The City was unsought, it was suffered, and it remained.

iii.- The City

In a mainly agricultural economy, when it was an easy walk to escape into the countryside, it is not surprising that the City was not a major source of literary inspiration. Langland in The Prologue of Piers Plowman clearly sees it as a meeting place, as it is, of course, for Chaucer's Pilgrims. For Ben Jonson it is the setting in which his crooks and wide boys naturally operate, as they did in the Cities of the Plain, and as they do today. It provides for Bunyan the image of the City of Destruction, which was also Jonson's city, but on which he passes moral judgment; and for him, as for Saint Augustine and other religious mystics, it serves as the promise of the after-life, the place of immortality, the everlasting and beautiful Celestial City. Blake shared the vision of the New Jerusalem and at the same time saw modern civilization's "dark Satanic mills". For Milton, on the other hand, the city was a place of contemplation and scholarly study: "Towered Cities please us then/And the busy haunts of men".[18] It is left to Shelley to say:

> Hell is a city much like London -
> A populous and smoky city;
> There are all sorts of people undone,
> And there is little or no fun done;
> Small justice shown, and still less pity. [19]

As a source of poetic inspiration the city came only gradually to compete with the traditional subjects. The sub-title of John Gay's "Trivia", published in 1716, was "The Art of Walking the Streets of London". The work is aptly described by Johnson[20] as "spritely, various and pleasant".

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[18] Milton, "L'Allegro", 11.117-8.

[19] Shelley, "Peter Bell the Third", Part III - Hell.

[20] Samuel Johnson, Lives of the Poets, 1779-81.

It is a mine of information about eighteenth century manners, and shows for example, that a traffic jam in the Strand was even more disastrous then than now. It is perhaps with Samuel Johnson's "London" that the "genre of City Poetry" begins. It proves a fit subject for the august Doctor's ire and wit. and proves, if proof were needed, that cities have altered in size rather than in their nature since his day, and people have altered not at all:

> Here malice, rapine, accident, conspire,
> And now a rabble rages, now a fire;
> Their ambush here relentless ruffians lay,
> And here the fell attorney prowls for prey;
> Here failing houses thunder on your head,
> And here a female atheist talks you dead.
> [London: A poem: In imitation of the third satire of Juvenal. Written in 1738.]

and, amusingly enough, he tirades against the immigrants of his day, giving unrestrained (and unreproved) vent to his xenophobia. But his comment on the attitude of the more fortunate to those in the city who are the victims of poverty would have been echoed by Thomson:"SLOW RISES WORTH" he says in capital letters "BY POVERTY DEPRESSED" (and this might well be taken as the theme and motto for Gissing's novels). And he recognizes the sense of leaving the city (where rents, then as now, were absurdly high), for the countryside where they were cheaper and there were visions of Arcadia, without showing the least intention of doing so.

Except when the image of the city has been used in allegory, its appearance in poetry had been, until about the time of Shelley's comment, descriptive and objective. Interestingly enough it is Wordsworth, the poet who first made the subjective relationship of man to nature the mainstay of his thinking, who is also the first major poet to react emotionally to the London of his day. The sonnet "Composed upon Westminster Bridge" in 1802 is still probably one of the

finest lyrical descriptions of a city. Written in a mood of exaltation, it represents only one aspect of his reaction to the "Great Wen". For the rest, we must look in Book VII of The Prelude, where we have a vivid and balanced description of the varied aspects of the city and its "mighty concourse", surveyed, as he tells us with typical and endearing solemnity, "With no unthinking mind". And indeed when Wordsworth sees the city from something of the same viewpoint, as that from which Thomson must have seen it, we have that endless search for "something far more deeply interfused"[21] that is the very mainspring of his poetry:

> As the black storm upon the mountain top
> Sets off the sunbeam in the valley, so
> That huge fermenting mass of human-kind
> Serves as a solemn background, or relief,
> To single forms and objects, whence they draw,
> For feeling and contemplative regard,
> More than inherent liveliness and power.
> How oft, amid those overflowing streets,
> Have I gone forward with the crowd, and said
> Unto myself, "The face of every one
> That passes by me is a mystery!"
> Thus have I looked nor ceased to look oppressed
> By thoughts of what and whither, when and how,
> Until the shapes before my eyes became
> A second-sight procession, such as glides
> Over still mountains, or appears in dreams . . . [22]
> [The Prelude, Bk.VII, 11.619-49]

Moreoever, the city by night makes a special impact on him, as it does on Thomson:

> The blended calmness of the heavens and earth,
> Moonlight and stars, and empty streets, and sounds
> Unfrequent as in deserts . . .
> [Ibid., 11.660-2]

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[21] Wordsworth, "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey".

[22] cf. The City, Section VII: "Some say that phantoms . . ." and Section XV: "Wherever men are gathered . . .".

Wordsworth himself supplies the diagnosis of the difference between the two poets in their reaction to the

> blank confusion! true epitome
> Of what the mighty City is herself
> To thousands upon thousands of her sons,
> Living amid the same perpetual whirl
> Of trivial objects, melted and reduced
> To one identity . . . [23]

For he says:

> This did I feel, in London's vast domain.
> The Spirit of Nature was upon me there;
> The soul of Beauty and enduring Life
> Vouchsafed her inspiration, and diffused,
> Through meagre lines and colours, and the press
> Of self-destroying, transitory things,
> Composure, and ennobling Harmony. [24]

And although Thomson, as we know from his descriptions of Jersey[25] and of the countryside around Central City,[26] had an eye for country and an appreciation of its beauty and grandeur, it was an objective, cataloguing kind of response, and not a source of spiritual solace or release.

In "Glasgow" Alexander Smith deliberately turns away from the poetry of 'nature', for he says: "I know the tragic hearts of towns" and "Instead of shores where ocean beats,/I hear the ebb and flow of streets." It would be easy to believe that Thomson had read Smith's City Poems,[27] and indeed it was possible that he did, for they were published in 1857 when their young author was only twenty. On the other hand, it may be that the similarities of Smith's descriptions

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[23] The Prelude, Bk.VII, 11.722-7.

[24] Ibid., 11.765-71.

[25] There are descriptions of Jersey coastal scenery in "Ronald and Helen"; in a letter to Mrs John Thomson quoted in Salt, p.45; and in a small notebook dated 1861-2, mentioned in Salt, p.45.

[26] In a letter to W.M. Rossetti dated 5 August 1872, Salt. pp.82-9. There is a copy of this letter in the Bodleian.

[27] Alexander Smith, City Poems, Cambridge, 1857.

of Glasgow, and its effect upon him, and Thomson's of his City of Night, owe more to the similarities of all great industrial cities than to any prompting that Smith's work gave to Thomson's already active invention. He certainly describes the City with more appreciation of its beauty "Sad and stern" than ever Thomson shows. He describes how it may

> Smoulder in smoky sunsets, flare
> On rainy nights, with street and square
> Lie empty to the stars.
> From terrace proud to alley base
> I know thee as my mother's face.
>
> When sunset bathes thee in his gold
> In wreaths of bronze thy sides are rolled,
> Thy smoke is dusky fire;
> And, from the glory round thee poured,
> A sunbeam like an angel's sword
> Shivers upon a spire.
> Thus have I watched thee, Terror! Dream!
> While the blue Night crept up the stream. [28]

Whether Smith had really suffered the loss of a woman he loved (and 1857 was the year of his marriage), or whether he was heightening the melancholy by a typical Victorian device, it is not possible to say from the available biographical material. Nevertheless he too has his lost loved one, and he too has his "Old God's acre" which he must visit:

> While o'er thy walls the darkness sails,
> I lean against the churchyard rails;
> Up in the midnight towers
> The belfried spire, the street is dead,
> I hear in silence overhead
> The clang of iron hours:
> It moves me not - I know her tomb
> Is yonder in the shapeless gloom. [28]

When at the end of his narrative poem, "Horton", published in the same volume, we read:

> Across the moonlight spaces and the shades
> I walked in silence, through pale silver streets,
> Athwart a desolate and moon-bleached square,
> Over a white and solitary bridge,
> Until I reached my home. . .

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[28] Alexander Smith, "Glasgow", City Poems, Cambridge, 1857.

we cannot but recall Thomson's

> Although lamps burn along the silent streets,
> Even when moonlight silvers empty squares
> The dark holds countless lanes and close retreats . . .

But alas! Thomson never reaches home!

It is impossible not to mention the unfortunate Emma Whitehead, whose "imperative duty" it was to "amend" her "adverse fortunes by undertaking the arduous design of publishing by subscription". Her book,[29] she says, "is written to retrieve my position, and to re-establish myself in my profession", and she was, she tells us, the daughter of a merchant of London. Whoever the unfortunate lady may have been (and Charles Dickens apparently saw fit to subscribe, charitably perhaps, for two copies of her work; and the Drapers' Company for ten), she lacks nothing in patriotic outlook, grasp of cliché, and homage to the gods of the counting house:

> It is not love of commerce can impress
> The mind with degradation, since it shows
> In the pursuit of human happiness,
> There is an equal share of human woes . . .
> [Emma Whitehead, "The City"]

she says, somewhat ambiguously, and adds firmly:

> But commerce cherishes all faculties
> Of generous fellowship and equal claim,
> Develops all the mental energies,
> And gives to life its aspect and its aim.
> [Ibid.]

She was obviously a dutiful daughter, and one wonders what adverse fortune can have overtaken her. It is a temptation that must be resisted to linger over her work and wonder once again that worthiness and (presumably) virtue are such poor seed-beds for poetry. But we must allow her, I think, some little merit in her first few lines. Her description of the

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[29] Emma Whitehead, The Romance of the City: or, Legends of London, published for the authoress at 18 Newman Street, Oxford Street, London, 1854.

City has some force, and is close enough to Thomson's description for us to be sure that a similar view of the London scene had merged into his first description of the City of Dreadful Night:

> While yet we watch the river's course,
> Till in the distance seen no more,
> The waters, glittering from their source,
> Lead us to trace the farther shore.
> We see the mighty City stand,
> As girdled by the waters round;
> The hoary buildings on its strand,
> Of heavy structure, form a mound
> Which, like an iron belt, has bound
> The giant stronghold of the land.
> [Ibid.]

It is in the work of a poet and novelist for whom Thomson had a high regard, and who was among the first to recognize the merits of The City that we can find another and more precise anticipation of Thomson's poetry. "The Sleeping City", written in 1851, owes its inspiration to the same tale from The Arabian Nights that is the source of "The Doom". It also contains images and descriptions, and an atmosphere that presages The City of Dreadful Night. The Princess in Meredith's poem

> Surveyed in wonder chilled with dread
> The seemingness of Death, not dead;
> Life's semblance but without its storm,
> And silence frosting every form;

> Crowned figures, cold and grouping slaves,
> Like suddenly arrested waves
> About to sink, about to rise, -
> Strange meaning in their stricken eyes . . .

and again:

> Surveyed in awe this wealth and state,
> Touched by the finger of a Fate,
> And drew with slow-awakening fear
> The sternness of the atmosphere . . .

and up to this point we have a preparatory sketch of "The Doom of a City". Then the mood changes. Meredith says that, just as the Princess is awe-stricken in the petrified

city, so he paces through the modern city at night, and in a verse that reminds us how important the street lamps were for Thomson, he says:

> For now the quiet stars look down
> On lights as quiet as their own;
> The streets that groaned with traffic show
> As if with silence paved below . . .

He sketches the silence of night-time which enfolds the city, and which becomes an effective element in the nightmare of Thomson's creation:

> The clattering chariot rolls not by,
> The windows show no waking eye,
> The houses smoke not, and the air
> Is clear, and all the midnight fair.
>
> The centre of the striving world,
> Round which the human fate is curled,
> To which the future crieth wild, -
> Is pillowed like a cradled child.
>
> The Palace roof that guards a crown,
> The mansion swathed in dreamy down,
> Hovel, court, and alley-shed,
> Sleep in the calmness of the dead.

In this calmness come the dreams which in Thomson are daydreams when man is blessed with fame and with good intent and "noble things in darkness grope". But in Meredith, as in Thomson, this comes to nothing; and in its way Meredith's conclusion is as shattering as Thomson's:

> Methinks in all around I see
> This Picture in Eternity; -
>
> A marbled City planted there
> With all its pageants and despair;
> A peopled hush, a Death not dead,
> But stricken by Medusa's head; -
>
> And in the Gorgon's glance for aye
> The lifeless immortality
> Reveals in sculptured calmness all
> Its latest life beyond recall.

Of all Thomson's poetic contemporaries, the one who suffered most through his religious doubting was A.H. Clough, Arnold's "too quick despairer". No two lives could be more

dissimilar than those of Thomson and Clough, for Clough had all the advantages of education, of school and university, Rugby and Oxford, that Thomson was denied. And the urbanity of the reading party, of the "professor's logical whereto and why"[30] is of the very stuff of Clough's poetry. The despair which he felt is sublimated in quiet intimate humour, irony and wit, through which the deeper feeling seeps, rather than finds expression. Clough was moreover, if never wealthy, at least cushioned from all contact with Thomson's world, and the life of the City was filtered to him through an aesthetic haze. "In a London Square" might equally well have been written in a country garden, and "In the Great Metropolis" is a pleasant little moral satire in the manner of "The Latest Decalogue". Only in Book IX of "The Bothie of Tober-n-vuolich" do we have any sustained description of "some populous city" verging on sentimentality:

> He that goes forth to his walks, while speeding to the suburb,
> Sees sights only peaceful and pure: as labourers settling
> Slowly to work, in their limbs the lingering sweetness of slumber . . .

and so it continues: "Half-awake servant-maids" (not yet with Eliot's "damp souls"[31]) "unfastening drowsy shutters". The picture that builds up, a sort of verbal version of Ford Madox Brown's "Work", with idealized labourers, and only at the end a glimpse of the seamier side, where in lines that anticipate MacNeice, the light of the new day means "that the whole great wicked artificial civilised fabric - /All its unfinished houses, lots for sale, and railway out-works -/Seems reaccepted . . ." At least once Tennyson felt more intensely

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[30] W.H. Auden, "Danse Macabre".

[31] T.S. Eliot, "Morning at the Window".

than this the impact of the City when he described "the long unlovely street", where "ghastly thro' the drizzling rain/On the bald street breaks the blank day".[32] Here too is identification, the pathetic fallacy applied to nature and place together.

Although Matthew Arnold had a more realistic vision of the great city than had Clough, his background and his position in a scholarly society led him to see it from time to time in much the same way. There is the same idealizing of the crowd in the description of Hyde Park in his "Epilogue to Lessing's Laocoön":

> Onward we moved, and reach'd the Ride
> Where gaily flows the human tide.
> Afar, in rest the cattle lay;
> We heard, afar, faint music play;
> But agitated, brisk, and near,
> Men, with their stream of life, were here.
> Some hang upon the rails, and some
> On foot behind them go and come.
> This through the Ride upon his steed
> Goes slowly by, and this at speed.
> The young, the happy, and the fair,
> The old, the sad, the worn, were there;
> Some vacant, and some musing went,
> And some in talk and merriment.

He could find, as Clough did, a rural peace in London, in his case, in Kensington Gardens:

> In this lone, open glade I lie,
> Screen'd by deep boughs on either hand;
> And at its end, to stay the eye,
> Those black-crown'd, red-boled pine-trees stand!
>
> Birds here make song, each bird has his,
> Across the girdling city's hum.
> How green under the boughs it is!
> How thick the tremulous sheep-cries come!

("Lines written in Kensington Gardens")

But he was conscious, as Clough was not, of "the huge world which roars by". And in "Thyrsis", his elegy for Clough, he laments that he must listen to the whispers of his friend's

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[32] Tennyson, "In Memoriam", vii.

voice "through the great town's harsh, heart-wearying roar".

It is in his poem "A Summer Night" that Arnold shows a capacity for some understanding of the plight of those who, like Thomson, were prisoners of the City, and of its life. The opening description of the City by night, with its light and shadow and sense of brooding menace, are consistent with Thomson's own vision:

> In the deserted, moon-blanched street,
> How lonely rings the echo of my feet!
> Those windows, which I gaze at, frown,
> Silent and white, unopening down,
> Repellent as the world . . .

But to Arnold a sudden gleam of moonlight brings release into memories of a far different scene (a little reminiscent of "Dover Beach") and he is led to consider what should be the direction of his life. The choice lies between the madness of the metropolis:

> For most men in a brazen prison live,
> Where, in the sun's hot eye,
> With heads bent o'er their toil, they languidly
> Their lives to some unmeaning taskwork give,
> Dreaming of nought beyond their prison-wall.
> And as, year after year,
> Fresh products of their barren labour fall
> From their tired hands, and rest
> Never yet comes more near,
> Gloom settles slowly down over their breast;
> And while they try to stem
> The waves of mournful thought by which they are prest,
> Death in their prison reaches them,
> Unfreed, having seen nothing, still unblest. . . .

or to be the slaves of unknown forces:

> . . . a few,
> Escape their prison and depart
> On the wide ocean of life anew.
> There the freed prisoner, where'er his heart
> Listeth will sail;
> Nor doth he know how there prevail,
> Despotic on that sea,
> Trade-winds which cross it from eternity. [33]

And in this conflict we are very close indeed to Thomson's

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[33] Matthew Arnold, "A Summer Night".

City; as we are again when in "The Buried Life" Arnold says:

> But often, in the world's most crowded streets,
> But often, in the din of strife,
> There rises an unspeakable desire
> After the knowledge of our buried life;
> A thirst to spend our fire and restless force
> In tracking out our true, original course;
> A longing to inquire
> Into the mystery of this heart which beats
> So wild, so deep in us - to know
> When our lives come and where they go.

And some years later he returned to the feelings of his youth at Rugby to find his "original course", and finding this life a boundless waste, he looked forward, as Bunyan and Saint Augustine had looked forward, to the City of God.

None of the poets we have mentioned, no one else before or since (except possibly Louis MacNeice) has been possessed by the City, body and soul, as Thomson was. It surrounded him physically, it dominated him emotionally, it provided the framework of his thinking, and the imagery of his greatest poem. And his greatest poem sprang from despair; and the despair, as Burton had foreseen, from Atheism.

iv.- Shelley and Atheism

Atheism is a word of the late sixteenth century, and Bacon has wise and cautionary comments to make about atheists, though he regards them as likely to be sober citizens and of no danger to the State(and Shelley quotes from Moral Essays to this effect in the notes to "Queen Mab"). But for Milton they are the sons of Belial:

> To him no temple stood
> Or altar smoked; yet who more oft than he
> In temples and at altars, when the priest
> Turns atheist, as did Eli's sons, who filled
> With lust and violence the house of God?

> In courts and palaces he also reigns,
> And in luxurious cities, where the noise
> Of riot ascends above their loftiest towers,
> And injury and outrage; and, when night
> Darkens the streets, then wander forth the sons
> Of belial, flown with insolence and wine,
> Witness the streets of Sodom . . . [34]

This is not the contemplative or thoughtful atheist; this is the blasphemer, and it is interesting that Milton associates him with the vice of the cities, as indeed does Dr Johnson, though in more cynical style, for "here a female atheist talks you dead".[35]

Though atheists existed, were known to exist, were called by that name and were apparently tolerated from Elizabethan times, atheism in poetry is comparatively unknown until the nineteenth century, and even then it had its dangers, for the blasphemy laws were still on the statute book and could be invoked.[36] By the beginning of the nineteenth century Voltaire, Rousseau, Hume, Locke, the French Revolution, and Godwin, were lying in wait for the enthusiasms of a poetic genius; and they were not waiting in vain, for these and similar influences came together to fire the poetry of Shelley. Sent down from Oxford for distributing an atheist pamphlet, he straightway composed "Queen Mab", an atheist poem. Shelley's development from this atheist position to pantheism and thence to a kind of transcendentalism is well appreciated and documented, but we cannot follow it here in

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[34] Milton, Paradise Lost, Bk.I, 492-503.

[35] Samuel Johnson, "London", op.cit.

[36] The last trial under the blasphemy laws was that of G.W. Foote, editor of The Freethinker, in 1883. See Warren Sylvester Smith, The London Heretics, 1870-1914, 1967. It is probable that only Thomson's personal obscurity and the limited circulation of The National Reformer saved him from a similar charge.

detail, except in so far as it influenced the thought, or found reflection in the poetry of James Thomson (B.V.) and affected The City of Dreadful Night. Shelley was for Thomson always the poet par excellence, and his articles on Shelley[37] show a very real understanding of his meaning, and contain on occasion critical comment of real insight. Thomson had studied Shelley's poetry in detail, sufficiently indeed to be able to discuss textual amendations with William Michael Rossetti, who gave Thomson a copy of his edition of the poems.[38]

Thomson's best work on Shelley is contained in his letter to 'Eikonoklastes', published in The National Reformer in 1860 and reprinted in Biographical and Critical Studies. Here he gives a brief but reasonably complete analysis of Shelley's 'religious' opinions, and indeed he defends him (unnecessarily in the Reformer) from the charge of atheism. Schaefer, as we have seen, traces Thomson's progression from theism to atheism, and it is worth noting that the two main articles on Shelley were written during his early, deistic phase.

It is necessary in order to show the depth of Thomson's understanding of Shelley's work to quote extensively from Thomson's "Letter" (though it is not long, even in its complete version). He starts, reasonably enough, with Shelley's immature work, but the opening quotation is of special importance, as we shall see later, in relation to the

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[37] Thomson's work on Shelley was collected and published in 1884: Shelley, a Poem; with Other Writings Relating to Shelley, by the Late James Thomson ('B.V.'): to which is Added an Essay on The Poems of William Blake, by the same author. Printed for Private Circulation by Charles Whittingham & Co London, Chiswick Press, 1884.

[38] Salt, pp.72-6.

final position of Thomson's own thought:

[from Biographical and Critical Studies, published by Reeves and Turner and Bertram Dobell, 1896]:

> Let us begin by putting the "Queen Mab" out of court. It was written when he was a mere youth, and its doctrines are shortly condemned in a couple of sentences by himself, written in some after year. "This materialism is a seducing system of young and superficial minds. It allows its disciples to talk, and dispenses them from thinking." These words are from his fragment "On Life," and allude to his own early materialism.
>
> "Alastor," written in 1815, is pervaded with an indefinite Nature-worship, which you would probably call Cosmism. This reappears, much modified or developed, sometimes seemingly contradicted, in all the more important of his subsequent poems. [p.284]

and

> In the preface to the "Revolt of Islam," written in 1817, Shelley speaks of Supreme Being and Deity, not, as heretofore, of Power. He declares that he does not speak against the Supreme Being. In the first half of the first canto he distinctly and magnificently develops a sort of Manicheism. [p.285]

and

> This philosophy is yet firther expounded in the "Prometheus Unbound," written in 1819. Herein Jupiter, the representative of the Evil spirit, is cast down, and "the tyranny of heaven shall never be reassumed." [p.285]

and

> But the most prominent and pervading idea of the poem is Pantheistic. The Good spirit, which at last triumphs, is, indeed, typified in the Titan Prometheus, and not in a man; but no faith in or worship of this deliverer is required from men who would be saved. The Universal Mind is freed and purified; the earth and the moon grow more glorious, and fertile, and beautiful, inspired by the renewed health of the informing spirit. The poem is an apotheosis of the One Infinite Soul, self-subsisting, informing all things, one and the same in all masks of man, and beast, and worm, and plant, and slime. The conclusion of the"Sensitive Plant," written in 1820, puts forth somewhat hesitatingly a species of transcendental idealism, which there is no space here for considering. [p.286]

and

> "Hellas" (in the wonderful chorus commencing, "Worlds on worlds are rolling ever, from creation to decay") contains a noble recognition of the character of Jesus

> Christ, a recognition much more decided than that in the First Act of the Prometheus. [p.286]

and he says of "Adonais":

> Such doctrine as is expressed and implied in ["Adonais"] differs little from what is called pure Theism. It simply dwells so continually on the Infinity of God as to overlook, or slightly regard His Personality: it is Spiritualism and Theism, but of the Greeks rather than the Hebrews. [pp.287-8]

and:

> So much for formulas: but, of course, we are agreed that Shelley's real religious character consisted in his unquenchable love and reverence for all holiness, truth and beauty. He believed so much more than the generality of us, he strove with so unusual an ardour to realise his belief in his life, that he is necessarily accounted an infidel and semi-maniac by the great majority. [39] [p.288]

Surprisingly it was not the poems he admired, nor the final and unfinished magnificence of "The Triumph of Life" that directly influenced The City of Dreadful Night. That was left to "Queen Mab", the poem that Thomson had explicitly "put out of court". For all his understanding of the finer flights of Shelley's work, for all the range of his reading and appreciation, Thomson's finest work springs from the agony of his limitations. As a result the philosophy of the intelligent, frustrated, middle-aged man is the philosophy of the brilliant intellectual adolescent. But it must be remembered that, in putting this into the poetry of agnosticism, he is expressing a genuine agony of mind, the distress of soul (though he might have rejected the word 'soul') of a mature human being. Indeed he was very much in the position

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[39] That Thomson was not exaggerating, may be seen from the criticisms of the nineteenth century writer, J.B. Selkirk, Ethics and Aesthetics of Modern Poetry, 1878:

> That the Atheism - or at least the pantheism - of Shelley was a mental unsoundness of a constitutional and hereditary kind, does not, we think, admit of a doubt.

that Shelley understood with compassion in "Queen Mab" itself, where he says, echoing Gray:

> How many a rustic Milton has passed by,
> Stifling the speechless longings of his heart,
> In unremitting drudgery and care!
> How many a vulgar Cato has compelled
> His energies, no longer tameless then,
> To mould a pin, or fabricate a nail!
> How many a Newton, to whose passive ken
> Those mighty spheres that gem infinity
> Were only specks of tinsel, fixed in Heaven
> To light the midnights of his native town! [40]

But there is, of course, an immense difference between the two poets. Even in "Queen Mab" Shelley is aware of the veil that divides the real from the ideal:

> Soul of the Universe! eternal spring
> Of life and death, of happiness and woe,
> Of all that chequers the phantasmal scene
> That floats before our eyes in wavering light,
> Which gleams but on the darkness of our prison,
> Whose chains and massy walls
> We feel, but cannot see. [41]

- a veil which Thomson explicitly finds hides nothing, for men

> pierce life's pleasant veil of various error
> To reach that void of darkness and old terror
> Wherein expire the lamps of hope and faith.

There is little doubt that many of Thomson's ideas came not only from "Queen Mab" but also from the notes that accompanied it. Can we doubt that Section XVII of <u>The City</u> owes some of its inspiration to Section II of "Queen Mab": the "supernal lights/Around the blue vault obdurate as steel", and the "mighty marching" and the "golden burning" must remind us of Shelley's "black concave" and that

> Countless and unending orbs
> In mazy motion intermingled,
> Yet still fulfilled immutably

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[40] Shelley, "Queen Mab", Section V, 137-46.

[41] <u>Ibid</u>., Section VI, 190-6.

Eternal Nature's law.
Above, below, around,
The circling systems formed
A wilderness of harmony;
Each with undeviating aim,
In eloquent silence, through the depths of space. [42]

And in the sermon in the cathedral of The City we find more echoes. The Speaker says:

Nothing is of us but the mouldering flesh,
Whose elements dissolve and merge afresh
In earth, air, water, plants, and other men.

Shelley had already included this in his pantheistic view of nature:

'There's not one atom of yon earth
But once was living man;
Nor the minutest drop of rain,
That hangeth in its thinnest cloud,
But flowed in human veins . . . [43]

Equally influential were Shelley's notes, for Thomson was, as far as we can ascertain, not given to the reading of scientific works, and in all probability was aware of the development of scientific thinking only at second hand. Certainly his one attempt at criticism of a scientific work[44] was disastrous and he never ventured into that field again. Nor is there any direct reference in his work to the views of Darwin or the theories of Lyall. But almost every aspect of Thomson's disbelief is contained in this one note by Shelley:

> The plurality of worlds, - the indefinite immensity of the universe, is a most awful subject of contemplation. He who rightly feels its mystery and grandeur is in no danger of seduction from the falsehoods of religious systems, or of deifying the principle of the universe. It is impossible to believe that the Spirit that pervades this infinite machine begat a son upon the body of a

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[42] "Queen Mab", Sec. VI, 190-6.

[43] Ibid., Section II, 211-5.

[44] v. Frederick Harrison, The Meaning of History, reviewed NR., 3 January 1863.

Jewish woman; or is angered at the consequences of that necessity, which is a synonym of itself. All that miserable tale of the Devil, and Eve, and an Intercessor, with the childish mummeries of the God of the Jews, is irreconcilable with the knowledge of the stars. The works of His fingers have borne witness against Him.

The nearest of the fixed stars is inconceivably distant from the earth, and they are probably proportionably distant from each other. By a calculation of the velocity of light, Sirius is supposed to be at least 54,224,000,000 miles from the earth [1]. That which appears only like a thin and silvery cloud streaking the heaven is in effect composed of innumerable clusters of suns, each shining with its own light, and illuminating numbers of planets that revolve around them. Millions and millions of suns are ranged around us, all attended by innumerable worlds, yet calm, regular, and harmonious, all keeping the paths of immutable necessity. [45]

[1] See Nicholson's Encyclopedia, art. Light

The last word of this note is 'necessity' and it is the doctrine of 'Necessity' expounded by Shelley in "Queen Mab" that had the greatest influence on the development of The City. When Thomson says, in Section XIV:

We bow down to the universal laws,
Which never had for man a special clause
  Of cruelty or kindness, love or hate:
If toads and vultures are obscene to sight,
If tigers burn with beauty and with might,
  Is it by favour or by wrath of Fate?

All substance lives and struggles evermore
Through countless shapes continually at war,
  By countless interactions interknit:
If one is born a certain day on earth,
All times and forces tended to that birth,
  Not all the world could change or hinder it.

I find no hint throughout the Universe
Of good or ill, of blessing or of curse;
  I find alone Necessity Supreme . . .

he surely had in mind Shelley's note to Section VI of "Queen Mab":

He who asserts the doctrine of Necessity means that, contemplating the events which compose the moral and material universe, he beholds only an immense and uninterrupted chain of causes and effects, no one of which

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[45] "Queen Mab", note to Section I, 252, 253.

could occupy, or act in any other place than it does act. The idea of necessity is obtained by our experience of the connection between objects, the uniformity of the operations of nature, the constant conjunction of similar events, and the consequent inference of one from the other. Mankind are therefore agreed in the admission of necessity, if they admit that these two circumstances take place in voluntary action. Motive is to voluntary action in the human mind what cause is to effect in the material universe. The word liberty, as applied to the mind, is analogous to the word chance as applied to matter; they spring from an ignorance of the certainty of the conjunction of antecedents and consequents.

Every human being is irresistibly impelled to act precisely as he does act: in the eternity which preceded his birth a chain of causes was generated, which, operating under the name of motives, make it impossible that any thought of his mind, or any action of his life, should be otherwise than it is. [46]

One more, one final echo of the young ecstatic, is word for word in the despairing lines of the later poet. Again in Section XIV of The City we have the final outcry in a line that epitomizes man's capacity to find suffering in the mingling of despair and relief that comes with the abandonment of hope:

Good tidings of great joy for you, for all:
There is no God; no Fiend with names divine
Made us and tortures us; if we must pine,
It is to satiate no Being's gall.

This very phrase is to be found in Section VII of "Queen Mab":

'There is no God!
Nature confirms the faith his death-groan sealed:
Let heaven and earth, let man's revolving race,
His ceaseless generations tell their tale;
Let every part depending on the chain
That links it to the whole, point to the hand
That grasps its term! let every seed that falls
In silent eloquence unfold its store
Of argument; infinity within,
Infinity without, belie creation . . ."

But that Thomson could proceed no further with the thinking of his most admired poet we see if we glance at Shelley's note:

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[46] "Queen Mab", note to Section VI, 198.

> This negation must be understood solely to affect a creative Deity. The hypothesis of a pervading Spirit co-eternal with the universe remains unshaken. [47]

Though Thomson was more directly influenced by Shelley than by any other poet, he should not be thought of as a sole atheist writing in an atmosphere of total belief. The uncertainty, doubt, and spirit of enquiry of nineteenth century literature have never been better described than by Basil Willey, writing about "In Memoriam".[48] Speaking of the nineteenth century he says:

> . . . Of course, the challenge of science to religious orthodoxy was no new manifestation peculiar to the century. Copernicus had challenged it by destroying the geocentric world-picture; the mechanico-materialism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had undermined the miraculous elements of Christianity. Nevertheless the middle decades of the nineteenth century are rightly felt to be the locus classicus of the science-and-religion conflict; and that, perhaps, for two main reasons. First because, to the older idea of immutable law operating throughout the physical universe, in the inorganic sphere, there was now added the idea of inexorable development proceeding within the organic world, moulding and modifying living species. Secondly, because this great idea, arriving upon the scene in a century of cheap printing and a vastly augmented reading public, soon advanced outside the studies of philosophers and noblemen - to which 'advanced' thought had hitherto been largely confined - and reached the average man, the sort of man who had generally been in possession of a simple, conventional faith.

v.- Atheism and Doubt - Contemporaries

Thomson's reaction to Tennyson was varied, but on the whole impatient. His "Real Vision of Sin" is a vicious and savage reply to Tennyson's poem which he found "very pretty and clever and silly and truthless."[49] But he knew Tennyson's

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[47] Note to "Queen Mab", VII, 13.

[48] Basil Willey, More Nineteenth Century Studies: A Group of Honest Doubters, 1963, p.82.

[49] From a comment written by Thomson at the head of the original MS.

poetry well enough to echo "The Two Voices" in Section VIII of The City of Dreadful Night. It is however an echo with all the undertones removed, with all the subtleties eliminated. Here was Thomson's weakness. While Tennyson could begin Section CXVIII of "In Memoriam" with "contemplate all this work of time", Thomson had neither the time nor opportunity for contemplation, or in the real sense, for learning, as Tennyson had. When he read Tennyson, Thomson was jealous and frustrated. The opportunity which meant so much to Tennyson to "linger on the lawn", was not give to Thomson until after The City had been written; and when it was granted at Forest Edge, it came too late.

Houghton, speaking both for our generation and for the Victorians, says:

> Those who have never been disinherited because they have never known the absence of doubt can only imagine the distress of the first, sudden catastrophe. [50]

Indeed, his chapter on "Anxiety" analyses very completely the social, economic, scientific and religious factors that combined to perplex some of the finest minds of the time, driving some, like Newman, to refuge in complete surrender to an established faith; others, like George Eliot, to a puritanical agnosticism. Among the honest doubters, to borrow Basil Willey's phrase, one or two sought in their poetry, without success, to resolve the conflict of doubt. Of these the two outstanding figures were, of course, Matthew Arnold and Arthur Hugh Clough.

It is interesting to consider the light thrown on the critical attitude of the eighteen-seventies by looking at contemporary criticims of these two poets. There were those who took a conservative and conventional view, like

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[50] Walter E. Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind, Yale, 1957.

J.B. Selkirk[51] who says:

> Doubt can command no prolonged sympathy, and consequently can find no permanent footing in any of the higher places of poetry. Faith on the contrary, seems to clothe itself with poetry without effort . . .

He is perhaps extreme, even for his time. But there were others with a more balanced outlook, like the Reverend R.H. Hutton[52] who was writing during the period that Thomson was composing The City. Rarely has there been a more perceptive analysis of Arnold's attitude:

> A more perfect intellectual anodyne . . . it would be difficult to conceive; it solves no problem, it lifts no veil, but it sings of perfect beauty, human effort, and celestial rest, as if they could really be harmonized . . .

And speaking of "this generation", Hutton says of Arnold:

> . . . no one has expressed more powerfully and poetically its spiritual weaknesses, its craving for a passion that it cannot feel, its sympathy with a faith that it will not share, its aspiration for a peace that it does not know.

He has the perception to see that in "A Summer Night" all the insight and ineffectiveness of Arnold's position is set out: there is, he says, "always a tincture of pride in his confessed inability to believe." His shrewdest comment would have won Thomson's approval: "Mr Arnold" he says, "does all this from the intellectual side, - sincerely and delicately, but from the surface, and never from the centre."

Thomson was familiar with Arnold's work and indeed its influence on him was obvious[53]. In the same year as Arnold

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[51] J.B. Selkirk, Ethics and Aesthetics of Modern Poetry, op.cit

[52] Rev. R,H. Hutton, Essays Theological and Literary, (vol.II Literary) 1871, revised ed. 1877.

[53] We are not concerned here with Thomson's Satires, but it is worth noting that Thomson's "Bumbles" are Arnold's "Philistines".

published the "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse", Thomson wrote the lines "suggested by" Matthew Arnold's poem. The contrast is interesting. Arnold is resigned, contemplative, nostalgic; but his critical sense isolates his problem for him. He knows he is "wandering between two worlds, one dead/The other powerless to be born". He knows that on the one side is "But a dead time's exploded dream". He knows that Shelley and Obermann have left no message of hope for the "inheritors of their Distress", and he asks: "What availed it, all the noise and outcry of the former men?"

In 1855, when he wrote the poem "Suggested by the Grande Chartreuse", Thomson's thinking was muddled in the extreme and he had little cause to complain about Arnold. The poem, as we have seen, is rambling, repetitive and obscure. Thomson is mingling Arnold's nostalgia for Christianity with Shelley's theories, and suggesting that there is the need for a new revelation of the ultimate God behind the God. Nevertheless, over the years, the atmosphere of doubt which surrounded and perplexed the Oxford scholar, who was also the son of Arnold of Rugby, filtered down through the crass atheism of Bradlaugh and his circle, to merge in the utter despair of Section IV of The City. Because "Dover Beach" set out the doubts of the serious-minded and comfortably ensconced civil servant, The City of Dreadful Night became possible as an expression of the last limits of despair for the less fortunate charity boy.

While Thomson made a barely adequate living by publishing in atheistic and radical journals, Clough went from all that he held dear into a comfortable but bitter wilderness, in the name of an indecisive agnosticism. The social gulf between them is ironically underlined, for while Thomson was an Army

schoolmaster in Ireland, Clough was Secretary to the Commission of Report on Military Education.[54] For Thomson, Clough's only importance lay in his contribution to the atmosphere of Christian doubt that made atheism in poetry a possibility. Saintsbury says of him, unkindly but accurately (though with an inadequate recognition of the civilized pleasures of his poetry):

> On the whole, Clough is one of the most unsatisfactory products of that well-known form of nineteenth century scepticism which has neither the strength to believe nor the courage to disbelieve "and have done with it." He hankers and looks back, his "two souls" are always warring with each other, and though the clash and conflict sometimes bring out fine things (as in the two pieces above cited [55] and the still finer poem at Naples with the refrain "Christ is not risen" [56]) though his "Latest Decalogue" has satirical merit, and some of his country poems, written without under-current of thought, are fresh and genial, he is on the whole a failure.

If "Dover Beach" was transformed by Thomson into the fierce journey through the desert in Section IV of <u>The City</u>, Clough reflected it only in the lyrical nostalgia of "Say not the struggle nought availeth". Clough like Thomson could ask the question, "Why are we here?":

> To spend uncounted years of pain,
> Again, again, and yet again,
> In working out in heart and brain
> The problem of our being here;
> To gather facts from far and near,
> Upon the mind to hold them clear,
> And, knowing more may yet appear,
> Unto one's latest breath to fear
> The premature result to draw,
> Is this the object, end and law,
> And purpose of our being here? [57]

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[54] v. F.T. Palgrave's introductory Memoir to <u>Poems</u>, by A.H. Clough, 1863.

[55] "Ambarvalia" and "The Bothie of Tober-na-Vuolich".

[56] A.H. Clough, "Easter Day".

[57] <u>Ibid.</u>, "'Old things need not be therefore true'".

But he could only answer half-facetiously:

> 'There is no God,' the wicked saith,
> 'And truly it's a blessing,
> For what he might have done with us
> It's better only guessing.' [58]

And finally, almost cynically:

> And almost every one when age,
> Disease, or sorrow strike him;
> Inclines to think there is a God,
> Or something very like him. [58]

There is no evidence that either poet knew of the other's existence, but there were flashes of ironical humour in each that the other would have appreciated. Thomson would surely have enjoyed "The Latest Decalogue", and Clough have smiled at the little poem of Thomson's, first published by Anne Ridler:

> Once in a saintly passion
> I cried with desperate grief:
> O Lord, my heart is black with guile,
> Of sinners I am chief!
> Then stooped my guardian-angel
> And whispered from behind:
> 'Vanity, my little man,
> You're nothing of the kind.'

When the debate about Poems and Ballads was at its height, Thomson rushed to Swinburne's defence, adopting the novel attitude that Swinburne had "outraged propriety and shocked Bumbledom" and he was therefore a True Poet![59] Later, in 1876, he wrote a balanced little article in The Secularist contrasting Whitman and Swinburne. There can be little doubt that Thomson enjoyed the richness of Swinburne's poetry, and must have been to some extent attracted to the subject matter, though his admiration must have been diminished by his dislike of lustfulness, if indeed he fully understood the more esoteric of Swinburne's pleasures.

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[58] A.H. Clough, "'There is no God,' the wicked saith," Poems, 1863.

[59] NR., 23 December 1866, later reprinted in Essays and Phantasies.

Swinburne was at least aware of Thomson's existence and apparently admired "Weddah and Om-el-Bonain" and wrote to Rossetti about it with quite extragavant praise.[60] Both poets denied the existence of God, but the difference between them is well expressed by Arthur Lyttleton[61] who says: "Paganism like Mr Thomson's is one of the facts of life which the jubilant paganism of Mr Swinburne refuses to face." Swinburne, he thought: "expresses with peculiar vagueness, but still with almost unique force, the confused thought of many minds."

Although Swinburne was not hesitant in expressing his non-Christian view of the universe, he does not go so far in utter denial as Thomson. While for Thomson there is "No fiend with names divine", for Swinburne there is always something, however unpleasant, or however ill-defined:

> For who shall change with prayers of thanksgivings
> The mystery of the cruelty of things?
> Or say what God above all gods and years . . .
> . . .
> Feeds the mute melancholy lust of heaven. [62]

[my italics.] Even the "Hymn of Man" substitutes a kind of essence of mankind for the Godhead: "But God, if God there be, is the substance of man which is man/Our lives are as pulses or pores of his manifold body and breath" and "Not each man of all men is God,/But God is the fruit of the whole"; and even if God is dead, we can still say: "Glory to Man in the highest! for Man is the Master of Things" (a fine epigraph to usher in the technological age).

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[60] Salt, p.156.

[61] Arthur Lyttleton, Modern Poets of Faith, Doubt and Paganism, 1904.

[62] Algernon Charles Swinburne, "Anactoria".

The City has no such hope. For Thomson, "This little life is all we must endure,/The grave's most holy peace is ever sure". This is the final contrast with the most famous of Swinburne's agnostic verse; for Swinburne there was no question of enduring life - it had more to offer than that:

> From too much love of living,
> From hope and fear set free,
> We thank with brief thanksgiving
> Whatever gods may be
> That no life lives for ever;
> That dead men rise up never;
> That even the weariest river
> Winds somewhere safe to sea. [63]

Second only to Shelley, Thomson admired Browning above all other nineteenth century poets. Three of his papers on Browning are collected in Biographical and Critical Studies, and they are all adulatory. It is interesting to consider what attraction Browning's work, as a whole, could have for him. He praises its variety and knowledge, with the words "Browning drinks in the living world at every pore".[64] Defending him against the charge of 'Obscurity', Thomson admits that there are some difficulties with the earlier poems, but by 1868 he finds that "the fire burns intensely clear, completely consuming its own smoke". To the charge of 'Harshness', he enters the shrewd defence:

> His strong, intensely original, and many-sided individuality has, among finer savours, a keen relish for the odd, the peculiar, the quaint, the grotesque; and when these offer themselves as the subject-matter, his guiding genius is apt to throw the reins on the necks of the vigorous talents and eager perceptions, which run risky riot in language as quaint and grotesque as the theme. [65]

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> . . . pure imagination, or imaginative reason, or

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[63] A.C. Swinburne, "The Garden of Proserpine".

[64] James Thomson, Biographical and Critical Studies, op.cit. p.438.

[65] Ibid., p.443.

> imaginative passion, incarnates inself in its own proper language of majestic rhythm, tenderest melody, orchestral harmony - orchestral because comprehensive and manifold with the complex simplicity and integrity of a high organism. For the rest, we do not in the grandeur of fortress or cathedral look for the minute finish and polish of carvings in gems or ivory. [66]

And he goes on to praise the "restless activity and almost unique rapidity of his intellect". Browning has, he maintains "a masculine soul", and he feels that his

> immense range and depth of sympathy or geniality, which has been rightly considered as of the essence of great genius, is naturally united if not identical with an intense and exuberant vitality . . . [67]

Finally, and with considerable generosity of mind, Thomson praises Browning for his Christianity:

> Thoroughly familiar with all modern doubts and disbeliefs, he trampled them all under foot, clinging to the Cross; and this with the full co-operation of his fearless reason, not in spite of it and by its absolute surrender or suppression. [68]

It might be thought that Thomson admired in Browning every quality that he did not show, and perhaps would not wish to have shown, in his own poetry. Certainly Thomson tried hard, though not always successfully, not to be harsh, but he cannot have believed that he sought for variety in his own poetry, since he returned to the same range of subjects again and again. He must have been aware of his own inability to "drink in the living world", since he found himself in the City of Living Death. He may have envied Browning's narrative power of which he himself had little. And he certainly did not share Browning's feelings about Christianity. In fact it is quite astonishing that

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[66] Ibid., p.444.

[67] Ibid., p.452.

[68] Ibid., p.454.

he should so admire Browning, but equally astonishing that at first sight, Browning should have influenced him so little, for there is little apparent resemblance of style or subject in their work.

Perhaps psycbologically it is not unusual that a man admires in another what he cannot expect to achieve himself. Perhaps the very difference in their natures made it possible for Thomson to admire the more gifted and ebullient Browning. But the admiration was not totally without effect. Apart from the obvious debt, which Thomson himself acknowledged, as we have seen, to Browning's verse structure, there is the subtle and almost indefinable feeling that The City (and in particular Section IV, "As I came through the desert") and "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came", belong in some manner not easily particularized to the same genre of poetry. Perhaps when the history of the Waste Land as an image in English poetry comes to be written, we shall see more clearly the relationship between them. But there is contrast too. "Childe Roland" chronicling the bleakness and despair that comes just before revelation, is nearer to the Dark Night of the Soul of Saint John of the Cross than Thomson could ever be. But it is not near enough. For Saint John, the Dark Night was succeeded by revelation and ecstasy. One cannot say that the final moments in "Childe Roland" are any more than the conquest of despair and a 'dauntless' return to the fellowship of the quest. This is little, but more than the wanderer in Thomson's City was able to find, and much, much more than the wanderer in Thomson's desert. But they were brothers in despair.

There is no line for line equivalent between the two poems, rather a similarity of atmosphere. A sense of

untrodden waste, "All was black/In heaven no single star, on earth no track/A brooding hush without a stir or note", and "Back therefore to my darkening path again,/No sound, no sight as far as eye could strain". Childe Roland's fording of the river:

> Which, while I forded, - good saints, how I feared
> To set my foot upon a dead man's cheek,
> Each step, or feel the spear I thrust to seek
> For hollows, tangled in his hair or beard!
> - It may have been a water-rat I speared,
> But, ugh! it sounded like a baby's shriek. . .

is as hideous as the passage through the desert where

> Eyes of fire
> Glared at me throbbing with a starved desire;
> The hoarse and heavy and carnivorous breath
> Was hot upon me from deep jaws of death;
> Sharp claws, swift talons, fleshless fingers cold . . .

And Browning's "great black bird" has its counterpart too in Thomson's enormous "Things" which had both "savage cries and clanking wings".

More than any other poem that I know in the English language, "Childe Roland" conveys, to me at least, a feeling of despair nearly as final as that in Thomson's City. From the moment that Childe Roland obeys the cripple, he has given up the struggle, he has surrendered. The outer landscape mirrors the utter hopelessness within, as Thomson's City does. What is gained at the end is barely worth the sacrifice, the effort to reach it. Roland's "slug horn" is raised in a last defiant gesture, a gesture that Thomson parallels with his address to Melencolia, his Goddess of Necessity.

Perhaps Thomson recognized a kinship between them. He could never escape from the City as Browning could escape from the "grey plain". But he admired the strength of intellect that could, all the more for this glimpse of despair in a world where grass "grew as scant as hair/ In leprosy".

vi.- Later poets and The City

We began this chapter by saying that every poet is unique, but at the same time is a product of all that has gone before. No poet had previously found himself in circumstances where spiritual, social and physical despair combined to find expression in just one great long poem. Just as Lady Chatterley's Lover opened the doors of English literature to the free expression of sexuality, so after The City of Dreadful Night there was no bar to the exploration in poetry of the difficulties of unbelief. In that sense perhaps the influence of The City was considerable and so widespread as to defy analysis. And, although in other respects we cannot find in subsequent poetry evidence of its direct and continuing influence, indirectly it was of some significance. Foakes sees clearly what this significance was in his conclusion to The Romantic Assertion:[69]

> Is is no longer possible for the modern poet to turn his face from the city as the Romantics could; the city is a great fact of modern life. During the nineteenth century the Romantic assertion gradually diminished in scope, until it was negated in The City of Dreadful Night. The vocabulary of assertion became detached from those images of impression which had supported it, and decayed into empty rhetoric; and the images ceased to be appropriate, as the natural world became less important and less accessible to the majority of people. Detached from the assertion, images drawn from the natural world tended to become what on the whole they have remained, vehicles of a sentimental appeal. But in seeking to come to terms with the city, the modern poet has to account for a world in which the lonely crowd is lonelier even than for the Romantics, in which the isolation of the individual is more marked, in which the city dominates everything and everyone. The problem these poets faced, of taming chaos into order, remains, but the modern poet reflects, in his reluctance to commit himself to any kind of assertion, a common loss of faith in an ultimate solution. If he does commit himself, it is to that old man's rage for life of

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[69] R.A.. Foakes, The Romantic Assertion: A Study in the Language of Nineteenth Century Poetry, 1958, p.181.

Yeats, or to a withdrawal into an authoritarian religion, such as T.S. Eliot made.

W.E. Henley's most famous poem, "Invictus", written a year after The City was finished, uses the images of night and of blackness to mirror the suffering to which, a cripple from boyhood, he was born:

> Out of the night that covers me,
> Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
> I thank whatever gods may be
> For my unconquerable soul. [70]

Henley's reaction to the "fell clutch of circumstance" and "the bludgeoning of chance", a reaction which produced the remarkable sequence of "Hospital Poems" (unmatched in its treatment of the subject until the poetry of Sylvia Plath) was that of defiance of fate, of, in fact, "the stiff upper lip". But there is a strange dichotomy even in this short poem. At one moment Henley seems to echo Thomson's feeling that there is no life after death, there is nothing but "The Horror of the shade". But in the last verse of the four verses he seems to realize that to be defiant, one must have some force to defy, and he turns back to Christian images, "It matters not how strait the gate,/How charged with punishments the scroll",[71] and having aligned the Christian nemesis against himself, he can state his creed: "I am the master of my fate;/I am the captain of my soul." In some ways this attitude is reminiscent of the earlier Thomson. As Schaefer points out,[72] when Thomson was writing his "Live Life" poems, he used the language of the soldier to convey his meaning:

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[70] From a group of poems called Echoes, written 1872-89, published in Poems by William Ernest Henley, 1926, No.IV: "In Mem. R.B.Hamilton Bruce (1846-99)" but known nowadays as "Invictus".

[71] cf. Matthew VII, 13-14 and XXV, 46.

[72] Schaefer, p.145.

Give a man a horse he can ride,
  Give a man a boat he can sail;
And his rank and wealth, his strength and health,
  On sea nor shore shall fail, [73]

and:

My love is the flaming Sword
  To fight through the world;
Thy love is the Shield to ward,
And the Armour of the Lord
  And the Banner of Heaven unfurled. [74]

and: Let my voice ring out and over the earth,
  Through all the grief and strife,
With a golden joy in a silver mirth:
    Thank God for Life! [75]

Nor is Henley's "Pit" so far from the City, also a place of night and blackness, as might be thought. For the fight remained in Thomson to the end; the last words of The City picture its inhabitants regarding their "Sombre Patroness and Queen":

The strong to drink new strength of iron endurance,
The weak new terrors; all, renewed assurance
  And confirmation of the old despair.

Surely Thomson's "renewed assurance of despair" matches Henley's "menace of the years" and they are both unafraid.

Though the mind turns naturally to "Invictus" and its dark images when looking at the work of those poets who were immediate successors to "B.V.", Henley shared with Thomson a strong emotional reaction to the great city for which he found expression in the strangely neglected London Voluntaries[76]. Though Henley was often moved, like Wordsworth, by the glory of the morning, and the City's capacity to be transfigured by light, his response was frequently in a mood that was similar

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[73] James Thomson, "Sunday Up the River", XV.

[74] Ibid., XVI.

[75] Ibid., XVII.

[76] London Voluntaries and Other Verses, 1893, W.E. Henley.

to Thomson's, even if in spite of his realism, his self sufficiency finally spared him Thomson's despair. In the first "Voluntary" he describes a journey through London at night:

> Through street and square, through square and street,
> Each with his home-grown quality of dark
> And violated silence . . .

and we are immediately reminded of Thomson's third section of The City:

> Although lamps burn along the silent streets;
> Even when moonlight silvers empty squares
> The dark holds countless lanes and close retreats . . .

and

> The ear, too, with the silence vast and deep
> Becomes familiar though unreconciled . . .

And passing through the Park, Henley exclaims

> O the mysterious distances, the glooms
> Romantic . . .

These are the open spaces which, for Thomson, "yawn with gloom abysmal", and when Henley goes on to say

> Still, still the streets, between their carcanets
> Of linking gold, are avenues of sleep. . . .

and later to describe

> . . . these long blindfold rows
> Of casements staring blind to right and left,
> Each with his gaze turned inward on some piece
> Of life in death's own likeness - Life bereft
> Of living looks as by the Great Release
> (Perchance of shadow-shapes from shadow-shows),
> Whose upshot all men know yet no man knows. . . .

we are immediately reminded of the first section of Thomson's poem where he says

> The street-lamps burn amidst the baleful glooms,
> Amidst the soundless solitudes immense
> Of ranged mansions dark and still as tombs.
> The silence which benumbs or strains the sense
> Fulfils with awe the soul's despair unweeping:
> Myriads of habitants are ever sleeping,
> Or dead, or fled from nameless pestilence!

One does not know if Henley was familiar with Thomson's poem, and certainly no element of plagiarism is suggested; but it is

fair to suggest that the Victorian atmosphere of thought, the search for some kind of faith allied to the physical experience of living within the same city oppressed and handicapped by ill health, has resulted in images that are similar, and though fresh and vigorous, typical of the poetry of the time.

Henley was strongly affected, as was Thomson, by the river that looms so large in London's very being. In the first "Voluntary", he describes

> A lamplit bridge ouching the troubled sky,
> And look, O look! a tangle of silver gleams
> And dusky lights, our River and all his dreams,
> His dreams that never save in our deaths can die.

(What a splendid word is 'ouching', presumably meaning to clasp, or to put in a setting, and seeming to make the bridge reach up and grasp the sky.) And in the third "Voluntary" he describes how

> The old Father-River flows,
> His watchfires cores of menace in the gloom,
> As he came oozing from the Pit, and bore,
> Sunk in his filthily transfigured sides,
> Shoals of dishoneured dead to tumble and rot
> In the squaler of the universal shore:
> His voices sounding through the gruesome air
> As from the ferry where the Boat of Doom
> With her blaspheming cargo reels and rides . . .

And we are reminded of Thomson's opening description to Section VI of <u>The City</u>:

> . . . the bridge-lamps glow like golden stars
> Above the blackness of the swelling tide,
> Down which they struck rough gold in ruddier bars . . .

as well as of the description of the River of Suicides in Section XIX:

> The mighty river flowing dark and deep,
> With ebb and flood from the remote sea-tides
> Vague-sounding through the City's sleepless sleep . . .

Though Henley can react enthusiastically and describe his London in terms that were never possible to Thomson in describing his City of Dreadful Night:

For earth and sky and air
Are golden everywhere,
And golden with a gold so suave and fine
The looking on it lifts the heart like wine. [77]

and can conclude by saying (and he is referring to the influence of the God Pan):

The enormous heart of London joys to beat
To the measures of his rough, majestic song:
The lewd, perennial, overmastering spell . . . [78]

he can come perilously near to Thomson's pessimism, if not to Thomson's despair. This is London by "a jealous lightlessness beset":

The afflicted city, prone from mark to mark
In shameful occultation, seems
A nightmare labyrinthine, dim and drifting,
With wavering gulfs and antic heights and shifting
Rent in the stuff of a material dark
Wherein the lamplight, scattered and sick and pale,
Shows life the leper's living blotch of bale:
Uncoiling monstrous into street on street
Paven with perils, teeming with mischance,
Where man and beast go blindfold and in dread,
Working with oaths and threats and faltering feet
Somewhither in the hideousness ahead;
Working through wicked airs and deadly dews
That make the laden robber grin askance
At the good places in his black romance,
And the poor, loitering harlot rather choose
Go pinched and pined to bed
Than lurk and shiver and curse her wretched way
From arch to arch, scouting some threepenny prey. [79]

Even the word 'bale' here reminds us of Thomson, and here is Thomson's "nameless pestilence" and his "builded desolation, of woe and terrors and thick darkness reared." Here too are the "breathings acrid as a dead sea foam" and the whole thought of Section XV which ends, it will be remembered, with:

That City's atmosphere is dark and dense,
  Although not many exiles wander there,
With many a potent evil influence,
  Each adding poison to the poisoned air;
Infections of unutterable sadness,
Infections of incalculable madness,
  Infections of incurable despair.

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[77] W.E. Henley, "Voluntary" II.

[78] Ibid.,"Voluntary" IV.

[79] Ibid., "Voluntary" III.

Indeed we have said that Henley approaches to Thomson's pessimism, but not to his incessant cry of despair. But in at least one passage of The Voluntaries, a passage of crude power, he comes perilously close to it:

> And Death the while -
> Death with his well-worn, lean, professional smile,
> Death in his threadbare working trim -
> Comes to your bedside, unannounced and bland,
> And with expert, inevitable hand
> Feels at your windpipe, fingers you in the lung,
> Or flicks the clot well into the labouring heart:
> Thus signifying unto old and young,
> However hard of mouth or wild of whim,
> 'Tis time - 'tis time by his ancient watch - to part
> With books and women and talk and drink and art:
> And you go humble after him
> To a mean suburban lodging: on the way
> To what or where
> Not Death, who is old and very wise, can say . . .

The full force of this description is in a phrase that underlines the closeness of Henley's experience to that of Thomson, and that makes on think immediately of "In the Room". For Thomson knew, and Henley knew, that when Death called, they would have no option but to go "Humbly . . ./To a mean suburban lodging", perhaps "Some old God's acre, now corruption's sty."

Henley was a precursor of Kipling and not a member of the "Rhymers' Club". Not for him the aesthetic of Pater which, or a misunderstanding of which, is credited with some responsibility for the decadent poetry of the 'Nineties. But so much of this follows so naturally on the introspective despair, the self-immolation, of Thomson that one feels that the streams of thought and feeling of the times must have forged some connection.. It is as though the despair that had dogged him had spilled over from his solitary existence, from his unnoticed class isolation, into the very preserves of those who felt that poetry should be discovered in the solitude of

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[80] Ibid., "Voluntary" IV.

private feelings. As Stanford says:[81] "Mortality and melancholy marked the poetry of this period", and these were the very qualities that distinguish The City. Dowson's poem, "A Last Word", which Stanford regards as a "swan song for the group attitude" could also be Thomson's own farewell:

> Let us go hence: the night is now at hand;
> The day is overworn, the birds all flown;
> And we have reaped the crops the gods have sown;
> Despair and death; deep darkness o'er the land,
> Broods like an owl; we cannot understand
> Laughter or tears, for we have only known
> Surpassing vanity: vain things alone
> Have driven our perverse and aimless band.
> Let us go hence, somewhither strange and cold,
> To Hollow Lands where just men and unjust
> Find end of labour, where's rest for the old,
> Freedom to all from love and fear and lust.
> Twine our torn hands! O pray the earth enfold
> Our life-sick hearts and turn them into dust.

There is here and there, of course, an element that was lacking in Thomson's poetry; the luxuriating in the pathos of transcience for its own sake, for example, that finds its apotheosis in:

> They are not long, the weeping and the laughter,
> Love and desire and hate:
> I think they have no portion in us after
> We pass the gate.
>
> They are not long, the days of wine and roses:
> Out of a misty dream
> Our path emerges for a while, then closes
> Within a dream. [82]

Thomson and Dowson share the sad, but unshakeable conviction of the solitariness of each individual man:

> The fire is out, and spent the warmth thereof,
> (This is the end of every song man sings!)
> The golden wine is drunk, the dregs remain,
> Bitter as wormwood and as salt as pain;
> And health and hope have gone the way of love
>
> Into the drear obblivion of lost things.
> Ghosts go along with us until the end;

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[81] Derek Stanford, Poets of the 'Nineties: A Biographical Anthology, 1965.

[82] Ernest Dowson, "Vitae summa brevis spem nos vetat incohare longam".

This was a mistress, this, perhaps, a friend.
With pale, indifferent eyes, we sit and wait
For the dropt curtain and the closing gate:
This is the end of all the songs man sings. [83]

If there is a difference in the atmosphere of despair here, it is in the element of self-indulgent self-pity that seems to come as Stanford says, from "the pursuit of an intensity beyond the strength of the organism". But the delicate lyrical ability of Dowson was quite outside Thomson's range.

But when we look at the poets of the 'nineties, "the Decadents", with their dipsomania, their drug-taking, their surrender either to a hopeless paganism or the glamours of Roman Catholicism, we can he excused for seeing them as the natural heirs of the charity boy who drugged and doped and felt the need of ritual and revelation, and died unable to hope for the life to come.

Because he was an atheist, because he wrote fine descriptive poetry of the city, because he knew and admired Thomson's work, and perhaps because he too fell into melancholy and committed suicide, John Davidson (for a short time himself one of the "Rhymers") is often thought to have been influenced by his brother Scot. But as we see from "The Triumph of Mammon", Davidson's atheism was polemical, as Thomson's never was. In Davidson's gruesome poem, "A Woman and Her Son" (a poem spoilt by its unsatisfactory conclusion) he makes the son say " . . . this Heaven of yours,/Is the lewd dream of morbid vanity".[84] - a statement which contains an ethical judgment, and in strong contrast to Thomson's fatalistic approach, using the same image: "It was the dark delusion

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[83] Ernest Dowson, "Dregs".

[84] John Davidson, "A Woman and Her Son", A Selection of His Poems, with a preface by T.S. Eliot, edited and with an introduction by Maurice Lindsay, with an essay by Hugh McDiarmid, 1961.

of a dream".

Thomson was a reluctant rationalist; Davidson, as Shaw so aptly said, was a "Lucretian materialist", who could say in "The Testament of John Davidson": "For when I die the Universe shall cease/To know itself". The great difference between Thomson and Davidson lies in the utter hopelessness of Thomson on the one hand("I find alone necessity supreme"), and Davidson's hedonism on the other. He was, as Townsend points out: "a mechanist without yielding to despairing determinism." [85]

> It is ours to make
> This farce of fate a splendid tragedy:
> Since we must be the sport of circumstance,
> We should be sportmen, and produce a breed
> Of gallant creatures, conscious of their doom,
> Marching with lofty brows, game to the last. [84]

But Townsend may well be right in his analysis of those elements of Thomson's work which had a direct influence on Davidson:

> From Thomson as well as from Coleridge and Poe came an interest in dream fantasy. From Thomson too came in part a fascination with cosmic phenomena and certain rudiments of his naturalistic hedonism. At the same time, Thomson by his example may have taught the later poet that a negative, despairing vision cannot endure. Accepting his forerunner's scientific determinism, even his bleak pessimism, Davidson undertook to transform them into an affirmative view of the universe. [86]

Both Thomson and Davidson were of humble Scottish origin, both were "educated" rather than 'cultured' men, both made their surroundings in the modern city an integral part of their poetry, but there the similarity ends. For Thomson, as we have seen, the city became the reflection of his inner suffering, its manifestation rather than its stage. Davidson's city is external to him, part of the scene. In "A Woman and Her Son"

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[85] J. Benjamin Townsend, John Davidson: Poet of Armageddon, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1961, p.266.

[86] Ibid., p.241.

it helps to create the atmosphere, it is part of the theatrical 'effects':

On muddy beer
The melancholy mean suburban street
Grew maudlin for an hour; pianos waked
In dissonance from dreams of rusty peace,
And unpitched voices quavered tedious songs
Of sentiment infarm or nerveless mirth.

In his view of the human condition in the city, Davidson shared more of Arnold's outlook than of Thomson's. His "Northern Suburb", for example:

For here dwell those who must fulfil
Dull tasks in uncongenial spheres,
Who toil through dread of coming ill,
And not with hope of happiers years -

The lowly folk who scarcely dare
Conceive themselves perhaps misplaced,
Whose prize for unremitting care
Is only not to be disgraced.

repeats the sentiments of "A Summer Night".

Thomson in The City describes his prison from the inside, subjectively, in distress and despair. His poetry contains no sign of awareness of the social evil that Davidson and Arnold recognized. Even in passages of pure description there is a clear difference between Thomson's internal city and Davidson's real London. "The Thames Embankment" is a thousand miles from the riverside by which Thomson sat forlornly

And watched the bridge-lamps glow like golden stars
Above the blackness of ths swelling tide,
Down which they strudk rough gold in ruddier bars;
And heard the heave and plashing of the flow
Against the wall a dozen feet below.

But Davidson sees that

Slowly the sun
Undid the homespun swathing of the clouds,
And splashed his image on the northern shore -
A thing extravagantly beautiful:
The glistening, close-grained canvas of the mud
Like hammered copper shone, and all about
The burning centre of the mirror'd orbs
Illimitable depth of silver fire
Harmonious beams the overtones of light,
Suffused the emboss'd, metallic river bank.

Townsend is probably right in feeling that in this aspect of his poetry Davidson owed more to the "Spasmodics", and in particular to Alexander Smith, than to Thomson. "Glasgow's foundries" he says, "black river, and stone walls inspired Smith's songs as the sooty bricks of Fleet Street and the oily Thames later inspired Davidson's".[87]

There are, of course, apparent similarities between some of Thomson's lesser known poems and some of Davidson's. In "A Woman and Her Son" the macabre scene where the mother returns to life is made all the more herrible by the realistic surroundings:

> She cast a look forlorn about the room:
> The door was shut; the worn venetian, down;
> And stuffy sunlight through the dusty slates
> Spotted the floor, and smeared the faded walls.

Thomson made effective use of the same kind of realism in his poem, "The Room":

> The sun was down, and twilight grey
> Filled half the air; but in the room,
> Whose curtains had been drawn all day,
> The twilight was a dusky gloom.

And in some ways Thomson's "Low Life" anticipates Davidson's famous "Thirty Bob a Week". But while Thomson's poem is little more than sentimental gossip in which the exploiting of the young women in the sweat shop seems almost taken for granted, Davidson's poem is a spunky expression of the individualistic philosophy in a materialistic society, refusing to be put down by new knowledge of the universe:

> I woke because I thought the time had come;
> Beyond my will there was no other cause;
> And everywhere I found myself at home,
> Because I chose to be the thing I was;
> And in whatever shape of mollusc or of ape
> I always went according to the laws.

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[87] Townsend, John Davidson: Poet of Armageddon, op.cit. p.109.

I was the love that chose my mother out;
  I joined two lives and from the union burst;
My weakness and my strength without a doubt
  Are mine alone for ever from the first . . .

By comparison with this, Thomson's conclusions are negative indeed:

  For this is law, if law there be in Fate;
What never has been, yet may have its when;
The thing which has been, never is again. [88]

As Townsend says, "Thirty Bob a Week"

> recommends in place of timorous fatalism a proud acceptance of one's destiny as shaped from the beginning of time by a nature self-willed and self-ordained . . . [89]

And, analysing Davidson's pilgrimage,he adds:

> Leaving behind the paternalistic religion of his forebears with its stress on self-denial, and the humble acceptance of God's will, he accepted first a naturalistic hedonism with its uninhibited enjoyment of pleasure and stoic endurance of pain. From this he progressed to a creed that not only equated greatness and the ability to suffer pain but rationalized suicide as the highest form of self-realization. [90]

While Thomson can end only in despair, with

The sense that every struggle brings defeat
  Because Fate holds no prize to crown success;
That all the oracles are dumb or cheat
  Because they have no secret to express;
That none can pierce the vast black veil uncertain
Because there is no light beyond the curtain;
  That all is vanity and nothingness. [91]

Davidson concludes his Testament significantly with a reassertion of the Romantic faith which Thomson has negated:

And thus I made the world a fit abode
For greatness and the men who yet may be;
And can myself with joy become again
The mountains and the ocean, the winds, the flowers,
And life and death, and fear and love and hope,
And tender sorrow and heavy grief, and all
Humanity, and all that thinks and is. [92]

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[88] The City, XVIII, 13.

[89] Townsend, John Davidson, op.cit., p.268.

[90] Ibid., p.441-2.

[91] The City, XXI, 10.

[92] Townsend, John Davidson, op.cit., p.421-2.

Yeats, like Davidson, was a member of the Rhymers' Club, but one who retained an objective view of his friends there. But he did make it clear, in those 'nineties days, that he detested Huxley and Tyndall, for he shared with Thomson the knowledge that their science had deprived him of the "simple-minded religion of boyhood". But there the similarity ends; for from Yeats's loss of simple faith came the elaborate metaphysical eclecticism which gave, with his other great abilities, the towering stature to his poetry. But strangely, in one of his greatest and most awe-inspiring poems, there comes a chilling moment of recollection of The City of Dreadful Night. The "rough beast" in "The Second Coming" that "slouches towards Bethlehem to be born" is described:

> . . . somewhere in sands of the desert
> A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
> A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
> Is moving its slow thighs . . .

This is the very shpinx, with "cold majestic face", half covered by shadow at the beginning of the section, in full moonlight at the end, that symbolized for Thomson the inscrutable force before which the messenger of heaven, the soldier of the Lord, and simple man, became as nothing. It was left to a greater man to understand the change from shadow to light and to set its menace into motion.[93]

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[93] Thomson does have a sphinx that comes to life. In the grisly sentimentality of "Vane's Story", Vane, having been kissed by the vision, says that in consequence:

> . . . Fate the marble Sphinx, dumb, stern,
> Terror of Beauty cold, shall yearn
> And melt to flesh, and blood shall thrill
> The stony heart, and life shall fill
> The statue . . .

But then he makes (I think unconsciously) the whole image ridiculous by imagining the moving figure as a kind of lap-dog:

> . . . it shall follow him
> Submissive to his every whim,
> Ev'n as the lion of the wild
> Fllowed pure Una, meek and mild.

Born only six years after Thomson, and seventeen before Davidson, Thomas Hardy long outlived them both. But in his agnosticism, in his inability to believe in a benevolent god, or the life to come, Hardy has something in common with "B.V.". He was, like Thomson, a pessimist. He held throughout his life "to his conception of a Vast Imbecility . . . presiding over a mankind endowed (or cursed) with sentience".[94] The early poem. "Hap", written six years or more before The City of Dreadful Night was first published, has some of the pessimism of The City:

> . . . How arrives it joy lies slain,
> And why unblooms the best hope ever sown?
> - Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain,
> And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan. . . .
> These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown
> Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain.

These "Doomsters" are surely Thomson's

> . . . universal laws,
> Which never had for man a special clause
> Of cruelty or kindness, love or hate . . .

Nearly sixty years later, in the "Apology" to Late Lyrics and Earlier, Hardy defended himself against the charge of pessimism by claiming that his were only "obstinate questionings" concerning existence in this universe, the presence of evil, and the incongruity of penalising the irresponsible."[95] But the fact remains that he could at times feel a sense of despair very near to Thomson's in its intensity, and calling on the same kind of imagery:

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[94] H. Coombs, "Hardy, De la Mare, and Edward Thomas", The Pelican Guide to English Literature, 7, The Modern Age, ed. Boris Ford, 1961, 1963; reprinted with revisions 1964, 1966.

[95] Thomas Hardy, Collected Poems, 4th edition 1930; reprinted 1952, 1960, 1962, 1065, 1968, 1970: p.526.

Black is night's cope;
But death will not appal
One who, past doubtings all,
Waits in unhope. [96]

While it may be true to say, as does John Wain in his excellent and helpful introduction to The Dynasts[97] that, in his novels, "Hardy's pessimism tends to scale down humanity to the status of toads under a harrow", it is not true of his poetry, even when this deals with his vision of an implacable "Universal Will". There is always the sense that even if there is little hope for man and his immortality, there is yet some; he is in fact a 'meliorist':

And will any say when my bell of quittance is heard
in the gloom,
And a crossing breeze cuts a pause in its outrollings,
Till they rise again, as they were a new bell's boom,
"He hears it not now, but used to notice such things"?
[98]

The closeness of Hardy's thought to the surrender of the City contrasting with the achievement and enthusiasm of his long life, throws into sharper outline the hopelessness that denied to Thomson even the tenuous immortality of a lingering existence in the memory of others. The range and capacity of the mind that could conceive and complete The Dynasts rose above the debilitation of despair.

In his preface to Maurice Lindsay's selection of John Davidson's poems,[99] T.S. Eliot lists the author of The City of Dreadful Night as being among those poets whose work

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[96] Thomas Hardy, "In Tenebris" I.

[97] Thomas Hardy, The Dynasts, with an introduction by John Wain, Papermac, New York, 1965.

[98] Thomas Hardy, "Afterwards".

[99] John Davidson, A Selection of His Poems, op.cit.

impressed him deeply in his formative years. But he goes on to add that he cannot describe the nature of his debt to James Thomson. Certainly it is not to Thomson alone that Eliot owes his city images. By the time of Prufrock, the poets of the city were well established. Nor is it from Thomson that Eliot derived his pictures of "smoke that rises from pipes/Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows"[100] or even of "The conscience of a blackened street/Impatient to assume the world".[101] The famous "damp souls of housemaids/Sprouting despondently at area gates"[102] is by Davidson out of Clough, and not from "B.V.". The "brown fog",[103] the sweating river,[104] the rat "dragging its slimy belly on the bank",[104] are Davidson, not Thomson. Perhaps the real debt lies in Eliot's comment about The Waste Land:

> To me it was only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life; it is just a piece of rhythmical grumbling. [105]

But it is interesting, and perhaps of some significance that much of this meditative complaint is centred in a city, and moreover in what he chooses to call an "unreal City" which he peoples with phantoms:

> Unreal City,
> Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
> A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many
> I have not thought death had undone so many.

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[100] T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", 1917.

[101] Idem., "Preludes", IV, 1917.

[102] Idem, "Morning at the Window", 1917.

[103] Idem., "Burial of the Dead" and "The Fire Sermon", The Waste Land, 1922.

[104] Ibid., "The Fire Sermon".

[105] T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land, a facsimile and transcript of the original drafts; including the annotations of Ezra Pound, ed. Valerie Eliot, 1971.

Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.
Flowed up the hill and down King William %Street,
To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours
With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine. [106]

Here it is as though Eliot had a faint recollection of Section I of The City:

. . . With weary tread,
Each wrapt in his own doom, they wander, wander,
Or sit foredone and desolately ponder,
Through sleepless hours with heavy drooping head. [107

Anne Ridler in the introduction to her selection,[108] suggests that there are echoes of Thomson in "Little Gidding" (though "the familiar compound ghost" to which she refers is in Part II, and not as she has stated in Part IV). It is a very doubtful identification. She points also to the similarity between Eliot's "We trod the pavement in a dead patrol" and Thomson's "Thus step for step with lonely sounding feet,/We travelled many a long dim silent street". But there is what seems to me a more precise trace of Thomson's influence in the opening to this last section of Part II of "Little Gidding":

In the uncertain hour before the morning
Near the ending of interminable night
At the recurrent end of the unending . . .

I cannot read this without remembering that Thomson, comparing life to a dream whose shapes return, describes: "In their recurrence with recurrent changes/A certain seeming order". This too is at an "uncertain hour" in which we cannot "Discern

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[106] "The Burial of the Dead", op.cit. 60-65.

[107] Ridler, p.xliii.

[108] Or perhaps he may have known "The Approach to St Paul's" (1855), especially the lines:
Eastwards through busy streets I lingered on;
Jostled by anxious crowds, who, heart and brain,
Were so absorbed in dreams of Mammon-gain,
That they could spare no time to look upon
The sunset's gold and crimson fires, which shone
Blessing keen eyes and wrinkled brows in vain.

that dream from real life in aught". And to people Eliot's "interminable night" we may recall Section VII of The City:

> Some say that phantoms haunt those shadowy streets,
> And mingle freely there with sparse mankind;
> And tell of ancient woes and black defeats,
> And murmur mysteries in the grave enshrined . . .

and:

> I have seen phantoms there that were as men
> And men that were as phantoms flit and roam;
> Marked shapes that were not living to my ken . . .

But this is as close as we can get to identification. In the main it would seem that the "rhythmical grumbling" of The Waste Land was at least encouraged by Eliot's knowledge of the sincerity which marked Thomson's threnody. And we can see in a cancelled passage on pp.30, 31 and 37 in Valerie Eliot's edition, that he had a deeper sense of the fatal ambience of the City which he never succeeded fully in expressing, or perhaps, in the face of Pound's discouraging comment, he decided to abandon the attempt. Thomson's City of Dreadful Night was more real to him than the City of Affairs in which he had to live.

The city imagery that informed the "thirties" poetry of Auden, MacNeice, Spender and Day-Lewis, has often been remarked upon. By the time they felt free to use the imagery of the great cities as freely as their predecessors had used the imagery of the countryside, a sufficient number of pioneers had shown them the way. Above all Eliot had, as we have seen, integrated the city into the emotional content, the inner meaning of his poem. So Auden could walk down Bristol Street, Spender dote upon the outline of a pylon, and Day-Lewis find symbolism in terms of the railway, and this was considered new, up-to-date, acceptable. But it was MacNeice who began to feel the city in his bones, as Thomson had felt it. It became part and parcel of his imagining. His agnostic suffering, his

constant inability to find faith, to find a platform for belief of any kind, even at time to find contact with his fellow men, is expressed in a great variety of images from the great cities in which he lived, and in which men are so much together, and so completely alone:

> And so to London and down the ever-moving
> Stairs
> Where a warm wind blows the bodies of men together
> And blows apart their complexes and cares. [109]

He shares with Thomson the feeling that the City is an extension of himself, but he has fortunately for him and for his poetry, a greater capacity than Thomson for appreciating its beauty:

> But yet there is beauty narcotic and deciduous
> In this vast organism grown out of us:
> On all the traffic-islands stand white globes like moons
> The city's haze is clouded amber that purrs and croons,
> And tilting by the noble curve bus after tall bus comes
> With an osculation of yellow light, with a glory like
> chrysanthemums. [110]

Towards the end of his life in "Goodbye to London" he expressed something of what the city had meant to him ofer the years, only to end on a note of solitariness and disillusion:

> From which reborn into anticlimax
> We endured much litter and apathy hoping
> The phoenix would rise, for so they had promised.
> Nevertheless let the petals fall
> Fast from the flower of cities all.
>
> 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. [111]

His vision of the last journey of all was of a bus-ride through London, and in "Charon" we are indeed close to the City of

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[109] Louis MacNeice, Autumn Journal, Canto I, 1939.

[110] Idem, An Eclogue for Christmas, Poems, 1935.

[111] Idem, "Goodbye to London", The Burning Perch, 1963.

Dreadful Night:

> The conductor's hands were black with money:
> Hold on to your ticket, he said, the inspector's
> Mind is black with suspicion, and hold on to
> That dissolving map. We moved through London,
> We could see the pigeons through the glass but failed
> To hear their rumours of wars, we could see
> The lost dog barking but never knew
> That his bark was as shrill as a cock crowing,
> We just jogged on, at each request
> Stop there was a crowd of aggressively vacant
> Faces, we just jogged on, eternity
> Gave itself airs in revolving lights
> And then we came to the Thames and all
> The bridges were down, the further shore
> Was lost in fog, so we asked the conductor
> What we should do. He said: Take the ferry
> Faute de mieux. We flicked the flashlight
> And there was the ferryman just as Virgil
> And Dante had seen him. He looked at us coldly
> And his eyes were dead and his hands on the oar
> Were black with obols and varicose veins
> Marbled his calves and he said to us coldly:
> If you want to die you will have to pay for it. [112]

We have examined some of the many influences in English poetry that consciously, or unconsciously, affected the writing of The City of Dreadful Night. We have found echoes, conscious or unconscious, of its imagery, its atheism, its despair, in later poets. But if it owes much to English poetry, it also owes something of its very inspiration to the "Inferno", and it is appropriate that we should finish, as we began, on the banks of the Styx.

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[112] Louis MacNeice, "Charon", The Burning Perch, 1963.

CHAPTER FOUR - THE NATURE OF THE POEM

1.- Myth and Archetype

The impression left upon the mind of anyone making a detailed examination of The City of Dreadful Night to this point, is such that he must now ask, I believe, whether there is a case for exploring its mythological or archetypal implications.

The impact of psychological studies over the past century has meant that in critical terms, the two aspects have come to overlap, since the psychological reasons for the invention of myth and its development in changing circumstances would seem to be similar to those that in the individual are expressed through the medium of poetry, which itself must be affected by the intellectual, religious and social outlook of the civilization in which it is written.

What then are the major themes of The City of Dreadful Night? They are the great and universal themes of Life and Death, and perhaps, Love. We have here one more attempt to answer mankind's age-old question of "Why?" Why are we here? What power, if any, set this world in motion and put us on it, perhaps only to suffer? There is one great certainty, and that is Death. What happens after Death? If Love is possible, why should it be denied? These are the problems with which countless poets have wrestled. The unique aspect of The City of Dreadful Night is that it seems to provide an answer, albeit a negative one; or to put it more precisely, the poet thinks that he has provided a totally negative verdict on the great universal questions.

Robert Graves sees myth as having two main functions:

> The first is to answer the sort of awkward questions that children ask, such as: 'Who made the world? How will it end? Who was the first man? Where do souls go after death?' The answers, necessarily graphic and positive, confer enormous power on the various deities credited with the creation and care of souls - and incidentally on their priesthoods.
>
> The second function of myth is to justify an existing social system and account for traditional rites and customs. [1]

and he makes the interesting additional point that myth is

> a dramatic shorthand record of such matters as invasions, migrations, dynastic changes, admission of foreign cults, and social reforms. [2]

He also comments on the fact that the word 'myth' carries the connotation 'incredible', which accounts for the omission, in Western society, of consideration of biblical narrative as being mythological. (We should have been saved much tedious debating matter from Bradlaugh if he had been able to regard it in this light; and since I do so regard it, the consideration of biblical myth will form part of this chapter.)

Let us now look at The City of Dreadful Night in the light first of Graves's definitions. Of course Thomson is asking these "awkward questions" such as children ask. Three out of four questions are at the very core of the poem. And we have incidentally suggested again and again in our analysis that if Thomson had been able to accept the mythology of the Roman Catholic church, to which he came from time to time perilously close in his imagery, then he would have found, if not comfort, then the kind of struggle with the darker side of his nature that we find in Francis Thompson and Hopkins.

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[1] Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology, with an introduction by Robert Graves, London 1959, p.v.

[2] Ibid., p.viii.

At first sight, Thomson would not seem to be concerned with the second function of myth as defined by Graves, until we consider that there is at no point in Thomson's work an explicit social criticism such as we would recognize today. If he suffered because he was poor, he suffered as Gissing's heroes suffered within an accepted social system. Surprising as it may be, the general impression of his attitude to society could best be summed up in the words of that revolting hymn:

> The rich man in his castle,
> The poor man at his gate,
> God made them, high or lowly,
> And order'd their estate. . . .

the gross injustice of which I can recall myself rebelling against as a child at Sunday School.
But Thomson seems to accept it as socially inevitable, and to that extent if he mythologized, he would not do so outside the definition. And interestingly enough, if we consider myth in its aspect of "a dramatic shorthand", then we may perhaps expect him to make some contribution, since he and the poets of his day had to come to terms, as we have seen, with the very foreign (in the sense of 'new' or 'strange') cult of Darwinism, with the theory of the origin of species which attacked the accepted myth of the creation of the world, and with the growing scientific knowledge about the universe.

The whole poem is about one or more of Graves's questions, sometimes quite explicitly. The whole of the Cathedral scene (Section XIII) is concerned with "Who made the world? How will it end?". And the same questions are examined, together with the question "Where do souls go after death?" in Section VI about the abortive attempt to enter hell; in Section VIII, in which the two voices debate the relation of Man to a Demonic super-power; and in the despairing cry of Section XVI.

There is a curious way in which Thomson's work mirrors

one of Graves's observations, and it may cast some light on whether Thomson 'created' a myth. For he does indeed suggest the existence of a 'cult' within his City, both in the last stanza of the Proem:

> O sad Fraternity, do I unfold
> Your dolorous mysteries shrouded from of yore?
> Nay, be assured; no secret can be told
> To any who divined it not before . . .

where it is a cult, moreover, with its own esoteric language:

> None uninitiate by many a presage
> Will comprehend the language of the message,
> Although proclaimed aloud for evermore. . . .

and in the whole of Section XI, where he describes in detail "What men are they that haunt these fatal glooms." Moreover it is a cult to which he provides a god-head in Section XXI, one which belongs to the new universe that is replacing the old Christian cosmology. It is a Mother figure, a scientifically modified version of the primitive Earth Mother, that presides where

> The moving moon and stars from east to west
> Circles before her in the sea of air;
> Shadows and gleams glide round her solemn rest.
> Her subjects often gaze up to her there:
> The strong to drink new strength of iron endurance,
> The weak new terrors; all, renewed assurance
> And confirmation of the old despair.

And as a final touch, we have a priesthood of "enormous power"; one is like an Old Testament prophet,

> With head uncovered and with streaming hair,
> As if large multitudes were gathered round:
> A stalwart shape, the gestures full of might,
> The glances burning with unnatural light . . . [3]

one, in the "dark pulpit" with

> Two steadfast and intolerable eyes
> Burning beneath a rugged brow . . .[4]

who had, moreover, an acolyte, "a shrouded figure" who "with

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[3] The City of Dreadful Night, Section IV.

[4] Ibid., Section XIV.

deep eyes burning through a blank white hood"[5] stood as guardian to the Cathedral, admitting only those who could give the password: "I wake from daydreams to this real night."

Let us now turn from a consideration in Thomson's work of myth as defined by a fellow poet to myth as understood in the field of that area of criticism strongly influenced by Jungian psychology. In the Princeton Encyclopedia, the contributor, presumably Philip Wheelwright, defines myth as:

> . . . a story or a complex of story elements taken as expressing, and therefore as implicitly symbolizing, certain deep-lying aspects of human and transhuman existence. [6]

and he points to the more recent appreciation of the possible connection between primitive myth and the Jungian 'archetypes' which Jung himself described as:

> . . . forms or images of a collective nature which occur practically all over the earth as constituents of myths and at the same time as autochthonous, individual products of unconscious origin. [7]

With these definitions in mind, we may base the next steps of our further consideration of myth in The City of Dreadful Night on the theories so fully expounded by Northrop Frye.[8] In his essay, "Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths", he points out that the "mythical mode" is both abstract and conventionalized, and that the structural principles of literature are "as closely related to mythology and comparative religion as

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[5] The City of Dreadful Night, Section XII.

[6] Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, ed. Alex Preminger, Princeton, New Jersey, 1965, p.538.

[7] Psychology and Religion, C.G. Jung, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1938 (17th printing March 1967), p.63.

[8] Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays, New York, 1967 (originally printed by Princeton University Press, 1957.)

as those of painting are to geometry." He believes that "In terms of narrative , myth is the imitation of actions near or at the conceivable limits of desire", and he makes the interesting assertion that one of these limits is reached at the point where, in effect, we say: "As flies to wanton boys, are we to the Gods,- /They kill us for their sport".[9] And in more closely defining the organization of myth and archetypal symbols in literature, he sees that the world of myth is concerned with both good and evil, with demons as well as gods. His definition of 'Romantic' is interesting in this context, for he sees it as "The general tendency to present myth and metaphor in an idealized human form, midway between undisplaced myth and 'realism'." And finally he suggests that the mythical patterns of ironic literature are usually associated with demonic myth.

Frye then proceeds to a discussion of Archetypal Meaning and begins by considering Apocalyptic imagery. It cannot be thought that this is the aspect of archetypal imagery that we shall find predominating in Thomson's work, but there are one or two aspects that are worth a passing glance, if only to dispose of some misconceptions. The city, as Frye points out, has long been one of the dominant metaphors of the Bible, reaching its highest point as myth in the City of the Apocalypse. But this City, the Golden City of New Jerusalem, is identified with the temple, with the "house of many mansions", of which individuals are "lively stones". Here the city is both a symbol for and a vision of a "Human universe". This is the way in which literary mystics like Charles Williams see it. In his essay "The Image of the City in English

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[9] Shakespeare, King Lear, IV, i, 36.

Verse"[10] he says that it "is the sense of many relationships between men and women woven into a unity", and for him, the ideal earthly city is caught in Shakespeare's description of "The singing masons building roofs of gold".[11] This is not Thomson's City. Thomson's City is the very converse of the apocalyptic vision. The inhabitants of his City are isolated, introspective units. The City is not for them the form of a human universe, but the form of a universe antagonistic to all that is most aspiring in the human spirit.

When we turn to Frye's consideration of 'Demonic Imagery', we begin to feel that we are re-entering the world as Thomson conceived and suffered it. Here is the world of nightmare, of waste, of ruin. Here are personified

> . . . the vast, menacing, stupid powers of nature as they appear to a technologically undeveloped society. Symbols of heaven in such a world tend to become associated with the inaccessible sky, and the central idea that crystallizes from it is the idea of inscrutable fate or external necessity. [12]

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[10] Charles Williams, "The Image of the City in English Verse", Dublin Review, July 1940; included in The Image of the City, and Other Essays, Charles Williams, selected by Anne Ridler, 1970.

[11] Shakespeare, Henry V, II, iii, 199.

[12] It is interesting that Frye should postulate here a "technologically undeveloped society". It would not seem to me to be in the least necessary to qualify his analysis of demonic imagery by suggesting that technological development would banish it. It would seems likely that the reverse would happen, and that man would find more readily in demonic myth an explanation of the blind forces which he is continually harnessing, and continually failing to explain in religious or metaphysical terms. Symbols of heaven in our society become associated with a sky that is day by day more inaccessible. And inscrutable Fate threatens us more and more. The imagery of Kafka, Golding, Graham Greene, and at the level of popular myth, Ian Fleming, would seem to support this view. And much modern poetry would seem to be an escape into myth.

Here is

> . . . the world that desire totally rejects: the world of the nightmare and the scapegoat, of bondage and pain and confusion; the world as it is before the human imagination begins to work on it and before any image of human desire, such as the city or the garden, has been solidly established; the world also of perverted or wasted work, ruins and catacombs, instruments of torture and monuments of folly.

At this point we feel ourselves re-entering the City of Dreadful Night. We have the nightmare description of the City in Section I:

> But when a dream night after night is brought
> Throughout a week, and such weeks few or many
> Recur each year for several years, can any
> Discern that dream from real life in aught?

It is the world in which the image of human desire has not become solidly established that is pictured in the journey through the desert, and indeed in the whole of Section IV. In the necessitarian verses from Section VIII:

> 'The world rolls round for ever like a mill;
> It grinds out death and life and good and ill;
> It has no purpose, heart or mind or will.
>
> 'While air of Space and Time's full river flow
> The mill must blindly whirl unresting so:
> It may be wearing out, but who can know?
>
> 'Man might know one thing were his sight less dim;
> That it whirls not to suit his petty whim,
> That it is quite indifferent to him. . . .'

We have what Frye describes as:

> the sense of human remoteness and futility in relation to the divine order which is only one element among others in most tragic visions of life

and these remote and invisible gods who "enforce obedience to natural . . . law as an end in itself", are surely those who have set moving the huge and overburdened wains of Section IX, that carry an unknown freight to an unknown destination:

What merchandise? whence, whither, and for whom?
  Perchance it is a fate-appointed hearse,
Bearing away to some mysterious tomb
  Or Limbo of the scornful universe
The joy, the peace, the life-hope, the abortions
Of all things good which should have been our portions,
  But have been strangled by that City's curse.

For in Thomson's world "We bow down to the universal laws/Which never had for man a special claim".

That for Thomson the symbols of heaven belong now to an inaccessible sky we know from Section XVII, which is devoted to saying, with both music and clarity, just that: "The empyrean is a void abyss", and in Section XVIII we have an explicit statement on the working of Time:

  For this is law, if law there be in Fate:
What never has been, yet may have its when;
The thing which has been, never is again.

Time itself Thomson describes as:

This time which crawleth like a monstrous snake,
  Wounded and slow and very venomous;
Which creeps blindwormlike round the earth and ocean,
Distilling poison at each painful motion,
  And seems condemned to circle every thus. [13]

Here we have surely a true archetypal image, the identification of the circle with the serpent. The serpent is, especially in Christian mythology, a demonic animal, and this is the picture of the ouroboros, the serpent with the tail in its mouth, an instrument of evil magic. And in the picture of Melencolia in the last section, we have Necessity personified. She follows, as is right, the description of the Angel and the Sphinx, in which a biblical archetype is overcome by one infintely more ancient, at the same time symbolizing the conquest of the apocalyptic vision by the demonic.

When Frye goes on in his consideration of demonic imagery, to consider the sexual implications, he says;

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[13] The City of Dreadful Night, Section XIII.

> The demonic erotic relation becomes a fierce destructive passion that works against loyalty or frustrates the one who possesses it. It is generally symbolized by a harlot, witch, siren, or other tantalizing female, a physical object of desire which is sought as a possession and therefore can never be possessed. The demonic parody of marriage, or the union of two souls in one flesh, may take the form of hermaphroditism, incest (the most common form), or homosexuality.

When we look into The City for this kind of imagery, we have a most interesting situation. For in Section IV we have an image of a form of marriage, which in a sense is a parody of the union of two souls, but which does not fall precisely into any one of Frye's categories.[14] But it is a symbol of what

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[14] It is interesting to consider Thomson's attitude to his lost love in the light of the article on "The Image of the Androgyne in the Nineteenth Century" by A.J.L. Busst, in Romantic Mythologies, ed. Ian Fletcher, 1957, p.9: "According to the mystic Boehme" we are told, ". . . man hopes to recover his former androgyny and immortality; in woman he hopes to find the divine virgin, his lost half, the divine image which has become effaced in him . . ." and we are referred to the Kabbala which (p.38) "proclaims as the supreme objective: 'le couple ne formant plus qu'un seule être . . ." And if we glance back from Section IV ("As I came through the desert") and Section X ("The Mansion stood apart") of The City to the earlier poems that celebrate the loss of the loved one, such as "Tasso and Leonora", or above all, "The Deliverer" (1859), we can see that it is indeed an androgynous symbol:

> So thou, the man, the circle incomplete,
> Shalt find thy other segment and be whole;
> Thy manhood with her womanhood shall meet
> And form one perfect self-involving soul.

What is more, we surely have here the type of cerebral lechery which Busst finds associated with the pessimistic symbol of the androgyne. This brings us back to Frye's demonic imagery for, in Busst's view, this kind of cerebral lechery is associated with demoniality, and he quotes Péladan in "Le Vice Suprême (p.50):". . . la demonalité est une oeuvre de chair qui consiste à s'exalter l'imagination, en fixant son désir sur un être mort, absent ou inexistant." Busst finds a similar preoccupation with the myth of the Androgyne in the work of Novalis.

Thomson appears to have had some acquaintance with nineteenth century theory. In the "Miscellanies" copied by Bertram Dobell (Bodley MS. e 48) he notes: "all things are said to be androgynous."

is desired but can never be possessed, for it is a symbol of union with one who is already dead, and who returning from the dead surrounded, as we have seen, with Roman Catholic imagery, adopts for a moment the position of the pietà, and then sinks into the sea, the archetypal symbol of dissolution. Here for a moment in the poetry, apocalyptic and demonic imagery come together and it is the tension between them that makes this one of the most moving and successful and fascinating sections of The City. And, I believe, we can be reasonably sure that the poet did not himself consciously appreciate the full import of all the imagery he employed, and that we have an example of archetypal imagery invading the individual mind as it does in dreams. Section IV is indeed full of demonic imagery, as Frye would define it, and in which he believes: "The animal world is portrayed in terms of monsters or beasts of prey":

> . . . Eyes of fire
> Glared at me throbbing with a starved desire;
> The hoarse and heavy and carnivorous breath
> Wat hot upon me from deep jaws of death;
> Sharp claws, swift talons, fleshless fingers cold
> Plucked at me from the bushes, tried to hold.

His world of malignant demons is also a world of fire, of serpents, and of nature malignant and threatening:

> That hillock burning with a brazen glare;
> Those myriad dusky flames with points a-glow
> Which writhed and hissed and darted to and from;
> A Sabbath of the Serpents, heaped pell-mell
> For Devil's roll-call and some fête of Hell.

And the sun

> . . . burned out black, except a rim,
> A bleeding eyeless socket, red and dim.

As one would expect, the Waste Land is a dominant image in the archetypal theory of myths. It can be:

> . . . a sinister forest like the ones we meet in Comus or the opening of the Inferno, or a heath, which

> from Shakespeare to Hardy has been associated with tragic destiny, or a wilderness like that of Browning's Childe Roland or Eliot's Waste Land.

The waste marshes that "shine and glister to the moon" in the first description of the City, the moorland black, bleak uplands, and black ravines, the stony ridges, the trackless wilderness, savage woods, enormous mountains, are all recognizable and archetypal images for man's desolation of spirit; and it is only right that beyond it should be that symbol of the unknown, the "shipless sea's unrest" ("the unplumbed, salt estranging sea"). And in the sermon in the Cathedral, the Waste Land imagery rises to a more subjective level:

> O melancholy Brothers, dark, dark, dark!
> O battling in black floods without an ark!

Indeed, the whole poem takes place within a Waste Land, for as Frye says, perhaps with Thomson's work in mind: "Cities of destruction and dreadful night belong here, and the great ruins of pride." And Thomson indeed tells us that the City is a "builded desolation,/Of woe and terrors and thick darkness reared", and it

> . . . rests for man so weird and awful,
> That his intrusion there might seem unlawful,
> And phantoms there may have their proper home.

Moreover it is the centre of "many a potent evil influence/Each adding poison to the poisoned air".

In concluding his study of the Theory of Myths, Frye concerns himself with his second definition (of 'mythos') in which he classifies it as: "one of the four archetypal narratives, classified as comic, romantic, tragic and ironic." And ironic literature he describes as:

> . . . a mode of literature in which the characters exhibit a power of action inferior to the one assumed to be the normal in the reader or audience, or in which the poet's attitude is one of detached objectivity.

In the last 'phase' of ironic literature, as he describes it, human life is presented in terms of largely unrelieved bondage. And he says:

> This brings us around again to the point of demonic epiphany, the dark tower and prison of endless pain, the city of dreadful night in the desert, or, with a more erudite irony, the tour abolie, the goal of the quest that isn't there. But on the other side of this blasted world of repulsiveness and idiocy, a world without pity and without hope, satire begins again.

And "it is irony, not tragedy, that represents the nightmare". In this sense The City is ironic. It falls short of tragedy because nothing can happen. The narrator has no stature, he is already fallen, he cannot attract the jealousy of the gods; there is no possibility of 'hybris'. In Section VI, when the "bodiless voices" in the poet's "waking dream" discuss their failure to escape this life into hell, we are at the dead centre of myth. This is the quest that can never succeed, the search for a hope so hopeless that the purpose of finding it is to surrender to the hopelessness of hell. It is the demonic form of the apocalyptic search for the Holy Grail.

And this is appropriate, for the apocalyptic myth must be heaven centred: there must be a paradise, a good God or Gods, a Reward. The demonic myth is hell centred: there must be a demon, there must be a punishment. And in The City there is a Demon. He is "Death-in-Life" and therefore the Eternal King (Section III). He is the God and Lord who is the creator of all sin, than whom the vilest thing must be less vile, and who is malignant and implacable (Section VIII). He is "Necessity Supreme". He is the Sphinx "changeless as life's laws", he is the adamantine "Never". And somewhere he has his hell and his demon warders; but, because we are in Limbo, demonic as well as apocalyptic hope is snatched away. We are denied hell as well as heaven.

The reference to Death-in-Life must remind us, as it did when we first considered it, of the Life-in-Death in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner". And since we are considering archetypes, it is interesting to glance at Maud Bodkin's fascinating analysis of Coleridge's poem.[15] She quotes Professor Lowes;[16] who says that when Coleridge was writing his poem: "Guilt haunted wanderers were the theme which for the moment was magnetic in his brain", and he believes that among the figures present in Coleridge's imagination were those of Cain and the Wandering Jew. Bodkin recalls that the crime of Cain was against human relationship, and the crime of the Wandering Jew the rejection of God in Man: "of a divine opportunity, a crime against the soul". If we apply these criteria to The City of Dreadful Night, we are immediately conscious of a kind of double vision: Thomson is a guilt haunted wanderer himself, since he had committed the crimes both of Cain and the Wandering Jew, by his failure to enter into real human relationships, and by his rejection of God in man. And the poet, in his wanderings through the City of Gloom which he creates, shares with the Ancient Mariner a compulsion to tell his tale, and indeed begins the poem by justifying the need he feels so to do:

> Because a cold rage seizes one at whiles
> To show the bitter old and wrinkled truth . . .

and

> Because it gives some sense of power and passion
> In helpless impotence to try to fashion
> Our woe in living words howe'er uncouth.

This echoes much of the Mariner's description of his own need,

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[15] Maud Bodkin, Archetypal Patterns in Poetry: Psychological Studies of Imagination, 1934.

[16] John Livingston Lowes, The Road to Xanadu, 1927.

and of the power that goes with it, in the last section of Coleridge's poem:

> . . . at an uncertain hour,
> That agony returns;
> And till my ghastly tale is told,
> This heart within me burns.
>
> I pass, like night, from land to land;
> I have strange power of speech;
> That moment that his face I see,
> I know the man that must hear me:
> To him my tale I teach.

Both the narrators must choose their audience, both know that only certain men will listen. Thomson tries to define those he expects to hear him; the Ancient Mariner knows intuitively who must do so. But the Mariner seeks salvation, so the heart within him "burns". For Thomson there cannot be salvation, so he is seized by a "cold " rage. Strangely the Mariner in his passing from land to land is himself "like night"; Thomson is imprisoned within "night". There is here, one feels, a fascinating projection through the lens of two quite different minds of images that are embedded deep within the human understanding, probably so deeply buried that they do indeed fall within the Jungian definition of an archetype.

But I have said we are conscious in relation to the archetype of a double vision. Thomson is in a City filled with others, self-absorbed, wandering like himself. His first encounter is with the man circling forever round his three shrines, cut off from man and god. His next is with the wild schizophrenic figure, beset like the Ancient Mariner by serpents, flames and bloody suns, but coming only to bewilderment and loss. Then as he is "wandering" in a suburb of the North, the poet encounters the creature trying to crawl back to infant purity:

> From this accursed night without a morn,
> And through the deserts which have else no track,
> And through vast wastes of horror-haunted time,
> To Eden innocence in Eden's clime . . .

Thomson offers two alternative courses of action, or inaction, to those who are, like himself, caught up into the conviction of a hopeless universe. One is to "drink new strength of iron endurance"; the other is to make use of the River of Suicides (Section XIX). Here again, in Bodkin's view, we are close to that stratum of the human consciousness which calls on archetypal imagery to express what is otherwise not capable of adequate expression. She draws our attention to Arnold's description of the Oxus in "Sohrab and Rustum" as "a foiled circuitous wanderer", and she personalizes the image by saying that: "We know from within what it is to be 'a foiled circuitous wanderer', our own life-currents hemmed and split." This would seem to accord well with Thomson's own vision of himself, and of those who find themselves within his City. And Bodkin would see in Thomson's "river flowing dark and deep,/With ebb and flood from the remote sea-tides" an archetypal image for the death-craving, the desire for a quiet resolution of all problems, that comes to us all from time to time, and remains with some neurotic natures always.

At the conclusion of her chapter on "The Image of Woman", Maud Bodkin considers the Gretchen/Margaret figure in Geothe's Faust, and Margaret's part in the final triumph of the angels over Mephistopheles. She says, referring to Goethe's agnosticism:

> If by his whole poem Goethe communicates to us an imaginative experience of a man's life of endeavour within which there works continuously the influence of a youthful love tragically shattered, then he would seem to have clear artistic right to this imagery borrowed from a creed he did not share, as a means of expressing that enduring influence, on the upper plane of timeless vision.

We can apply this to Thomson's work even if the poem does not reach "the upper plane of timeless vision", but remains firmly in the ironic mode. The comment can justifiably be used to

explain and excuse Thomson's use of Christian symbols in his poem, and its close association with Dante's "Inferno", a great work of Christian imagery. I think it right to confine the reference to the "Inferno", since there is little internal evidence in the poem that Thomson had either of the other sections of the Divine Comedy in mind. The Christian imagery, which we have noted in detail in previous chapters, clusters mainly, apart from the Cathedral sequence, round the figure of the unattainable woman - in the Desert section, for example, and in that which describes the mansion flooded with light. It is not therefore surprising that Thomson found Dante, also seeking for union with his lost love, entirely sympathetic. But there is as much difference between Dante's conception of the spiritual transfiguration that would come in the final mating of the souls, and Thomson's desire to be reunited with his lost love, to gain some sort of peace and understanding here on earth, as there is between Thomson's Dreadful Night and Saint John of the Cross's Dark Night of the Soul. Indeed Thomson is like a more despairing Orpheus seeking his Eurydice in the City of Dis than he is like Dante seeking his Beatrice, for indeed "the City is of Night; perchance of Death". The image of the "descent into Hell" which he shares with Dante, must be one of the oldest and most universal of all archetypes, persisting from primitive myth in an agrarian community to Eliot's poem, "The Hollow Men", where:

> In this last of meeting places
> We grope together
> And avoid speech
> Gathered on this beach of the tumid river.

But we must notice that neither Thomson nor Eliot follow Dante into the theological boundaries of hell itself. Both

stop short, Thomson perhaps more consciously than Eliot, in Limbo among

> . . . this the tribe
> Of those ill spirits both to God displeasing
> And to his foes. [17]

If hell itself smybolizes, as has been suggested, the encounter with one's own suppressed guilt, then the descent is possible only as far as Limbo for those who can admit neither the apocalyptic vision of redemption, nor the demonic concept of divine punishment.

ii.- Parable and Allegory

Before we pursue the mythopoeic path any further, we may do well to pause and take heed of a warning of the danger that lies in our path. Louis MacNeice, who spent much thought on the problems of myth, parable and allegory in literature, brackets parables and myths together in one respect. He says:

> In so far as parable writing is akin to dreams, it tempts one, just as religious myths and folk tales do, to look below its 'manifest' content for a 'latent' content which can then be interpreted in terms of one's favourite modern psychologist. This is an amusing proceeding but can be very destructive. . . . The writer's mythopoeic faculty transcends both his personal background and his so-called message . . . [18]

We must recall that we are considering The City of Dreadful Night in its entirety, and we have now been prompted to ask if we should look at it as a parable. The work that springs most readily to mind, for purposes of comparison, when we consider the structure of The City, is The Pilgrim's Progress.

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[17] Dante, "The Inferno", Canto III, Cary's translation.

[18] Louis MacNeice, Varieties of Parable, (Clark Lectures 1963), Cambridge University Press, 1965.

Here we have the 'Quest' type of narrative, interspersed with adventures and anecdotes, each of which has an allegorical value additional to that of the pilgrimage itself. The incidents in the Slough of Despond, in the Interpreter's House, and in the castle of Giant Despair, for example, are strung like beads along the narrow way, just as in Thomson's work the sequences in the desert, in the Cathedral, by the river, and in other parts of the City, are alternated with passages of its description. The difference between the two works is considerable and recognized in their titles. The City is static. Within it nothing can change; time does not pass, since it is the city of perpetual night. Such progress as each inhabitant had known, took place in the past, and was towards the City. Bunyan's work on the other hand, is concerned with constant movement. The illusion of hard won physical progress along the straight and narrow path sustains the feeling of intellectual and emotional progression towards greater understanding of Christian doctrine, virtue and redemption into faith, so that Christian's journey is through life itself. And there are great differences both in the atmosphere and in the intent of the two works. Bunyan is writing that all may learn; Thomson is writing that some may understand. This kind of difference (though he makes no mention of The City) is dealt with by MacNeice in his Clark lectures:

> for /I have suggested that any parable writer, in whatever form, is concerned with the projecting of a special world. How far such a special world must be also a private world is open to argument. . . . often, both in novels and in plays, and most frequently in poetry, the author is dealing not with man the political or social animal . . . but with man the solitary animal. In these latter cases the special world tends to become a private world. But even if this is so, it

> need not mean we cannot share it with its creator. [19]

Here indeed are terms of reference that are close to Thomson. We might well consider that in this poem he is concerned with man the solitary animal who, while not totally alone, is denied the fullness of communication with his kind. There are others in Thomson's City, and he meets them and speaks to them. He questions the creature crawling back along its own life's path. He questions the man mourning at the graves of Faith and Love and Hope. But nothing comes of it. There is empathy, but no sympathy. This type of distancing from his fellow creatures which we have already compared to the sin of Cain, is described as "this accursed cage wherein I pine". At a time when he was halfway through the composition of The City, he describes it with great clarity. "This isolation of thought" he says:

> is sometimes almost appalling. Walking in the streets at night and sunk in musing, I come up to the surface and regard the moving people; and they seem to me distant and apparently unrelated as ships on the horizon traversing the ocean between unknown foreign ports; and there are moments when they seem incalculably and inconceivably remote, as stars and star systems in infinite space. [20]

Thomson undoubtedly projected in The City this "special world", in MacNeice's terms, and it is one which we can share with its creator, for we are all familiar with it in some degree. But even if this means that we could, if we wished, describe Thomson as a parabolist, it cannot mean that the poem, taken as a whole, can be described as a parable.

Perhaps the difficulty arises from trying, at this stage,

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[19] Louis MacNeice, Varieties of Parable, op.cit.

[20] James Thomson, "Fragment" written in 1872, and published in Poems, Essays and Fragments, 1905.

to consider the poem as a whole. When we consider the whole poem, we are obliged to take into account the transitions between the descriptions of the City into which the poet withdraws, as it were to take breath, which is the first element, and the second element which consists of the intervening sections which attempt to explore, in one way or another, the internal tragedy of the human state subdued by the apparent limitations of the universe. Fraser[21] finds not dissimilar transitions in The Waste Land, but here they are, he thinks, "abrupt", a quality which cannot be applied to The City. The abrupt transitions in Eliot's poem give it, in Fraser's view, "the effect not of a vision but of a dream". The deliberate transitions in Thomson's work lend it the quality not of a dream, but of a nightmare. This makes "The City of Night" a symbol, in the sense of an "expanded metaphor" for the permanent depression induced by the logic of unwavering atheism. If we accept this, that the City sequences are a symbol making intelligible and vivid a despairing and inescapable state of mind, then we can see them as the essential framework for the remaining sequences describing the emotional causes and effects of that state, sequences fitting into the framework like pictures on the wall of a sombre gallery. These are the two elements: the City which exists, but is at the same time a state of mind; and the woes of those within it, but who themselves project it.

We may, perhaps, find the word 'element' acceptable, although we have rejected the attempt to divide the poem into two portions, either on grounds of chronology or on grounds of subject matter. The two elements are each essential to the

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[21] G.S. Fraser, Vision and Rhetoric, 1959.

overall concept of the poem and are yet each integral and distinct. This may well mean that we find ourselves in the same dilemma in categorizing the poem that Fraser experiences when visiting The Waste Land.[22] He finds The Waste Land is not an allegory in any strict sense. It is not, as the dictionary has it: "The description of a subject under the guise of some other subject of aptly suggestive resemblance". He finds instead that it has much in common with a "vision poem", like Piers Plowman.[23] Similarly Thomson, like Langland, had a message to convey. It is that, if a God exists, he takes no interest in the affairs either of the individual man, or of mankind. Or if he does take an interest, it is a baleful one. Or that he does not exist at all, and that his place is taken by immutable laws, by blind Fate, or by Necessity. And such development as there is in the poem is from the first of these positions to the last. From the very opening of the poem, what matters is the effect of this atheistic belief, emotionally speaking. To make it clear what it feels like to have no God, Thomson required a symbol that would play its part in determining the reader's reaction. He found it in a special kind of City, because the city is an ancient and frequent metaphor for differing

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[22] G.S. Fraser, Vision and Rhetoric, op.cit.

[23] cf. John Heath-Stubbs, The Darkling Plain: A study of the Later Fortunes of Romanticism in English Poetry from George Darley to W.B. Yeats, 1950, p.116:

> The poet's visual sensibility is acute, and the imagery he employs is always precise and concrete; there is little vague rhetoric. The apparent plainness arises from the pictorial method characteristic of Thomson. He builds up, often through a number of stanzas, a single visual image, often of a striking magnitude, and it is these images which are the units of his poetry. In this he is akin to the mediaeval poets who followed the method of allegory - a tradition carried on by Spenser.

aspects of man's feeling about the world as he finds it, and about the world to come. There is the City of Destruction, and the Celestial City. There were the Cities of the Plain, and the mystic city of Jerusalem. "Hell" Shelley tells us, "is a City much like London." There is the City of the Book of Revelations, that great metaphor for universal understanding which has not yet come in sight. It is a mistake to think that Thomson chose the City metaphor solely because he was so often a wanderer in the City of London, especially at night. Relevant as these experiences were, they cannot have been the sole inspiration. There is more to the choice of imagery than proximity; there must be a climate of understanding. Though his environment may have made the choice more immediately obvious, just as the Romantic poets, his predecessors, found the metaphor of solitary contemplation and understanding in nature and the rural scene, so Thomson found the extended metaphor of solitary disbelief and lack of universal understanding in the natural habitat of man the gregarious, and man the lonely.

iii.- Conclusion

Now we are at the end of this exploration of The City of Dreadful Night. It has proved to be a longer and more complicated journey than we might have thought, for we had been led to expect an atheistical poem, written by a mid-Victorian poet who had lost his loved one when still a youth, was an alcoholic and probably took opium, and which was published in a journal devoted, not to literature, but to the

discussion of 'free thought'. In the event, this is indeed what we found, but there was a great deal more beside; and of the poem itself it can be said, I believe, that it is of thicker texture, and has wider associations, than has previously been thought. Even so it defies definition. We cannot say of it that it is an epic poem, or a parable, an allegory, or a myth. It is like its author, unique; a member of a class of one.

But we have made a few decisions about it and we may attempt a summary of them. It is an Ironic not a Tragic poem, but Ironic in the fullest sense of the word. The poet is a "guilt-haunted wanderer" among other guilt-haunted men. He regards his fellows with empathy, not with sympathy;[24] his City if static, and he does not progress through it. He

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[24] Thomson's article on "Sympathy" (Essays and Phantasies, op.cit.) is, in the form of an essay on the subject generally, an unconscious analysis of his own attitudes and difficulties, casting light on his stance as an understanding but uninvolved observer of the guilt-haunted wanderer in Section II, of the Festival of Light in Section X, and of the creature seeking to return to the womb in Section XVIII. In this article he says that if we analyse any charitable action, we shall find it much less sympathetic than we might expect:

> It was not the result of a feeling with its object; but was rather the result of a process strictly analogous to the process used in solving an algebraic equation, almost as purely intellectual and non-cordial; dealing not with the very things in question, but with familiar abstract symbols that, until the solution is obtained, are scarecely in our thought connected, much less are identified, with those things themselves.

Later he adds that:

> . . . we are nearly always ready to do more for friends or strangers overtaken by calamity than we can bring ourselves to feel for them.

In "The Sayings of Sigvat", also written in 1865, and included in Essays and Phantasies, he adds:

> In this wide world of ours there is no creature who has either the will or the power to help another.

submits to fate, he does not challenge it. There is no tragic 'hybris', there is only ironic despair. His Waste Land is the same as Childe Roland's, but his response is unheroic, since he has sacrificed all hope. The Gods ignore him.

To convey this situation, he has invented his own myth - not as McGann suggests,[25] an "anti-myth", but a demonic myth as Frye denies it. His City is "the world that desire rejects", but which has its own appalling, but irresistible spell. Its inhabitants are isolated, introspective units, informed by a sense of the world's futility. But they have their own language, their own priesthood, their own ritual.

The myth is contained within the framework of a symbol, the City itself, which is an expanded metaphor for an inescapable state of mind. As an observer himself, trapped within the City, Thomson describes in a series of visions mostly of nightmare intensity, the sufferings of the journey into the City, the nightmares of those who are remorselessly trapped, and the hopelessness of those imprisoned within it who have no alternative except the choice of an earlier death, an earlier escape from bending before the blind will of Fate, or of living only to share the iron endurance of Necessity itself.

His nightmares are described in a series of visual images, in a manner that is reminiscent of Spenser, and the work has something of the allegorical nature of The Fairie Queene, though its arrangement is not unlike that of The Inferno. Unique as it is, the antecedents of The City of Dreadful Night reach back into mediaeval literature. It deals with the basic

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[25] Jerome J. McGann, "James Thomson (B.V.): The woven hymns of night and day", Studies in English Literature, III, (Autumn 1963) pp.493-507.

questions of the mystery of existence, and the poet has not hesitated to press into service religious imagery that would appear to be the very antithesis of his thought. Christian symbolism, whether used consciously or not, adds indeed to the very hopelessness of the City's inhabitants, since they can express their despair only by the help of rituals and emblems that belong to a religion of hope.

But the message of The City is the loss of Hope that followed on the loss of Faith; and the loss of Love that followed from the loss of the religious promise of the life to come. The symbol of the City of Dreadful Night is used to convey the bleakness of life once man is convinced that there is no personal God, that is yet worse when he is convinced that there is no God at all, not even a 'fiend' who exercises malevolent power over mankind. And the nightmares and the calmer pessimistic visions are there to show the effect on the thought and feelings of those who must accept this bleak existence because they cannot achieve that combination of will and of emotion that is faith.

The force of The City of Dreadful Night lies in the extreme nature of the message. Night and melancholy were no new subjects for poetry; atheism, or at least disbelief had found its place in English poetry before Thomson; and certainly poets had explored other ways than Christianity of thinking about the divine origin of the world. Nor was doubt an exceptional subject in the poetry of his time, but others considered it in a gentlemanly fashion, or buried it in the Garden of Proserpine. But for Thomson denial of hope, denial of religious hope, brought an extremity of pessimism that has no equal in English poetry, and which only Leopardi seems to match. Its undisciplined obverse is the frenetic shrillness

of his prose blasphemies.

However extreme the despair that he sought to convey, Thomson found much of his imagery not only in the .Church which no longer satisfied him, but also in the images of the Waste Land in which despairing humanity has wandered through the ages. He is in the desert, he is in the empty and echoing City, he is in night and surrounded by phatoms; he cannot communicate, his love is dead and he cannot escape from her shrine. These are part of the poetic world of unhappy man; the City fits within it as a desert of the soul, and at the opposite pole of human understanding from the City of Light.

That the poem was not without influence on subsequent work we have already seen, but though it has remained reasonably well known, that influence has not been great. And this is not surprising, for it is, in effect, a dead end. It deals with a subject great enough to sustain one outstanding poem, but once that had been effectively written, the theme of the great void and its effect on man offers no further inspiration. And one of the reasons must surely lie in the intellectual limitations of the poet, and the contradictions which are therefore embedded in his thinking. For at the last, he cannot say there is in truth nothing but a blank and meaningless universe. Having rejected God, having rejected a divine, or indeed a satanic, power, he must needs erect Necessity in its place; and in doing so he is, had he but realized it, at the very beginning, the starting point of metaphysics. So the cul-de-sac is not only because despair that comes from his thinking can be described only once, it is also because it is no longer possible to stop where Thomson stopped, and erect an edifice of disbelief on so slender a belief.

Thomson with "his ghoulish wanderings through deserted streets" remains, indeed, "one of our rarer monsters",[26] and the stature of his work is well established by Vachot:

> Symboliste et surréaliste au sens plein et vrai de ces deux termes, la Cité de l'Epouvantable Nuit est une des rares oeuvres modernes qui soient du même rang que les grands poèmes bibliques: ce testament d'un Européen, au declin d'un siècle sceptique et scientiste, est universel comme le Livre de Job. [27]

Surrealist the poem may indeed be called, and it has the merit of the greater surrealist paintings, a merit which we granted to it at the outset of this study, that of discipline. For, controlling the symbolism, controlling the vision, is a coherent and discernible plan, which is none the worse for having developed slowly, as we have seen, over two or three years of steady composition, and which reached its final form after much consideration. We are introduced to the City, we are kept within the City, we are taken ceaselessly round the three shrines of dead Faith, dead Love, dead Hope. And the resolution is to deliver us into the arms of blind Fate, and Necessity Supreme. To this overall plan the regular prosody, and even such minor detail as the length of the sections in relation to their arrangement, provide a firm framework. For Thomson it was an unusual exercise in poetic self-control, and he was rewarded by presenting a poem of unusual interest, mordant grandeur, and utter integrity.

Integrity is indeed the final word. If any factor makes the poem great, it is the utter sincerity with which he struggles, and in great measure succeeds, to make us understand

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[26] "Bysshe Vanolis: Jame Thomson's Journey into Night", The Times Literary Supplement, 16 February 1967.

[27] Charles Vachot, James Thomson (1834-1882), Paris, 1964, p.234.

from the dreadful mental suffering, the total despair, that comes from the misconceived need to sacrifice all feeling on the altar of an over logical intelligence. And the integrity is all the greater in that he cannot fully succeed, that we are not presented with a cold inhuman analysis as the victorious cause of his despair. Thomson was an eagle born into captivity. He felt without knowing why, that his wings were clipped; and he described as never before or since, the horrors of the cage.

APPENDIX I - Bertram Dobell

Bertram Dobell, the son of Sydney Dobell (a prominent member of the "Spasmodic" school of poetry), was a bookseller, publisher, editor, biographer and poet. His shop was at 77 Charing Cross Road, and until recently these premises were still selling antiquarian and second-hand books. The family carried on a similar business in Tunbridge Wells until the middle of 1972.

There is a delightful pamphlet on Bertram Dobell by a certain S. Bradbury,[1] written in 1909 when Dobell was sixty-eight and, amusingly enough, published by him. (Did he commission it, I wonder, in a moment of pardonable vanity?) His efforts on Thomson's behalf were untiring, and it is probably true to say that he rescued him from obscurity. He has yet more claim to fame in the literary pantheon, since he recognized the unsigned MSS of Treherne's verse and prose, and published The Poetical Works of Thomas Treherne - "from the original manuscripts" in 1903 and Centuries of Meditation in 1908. He also "rescued" the works of William Strode (1600-1645).

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[1] S. Bradbury, Bertram Dobell: Bookseller and Man of Letters published by Bertram Dobell, London, 1909.

Something of the enthusiasm of the man comes out in these verses:

> Old tomes I love most with their time-worn covers,
> Quaint printing and dark paper stained with age;
> About them a peculiar magic hovers,
> Such as I find not in the modern page.
>
> I love the odd, the quaint, and the fantastic -
> All that your men of "common sense" decline;
> Such treasures with a joy enthusiastic
> I greet and prize as connoisseurs old wine.
>
> Old plays are there, old poems, old romances,
> Things that the busy world has long forgot;
> Books full of strange and undigested fancies,
> By brains half mad and half inspired begot. [2]

Dobell's collection of MSS relating to Thomson were donated by his son to the Bodleian Library.

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[2] From "Bookworm's Confession" by Bertram Dobell.

APPENDIX II

a.- Sections in date order of fair copies

Because he seemed to walk	16/20 Jan. 70 6 Mar. 70
I wandered in a suburb	22/23/24/26 May 70
I sat me weary	12 June 70 7/9 July 70
The City is of night	10/11/15/16/19 July 70
How he arrives there	26/27 Aug. 70
What men are they	27/28 Aug. 70
Some say that phantoms	28 Aug. 70
As I came through the desert	28 Aug. 70 5 Oct. 70
The Mansion stood apart (The Festival of light)	6/13 Oct. 70
I sat forlornly	14/20 Oct. 70
Although lamps burn	23 Oct. 70

While I still lingered	- May/2 June 73
It is full strange	7 June 73
The mighty river flowing	6 June 73 1 Oct. 73
Proem	11 June 73
Anear the centre (Melancholy)	13 June 73 15/24/28/29 Oct. 73
Our isolated units	3 July 73
Large glooms were gathered	3/4/5 July 73
How the moon triumphs	1/2 Oct. 73
Wherever men are gathered	4 Oct. 73
Of all things human	4/29 Oct. 73
Our shadowy congregation	6/11 Oct. 73

b.- Sections in order of British Museum drafts

Pencil draft		Ink draft	
XV	Wherever men are gathered	Wherever men are gathered	XV
I	The City is of night	The City is of night	I
II	Because he seemed to walk	Because he seemed to walk	II
IX	It is full strange	*What men are they	XI
VIII	While I still lingered	While I still lingered	VIII
III	Although lamps burn	Although lamps burn	III
XII	Our isolated units	Our isolated units	XII
VII	Some say that phantoms	Some say that phantoms	VII
XIV	Large glooms were gathered	Large glooms were gathered	XIV
XIII	Of all things human	*It is full strange	IX
X	The mansion stood apart	The mansion stood apart	X
V	How he arrives there	How he arrives there	V
IV	He stood alone	He stood alone:	IV
XI	What men are they	*Of all things human	XIII
VI	I sat forlornly	I sat forlornly	VI

[The numbers of the sections are those used in The National Reformer and subsequent editions.

Variations in the ink version as compared with the pencil are marked *]

c.- Possible arrangements (i)

At the beginning of BM. Add MS.38532, the 'ink' version of The City of Dreadful Night, (Folio 21), Thomson makes the following notes of possible arrangements:

Sequence?

II.	[Illegible deletion]	Dead Faith, dead love, dead Hope	II.
IV,		As I came through the desert -	VIII
~~VI.~~ XII		The festival that filled with light -	X.
~~VIII.~~ VI		Refused entrance into Hell -	
X.		The searcher for the broken clue -	IV.
V. ~~XII.~~ VIII		The Conversation -	trs XIV

	I	The City	
V. III		*How he arrives there none can clearly know	III
III. V.		Although lamps burn along the silent streets	
	VII	What men are they who haunt these fatal glooms?	V
	IX	Some say that phantoms haunt those sombre streets	
V	XI	It is full strange to him who fears and feels*	V
V	XIII	[The River of Suicides - in pencil - overwritten in ink -] River XIX.5.p.28	

[fig.XV and one line of illegible pencil over-written in ink -]

Wedy. 1.10.73

Yet it is but for one night after all:
[continued in ink] What matters one brief night of dreary pain
When after it the we weary eyelids fall
Upon the weary eyes and heavy languid brain;
Then/And all sad scenes and thoughts and feelings vanish
In that sweet sleep which never wakes again?

The above is diagrammatic only. The original is still protected by copyright and cannot be reproduced.
Deletions and underlinings are Thomson's.
Comments in square brackets are mine.
* to * - all these lines are written in pencil. The asterisks are mine.

d.- Possible arrangements (ii)

In BM. Add MS.38532, the 'ink' version, p.32 (Thomson's pagination; BM. p.38) after XV, later adopted as "Proem", there are many erasures and over-writings, but the following version is as accurate a transcription as I can make. Thomson's notes given below, list "A" (my letter) are written on the right of the page, list "B" (also my letter) on the left:

The above for Proem? [this remark written in pencil]

(To come in about middle! [This looks as though Thomson meant the remark to precede list B, as it is in the same ink and size of writing, giving the impression that it was written at the same time]

[A]	I	The City
	II	Dead Faith dead love etc.
	III	Altho' lamps burn
	IV	As I came through the desert
	V	How he arrives there
	VI	Refused entrance into hell
2	VII	What men are they
	VIII	The Conversation
1	IX	Some say that phantoms
		18 - XVIII
	XVIII	Searcher for broken clue
XIII [pencil]	XI	It is full strange
X [written over pencil XVI]	XII	The Festival of light
XIX [written over illegible pencil]	XIII	River of suicides
XX [ditto]	XIV	Sphinx and angel
XXI [ditto]	XV	Why and for whom written
[————————]		Melencolia

[The whole of this is in small writing in a space approximately 1" x 2". It is probable that the figure XXI is intended to apply to "Melencolia".]

"The above for Proem" (see previous page) and figure XIII are in pencil. Certain pencil notes are over-written in ink. It is not immediately clear that the figures in the left apply to my list "A", but it seems logically fairly certain that they do.

[B] [("To come in about the middle!" might well be intended to come here.]

	XIII	Odd - The moon and stars shining
	XII	Even - Whence come you?
XVII [pencil]	XV	Odd - Strange that men complain of the shortness of time -
	XIV	Even - The Cathedral Service
	~~XVII~~	Odd - The air infected with sighs etc.
	XVI	Even - Lament this once chance of happy life lost -
	XV	[fig.XV and connecting line in pencil]

There are twentytwo sections listed, but only fifteen in each of the British Museum versions.

On the last page of the pencil version, also in BM.38532 and between vv.4 and 5 of what is now the Proem (B.M. p.55), Thomson wrote, also in pencil:

The River of the Suicides. V

Whence come they?

The horses and vehicles of what merchandise

(Last) Why and how written for whom

The Cathedral service

The Moon and Stars shining

Of these, "Whence came they" (XII), "The Cathedral Service" (XIV), "The Moon and Stars shining" (XVII) are not in either of the British Museum versions.

e.- Sequence as in The National Reformer

The sequence of the sections as they appeared in The National Reformer (Proem-IV, 22 March; V-X, 12 April; XI-XVI, 26 April; XVII-XXI, 17 May 1874) is given below, with the dates on fair copies. All subsequent versions follow this sequence, with the addition of one stanza (10) in Section XIV.

Proem	Lo, thus, as prostate (Why and for whom written)	11 June 73
I	The City is of Night (The City)	10/11/15/16/ 19 July 70
II	Because he seemed to walk Dead faith, dead love, dead hope)	16/20 Jan. 6 Mar. 70
III	Although lamps burn	23 Oct. 70
IV	He stood alone (As I came through the desert)	28 Aug. 70 5 Oct. 70
V	How he arrives there	26/27 Aug. 70
VI	I sat forlornly (Refused entrance to hell)	14/20 Oct. 70
VII	Some say that phantoms	28 Aug. 70
VIII	While I still lingered (The conversation)	- May 73 2 June 73
IX	It is full strange	7 June 73
X	The mansion stood apart (The festival of light)	6/13 Oct. 70
XI	What men are they	27/28 Aug. 70
XII	Our isolated units (Whence come you)	3 July 73
XIII	Of all things human (Strange that men complain of the shortness of time)	4/29 Oct. 73
XIV	Large glooms were gathered (The cathedral service)	3/4/5 July 73
XV	Wherever men are gathered (The air infected with sighs)	4 Oct. 73
XVI	Our shadowy congregation (Lament this one chance of happy life lost)	6/11 Oct. 73
XVII	How the moon triumphs	1/2 Oct. 73

XVIII	I wandered in a suburb (The search for the broken clue)	22/23/24/ 26 May 70
XIX	The mighty river flowing (River of suicides)	6 June 73 1 Oct. 73
XX	I sat me weary (Sphinx and angel)	12 June 70 7/9 July 70
XXI	Anear the centre (Melencolia)	13 June 73 15/24/28/ 29 Oct. 73

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An Abstract of "An Exploration of 'The City of Dreadful Night'" by D.B. Moore: a Thesis submitted for the degree of Ph.D. in the University of Leicester, 1973.

The object of this exploration of The City of Dreadful Night is to discover what makes it a major work by a very minor poet.

The first chapter examines the life story of James Thomson (B.V.), to show how his upbringing, the social pressures of the nineteenth century, and the chance friendships of his early manhood, brought him to total despair. His reading, while perceptive, was so narrow in its choice (because undirected) that he lacked intellectual variety and stimulous. His other poetry is briefly examined to show how it led to this one great work, and how inspiration failed him thereafter, except when he took up the same theme in the last months of his life.

The remarkable prosodic ability with which The City is composed, and its appropriate, though limited, vocabulary is examined. Close study is given to the manuscripts, and previous theories about Thomson's method of composition are modified in the light of various holograph notes.

Much of this thesis is a long explication of the poem itself. The structure of the poem round the concepts of "dead Faith, dead Love, dead Hope" is demonstrated for the first time, as is the wide and constant use of Roman Catholic imagery and its striking contrast with the Puritan conclusion.

A chapter is devoted to considering how this unique work is related to the main stream of English poetry, and that its influence on later poetry is of importance.

In the light of the theories of Northrop Frye, the poem is described as ironic and a "demonic myth". It clearly contains the pessimistic symbol of the androgyne. The archetypal imagery of the poem is stressed.

While it may be right to consider Thomson as a parabolist (in MacNeice's sense of the word), the poem is best understood as an extended metaphor for a state of mind, illustrated by allegorical examples.