ESTRANGEMENT AND COMMUNITY IN JAMES "B.V." THOMSON'S *THE CITY OF DREADFUL NIGHT*

by

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The Development of James B.V. Thomson's Poetics: Ideological Estrangement and the Poetic Forging of Community

Victorian poet James "B.V." Thomson remains on the periphery of scholastic attention, largely unknown by many except as the author of *The City of Dreadful Night*, his masterwork. Even this poem is consigned to relative canonical obscurity, anthologized often as a sort of pessimistic, atheistic anomaly.[1] Thomson himself has been called a pessimist, atheist, radical, and blasphemer by critics, recent and contemporary alike, but perhaps the most accurate description is "minor." I use this term not dismissively, but critically, much as Joseph Bristow proposes in regard to Amy Levy, whose volume *A Minor Poet and Other Verse* "positions her. . . . with a 'minor' poetic identity, one that either refuses, resists, or at least feels uncertain about the implicitly 'major' demands of the literary canon" (76). To be minor is not to be insignificant, but to be dissident. Deleuze and Guattari's study of Kafka reveals the significance of minor literature and its political and collective nature. They state: "It is literature that produces an active solidarity in spite of skepticism; and if the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility" (17). Minor literature itself provides the means by which figures outside of a major community may be united. A minor poet, therefore, may operate outside the realms of popular thought and opinion, and forge a place to cultivate "another sensibility." However "unpopular" pessimism and atheism might

[1] More recent anthologies, however, have worked toward expanding the canon beyond the traditional poetic figures and recognize Thomson's poem as an important piece. Frances O'Gorman, for one, in *Victorian Poetry: An Annotated Anthology* (2004) calls it "a key poem in defining the new urban experience of the great Victorian city as godless and hopeless" (394).

have been for Thomson's contemporaries, the grim and isolated world of *The City of Dreadful Night* offered (and continues to offer) a place to forge a "minor" community.

Thomson knew he was "minor," and even the communities he allied himself to were far from "mainstream."[2] Throughout Thomson's writings is a prevailing theme of estrangement, not only from popular thought and belief systems, but also from society at large. This theme is well-explored by Thomson's critics; indeed, many studies of Thomson are largely biographical, and attempt to trace out the hardships of his life in order to explain (or excuse) the pessimism and atheism of *The City of Dreadful Night*. Other Thomson scholars, however, shun a purely biographical reading of Thomson's work, focusing instead upon his intellectual and philosophical development and his literary background. Though both of these approaches are valuable for a consideration of Thomson's most important poem, they neglect an important element: the role of community. In life and in beliefs, Thomson was isolated, but in the act of writing and publishing he is a public poet who recognized his position within a community: that of others who shared his beliefs, of others who felt likewise estranged. This paradoxical community of the isolated is forged explicitly in *The City of Dreadful Night*, in which Thomson offers an ironic ray of hope in an otherwise bleak outlook—though one may suffer, one is not alone in suffering. Poetry, then, serves an important social role, a way to connect individuals who might be otherwise separated. The message of Thomson's poem is not simply one of atheism or pessimism or dissatisfaction, but one of comfort and community. This project intends to establish the framework for approaching this important poem through an investigation of Thomson's personal (and

[2] Thomson wrote for the secularist *National Reformer*, but was never an active member of the National Secularist Society—a point to be further discussed in the following chapter.

poetic) philosophy, coupled with an exploration of contemporary Victorian representations of "the city" and the experience of the "modern" world.

To arrive at a sense of Thomson's poetics, one must first be acquainted with the man to determine his "minor" status. Thomson's pessimism and melancholy have been under critical discussion and debate since his earliest biographers—one of whom, Bertram Dobell, went so far as to dub Thomson the "laureate of pessimism" in his biography of the same title. Thomson's life, certainly, was not without hardship, though the degree to which these hardships affected his writing is speculative. While many critics argue that it is a disservice to a poet's genius to look too closely to biographical contexts when analyzing a poem (or, at least, *only* to biographical contexts), it can be relevant to grasping his poetics when coupled with evidence such as published letters, among other materials. Poetry does not emerge from a vacuum, but is shaped by the attitudes and experiences of the poet, whether or not these experiences serve as the actual subject matter. As the events of Thomson's life are significant to his poems (and since biographical readings of his poems, particularly *The City of Dreadful Night*, have spurred critical debates), it is necessary to plot out at least a general summary of his life before undertaking his critical treatment. The information which follows is largely indebted to Tom Leonard's remarkably well-researched book on Thomson, *Places of the Mind*, cross-referenced with other biographies of Thomson. Leonard's book is particularly useful in that it is based in archival research and primary materials more so than conjecture (with which some scholars have faulted some of Thomson's earlier biographers, such as Salt and Dobell, though Salt's biography is quite useful for its inclusion of a number of Thomson's letters).

James Thomson was born in Port Glasgow, Scotland on 23 November 1834. His father was a merchant seaman until partially paralyzed by a stroke in 1840, after which Thomson's mother, a deeply religious woman and devout follower of Edward Irving,[3] began working as a court dressmaker to try to support the family. By this time the family had relocated to the East End of London, and when Thomson's mother fell ill in 1842, she sought admission for him in the Royal Caledonian Asylum in Islington, an asylum for "the maintenance and education of the children of soldiers sailors & marines, natives of Scotland, who have died or been disabled in the service of their country, and of indigent Scotch parents, resident in London, not entitled to parochial relief" (qtd. in Leonard 20). It was during his time at the Caledonian Asylum that Thomson began to read widely. In one of his letters he claimed to have been particularly fond of Byron at fifteen, and by sixteen had developed an appreciation for Shelley that would stay with him into his adult years (qtd. in Salt 7). In 1850, Thomson left the Caledonian Asylum and was admitted as a monitor at the Royal Military Asylum in Chelsea, which doubled as a "refuge for the children of servicemen, and as an army teacher-training college" (Leonard 39). Thomson left the Military Asylum for the garrison at Ballincollig in 1851 in order to become an army schoolmaster. Thomson acted as an assistant to the schoolmaster until 1854, when he received his first appointment at a garrison in Plymouth (Leonard 52). It was at Ballincollig, however, that Thomson met Charles Bradlaugh, who would become an important figure in Thomson's life and writing.

Charles Bradlaugh had been dedicated to anti-religious propaganda since he was seventeen, taking part in lectures, attending meetings, and publishing pamphlets. In 1853, he

[3] Thomson mentions, in a letter to his sister-in-law Julia, that he thought his mother "mystically inclined with Edward Irving," and remembers reading some of Irving's interpretations of prophecy "for the imagery" (qtd. in Salt 3-4).

returned to London to work as a clerk in a solicitor's office, but maintained contact with Thomson. Bradlaugh continued to be active in the movement then coming to be known as "secularism"—a term adopted by George Jacob Holyoake in 1851. Secularism, atheism, freethought, and humanism are all closely related concepts undergoing revision during this time. What is significant to note is that they are not simply operating from a perspective of religious rejection: these secular societies were usually very socio-politically motivated and focused on reform via a rejection of Christianity and the social institutions that uphold it.[4] One contemporary definition published in the *National Reformer* in1868 states: "Secularism adopts reason instead of faith, science instead of revelation, nature instead of providence, work instead of worship and prayer, and holds that humanity, instead of divinity, should occupy the thoughts of men and command their service" (qtd. in Walker 44). Even within these like-minded communities, however, disagreements and divisions were not uncommon. This would be true in Thomson's experiences as well.

At this point in Thomson's life, however, he had not joined Bradlaugh in his social and political activism. During his time as a schoolmaster, Thomson developed his literary skills, writing numerous poems. His first published poem appeared in 1858 in the *Investigator*, a periodical at which Bradlaugh was employed (and later took over editorship), under the pseudonym Bysshe Vanolis (later shortened to "B.V.")—"Bysshe" being a tribute to Percy Bysshe Shelley, and "Vanolis" being an anagram of the German poet Novalis, whom Thomson had been reading as he taught himself German. He published some twenty poems in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* from 1858 to1860 under the pseudonym "Crepusculus," Latin for "dusk." Tom Leonard points out that Thomson published "nothing

[4] Edward Royle has written two books useful for an examination of secularism: *Victorian Infidels: The Origins of the British Secularist Movement, 1791-1866* (1974) and *Radicals, Secularists, and Republicans: Popular Freethought in Britain, 1866-1915* (1980).

controversial or vehement" in *Tait's*, focusing on more romantic themes (69-70). Thomson also published his first critical essay in the *Investigator* in 1858, a piece on Ralph Waldo Emerson. After the *Investigator* collapsed for financial reasons in 1859, Bradlaugh established the *National Reformer*, which he envisioned having the following positions:

> It will advocate advanced Liberal opinions, on Social, Political, Theological, and Scientific questions, and will permit free discussion on every statement made. . . . The present platform, of theological advocacy, will be that of antagonism to every known religious system, and especially to the various phases of Christianity. . . . but every one. . . . shall have full space to illustrate his own views. (qtd. in Leonard 84)

Thomson's first contribution to the *National Reformer* in 1860 came in the form of a letter to the editor in response to a previous contributor's comments on Shelley's atheism. Thomson proposes (through an examination of Shelley's poetry) that Shelley was more of a pantheist than an atheist. He would publish another article on Shelley in the *Reformer* later that same year, praising the musicality and inspiration of his verse.[5] Thomson would soon become a regular contributor to Bradlaugh's periodical, writing poetry, translations, reviews, critical essays, and prose satires.

After being discharged from the army in 1862, Thomson became a clerk in a solicitor's office where Bradlaugh was then acting as a manager and moved in with the Bradlaughs. Though living, working, and writing with Bradlaugh, Thomson never joined the National Reform League or the National Secular Society, though the *National Reformer* would serve as the mouthpiece of both (Leonard 128-29). Thomson did occasionally publish outside of the *Reformer* during his time as a contributor, calling his idyllic poem "Sunday up

[5] In these essays on Shelley, Thomson articulates some of his earliest evaluative criteria regarding poetry, with Shelley as an exemplar—a point to be discussed further in this chapter.

the River" in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1869 his "only production in reputable society" in a letter in 1872 (qtd. in Salt 54). In 1866, Thomson found his own lodgings in London. By 1867, he had taught himself Italian (in addition to German and French), and began publishing translations of the pessimistic Italian poet and essayist Giacomo Leopardi. In 1869—the year of his self-described only "reputable" publication—Thomson burned all of his old manuscripts, letters, and papers. He wrote in his notebook:

> I was sad and stupid—scarcely looked into any; had I begun reading them, I might never have finished their destruction. . . . I felt myself like one who, having climbed half-way up a long rope, cuts off all beneath his feet; he must climb on, and can never touch the old earth again without a fatal fall. . . . But after this terrible year, I could do no less than consume the past. I can now better face the future, come in what guise it may. (qtd. in Salt 46)

The exact causes for Thomson's actions are unknown, as any documentation would likely have been burned regarding that "terrible year." Critical speculations range from his struggles with alcoholism (which is speculated to have begun during his time as an army schoolmaster), his loneliness, his perceived lack of success with his writing, to his growing pessimistic outlook. All that can be said for certain is that Thomson experienced something that he desired to move past. A few months later, Thomson would begin writing *The City of Dreadful Night*—a project that would span nearly four years, and be followed by three years of no poetry written (discernible since Thomson dated his material). The few poems Thomson did write over the next four years were apparently of little significance to Thomson himself, as he referred to this complete period (1874-1880) as his "seven songless years" (qtd. in Salt 94).

During the time he was writing *The City of Dreadful Night*, Thomson left the country twice for extended periods of time on business, once as a secretary to a mining company (which sent him to America) in 1872, and once as a correspondent for the *New York World* to Spain in 1873. He continued working on his manuscript of *The City of Dreadful Night*, publishing it in the *National Reformer* in four installments in 1874. After an irrevocable break of the friendship between Thomson and Bradlaugh in 1875 (the cause of which is not entirely certain, though Bradlaugh's dismissal of Thomson cites "drunkenness"), Thomson went to work as a contributor for *Cope's Tobacco Plant* as well as the *Secularist*, a freethought paper launched to be a competitor to the *Reformer* (Leonard 204, 209). In 1880, Thomson saw the publication of two volumes of his poetry through the efforts of Bertram Dobell—*The City of Dreadful Night and Other Poems*, and *Vane's Story, Weddah and Om-el-Bonain, and Other Poems*—and in 1881 a volume of his prose works, *Essays and Phantasies*, was published, both of which received positive reviews. His alcoholism increased in his final years, despite the publication of poems in two more "reputable" periodicals—the *Fortnightly Review* in 1881 and the *Cornhill Magazine* in 1882—as well as the publication of an essay on Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* in the *Athenaeum* in 1881. Whether Thomson's afflictions led to his alcoholism or his alchoholism led to his hardships, in either case Thomson's health declined as did his quality of life. Thomson wrote in a letter to a friend, dated 22 April 1882, apologizing for one such episode:

> I can only say that I was mad. In one fit of frenzy I have not only lost more than I yet know, 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 in Leicester.

> As, unfortunately for myself at least, I am left alive, it only remains for me to endeavor 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, as very probably I shall fail, the failure will but irresistibly prove what I have long thoroughly believed, that for myself and others I am much better dead than alive. (qtd. in Salt 137-38)

On June 3, 1882, James Thomson died of intestinal hemorrhage.

Before delving into my own arguments regarding Thomson, a critical overview of the significant or at least most widely cited studies of Thomson is in order.[6] Though admittedly reductive, there are two perceivable "camps" within Thomson criticism. The first are the "apologetic biographers" (as termed by Henry Paolucci), who look to Thomson's life and hardships for sources of his pessimism and despair as perceived in his poetry. The second camp of critics reject such treatment of Thomson, arguing that focusing on Thomson's "tragic" life makes him a figure of pity rather than recognizing him as a talented poet. These scholars look toward Thomson's intellectual background and philosophical pessimism in order to acknowledge the mind more than the life of the man. All of Thomson's critics, however, recognize the power of his *The City of Dreadful Night*, and to some degree attempt to investigate "where it came from," whether originating as a response to personal tragedy or as an articulation of pessimism and a commentary on the insufficiency of sources for meaning in the modern world.

My own argument likewise grows out of a sense of compulsion to probe the power underlying his most famous poem. My approach is more of the line of the second camp of theorists, for though I acknowledge that the events of Thomson's life are relevant to his

[6] In addition to book-length studies, numerous critical articles have been published regarding Thomson and "The City of Dreadful Night," though these are best explored in conjunction with the analysis of the poem to come.

writing, I find the *causes* of his atheism and pessimism to be of secondary importance to the actual *worth* of his poetry, particularly *The City of Dreadful Night*. Though the poem is an articulation of isolation and dissatisfaction with contemporary belief and value systems, I argue that its true purpose is not social reform or atheistic advocacy;[7] rather, it posits the important social role of poetry: that the expression of sentiments found within may be shared by a fellowship of readers. This fellowship is important in regard to Thomson's subject matter, for it is not simply aligning a group of like-minded intellectuals, but it is directly replacing a lacking element: understanding without judgment. Understanding Thomson's orientation toward poetry and its role in forming communities, then, is key to grasping the significance of this poem, as well as the implications for poetry itself.

The City of Dreadful Night is critically important for the social and political role of poetry that it endorses as a unifier of "minor" perspectives, but it is not only important as a cultural artifact but as a poem. The power of the poem lies in its sentiments and its articulation, its subject and its artistry. It is a poem of absolute despair and isolation, but with the outreached hand of fellowship, of "we are all alone together." Thomson's prose journalism may also be viewed as participating in the creation of a "minor literature," but there is poignancy in his poetry that biting social satire cannot equal. Indeed, Thomson's contributions to secularist journals very likely catered to the ideologies of the editors that commissioned them—Thomson was writing for an already established community. Though Thomson's poetry was likewise published in these journals, he also sought their publication in other non-secular journals, and sent them to other poets that he respected. Poetry, then, arguably occupied a separate sphere for Thomson, and a separate community. Even those

[7] Thomson's prose satires and articles are the prominent place in which Thomson addresses issues of religion and social reform.

who do not share the sentiments of Thomson's poem cannot discount his poetic talent, which is likely why some of the earliest studies on Thomson seemingly attempt to redeem him or to excuse his pessimism due to events in his life.

Many Thomson scholars have sought to riddle out his afflictions and their causes. Henry Salt proposes genetic predisposition, stating:

> It has been generally assumed by those who have written about Thomson that the two most prominent traits of his character were inherited from his parents, the emotional and imaginative temperament being traced to his mother; to his father the constitutional dipsomania which was the cause, or at any rate the aggravation, of the gloom of his closing years. (4)

Bertram Dobell laments the misfortunes of Thomson's life, stating from the outset that Thomson "could not well have been more unfortunate than he was" and that he suffered "under the disadvantages of poverty and unpopular opinions" (1, 2). Salt, Dobell and Imogene Walker all place a great deal of importance upon the death of a young girl named Matilda Weller whom Thomson knew at Balligcollig, who was the daughter of an armourer-sergeant. Dobell claims that "her influence *might* have saved him from his life-long melancholia," though he qualifies this by stating that the causes of his melancholia were "perhaps too deeply-rooted to be overcome" (45). Salt claims a love involvement, calling her death "the heaviest calamity he ever endured," and Walker goes so far as to propose they were engaged to be married, though neither provides evidence for their claims (9, 11). Salt himself admits the "lack of detailed information" on the matter, pointing to lines from Thomson's poem "Vane's Story" as evidence:

> You were an Angel then; as clean

From earthly dust-speck, as serene

And lovely and above my love,

As now in your far world above (Salt 10-11).

What can be proposed from such evidence is that Weller perhaps provided inspiration for a symbolic angel figure for Thomson's poetry, if indeed it is to her that he refers. In an interview with Salt, Bradlaugh himself disputed and even ridiculed the idea of a romantic involvement between Thomson and Weller, though Salt neglected to include Bradlaugh's comments on the matter in his book (Schaefer 16). What is most significant about the Weller debate is the role it serves for some of his "apologetic" biographers: a potential cause for his melancholy.

Aside from "lost love," Imogene Walker suggests that Thomson was consumed by "dissatisfaction with himself and his life," beginning with his career as an army schoolmaster (21). Dobell claims that Thomson "was an efficient and painstaking teacher in spite of the fact that he had little or no liking for his chosen profession," but Walker suggests that Thomson "considered his teaching a dismal failure and blamed himself for his students' dullness" (9, 21). Both cite the same letter, in which Thomson states in verse:

. . . . knowing well it's all in vain—

Pumping muddy information into unretentive sieves

. . . . and he might

Fit sound bottoms to those sieves too were he not so weak a man.

Walker purports that this dissatisfaction extended into his early creative writing efforts as well, and finds this recurrent theme in selected poems and prose writings of the mid 1860's

(23). Dissatisfaction and self-doubt, according to Walker, plagued Thomson throughout his life, fueled by his dipsomania and insomnia, which inhibited his attempts at success.

One of the most recent book-length studies on Thomson, Richard Pawley's *Secret City*, returns to such discussions of the "emotional life" of the poet, performing a psychoanalytic examination of the poet as author of *The City of Dreadful Night*, rather than a critical assessment of Thomson's literary contributions. Pawley, like some of his predecessors, searches for causality in investigating the "inner life" of the poet from a Freudian perspective, and calls *The City of Dreadful Night* "a neurotic's attempt to cope with his unconscious thoughts" (xiv). Though an interesting study of psychological diagnoses, Pawley's study does relatively little to advance the significance of the poem, looking instead to ways that Thomson's life experiences may be read into the text. Pawley proposes that Thomson likely regarded sexuality with anxiety and was potentially impotent, connecting Thomson's "attacks on God" to "his castration anxiety due to father-hatred" (164). Such statements, though objective, serve the same function as Thomson's previous "apologetic" biographers—to depict him as a figure of pity and to "excuse" his atheism as a product of his difficult life. For Pawley, Thomson's poetry is deeply entrenched in his own inner life, and though I agree that poetry is the product of an individual, I argue that a purely psychoanalytic reading of the poem neglects the enduring significance of the poem as a means for community, and isolates the poem within the individual.

It would be irresponsible, however, to ignore the estrangement present within the poem, for the simultaneous presentation of isolated individuals and individuals united in isolation is at the heart of the poem's complexity. Therefore, the "comfort" of community can only occur with the recognition of isolation, and the pessimistic absence of systems of

meaning that would otherwise serve to unite (i.e. religion, etc.). Kenneth Byron's study *The Pessimism of James Thomson (B.V.) in Relation to His Times* postulates that the pessimism in Thomson's writings "is a symptom of the pessimism and mental confusion of the period," reflecting and contributing to the "essence of nineteenth century pessimism resulting from (1) the breakdown of religion, (2) the dissolution of philosophical idealism, and (3) the destruction of emotional judgments caused by the apparently incurable evil following the industrial revolution" (13). Thomson's pessimism, then, is not a wholly unique nineteenth century condition. Yet Byron also cites Thomson's alcoholism as a problem for Thomson, estranging him from even his close friends. He states that Thomson was "an outcast from religion, emotion, society, and the philosophy to which he finally attained did not relieve the futility of his search for the way back" (14). Thomson, then, inhabits a unique position as both a "sign of his time," and a poet isolated from it, as radicalism, pessimism, and atheism remained largely unpopular, in contrast to more traditional frameworks (for example, Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*).

Other Thomson critics shun biographical readings of Thomson's work. Henry Paolucci, for one, states that while Thomson lived "no critic presumed to interpret his *City* biographically as an utterance of personal despair," and that due to what he views as overly biographical interpretations of Thomson's poetry, "rare is the reader today who comes to the *City* with a mind devoid of preconceptions about the life and character of its author" (12). This is certainly true, as even recent works (such as Pawley's) claim the "Matilda Weller legend" as a fact, despite the lack of actual evidence. Noting Thomson's strong literary and poetic background, Paolucci proposes that "Thomson evidently expected his readers to come to his *City* not with vaguely informed curiosity about his personal life, but with the sound of

poetry in their ears" (13). Emphasizing the hardships of Thomson's life, therefore, de-emphasizes his work. He regrets the "apologetic biographers" and their effects on subsequent criticism, stating that rather than establishing the importance of Thomson as a poet as they intended, they made him the object of pity and one of the "curiosities of English literature" (20). I share with Paolucci the intent to recover Thomson—not simply from the realm of obscurity, but from that of myth-making. Though perhaps Thomson remains a sort of "curiosity," more recent scholarship on Thomson has indeed aimed at recognizing his talent rather than lamenting his hardships.

William Schaefer also acknowledges that "Thomson's life. . . . has received considerably more attention than his poetry" (1). Schaefer recognizes Thomson as both a poet and a critic and traces Thomson's intellectual development in his study, including Thomson's views on religion, his thoughts on social, economic, and political matters, and his attitudes toward poetry and literary criticism. Schaefer, like Paolucci, points out the disservices wrought by Thomson's earliest biographers, debunking in particular the "Matilda Weller legend" as well as the notion that he suffered from "constitutional melancholy" (6). Schafer separates the concepts of Thomson's "unhappiness" and his pessimistic philosophy, pointing out that numerous acquaintances of Thomson's disputed that he was a gloomy or melancholy man. Personal philosophy, in other words, is a separate entity from emotional demeanor. The question of Thomson's pessimism, then, is an intellectual one. Regardless of the extent of Thomson's pessimism or melancholy, however, overemphasizing the story of the man clouds the appreciation of his work. Thomson may or may not be the speaker of his poems (an ambiguity which offers much poetic freedom of expression), and it is less significant that he may or may not have been depressed when he wrote *The City of Dreadful*

Night than that he recognizes and articulates the condition of estrangement and the fruitless search for meaning for an audience that may understand and share in such a view.

Contemporary critical reception of Thomson's poetry was mixed, but generally favorable. After being sent a copy of "Weddah and Om-el-Bonain" by Thomson, William Michael Rossetti remarked, "I read the poem, and thought it excellent" (qtd. in Salt 52). This correspondence, started in 1872, would continue through letters and visits, largely focused on discussions of Shelley's work. James Anthony Froude, editor of *Fraser's Magazine*, praised Thomson's "Sunday up the River." Thomson's *The City of Dreadful Night* garnered more interest than previous poems, and a favorable review in the *Academy* led to a series of applications to the *National Reformer* for the numbers containing the poem (Salt 80). Much of the popular response to *The City* acknowledged the artistry and power of the poem while voicing opposition to the uncomfortable subject matter; even Thomson himself wrote a letter of thanks to the *Academy* for its favorable review, noting that it was a "brave act, on the part of a respectable English periodical, to spontaneously call attention to an atheistic writing… [and] treating it simply and fairly on its literary merits" (qtd. in Salt 86). Thomson's interest in feedback on his work's "literary merits" likely influenced his sending it to fellow writers whose opinions he admired.

One of these figures was George Eliot, who praised the "distinct vision and grand utterance" of *The City of Dreadful Night*, though admitting a hope for "more heroic strains with a wider embrace of human fellowship in them" (qtd. in Salt 81). Thomson replied, thanking her for her praise, but claiming no "Byronic quarrel with my fellows" and stating that "I am aware that the truth of midnight does not exclude the truth of noonday, though one's nature may lead him to dwell in the former rather than the latter" (qtd. in Salt 82).

Bertram Dobell's notice of the poem would lead to his efforts toward its book publication, and Thomson would enjoy not only the praise but also the friendship of Philip Bourke Marston and George Meredith. It is notable that much of the critical reception received by Thomson came as a result of his sending the poem to the reviewer, rather than his or her reading the poem in its original publication.

One potential stumbling block for Thomson's "fame" was his involvement with the *National Reformer*, Bradlaugh's weekly secularist newspaper, which Royle credits with the "revival of Secularism in 1859 and 1860" (*Radicals* 4). From 1860-1875, Thomson contributed approximately 80 prose articles and approximately 40 poems to the periodical, with varying regularity. The subject matter of his prose varied, including literary criticisms, translations (including Heine and Leopardi), and essays and satires of social, political, and religious subjects. As a contributor to a periodical dedicated to free thought and radicalism, who acknowledged himself as writing "among the most wicked and blasphemous which even Mr. Bradlaugh ever published," Thomson was keenly aware that the association had its drawbacks (qtd. in Salt 54). Though the *National Reformer* had a potential circulation of 7,000 in 1874, Thomson himself comments in a letter to W. M. Rossetti that "the great bulk if its readers are poorly educated, and care little or nothing for literature as literature, but only as a club to hit parsons and lords on the head with," making it somewhat ill-suited to purposes of obtaining literary fame (qtd. in Ridler xvii). If it was ill-suited to obtaining popular acclaim, it was also ill-suited as a source for true community for Thomson, as the previous quote indicates. Thomson clearly sought a community that cared for literature, a fellowship of intellectuals rather than a crowd that sought only to criticize religion. This is supported not only by Thomson's words themselves, but also by the fact that they were

addressed to an intellectual who was one of the founding members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The general readership of the *National Reformer*, therefore, did not fulfill Thomson's fellowship of like-minded, for though they may have shared radical beliefs, they did not share his poetic appreciation.[8] Thomson did, however, enjoy the freedom it allowed for his more controversial pieces (both poetry and prose), stating: "its supreme merit consists in the fact that I can say in it what I like how I like; and I know not another periodical in Britain which would grant me the same liberty or license" (qtd. in Salt 40).[9] His controversial prose, however, is perhaps less useful to ascertaining a sense of his poetics than his critical poetic writing and his poetry itself.

Thomson's earliest critical essays in the *National Reformer* were on Shelley, a figure that he esteemed throughout his life. In his second of these contributions, entitled "Shelley," Thomson hails Shelley as an exemplary poet, praising the "musicalness" and "living melody" of his poems (*Biographical and Critical Studies* 272). It is the lyric quality, more than even the "profound thought, and keen moral insight" that elevates Shelley, and it is this skill that Thomson views as most important in a poet, though he does create a list of qualities (through a series of inquiries) that truly make Shelley significant. The first of these is Shelley's subject matter: "questions concerning the existence of God, the moral law of the universe, the immortality of the soul, the independent being of what is called the material world, the perfectibility of man. . . . fascinate his mind" (274). Thomson perceives these as the best subjects for poetry, stating "Believing that the essence of poetry and philosophy is

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[8] Anne Ridler points out that, though the *National Reformer*'s audience might have been chiefly drawn from the working classes, Thomson's *The City of Dreadful Night* attracted notices in both the *Academy* and the *Spectator*, as well as attention from readers such as Bertram Dobell, who first read it in the *Reformer* (xvii).

[9] Despite Thomson's claimed satisfaction at free speech, he made many efforts to publish in more widely-read literary journals and periodicals—from 1869-1870 he sent his poem "Weddah and Om-el-Bonain" to the *Fortnightly Review*, *St. Paul's Magazine*, *Macmillan's*, *Fraser's*, and the *Cornhill*, though none accepted it (Schaefer 7).

communication with the Infinite and the Eternal, I venture to conclude that to be strongly inclined to such a communication is to be gifted with the first requisite for a poet and a philosopher" (274). Significantly, even at this early stage in his career, Thomson associates the poet with the philosopher—one who contemplates and theorizes rather than merely commenting.

Thomson also notes Shelley's belief in "the doctrine of the perfectibility of human nature, an intrinsic perfectibility to eventuate in a heaven on earth realized by the noble endeavours of man himself," stating that "though I must consider Shelley mistaken in this belief, I yet honour and not blame him for it" (275). Rather than fault Shelley for his naïveté, Thomson appears almost envious, as though desiring such optimistic faith in humanity: "perchance, were we more like him in goodness, we should be more like him in faith" (276). (Thomson, after all, believed Shelley a pantheist, not an atheist.) Thomson also praises Shelley's morality and compassion, stating that in this "he bears comparison with the holiest of Christians" (277). The final quality Thomson explores in Shelley is his "inspiration," quoting Shelley's own translation of Plato's *Ion*: "For the authors of those great poems which we admire do not attain excellence through the rules of any art; but they utter their beautiful melodies of verse in a state of inspiration and, as it were, *possessed* by a spirit not their own" (279). What Thomson is celebrating here is Shelley's sense of the sublime in the creation of poetry. It is a revelation, an epiphany, which Thomson depicts as being most necessary for the creation of great poetry.

Thomson's subsequent critical essays in the *Reformer* would explore William Blake, Robert Browning, Heinrich Heine, and Giacomo Leopardi, among others. In an essay entitled, "The Poems of William Blake," Thomson praises Blake's simplicity in his ability to

"concentrate the full essence of a universal truth into a small fact" (*Biographical and Critical Studies* 256), adding, "Blake has attempted what all profound poets and thinkers have ever most earnestly attempted—to seize a rude but striking image of some sovereign truth, and to stamp it with roughest vigour on the commonest metal for universal circulation" (257). Again Thomson promotes his linkage of poetry and philosophy—great thoughts in great utterance. Poetry, for Thomson, should not be merely ornamental, but profound. In this same essay, Thomson praises Shelley and Keats as well as Blake, but finds Tennyson deficient in great thought, though gifted in artistry: "While it cannot be pretended that he is a great sculptor, he is certainly an exquisite carver of luxuries in ivory; but we must be content to admire the caskets, for there are no jewels inside" (265).

What is perceptible here is Thomson's perceived alienation from his contemporary poets. He exalts the Romantics (save Byron), but sees the Victorians as lacking; even though he calls Robert Browning "a really great thinker" and a "splendid genius" and admires much of his work, he states that "his vigorous and restless talents often overpower and run away with his genius so that some of his creations are left but half redeemed from chaos" (266). In his essay on "The Ring and the Book," Thomson also praises George Meredith for his "supreme analytic synthesis," "unappeasable intellect" and "dramatic imagination" (*Biographical and Critical Studies* 475). Emerson he admires as well, but claims he is not "gifted with the singing voice"—another quality Thomson values in Shelley (*Biographical and Critical Studies* 267). By the mid 1860's, Thomson's poetic standards appear much unchanged.

An interesting discussion of inspiration and improvisation surrounding the creation of poetry can be found in one of Thomson's later critical essays, "A Strange Book," a review of

Garth Wilkinson's *Improvisations from the Spirit*. "Inspiration" is a term Thomson has used before, in his discussion of Shelley, and he returns to it here in words not unlike William Wordsworth's description of "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings": "Long poems, indeed, are usually premeditated and planned in their general outline; but the first conception of the subject, in its most general outline, yet most essential living individuality, must be unpremeditated, as real a lightning-flash of inspiration as ever suddenly illumined mystic or seer" (323-24). Improvisation may be the unpremeditated creation of verse, but it does not bear the sublime quality of inspiration, which Thomson admits must be paired with revision, once again citing Shelley as an example: "But however spontaneously Shelly conceived, and however rapidly he wrote the first draught, he, in common with the greatest and most enduring poets. . . . carefully revised and corrected, afterwards" (334). Here Thomson denies inspiration as the sole factor in the poetic generative process—the poem, roughly carved, must be polished. Thomson himself went through a number of revisions with his own *The City of Dreadful Night*, and though he deemphasizes its significance as "the product of much sleepless hypochondria" in his response to George Eliot, doubtless he felt some inspiration in its creation.

In these pieces, it is perceivable that Thomson used the criteria he found praiseworthy in Shelley's work in order to evaluate nearly all other poets' works. The most exemplary poetry, for Thomson, would be inspired, lyrically-pleasing, and full of depth of thought and truth. Each of these qualities can arguably be ascribed to Thomson's poetry, or at least a respectable portion.

It is within Thomson's subject matter that critics view him transitioning as a poet, whether from hope to despair, optimism to pessimism, or theism to atheism. Within these

shifting ideologies, one can perceive a growing sense of isolation and estrangement, though this is present even in his early poems. As mentioned above, critics find numerous causes for his evolution, from the loss of family and friends in his youth, to his inability to achieve true renown, to his enduring poverty, dipsomania, and insomnia (all three of which Thomson makes comments on in his letters and/or journal). Any or all of these might have played a part in cultivating the darkness and pessimism that haunt so much of his poetry. In addition to these factors, however, literary influence is also perceivable, not only in terms of the poetic style of Shelly, but also in two poets that Thomson dedicated time, effort, and enthusiasm to translating and studying: Heine and Leopardi.

Thomson's admiration of Heine was enduring, as he published translations of his poems and prose in the 1860s and 1870s. In his biographical essay on Heine, published in the *Secularist* in 1876, Thomson's respect for Heine is clear. The motivation for writing this essay arose out of Thomson's disgust for William Stignand's volume on Heine, which Thomson attacks for what he regards as the "gross, obvious, and vulgar mistakes" in his translations (qtd. in *The Speedy Extinction of Evil and Misery* 244). He praises Heine's style as well as his "immense and indestructible love of life" (255). Thomson quotes widely from Heine's prose, giving a sense of the character of the man and his attitudes. He states:

> In all moods—tender, imaginative, fantastic, humourous, ironical, cynical; in anguish and in horror; in weariness and revulsion, longing backward to enjoyment, and longing forward to painless rest; through the doleful days and the dreadful immeasurable sleepless nights; this intense and luminous spirit was enchained and constrained to look down into the vast black void which undermines our seemingly solid existence. (269)

Significantly, Thomson's characterization of Heine is presented in a language not unlike that of *The City of Dreadful Night,* down to the phrase "dreadful immeasurable sleepless nights." It is clear that Thomson feels not only respect for Heine, but a kinship as well, that with another unwilling sufferer. As to the influence of Heine's poetry, critics have pointed out that a number of Thomson's translations are of Heine's love poems, perhaps influencing Thomson's own love poems, but it is the darkness here that is pervasive. Thomson's essay devotes much space to discussing Heine's tragic and tortured end: "he who had reveled in surpassing opulence of life, physical and intellectual, was stricken down in his prime" and "lay on the very verge of that unfathomed abyss into whose cold shadow-haunted gloom we common men in our common lives cast but a few swift yearning and shuddering glances" (268). If Thomson took inspiration from Heine's love poems in his early love poems, in this prose essay at least, Thomson focuses to a large extent on Heine's struggle between his "love of life and his revulsion from its horrible tortures" (269).

Another influential poet and essayist for Thomson is Leopardi. Leopardi is well-known for his pessimistic philosophies, and Thomson translated and published much of him. One translated letter states: "For this is the miserable condition of man, and the barbarous teachings of reason, that, our pleasures and pains being mere illusions, the affliction which derives from the certitude of the nullity of things is evermore and solely just and real. . . . when there is no other truth than nothingness" (qtd. in Leonard 142).

Leopardi also comments on the alienation experienced in large cities:

> In a large city man lives without relation at all to what surrounds him, because the sphere is so large that the individual cannot fill it. . . .and thus there is no point of contact for him and it. . . . Hence you may conjecture how much greater and more

> terrible is the life-weariness experienced in a large city. . . since indifference, that horrible passion, or rather apathy, of man, has really and necessarily its chief seat in large cities. (qtd. In Leonard 143).

The connection of Leopardi's writings to Thomson's *The City of Dreadful Night* is apparent in the disillusionment and dissatisfaction with life and the "miserable condition of man" as well as the sense of estrangement and isolation afforded by city living. In addition to these thematic similarities, Thomson makes his connection to Leopardi explicit by the fact that Thomson's poem is prefaced, not only with a quote from Dante's *Inferno* ("Through me is the way to the city of pain"), but also with two quotations from Leopardi (all in the original Italian, but translated here[10]):

> Then out of such endless working, so many movements of everything in heaven and earth, revolving incessantly, only to return to the point from which they were moved; from all this I can imagine neither purpose nor gain.
>
> Eternal alone in the world, received of all created things, in you, death, our naked being comes to rest; joyful no, but safe from the age-old pain. . . . For happiness is denied by fate to the living and denied to the dead. (395)

This is the "truth" that introduces Thomson's poem: futility, meaninglessness, and isolation. Any hope for love or salvation presented in Thomson's earlier poems (not to mention the jubilant "Thank God for Life!" of "Sunday up the River") is annihilated in this.

Having, however cursorily, acknowledged Thomson's poetic and philosophical literary heritage, the question that remains is Thomson's view of the purpose of poetry. Though certainly no poet is completely divorced from his product, and some of Thomson's poems may be more autobiographical than others, I am less than convinced that Thomson

[10] Translations obtained from Francis O'Gorman's *Victorian Poetry: An Annotated Anthology*.

viewed poetry as a completely self-serving form. My first reason for this is that he not only wrote poetry, but read, translated, and wrote critical essays on numerous poets. He had an earnest interest in poetry from a young age, and turned that interest into the study of poetry. This, perhaps, may still constitute self-indulgence, but the fact that he wrote and published criticism serves the purpose of sharing not only his appreciation with others, but also communicating to his readers that poetry is meant to be shared by sharing the poets' works himself.

In addition to writing critical essays on poetry, Thomson also wrote poetic responses to other poets' works. One of his earlier poems (published in 1855) is entitled "Suggested by Matthew Arnold's 'Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse,'" in which Thomson himself struggles with the question of faith as a "dead time's exploded dream" (Arnold 98). Thomson also wrote a response to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" entitled "Bertram to the Most Noble and Beautiful Lady Geraldine" which he published in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* in 1859. In 1859, Thomson also published "A Real Vision of Sin" in response to Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "A Vision of Sin." The fact that Thomson not only read but also responded to other poets' work with his own poem creates a poetic dialogue—poetry from poetry. William Schaffer argues that "insofar as ["Suggested by Matthew Arnold's 'Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse'"] was a prayer, it was personal rather than didactic," and given the fact that it is undeterminable whether or not Thomson intended to publish the poem at the time (as it was not published until 1884, as part of a collection), it may have indeed been a "personal" poem (69); however, by responding to the works of other poets, Thomson the poet does not exist in isolation—he is part of a poetic community.

Translating poetry widened the pool of available poems for an audience that did not speak German or Italian. In addition to this, of course, he also published his own poetry. The act of publication is an act of public discourse, for it is communication between people (albeit via a print medium). Simply by publishing his poems, Thomson was establishing himself within a community of readers, through both periodical and book compilations. This point is, of course, restricted by the individual periodical audiences. As mentioned previously, the audience of the *National Reformer* was largely working-class and interested specifically in secularist issues—those unsympathetic to the secularist cause would not likely be regular readers. This did not, however, prevent Thomson's poem from receiving notice in other periodicals after its publication in the *Reformer* (i.e. the *Academy* and the *Spectator*). The 1880 book publication of *The City of Dreadful Night and Other Poems* received a favorable review in the *Fortnighly Review*, which likewise widened the audience for Thomson's poem to individuals who might never have had access to the poem within the *Reformer*'s pages. Christopher Kent notes the functionality of periodical publication for keeping poets "in the public eye" between volumes, and states that "Victorian poets arguably got the most out of the journals' critical function [because they] seem to have been reviewed with greater éclat than were the novelists" (2). Thomson, however, did not fare as well as his better-known contemporaries, for while *Cornhill* and *Macmillan's* battled over Tennyson in order to attract readers, Thomson was not popular enough to attract readers to the *National Reformer*, nor was the *Reformer* popular enough to obtain the readership he would have enjoyed, at least for his poetry. Reviews elsewhere, however, turned attention to Thomson's poetry that he would not have obtained through either his or the *Reformer's* merit—allowing him to profit from the borrowed ethos of more "reputable" publications.

The nature of periodicals as vehicles for both the consumption and discussion of texts owes much to both the intertextuality of its contents and the circulation of its reception. Margaret Beetham discusses this intertextuality at length, noting how periodicals became commodities of exchange as well as commodities of meaning-making. Beetham astutely points out the heterogeneity of periodicals in regard to both the variety of materials and the genres featured. This is true within each periodical itself, as well as across titles, as is perceivable through reviews, for not only do they allow for exchanges of borrowed symbolic capital (i.e. endorsement), but they allow for the diversification of subject matter—the further creation of texts and participation in the very sort of "reader response" that Beetham indicates (26-27). By "writing letters, comments and other contributions," readers interact in, perpetuate, and develop dialogues, contributing not only to periodical sales, but also to the formation of public meaning, defining and redefining standards and ideologies. In this case, a poem engaging in pessimistic and atheistic discourse in a journal of specified interest (and for specified purposes) finds its way into the magazines of the increasingly literate and intellectual, the avowedly religious, the family as a whole—indeed, the general public at large. "Radical" materials become part of the mainstream dialogue, all due to the nature of periodical culture.

In addition to his journalistic publications, both prose and poetry alike, in which his participation in these general public communities is implicit, in the proem to *The City of Dreadful Night*, Thomson reaches out explicitly to a very particular community—the community of the isolated. He begins poignantly with a despairing quote from Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, and then asks rhetorically why he would set such a tone, and why he would write this poem:

Lo, thus, as prostrate, "In the dust I write
My heart's deep languor and my soul's sad tears."
Yet why evoke the spectres of black night
To blot the sunshine of exultant years?
Why disinter dead faith from mouldering hidden?
Why break the seals of mute despair unbidden,
And wail life's discords into careless ears? (1-7)

Thomson (or Thomson's speaker) begins his poem fully aware that he is addressing an audience. He acknowledges the unpleasantness of his subject, and anticipates that some might be disapproving. He then proceeds to answer the predicted questions, outlining explicitly his reason for writing this poem:

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 innocence to try to fashion
Our woe in living words howe'er uncouth. (8-14)

Thomson admits to an impetus in writing the poem, which thus far appears self-gratifying, as if to say "I feel compelled to say what I know is true." Likewise, he admits that it is empowering to give a voice to untold things. The irony here is that one should be empowered by making one's self bare—by exposing one's weakness, or one's private thoughts. It would not be empowering if it were making one's self vulnerable to an enemy,

but neither is it attempting to provoke a foe if, as Thomson later states, they are “weak words” (26).

Thomson is attempting to reach a particular audience, one that will understand what he is conveying. He states this explicitly in the next few stanzas, outlining those he does not write for: the “hopeful young,” the happy, the satisfied, the undoubting, or the faithful. He does not write for them, not because he harbors ill-will against them, but because they could not understand what he is saying. In Thomson’s eyes, doubt, despair, hopelessness, meaninglessness, and faithlessness cannot be comprehended by those who have not experienced them. His reason for writing the poem is because its words need to be said; his purpose for writing this poem is to reach out to others who can understand those sensations:

> Yes, here and there some weary wanderer
> In that same city of tremendous night,
> Will understand the speech and feel a stir
> Of fellowship in all-disastrous fight;
> "I suffer mute and lonely, yet another
> Uplifts his voice to let me know a brother
> Travels the same wild paths though out of sight." (29-35)

Thomson seeks to unite a community of those estranged by the general community at large—those without hope or faith. It is a community of the faithless, which I differentiate from a community of atheists, in that many atheists of the time found strength and validation through their atheism (a concept I will discuss further in subsequent chapters). Many atheists had strong humanist principles, and found purpose and meaning through their personal philosophies. Thomson is writing for those without purpose or meaning, who feel

themselves adrift in a shapeless limbo, without destination or function. Poetry provides the means for comfort, in knowing one is not truly alone.

The Victorian City: Perspectives on Urban Experience

The theme of estrangement is central to Thomson's *The City of Dreadful Night,* but it is also important to discussions of the urban experience in the Victorian period. The poem takes place in a city, but it functions as more than simply the setting of the poem. The city of *The City of Dreadful Night* is both a literal city (London or London-esque) and an allegorical city (akin to the Hell of Dante's *Inferno*); at once the cause of estrangement for its inhabitants and a representation of its inhabitants' estrangement. Both critically and historically, the concept of "the city" provides an ironic duality of isolation and immersion, as one is physically surrounded by people, but socially, culturally, and ideologically separated from them. Industrialization fueled this separation, as individuals became increasingly separated from the products of their labor, but it also introduced an important means to community—print culture and the creation of a mass reading public. Here, discussions of "modern" problems took place; here, representations of the urban experience were depicted, in both prose and, importantly, poetry. Thomson's poem, therefore, participates in a poetic discourse, an examination of the conditions and experiences of urban life. In order to contextualize and examine "the city" of Thomson's *The City of Dreadful Night* as a product of its time, it is necessary to lay the framework for how it may be regarded as both contrary to, and aligned with, contemporary representations of "the city," including poems by Arnold, Clough, Hardy and others. To a degree, Thomson is engaging in similar themes as his fellow Victorians in his poetry: he is interested in pointing out the estrangement of the individual in the city, not for the purpose of social reform, but more toward the purpose of "realism"—not in depicting things as they literally are (i.e. achieving verisimilitude by presenting literal scenes that might physically take place in London), but how things *actually* are, via

allegory—by revealing an understanding of experience through creative, representative depiction.

The Victorian era, after all, was a period of industrialization and Darwinism (the *Origin of Species* being published in 1859), with a new focus on science and psychology that was often put at odds with religion and traditional Christian morality, and many Victorians found themselves either questioning their old ideals or searching for new ones. Josef Altholtz states: "To retain a traditional Bible-centered faith in the 1870s, an educated man had either to deny the findings of biblical criticism and natural science, supported by an increasing mass of evidence, or else to re-create that faith on a new basis which few were able to construct" (59). It is within this disconnectedness that many critics trace the development of Victorian disillusionment and pessimism. Kenneth Byron lists the contributing causes of Victorian pessimism as "1) the breakdown of religion, 2) the dissolution of philosophical idealism, and 3) the destruction of emotional judgments caused by the apparently incurable evil following the industrial revolution" (13). Defining "Victorian pessimism," however, is no simple task, for it is deeply entrenched within philosophical discussions, many emerging from the works of German philosophers (especially Schopenhauer), surrounding individual Will and the purpose of life, and whether it was worth living.[11] One critic goes so far as to point out three types of pessimism prevalent during the nineteenth century: the pessimism of futility (which holds that life is meaningless), the pessimism of disillusion (which is the pessimism of futility with added disappointment when belief in an idea proves false), and the pessimism of pain (which is the belief that there is an "unbearable surplus of pain in the world") (qtd in Byron 91).

[11] W.H. Mallock's "Is Life Worth Living?" in the *Nineteenth Century* (1877) explored that very subject.

Pessimism not only had a number of emerging causes, but also numerous degrees of manifestation.

Even late Victorian thinkers debated a definition of "pessimism"—for example, F.C.S. Schiller published "The Relation of Pessimism to Ultimate Philosophy" in the *International Journal of Ethics* in 1897, illustrating that not only was pessimism a term being discussed, defined, and theorized, but that it was also clearly a public issue of some concern among philosophical and religious communities as well as the general public. Kenneth Byron points out that several studies regarding pessimism were published in the last two decades of the nineteenth century examining the causes and conflicts of the condition (28-29). Mary Anderson's article "Cultural Dissonance and the Ideology of Transition in Late Victorian England" cites a number of instances of periodical discourse concerned with the dissonance that marks the period (for her purposes, between 1880 and 1885), and notes the diverging perspectives between sensing crisis (and seeking resolution—whether through reconciling science and religion or by clinging to one over the other) and looking to progress with hope. It is significant that Anderson's selected Victorian periodicals were among the more notable, including *Fraser's* and the *Fortnightly Review*, further evidence that the reading public as a whole was largely concerned with the changing times, pessimism included. Pessimism is, then, in brief (at least according to predominant ideas), the loss of hope and the destruction of belief in the value of life largely resulting from a questioning of faith—whether that be a faith in God, a faith in humanity, or a faith in some larger principle (even the stability of the age). Though certainly existing prior to the Victorian period, pessimism now had not only a name, but also an ideology[12].

[12] According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "Pessimism" as "The tendency or disposition to look at the worst aspect of things" was used in the mid-to-late 1700's, whereas the philosophical "doctrine or belief that the

This is not to say that most Victorians would call themselves "pessimistic," but, as Isobel Armstrong points out, they did think of themselves as "modern," and a number of the factors contributing to pessimism were linked to the conditions of modernity. She states: "Victorian modernism, as it emerges in its poetics, describes itself as belonging to a condition of crisis which has emerged directly from economic and cultural change" (3). Armstrong points out that the Victorians were post-Romantic, arising from the combined conditions of being "post-revolutionary, post-industrial, post-teleological, and post-Kantian" (4). Within each of these conditions is a form of alienation, whether the separation of product and producer via mechanization, the political separation of people from political structures via the vote (which functions as a signifier), and even the separation of language beyond the control of its writer via printing (or "movable types," as termed by Carlyle) (4-5). All of these contribute to a problem of relationships and representation—a problem that extends beyond social, economic, and political realms into the world of poetry

One of the most significant observations Armstrong makes is of the Victorian double-poem, which is both expressive and interrogating: "By seeing utterance both as subject and as object, it was possible for the poet to explore expressive psychological forms simultaneously as psychological conditions *and* as construct" which "draws attention to the act of representation" (13). A poem is at once a product of the poet's expression, and a self-aware product of the culture that created it, as the poem becomes "not only the subject's utterance but the object of analysis and critique" (12). The complexity of Armstrong's model illuminates the political potential in Victorian poetry by virtue of its very consciousness of itself as a vehicle of representation.

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actual world is the worst of all possible worlds, or that everything naturally tends to the worse" became popularized in the 1870's and was associated with Schopenhauer.

Defining a coherent sense of "Victorian" poetics—or, even the unifying ideologies which would constitute the "Victorian period"—however, is no simple task. Though certainly a period of important changes or crises (whether scientific, religious, economic, political, etc.), it is not a period wholly divorced from its predecessors, as scholars have pointed out. Numerous critics have examined the Victorian period as one in "transition" between the Romantics and the Modernists; indeed, the effort of the Modernists to divorce themselves from their parent generation illustrates their desire to claim a "break" of ideologies. Carol T. Christ complicates the perceived shift from Victorianism to Modernism in her book, *Victorian and Modern Poetics*. She views Victorian and Modern poets as both modifying their "Romantic heritage by seeking a more objective basis for poetic discourse" (3). This modification, however, does not imply a complete "break" from Romantic tradition. Christ notes that the English Romantics "share a belief in the imagination as the generative source of poetry's substance and form" in that the typical Romantic lyric "enacts the poet's self-discovery at a moment of imaginative contemplation" (4). The Victorians and Modernists, though not sharing the same view, are "nonetheless concerned in their poetry with mental acts" (4). These are, naturally, generalizations, but they illustrate the ways that poetic traditions evolve rather than splitting neatly into separate categories.

Victorian perceptions of experiences, particularly those of urban life, are therefore inextricably linked to history, tradition, and socio-economic and political conditions. They occupy and respond to their situation, developing attitudes regarding not only what city life constitutes, but also how it can and should be represented. These various attitudes themselves evolve over the course of the mid to late nineteenth century, illustrating that even the term "Victorian" is more an indicator of temporality than unified perspectives. Joseph

Bristow, for one, questions the notion of the term "Victorian" as a signifier and suggests how period-definition and canonization privilege some figures as representatives of the time, while making others difficult to place.[13] I acknowledge the complications of such a term; indeed, my own examination of a "minor" poetic figure in regard to an established (but ever expanding) literary canon is dependent upon insisting on such complications. In order to view how Thomson's important poem "fits" (or doesn't "fit") within the popular perspectives of his contemporaries, it is first necessary to explore what those perspectives potentially are: here, regarding "the city."

"The city" is, by matter of contrast, normally put in opposition to "the country." "The country" denotes the pastoral, the idyllic, the rustic, a place in communion with nature. Nature, as a poetic device, was key to the canonical Romantics—the home of the Wordsworthian sublime. It is little wonder that nature, and "the country," feature so prominently in the lyric poetry of nearly any epoch, for it is a signifier of life, creation, and a union with the earth, as opposed to the man-made structures of city experience: the vaunted innocence of the country versus the corruption and exploitation of the city. Villainy of the city aside, alienation proves a key associative factor, for as Raymond William points out:

> The growth of towns and especially of cities and a metropolis; the increasing division and complexity of labour; the altered and critical relations between and within social classes: in changes like these any assumption of a knowable community—a whole community, wholly knowable—became harder and harder to sustain. (165).

[13] Martin Hewett argues that the notion of Victorian Britain does make sense in his article by the same name, in which he lays out five separate criteria and investigates continuity within the span of years from roughly the 1830's to 1900, arguing that this period shared more common features than it did with the culture twenty years before or after.

This would culminate in the middle of the nineteenth century, when "the urban population of England exceeded the rural population," and by the end of the nineteenth century "the urban population was three-quarters of the whole (Williams 217). The irony is that, the larger the urban population grew, the more and more isolated people became from one another, for the reasons Williams dictates above.

The conditions of urban life—particularly its hardships, labor, and poverty—did not escape notice, not only by novelists such as Dickens, but by poets as well. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, for example, reacts against the cruelty and exploitation of child labor in her poem "The Cry of the Children." Her poem is laden with pathos, as the children she depicts hope for death as a way to end their sufferings. Significantly, Browning does not simply present the dangers to their physical bodies but foreshadows potential dangers to their souls: "For God's possible is taught by His world's loving,/ And the children doubt of each" (135-36). The physical hardships of urban life, therefore, are linked to spiritual hardships, for one who has lost hope will eventually lose faith. In this is also a judgment on the urban world, which profits from the suffering of children.

Francis O'Gorman points out that Browning had been reading Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, Blake himself being well-known for his distaste for the effects of industrialization. His poem "The Chimney Sweeper" from *Songs of Innocence* likewise protests child labor through the speaker of a young child sold by his father into work as a chimney sweep. *Songs of Experience* likewise includes a poem entitled "The Chimney Sweeper," featuring a speaker described as "A little black thing among the snow,/ Crying 'weep weep' in notes of woe" (1-2). Also in this collection is Blake's "London," in which he paints a bleak and critical picture of the city as a place where in every face he sees "Marks

of weakness, marks of woe" (4). In the city, the speaker hears the cries of chimney sweepers and the sighs of "hapless" soldiers, though the worst to him is "How the youthful harlot's curse/ Blasts the new born infant's tear,/ And blights with plagues the marriage hearse" (14-16). For Blake, it is the moral decay, particularly in regard to sexuality, that is the most deplorable effect of city life, spreading disease and the taint of sin. As Williams points out, however: "This is very far from the traditional way of seeing innocence in the country, vice in the city. The innocence and the vice are in and of the city, in its factual and spiritual relations" (148). What Blake sees, then, are the connections within the urban machine, innocence and vice as both products and producers of the city condition which, as William Thesing states, "encompasses and reflects the welfare of all" (4). Prostitution and moral decay both create and result from urban life. Prostitution would not go unnoticed in Victorian poetry, either, which reacted with varying degrees of judgment and sympathy.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Jenny" is perhaps the most well-known of such poems, as it sparked the famous critical dialogue between Rossetti and Robert Buchanan over his condemnatory "The Fleshly School of Poetry."[14] The question of Rossetti's treatment of Jenny is of some critical interest, as the speaker is neither truly judgmental of Jenny, nor truly sympathetic, choosing instead to muse upon her condition. Other poets would explore the figure of the prostitute, including Augusta Webster ("A Castaway"), Arthur Symons ("Stella Maris"), and Thomas Hardy ("The Ruined Maid"). Webster's poem is important in that she allows the woman to speak for herself, giving an account of how she came to be a prostitute. Webster, like Rossetti, complicates the figure of the "fallen woman" by humanizing her, arguably more so than Rossetti's speaker. Both poets, however, raise questions about the

[14] Buchanan criticizes Rossetti for the overly sensual nature of his poetry; Rossetti himself replied with an article entitled "The Stealthy School of Criticism."

sexual economy that lies behind prostitution, provoking the reader to reconsider the morality of the situation as not a failing of morality in the woman, but as a failing of society and the conditions that create prostitution.

Another element of urban life examined by Victorian poets is poverty. This, indeed, contributes to child labor, though it is not only children that suffer in the city. One clear example of class divisions and the drudgery of a life of labor in city life is John Davidson's "Thirty Bob a Week." The working-class speaker, a clerk, addressing the higher class "Mr. Silver-tongue," conveys both his situation and his attitudes toward his life and the difficulties of living on a meager thirty shillings a week. He notes that it is "often very cold and very wet," and he and his wife and children live in "three rooms about the size of traveling trunks" (19, 22). He proposes that "p'r'aps we are in Hell for all that I can tell,/ And lost and damn'd and served up hot to God" (29-30). Though the speaker admits the hardships of his life, he does not, interestingly, place the blame upon the socio-economic structures that have left him in such a position. He states: "I chose to be the thing I was," though admitting "the difficultest job a man can do,/ Is to come it brave and meek with thirty bob a week,/ And feel that that's the proper thing for you" (76, 88-90). Though urban life is not easy on such an income, the speaker refuses to resign himself as powerless—he alone chose his course. In such a way, Davidson invites his audience to regard his speaker, not with heartbreak or pity (as with the children of Browning's poem), but with respect for his honesty and determination. The speaker does not want Mr. Silver-tongue's charity; he simply wants him to listen. The city, then, forges class divisions, which Davidson's speaker attempts to bridge, fostering a union and sense of community among the economically separated.

In addition to these various attitudes regarding city life and its problems, it is also important to note changing representations of the city in Victorian poetry. William Thesing links Tennyson with Blake and Wordsworth in his treatment of the city, claiming that all three poets "envisioned what it would be like for humanity to live in an ideal city. . . . [and] also experienced the reality of the nineteenth-century city" (1). The ideal city, according to Thesing, is found in Blake's New Jerusalem, Wordsworth's depictions in *The Excursion*, and Tennyson's Camelot. G. Robert Stange likewise claims that "the city that one feels is most real to [Tennyson] is Camelot. . . . an interesting literary recurrence of the 'archetypal model' of the celestial city" (478). Both Stange and Thesing note that Tennyson's actual experiences of the city are found in *Maud* and *In Memoriam*, and that these experiences are decidedly anti-urban. Stange recounts the speaker's visits to London in *In Memoriam*, and how the first passage is marked with despair at visiting his deceased friend's house ("the long unlovely street"), only to have "its metropolitan horror [. . . .] mysteriously dissolved by nature" in a subsequent passage: "I come once more; the city sleeps;/ I smell the meadow in the street" (478). Thesing also notes the "nightmarish exaggeration of the city" in Tennyson, but states that Tennyson "became more realistic in his perceptions of social conditions in the burgeoning urban centers" in the last decade of his life (30). This progression toward "realism" would be endorsed by mid-Victorians, and further attained by the later Victorian poets.

Stange and Thesing both note that Arthur Hugh Clough in 1853 called for a "new realism in poetry which would treat the city as it actually and presently existed," and that poets "find a charm in images drawn from the 'busy seas of industry,' and recognize that 'the true and lawful haunts of the poetic powers' are, 'if anywhere, in the blank and desolate

streets, and upon the solitary bridges of the midnight city'"(Thesing 32, Stange 485). Clough, Stange notes, reviewed Arnold's first two volumes of poetry along with Alexander Smith's *A Life Drama*, and suggested that "Smith's poetry was in touch with actual life in a way that Arnold's was not," though Stange proposes that neither Smith, Arnold, nor Clough himself truly achieved what Clough sought, too often falling back on traditional themes rather than pure realism (485). A brief examination of the city poetry of these men, then, becomes necessary.

Arnold's "A Summer Night" begins with an image of isolation in the city: "In the deserted, moon-blanched street,/ How lonely rings the echo of my feet!" (1-2). His speaker remarks: "Those windows, which I gaze at, frown,/ Silent and white, unopening down,/ Repellent as the world" (3-5). This image transitions into a contemplation of identity and the condition of existence, its meaninglessness and drudgery, which Arnold compares to men fruitlessly toiling in prison. The sense of estrangement evoked by the physical environment of the city, then, is both a product and a symptom of it. Arnold's two "London" poems—"East London" and "West London"—both frame the speaker as a wanderer encountering members of the city. Though "East London" includes the strength of a preacher's fortitude and faith in the face of earthly toil, the scene presented is less than favorable, as the "squalid streets" are occupied by a "dispirited" and "pale weaver," and even the preacher is assumed to be "ill and o'erworked" (1-6). "West London" recounts observations of a beggar and her children who ask for money from laborers but not the rich. Arnold comments that "She will not ask of aliens, but of friends,/ Of sharers in a common human fate" (10-11). Here the divisions within the city are acknowledged—class preventing community, even among those living in the same city. A lack of shared understanding prevents this greater and united

community from being formed. In "Lines Written in Kensington Garden," the garden represents a reprieve for Arnold "amid the city's jar" (38). Nature functions as a retreat from city life: "In the huge world, which roars hard by,/ Be others happy if they can!/ But in my helpless cradle I/ Was breathed on by the rural Pan" (21-24). Estrangement, notably, haunts Arnold's non-city poems as well, as he states in "To Marguerite—Continued": "We mortal millions live alone" (4). Arnold's poetry at large is predominated by a sense of isolation as a condition of modernity—a concept inextricably linked with the culture of city life.

Clough, as a proponent of "realism" in depicting the city, is an important figure. Thesing posits that Clough's shorter poems about the city fall into four categories: "(1) Those which see the city as a religious battlefield between spiritual and secular forces, (2) those which see the city along the lines of an "I-them" dimension, (3) those which preach an ascetic gospel of work, duty, and labor, and (4) those which present a parade of descriptive urban images" (42-43). The important point to be made in a discussion of urban estrangement is that a number of Clough's poems focus very much on the speaker's sense of alienation. Even the sense of community offered in "Easter Day. Naples, 1849" is a community of the abandoned and estranged from both faith and the city of Heaven: "Eat, drink, and die, for we are souls bereaved/ Of all the creatures under heaven's wide cope/ We are most hopeless, who had once most hope,/ And most beliefless, that had most believed" (86-89). Loss of faith, frustrated relationships, and disillusionment are also themes in Clough's work, including *Amours de Voyage* and *Dipsychus*—themes which are interrelated with "modern" problems.

Like Clough, other Victorian writers produced long poetic works contemplating the problems of modern life. George Meredith's *Modern Love* provides one example of such

problems of modernity as the audience is denied depictions of "ideal" love and presented instead with the conditions of "modern" love—estrangement, infidelity, and dissatisfaction. Alexander Smith's *A Life Drama* explores the urban experience as a place of temptation and sin, "a great city lying in its smoke,/ A monster sleeping in its own thick breath" (IV). And again: "The wildeyed city seemed a demon's brain,/ The children of the night its evil thoughts" (IX). This is presented in conflict with the country, which is, as with Arnold, a reprieve: "These worldly men will kill me with their scorns,/ But Nature never mocks or jeers at me;/ Her dewy soothings of the earth and air/ Do wean me from the thoughts that mad my brain" (VIII). Questions of love and sexuality are of interest here, for both the city and modernity are filled with lust and infidelity, whereas Nature, personified, represents a sort of untainted earth-mother, both feminized and unsexed. Urban life is threatening, but the country remains pure.

Thomas Hardy was likewise concerned and disillusioned with modern urban life, and wrote in 1887: "London appears not to see itself. Each individual is conscious of himself, but nobody conscious of themselves collectively" (qtd. In Thesing 215). Again the city serves as a place filled with people, and yet each of them alone. Hardy's poetry is largely concerned with themes of isolation and the question of meaning or purpose. One clear example of this is in his poem "Hap," in which no God exists to give cause or reason for suffering: the only truth is happenstance. This sentiment would be echoed in Thomson's *The City of Dreadful Night*: "I find no hint throughout the Universe/ Of good or ill, of blessing or of curse;/ I find alone Necessity Supreme" (73-75). A world bereft of meaning, marked by isolation and disappointment—this is the threat of modernity.

Modernity did not always denote a threat, however—Ana Parejo Vadillo points out that fin-de-siècle poets recognized London as "a source of intellectual and aesthetic stimulation" and that "London was synonymous with modernity" (3). Modernity and the urban experience, then, toward the end of the nineteenth century, received a shift in popular poetic perspective, with city poetry celebrating city life, rather than feeling its despair. Stange credits the poets of the 1890s, in particular Lionel Johnson and Arthur Symons, with "clearing the way for many new literary forms" and "helping to make the twentieth-century city available to Joyce and Pound, Virginia Woolf and T.S. Eliot" (493). Vadillo's work seeks to reintegrate women into discussions of city poetry, illustrating "the key role of women poets in the formation of the cultural discourse of urban aestheticism"—a role just as important as that of men (6). One key point in the shifting of perspectives on the city is the formation of communities—a public urban life. The Rhymers' Club was one central vehicle for male poets (it excluded women), but as Vadillo points out, women likewise engaged in such exchanges—meeting at other London venues and literary salons (7). By having public spaces dedicated to community, intellectual exchange, and the reading and discussion of poetry, the poetry thereby produced would illustrate the influence of the forged union of city and community, turning away from previous depictions of the city as a "villainous" divider.

Amy Levy is significant here, not only as an urban poet, but also for her connection to Thomson. Thematically, her works and his share a common ground: "Levy's poetry shared with Thomson's the consciousness of pain, a questioning of religious faith, and. . . . a deep interest in urban experience" (Vadillo 55). Not only did Levy share an understanding with Thomson, but she also wrote about him. She published an essay entitled "James Thomson: A Minor Poet" in 1883, a few months after his death, with a dramatic monologue "A Minor

Poet" published a year later. Levy's essay praises Thomson, calling him "essentially the poet of mood; he has symbolized, as no poet has done before him, a certain phase of modern feeling, I was going to say modern pessimism, but the word scarcely covers the sense" (*Broadview Anthology* 1358). The circumstances of *The City of Dreadful Night* Levy claims as perceptible by nearly all: "Most of us at some time or other of our lives have wandered in the City of Dreadful Night; the shadowy forms, the dim streets, the monotonous tones are familiar to us" (1359). The condition of "the City" is a modern one, comprehensible to those denizens of urban society. She states: "The fact that such a state of mind exists is enough; it is one of the phenomena of our world" (1359). Levy is claiming for Thomson a representative perspective, particularly in regard to this poem, the value of which stands "as a complete conception, as a marvelously truthful expression of what is almost impossible to express at all," and it is for this earnestness that Levy feels he must be recognized (1360, 1363). For Levy, Thomson succeeds in his efforts to reveal "the bitter old and wrinkled truth/ Stripped naked of all vesture that beguiles" (9-10). In this way, Thomson achieves the "reality" in expression of city life that Clough espoused, not in terms of actual "realism," but in truthfulness. Levy recognizes in Thomson the duality of "the City" as both a physical place as well as a state of mind—it is equally real as it is metaphorical.

Levy's poem "A Minor Poet" very likely refers to Thomson. The title alone bears similarity to her essay on Thomson, and the content—the suicide of a poet "All out of tune in this world's instrument"—bears some similarity to the subject of Thomson's "In the Room." The key difference is that the poet (not his furniture) speaks for himself, detailing the depths of his suffering. Numerous details throughout the poem point to the life of Thomson: on his shelf are books including Heine, and reference is made to Shelly (who, the poet states, he has

"grown too coarse for") (89-90). Other details represent plausible connections to sentiments presented in Thomson's work, such as: "I lament/ The death of youth's ideal in my heart;/ And, to be honest, never yet rejoiced/ In the world's progress—scarce, indeed, discerned;/ (For it seems that God's a Sisyphus/ With the world for stone)" (29-34). Levy's poet also asks "Was ever Hell conceived/ By mortal brain, by brain Divine devised,/ Darker, more fraught with torment, than the world/ For such as I?" (86-89). This hellish world is very likely a reference to Thomson's *The City of Dreadful Night*, as the city of the poem is a place of torment without hope for relief.

Thomson's *The City of Dreadful Night* is not, however, his only poem concerned with representations of "the city." The idealization of the country (as the antithesis of the city) would be represented in the earlier works of Thomson. In 1865, Thomson wrote a number of idyllic poems, including "Sunday up the River" and "Sunday at Hampstead." "Sunday up the River" describes a boating outing between a pair of young lovers. It is a celebration of love, life, and outdoor play—an idealization of youthful recreation. Thomson's speaker robustly proclaims the joy of the experience reiterating: "Thank God for Life!" "Thank God for love!" and "Thank God for you!" (XVII). Nature is celebrated throughout in descriptions of the "tranquil river," "shining meadows," and "golden noonlight" (XX). "Sunday at Hampstead" is similarly celebratory, but importantly, it compares urban living with the "green, green country" as well as exploring class divisions. In the poem, a pair of young lovers enjoys their Sunday escape from the weariness and drudgery of work in the city as they meet friends for tea: "Through all the weary week, dear,/ We toil in the murk down there,/ Tied to a desk and a counter/ A patient stupid pair!" (I). London is "dark and dreary," marked by "the smoke and the smirch"—the only references to the city, significantly, are to its pollution and

unfulfilling labor (II, I). Also notable is the speaker's mockery of the upper-class and the status of their relative happiness. He claims that the pair have "ten times the love and glee/ Of those pale and languid rich ones" that are "So fine and cold and staid,/ Like exquisite waxwork figures/ That must be kept in the shade" (I). This contrasts with the lovers, who can "laugh," and "romp," and "loll on the grass and sing" (I). These are joys, however, connected with the country, as the city is a place of foreboding and death: "And my ears still throbbing seem, my Love,/ With the rush and clang of wheels;/ Of a vast machinery roaring/ For ever in skyless gloom/ Where the poor slaves peace imploring,/ Found peace alone in the tomb" (II). Even in an arguably light and playful poem, Thomson presents the bleakness of urban life, specifically that of the working class, whose only release is death.

Another important poem of Thomson's concerned with images of the city is "The Doom of a City," written in 1857, a poem in which many see early similarities with Thomson's later "The City of Dreadful Night." The poem is comprised of four parts: "The Voyage," "The City," "The Judgments," and "The Return." Rather than attempting to present a realistic portrait of urban experience, this poem functions allegorically—as the speaker leaves the "real" city on a voyage to the City of the Dead. Even the "real" city, however, is marked by descriptions of barrenness and death, as "lamps sepulchral" light the "desert streets," evoking images to the speaker of "a buried City" whose "peopling corpses" "lie motionless and never laugh or weep,/ All still, and buried deep/ For ever in death's sleep" (I, 26-40). Restless and unsatisfied, the speaker takes his boat out on the river, desiring to be free from the city "which had home nor hope for me,/ That stifling tomb from which I now was free" (I, 54-55). A tempest drives the boat out to sea, where the speaker's nightmarish journey begins, leading him to the City of Death. There he finds all its citizens

frozen in stone; statues adorning the city as if alive, but "Stark, strangled, coffined in eternal stone" (II, 216). Significantly, in the face of the solitude of this city, he rebukes himself as a fool for having thought himself alone before:

> I shut myself up from the lives around me,
> Eating my own foul heart—envenomed food;
> And while dark shadows more and more enwound me,
> Nourished a dreary pride of solitude;
> The cords of sympathy which should have bound me
> In sweet communion with earth's brotherhood,
> I drew in tight and tighter around me,
> Strangling my best existence for a mood. (II, 459-66)

Rather than blaming society for exiling him, he admits a self-imposed isolation growing out of his disdain for the perceived "folly of the world's much gladness" in the face of its prevalent "guilt and woe" (II, 457-58). Thomson's speaker is self-aware, and longs for a sense of community. His desire to escape the dreariness of the city has confronted him with a terrible irony: the city that represents a meaningless tomb of toil and strife is made not just of buildings made of stone, but of the people that inhabit it. The city holds the fellowship he desires, but in rejecting the city, he rejects community, too.

The rest of the poem consists of a series of judgments by God, in which He destroys the unworthy statues and redeems the virtuous, allowing them to ascend to the city of Heaven. The speaker reacts with awe in the face of the Divine, only to lament his fate as the gates shut and "left the earth a dark and soulless clod" (III, 401). The experience only deepens his sense of the vanity of the material world: "O Life! This is thy deepest woe of

all—/ That as a soul regains its heaven of birth,/ The body drags it swooning back to earth,/ Stunned, hopeless, blind with its tremendous fall" (III, 406-09). He compares himself to one returning home from a night of shameful sin only to be confronted with the pure and holy worship in a Cathedral: "Too pure! What right has *he* to share/ Their silent feast of sacred love?/. . . . How dare he seek the Father's gaze/ Thus hopeless, loveless and defiled/. . . ./ though he yearn/ To join such fellowship for aye?" (III, 519-26). Thomson's speaker's consistently frustrated longing grows from his own feelings of unworthiness. He is estranged not only from an earthly fellowship, but also from a heavenly one. The speaker's feelings of his unworthiness, however, extend to his own society. As he journeys home, a Spirit speaks through him, and criticizes:

> thy chief social laws seem strictly framed to secure
> That one be corruptingly rich, another bitterly poor,
> And another just starving to death: thy fanes and mansions proud
> Are beleaguered with filthy hovels wherein poor wretches crowd (IV, 125-28)

His experiences in the City of Death have only compounded his own frustration with the state of modern life, as "Doom" may apply not only to the allegorical City of Death, but also to the actual city.

The sense of futility afforded by modern early life is present in a number of Thomson's other poems both preceding and following *The City of Dreadful Night*, one of which, "In the Room," written in 1868, presents a unique view of the totality of isolation in an individual. The man presented in the poem is doubly removed from the course of modern life: at once, he is the object of discussion as well as a representative of the pains of estranged existence. The man is not the speaker; rather, the furniture of his room speaks,

denying the poem a human utterance, aside from a brief introduction to the gloom and barrenness of the room by an unspecified narrative voice. The furniture comments on the life of their occupant, noting his restlessness and isolation and how "Not one of all his fellow-men/ Has ever passed a social hour" (126-27). The bed reveals that the man is dead, and an empty vial reveals that its contents were poison, which the man had drunk. The contents of the room do not mourn the man, contemplating only how they will all be separated. The man is relegated from a "he" to an "it"—"the form whose purpose was annulled"—and his body, "the lowest thing there," reveals only that man is weak and "life [is] torture through and through" (185-95). The concept of suicide as an anodyne for the pains of living would be revisited in *The City of Dreadful Night* as well as in a posthumously published prose piece entitled "On Suicide": "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" (*Poems, Essays, and Fragments* 249). Mixed into this justification and, indeed, self-empowerment of one's ownership of one's own life, is an interesting caveat—that no one will suffer by his death. Suicide may not be cowardly (as Thomson claims it is not), but suicide should not be selfish—only one who has no one that will miss him may take his own life. An individual's self-possession is evident, but the value of human life is not placed in the hands of God, but in the hands of those in that individual's life. Community is a preventative for suicide for one disconnected and dissatisfied with modern life.

Thomson's dissatisfaction with the city is an attitude he shares with many of his contemporary poets, though his emphasis is not upon encouraging changes in social perceptions and economic reforms, nor is it upon the literal "realism" endorsed by Clough.

Thomson's dissatisfaction grows from a sense of alienation and a longing for community which, interestingly, is not achieved by tearing down class barriers but by something as simple as recognition: realizing that one is not alone and avoiding a self-imposed isolation (as the speaker does in "The Doom of a City), for "some weary wanderer/. . . ./Will understand the speech and feel a stir/ Of fellowship in all-disastrous fight;" (*The City of Dreadful Night* 29-32). This recognition of a community of like-minded individuals is the solace Thomson offers his readers. Though Thomson shares this sense of isolation with other mid-to-late-Victorian poets, he shares with later poets of the 1890's the impetus toward forging poetic communities. His is not a community of a literary salon, celebrating urban life, but one hopeful of understanding and acceptance. Thomson understood that poetry could achieve that goal. Thomson's poetic community extended beyond that of his contemporary Victorians, as a community based upon shared knowledge and understanding that transcends not only language (as illustrated by his affinity for Leopardi and Heine) but also actual physical interaction (as Levy's affinity for Thomson, a poet she never met, indicates). Poetic influence is also not limited to ideas either, but can include style, a point which introduces Dante into a discussion of Thomson. Stylistically, Thomson did not share the actual realism endorsed by mid-Victorians, but rather the allegory presented by Dante. Though evoking Dante's style, Thomson departs from Dante's Christian context. Thomson adapts Dante's *Inferno* within *The City of Dreadful Night*, restructuring Dante's spiritual model into a faithless modern city.

Thomson had read Dante's *Divine Comedy*; indeed, he prefaces *The City of Dreadful Night* with a line from the *Inferno*: "Through me is the way to the city of pain." The actual Italian "citta dolente" can be variably translated as "sorrowful city," "city of woe," or the

"woeful city," etc. Important, however, is the connection between Hell and "the city." Hell is, generally speaking, a place of torment, where multitudes suffer together and yet in isolation—as each must endure his own punishment for his own sins. Any interaction between them serves not to foster a community, but as part of their punishments (for example, as the thieves transform into snakes and bite one another). Dante's Hell takes this rough model and structures it further, architecturally, with varying circles leading inward to Dis, the central city of Hell. Dante's structuring of Hell functions as a hierarchy of sin, allowing Dante the author the power to ascribe punishment under his own terms, placing those he finds most abhorrent in the city itself. This God-like power is denied Thomson's speaker in his City, for while Dante is a visitor passing through, Thomson's speaker is an inhabitant, and while Dante has Virgil as a guide, Thomson's speaker journeys through the City alone. Further relevance of Dante's *Inferno* to Thomson's poem will be discussed in conjunction with the poem in the following chapter, though since Hell is a Christian concept, Thomson's atheism is important to discuss.

Atheism, as the denial of a supreme deity, involves a definitive estrangement from the comforts of a benevolent God and an afterlife. It is also potentially stagnant to the imagination, as Alister McGrath points out:

> To deny God is one thing, but the outcome of such a denial, for many in the early nineteenth century, was a dull rationalism that failed to excite—that singularly lacked the ability to provoke a sense of wonder on the part of its beholder. A cold and dry rational account of nature might well satisfy the human reason, but it left the imaginative and emotional faculties untouched. (115)

McGrath goes on state that nature provided a way to attain transcendence for many Romantic poets, pointing out the various approaches by Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley. Shelley's religious beliefs, generally acknowledged to be atheistic, certainly involved an understanding of the transcendent. Thomson claimed Shelley was a pantheist, not an atheist, and noted of Shelley that "[his] real religious character consisted in his unquenchable love and reverence for all holiness, truth, and beauty" (*Biographical and Critical Studies* 288). Shelley himself raises this point in one of his letters, stating, "[Southey] says I ought not to call myself an atheist, since in reality I believe that the universe is God" (*The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley* 205). Meeker notes that Thomson, like Shelley, "considers organized social institutions, such as the government and the church, as tyrannous and soulless machines. . . .Yet unlike Shelley or Leopardi, Thomson had no strong constructive vision of the elements which must be built up to replace these outworn institutions" (34). One of such elements is found in the humanism of Secularism.

Secularism itself is precariously connected to atheism and freethought, a point found in the disparate opinions of two important figures: Charles Bradlaugh and George Jacob Holyoake. Holyoake maintained that secularism was non-atheistic, favoring the definition that "the knowledge of Nature's laws is possible, while the mystery of its origin is unfathomable" (*Secularism, Scepticism, and Atheism* v). Bradlaugh, like Holyoake, a member of the National Secular Society, held that "Atheism is the logical result to all who are able the think the matter out" (vii). The two men, interestingly, engaged in a series of debates to settle the matter, with Holyoake preferring the designation "non-Theist," and Bradlaugh maintaining that such a term was synonymous with "Atheist" (12). Despite disagreements on this ideological terming, both men (and the National Secular Society)

believed in social reform, particularly in regard to education—with "secular" referring to the separation of church and state, with the inclusion of Utilitarian morality (4). Though a good friend of Bradlaugh's in particular, Thomson was not active among the secularists. Indeed, Thomson's satirical essay "Proposals for the Speedy Extinction of Evil and Misery" pokes fun at would-be reformers and their belief in the perfectibility of man, proposing that three virtuous and intelligent National Reformers should perfect themselves, then start the "Universal Perfection Company, Unlimited." The perfectibility of man was a belief held by Shelley as well, which Thomson noted but could not share, despite his earnest regard for the poet. Thomson shared instead the doubts of Leopardi, stating that Leopardi's greatness lay in his acknowledging that mankind, despite its hopefulness, is invariably flawed: "the facts of the world do not sanction the belief in a good tendency" (qtd. in Schaffer 72). This absence of hope and faith permeate the city of *The City of Dreadful Night,* as life holds no meaning, driven only by "Necessity Supreme." Thomson was not an idealist, and the triumphant zeal of the secularists did not fulfill him any more than that of the religious community. As Thomson did not share the optimism of the reformers, he could not join them. Even such a movement—so "against-the-grain" of mainstream thought—could not provide a fully like-minded community for Thomson. His atheism would remain without transcendence.

An isolated mind, estranged from both popular belief systems and "radical" alike, Thomson consistently presents in his poetry a man without a community. The longing for love presented in his earliest poems would give way in his later poetry to a longing for understanding, for the solace of community offered by his own *The City of Dreadful Night*. Conflicted with the freedom of publishing in a radical periodical and the desire to obtain approval from intellectuals that he respected (like George Eliot and W.M. Rossetti),

Thomson appears estranged from both—a voice truly "out of tune in this world's instrument," as Levy terms it: a "minor poet." Joseph Bristow, in examining the "minor" poetry of Amy Levy, makes a very important observation regarding the alienation and pessimism in Levy's writing that applies to Thomson too: "Since the city at least permits 'minor' poets to share an identity, the estrangements of the metropolis fail to overwhelm them entirely" (61). In addressing his poem to a "sad Fraternity" of shared understanding, Thomson makes his poem function as a means of community—of shared identity—not exclusively among poets, but of wanderers in the City of Dreadful Night.

The City and "The City": Implications and Duality in Representation

"Good tidings of great joy for you, for all:/ There is no God." The undeniable power behind this statement lies not in its "shock value," nor even in the ironic structuring of the statement in the discourse of theism, using religion's own language to deny it (as Isobel Armstrong points out[15]). The true power of this poetic moment cannot be appreciated out of context, but only through a close analysis and exploration of its source: The *City of Dreadful Night*. Published in the secularist journal *The National Reformer* in four sections in 1874 (March 22-May 17) by James "B.V." (Bysshe Vanolis) Thomson, the critical value of the poem remains underemphasized—both in terms of its purpose as a vehicle for poetic community as a piece of "minor literature" as well as the power and poignancy of the poem itself. *The City* is more than the product of a "pessimist" or an "atheist," though many feel compelled to "redeem" Thomson in one direction or the other by either questioning his atheism or emphasizing his radicalism; the poem is exquisite in its rendering of a dissonant and alienated world that defies simple or singular definitions. It presents multiple perspectives simultaneously: observation, contemplation, representation, all of which take place through multiple lenses—the narrator (who may or may not be the poet) mediates between his own reflections and the sights and specters that he comes into contact with within the City.

The complexity of the poem is not accidental, nor the result of an "inferior" poet: it is perhaps the greatest factor of interpretative potential within the poem. Isobel Armstrong remarks,

[15] See "James Thomson: Atheist, Blasphemer and Anarchist" in Armstrong's *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics* (463).

> Immersed as he was in the alienation of the city, [Thomson] was not concerned with an account of its physical horror or its psychological estrangement as an end in itself. Rather the city as a symbol is symptomatic: it is not the cause of despair but the representations which despair, imprisoned in theological and ideological fallacies, makes for itself. (462)

That being said, it is not only the intellectual aspects of the poem that give it value (nor only the social/political aspects, either, though these are present as well); arguably the greatest force behind the poem is the utter bleakness of its sentiments: pain, despair, longing, fear, hopelessness, denial, regret—the narrative is a journey through worse-than-Hell (for Hell is a Christian concept and thus the confirmation of God, whereas the atheism of the poem denies it, relegating the condition of "the City" to a place without a Heaven to aspire to), without hope for relief (unless it can be achieved through death and negation). But it is also a poem meant to comfort. This aspect of the poem is little recognized, but absolutely essential. Within its suffering and disillusionment, the poem offers solace to the reader: you are not alone.

Composed of a proem and twenty-one sections, Thomson's poem takes the reader through the City—an amalgam of both the Hell of Dante's *Inferno* and London—which is simultaneously allegorical and realistically representative of the experience of urban isolation. Structurally, the poem vacillates between the narrator's account of the City itself and his encounters within it, blending reflection and narrative. The speaker himself is a figure in isolation: though the City is inhabited, he is decidedly alone, unguided. The figures he encounters seldom regard him, concerned instead with their own fates—searching for meaning and solace within the City. It is within these concepts of "meaning and solace" that

an important aspect of the poem as poem is found: the pessimism and insistent estrangement offered by the text of the poem are visibly undermined by the proem. The text of the poem ends bleakly, with "renewed assurance/ And confirmation of the old despair" (XXI, 84), but the poem begins with the assurance of the proem, that another "Uplifts his voice to let me know a brother/ Travels the same wild paths though out of sight'" (34-5). Each individual is simultaneously alone, and yet members of a fraternity. It is the same fraternity Levy found in Thomson: "I, who had never seen your face, / Perhaps I knew you best" ("A Dead Poet" 15-16). Those alone in life are united by understanding. This is the value of poetry; this is what Thomson's poem affords.

In this poem, the divergent cities presented in Thomson's "A Doom of a City" become conflated: it is at once the experiential London (or a London-like city) and the nightmare City. This is evident from the first section of the poem: "The City is of Night; perchance of Death/ But certainly of Night"; "The sun has never visited that city,/ For it dissolveth in the daylight fair" (1-2, 6-7). The city is of metaphorical night, for the blackness and oppression evoked by the linkage of "Night" and "Death" connote the experience of despair, contrasted with "the lucid morning's fragrant breath" (3). This is not, however, the only meaning present here, for the metaphorical city is literally of perpetual night; the nightmare city "Dissolveth like a dream of night away" (8). The city itself is like a phantom; the city is not real—it is a state of mind, "present in distempered gloom of thought/ And deadly weariness of heart all day" (9-10). Therefore, when the sun does visit London—when the day literally comes to the literal city—the darkness and oppression of the City remain, the literal light foregrounding the construct of night as a construct, not an essential reality.

Thomson conflates the notions of "reality" and "dreams," for each of these cities is equally real to those who experience it: "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?" (11-14). It is a deeply metaphorical and metaphysical concept, involving a theorizing of perception:

> For life is but a dream whose shapes return,
> Some frequently, some seldom, some by night
> And some by day, some night and day: we learn,
> The while all change and many vanish quite,
> In their recurrence with recurrent changes
> A certain seeming order; where this ranges
> We count things real; such is memory's might. (15-21)

There is none of Shelley's transcendence here, for knowing is not elevated but frustrated—the possibility of knowing itself drawn into question. It is indicative of the mundane repetitiveness of modern urban experience; the endless toil, day leading on to day, without reason or purpose. The denial of the certitude of knowing is profound, for no meaning can be found in nothingness. This indeterminacy is also plausibly the representation of the insomniac's perspective in particular.[16] Thomson also, notably, wrote a poem entitled "Insomnia," in which he personified the Hours of the night as winged apparitions that hover over the speaker, depriving him of "Sleep's divine oblivion and repose" (12). Kevin Mills examines the alteration of perspective afforded by insomnia in terms of rupturing the distinction between interiority and exteriority: "Much more than a trying and exhausting

[16] Thomson himself refers to his insomnia, explicitly referencing it in regards to the creation of this poem in his correspondence with George Eliot as the "product of much sleepless hypochondria" (qtd. in Salt 82).

ailment, then, insomnia is a falling out of the cosmos—the ordered worlds of human categories and experience—an irruption of alterity within consciousness" (125). Insomnia interrupts the normal perception of reality, and if "knowing is an interior reflection of an exterior reality," the collapsed "interior/exterior distinction constitutes the confounding of knowledge" (125). In a way, Thomson's city may be viewed as both the city of an insomniac and an insomniac city, both as an individual's manifestation of conflated perspective and as a representation of such an experience as representative of modern life.

The question of the condition of "the city" then becomes: Which perspective is true, and which perspective is real? The answer is both—the city is simultaneously a physical city as well as a state of mind, a constructed metaphor of lived experiences and perceptions. Truth and reality need not be synonymous here, for they are perceptual—if a dream repeats day after day, as Thomson proposes, it might be perceived as "reality," and the "waking world" a dream. Jerome McGann likewise observes that "illusion and reality become confounded in the poem," stating:

> Life with its day-values is seen to be illusory when the truth is discovered that the human mind, aided by memory, only postulates an order for its own comfort and peace: there is really no such order at all. . . .[But] the nightmares are no more "real" than the daydreams; they are illusory postulates set up for the comfort of those who have seen through the other illusions, the illusions of daylight" (501).

The distinction between illusion and reality, daydream and nightmare, is indeterminate, but purposefully so. It is not a failure of Thomson's poetic ability to represent accurately, rather the indeterminacy is entirely accurate. This experience is subjective, arising from the individual consciousness, but also able to be shared, though only among those who already

have experienced the truth of it. The seeming inaccuracy of language is, therefore, precision; imagination becomes its own realism.

Thomson's City, therefore, is a deeply complex entity. This likewise extends to its geography, which Thomson describes in both literal and allegorical terms. The "real" city is bordered by a river to the south and west, "waste marshes," "black moorlands," and "stony ridges," and is connected to islet suburbs by bridges, piers, and causeways (22-28). To the north and west are found "trackless wilderness," "savannahs," "savage woods," "enormous mountains," "bleak uplands," and "black ravines with torrent fountains," and to the east is the "shipless sea's unrest" (31-35). These descriptions are at once functional as pseudo-realistic indicators of "actual geographical phenomena," and a seeming catalogue of differently evocative structures, mostly foreboding—as the woods are "savage" and the ravines "black" and torrential. The city itself appears estranged amid a wild expanse of nature, not the sublime or inspiring natural world of the Romantics, nor the pleasantly pastoral green world of Thomson's idylls, but a nightmarish wild, akin to the imaginative and unstable nature in George Meredith's "The Woods of Westermain." The city itself, though connected to "islet suburbs," appears separated from any other post of civilization, as if existing in an isolated reality, disconnected from an inhabited world, as even the sea is "shipless."

The city itself is not only geographically disjointed, but also temporally unstable. Simultaneously, the city is "not ruinous," but characterized by "ruins of an unremembered past" (36-7). It is at once not decayed and decaying, out of place with its own identity, having forgotten its past. As Valeria Tinkler-Villani observes, the ruins of the city parallel the "mental ruins of the half-remembered lives" of the figures inhabiting the city (126). Without a history, all ruins are meaningless—any landmarks are monuments to nothing, as

any memories are only reminders of what is irrevocably lost. The City does not know itself, nor do its inhabitants. Within the conflicted real and dream/nightmare cities, the status of its citizens is also in flux. In the "real" city (the London of the waking world), the masses exist, but in the City of Night they are simultaneously present and absent, for they sleep. Sleep and death are related terms in Thomson's poetry; since insomnia denies sleep, the only rest is found in death. Sleep is escape; sleep is freedom from the nightmare city, but this freedom never comes, for "The City is of Night, but not of Sleep" (71). Sleep is not afforded by the City, and its denizens are characterized by "worn faces that look deaf and blind/ Like tragic masks of stone" (52-53). The wanderers in the City resemble the status of the city as ruinous/not ruinous, for they inhabit a place somewhere between life and death—which Thomson calls "Life-in-Death" (III, 25). This potential allusion to the "Night-mare Life-in-Death" of Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is significant, as she is presented as the greater terror. The "certitude of Death" is described as an anodyne from the "termless hell" of such existence, as the weary multitudes suffer endlessly and inwardly, seldom speaking to one another.

Thomson's speaker comes into contact with a number of these inhabitants, and in nearly each of these instances Thomson uses Christian discourse and iconography subversively to undo itself. In this we find two modes of Thomson's representation of isolation, indicative of both the social estrangement of the city as well as the ideological estrangement of Theism. In the first of these encounters, Thomson's speaker follows a figure "because he seemed to walk with an intent" (II, 1). Significantly, Thomson's speaker does not stop the man or speak to him, but merely follows him. The man comes to three representative scenes, each housing the deaths of Faith, Hope, and Love—the three ideals

presented in 1 Corinthians 13. Rather than abiding, each of these lies dead, destroyed by the corruption of modern life: Faith was poisoned by the "charnel air" of the City, as its holy residence has become "corruption's sty"; Love was destroyed by its own worshippers (and presumably lust); Hope starved in the face of squalor and poverty (II, 10-29). The speaker, moved to speech, asks how life can continue without these three, to which the man replies with the image of the clock, reminiscent of the Deist concept of God as the "watchmaker":

> 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. (II, 32-36)

Here, all meaning ascribed to life is terminated. Far from treating the watch as evidence of intelligent design, the dismantling of the watch here functions as dismantling of signification—the fact that life exists is not a marvel, it is purposeless and mundane repetition, paralleled by the repeated cycling of the figure, announcing the deaths of these three. As Valeria Tinkler-Villani states: "The relief offered by the clarity and impartiality of the system as it announces itself on the dial is removed, and the system becomes unreadable" (129). Without a way to know meaning—through faith, hope, and love—life is utterly without meaning.

Thomson's poetic handling of meaning and representation is complicated through the introduction of these other figures, for they become the mouthpieces for the sentiments uttered. Thomson is once removed from the poem through the introduction of his speaker, and twice removed through the secondary figures that the speaker encounters. Structurally,

this functions as a means by which Thomson can both share in and comment on the various sentiments presented. Thus, the poem *is* Thomson's utterance *and* his representation of the perspectives of others. This plays well into Isobel Armstrong's definition of the double-poem, as the City (and its citizens) is both the subject and object—a place for presenting viewpoints and critiquing them. Thomson's critiques are, however, indeterminate, as it becomes difficult to say with any certainty precisely which sentiments are Thomson speaking through his figures, and which are the figures speaking for themselves. The poetic effect of such a strategy is that Thomson creates a community of voices within a single poet's utterance—a community to which he belongs, and yet remains removed from. This effect is heightened by the shifting perspective of the speaker as observer and commenter—observer of the narrative scenes, and commenter on the state of life in the City in the meditative passages.

The meditative passages function largely as a place for the speaker to convey the truths of the City. One of these passages concerns the arrival of the citizens to the City. Though one does not know how he or she comes to the City, one can never truly leave: "who once hath paced that dolent city/ Shall pace it often, doomed beyond all pity,/ With horror ever deepening from the first" (19-21). Despair, dissatisfaction, and disbelief are permanent entities: much akin to what today would be diagnosed as clinical depression. The truly terrible misery of the City occurs when one does manage to leave; when one manages to overcome the impediments to happiness afforded by modern life; when one manages to find hope, faith, or love. None of these will suffice:

> Though he possess sweet babes and a loving wife,
>
> A home of peace by loyal friendships cheered,

And love them more than death or happy life,

They shall avail not. (V, 22-25)

The dejected spirit can never be free—the City of Night is a prison; a tomb—as its inhabitance are denied sleep, they are denied freedom; prey to their own demons. The City is simultaneously a physical place and a representation of interiority.

In later meditative sections, however, the individual in isolation is given community, as offered by the proem. Canto XI describes the different kinds of people found in the city: "some great in rank and wealth and power," "some renowned for genius and for worth," "And some poor and mean" (22-24). Despite their different backgrounds, "yet these and those are brothers,/ The saddest and the weariest men on earth" (27-8). In addition to the fellowship offered, what is important to note here are the divergent backgrounds of the City dwellers—a member of any class or intellectual background can be found in the City, illustrating that none are immune to it. In addition, the class divisions present in so many other city poems are not a factor here—despair makes all men equal. This sense of community is further emphasized in Canto XIII, where the speaker becomes the representative voice linking all members of the City: "WE do not ask a longer term of strife" (36). The characteristic linking these members is their apprehension of the dreariness of a prolonged and pointless existence. Life, then, is a prison term, which all people must serve out, without hope for release and freedom.

This unity is also emphasized in Canto XII. In this narrative scene, the speaker does not speak for the people, but allows them to speak for themselves. Each one, in turn, details the course of life and cause of disillusionment that brought them to the City, echoing the refrain: "I wake from daydreams to this real night." The notion of the "reality" of the City of

Night versus the "daydreams" of the waking world is once more present here, as the futility and vanity of the material world are the matter of the "daydreams," and the disillusioned mental condition apprehended by the speakers is described as "real"—lived experience is secondary to the perception of experience—this is the "truth" of the City. Significant is the variety of backgrounds of each of the figures in this section, as each represents some aspect of life that *should* provide enjoyment, if not meaning: a senator pleading for some justice for the poor, one who once found pleasure in opium visions, a successful comedian, a pious monk, a king of a powerful nation, an inspiring preacher, a partaker in drink and women, a faithful artist, a religious writer, a soldier fighting tyranny. Thomson's rhetoric of irony is powerful here, as each figure, describing with passion his life's work, reiterates the same refrain. This should not be taken to imply, however, that Thomson argues that nothing in life is meaningful. In his proem, for example, Thomson admits that people may find happiness and satisfaction in life. What Thomson is doing here, again twice-removed through the speaker and the figures speaking for themselves, is presenting the "truth" that not everything that *should* provide meaning succeeds. Meaning is subjective, determined by the individual's experience of the experience itself—two men with the same profession in life, and with the same modicum of success, may derive different senses of satisfaction from it. Thomson is deconstructing and reconstructing the community of society and class structures—here kings, and drunks, and preachers exist together, as equals, united by the despair that isolated them in the material world of "daydreams."

Within such an interpretation, Thomson's poem resists one particular reading of the causes of despair in the City. Though an atheist poem, it is not a poem about atheism specifically; as this is a poem about the frustrated search for meaning in life, for those whose

atheism provides a sense of meaning and understanding of life, this frustration does not apply (Bradlaugh, for example, celebrated his atheism). This becomes clear in Canto XIV, where the line of figures mentioned above now sit in a cathedral, listening to another figure proselytize. It is here that the language of Christianity is subverted utterly, through the speech of the "preacher" as well as the description of the situation. The setting, ironically, is a cathedral; the gathering a "congregation." The "pulpit speaker" laments the woes of his "melancholy Brothers" in the "shadowy congregation," but brings them solace and "authentic word," stating:

> 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. . . .
> I find no hint throughout the Universe
> Of good or ill, blessing or of curse;
> I find alone Necessity Supreme;. . . .
> But if you would not this poor life fulfill,
> Lo, you are free to end it when you will,
> Without the fear of waking after death. (39-42, 73-75, 82-84)

His speech is the complete reversal of Christian dogma: the "good tidings" are not about the birth of the Savior, but of the denial of God, who is himself the "Fiend," not Satan. The loving God of Christianity is negated by the doctrine of suffering, and the fiendish God of suffering is negated by Necessity and free will—existence persists because it must, but not for any plan or reason. The promise of Heaven is subverted as well; replaced with the

promise of oblivion—the endless sleep. Release, not an afterlife, becomes the goal; free will allows for suicide for life is one's own, without Divine judgment or punishment. Through such an inversion, the suffering of life is akin to Hell; sleep akin to Heaven; and the individual his own God.

The notion of power afforded in ownership of one's life comforts the "preacher" in this section, but not all of his "congregation" is swayed. In the subsequent narrative scene (Canto XVI), a member of the congregation admits the truth of the pulpit speaker's proclamation, but not the truth of its solace: "Speak not of comfort where no comfort is,/ Speak not at all: can words make foul things fair?/ Our life's a cheat, our death's a black abyss:/ Hush and be mute envisaging despair" (39-42). The layers of discourse here complicate a direct reading of "Thomson's opinion": his speaker does not comment on the matter, only "musing on that message" with the rest of the silent congregation. Thomson's other two figures are presented with conflicting opinions as to the comfort afforded by atheism: the first, like Bradlaugh, celebrates atheism as "good tidings," the second dismisses it as a truth, but only that. It is, therefore, difficult to assign either perspective exclusively to Thomson: what is remarkable is the way in which he presents the disparate opinions of the modern atheist, one as a satisfying revelation, and the other a cold truth.

Another section within the poem presents arguments against both Divine plan and Divine mercy. In Canto VIII, the speaker hears two figures discussing their misery in life. One states with malice and fervor: "I would rather be/ My miserable self than He, than He/ Who formed such creatures to His own disgrace./ The vilest thing must be less vile than Thou/ From whom it had its being, God and Lord!" (22-26). Though blasphemously angry at God, the figure does arguably believe in God, while having lost faith in mankind. The other

figure corrects him: “As if a Being, God or Fiend, could reign,/ At once so wicked, foolish and insane,/ As to produce men when He might refrain!” (33-35). The existence of suffering and the absence of reasons for the existence of mankind itself creates a logical argument against the existence of God, for a rational, reasonable Being would not have done so—God is not unmerciful, God simply is not. In the absence of a sufficient reason for life, the fact that life *is* is described as such: “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” (36-38). Man’s belief in God is mocked as a vanity: “Man might know one thing were his sight less dim;/ That [the world] whirls not to suit his petty whim,/ That it is quite indifferent to him” (42-44). Mankind is not special enough to warrant a sentient God; life has no purpose, and simply grinds on, like the grind of labor. Much like a machine, the world cares not for its parts.

Other instances of the dismantling of Christian iconography are present in the poem. One such instance involves the physical dismantling of an angel in contrast with an unchanging sphinx. The great stone statues stood in opposition to one another, the sphinx placid and solemn, contrasted with the angel, armed with a sword “as prompt to smite,” staring with “vigilant intense regard” upon the sphinx (14-5). Over the course of the poem, the angel goes through a series of transformations as it slowly falls apart: first the wings fall and shatter, leaving an armed warrior; next, the sword falls, leaving an unarmed man; finally, the man himself collapses, its stone head landing between the sphinx’s paws: “beneath its grand front changeless as life’s laws” (42). Michael Steele proposes a possible source for this scene in Winwood Reade’s “rationalistic, atheistic history of the world,” *The Martyrdom*

of Man, of which the *National Reformer* published a four-part review in 1872 (374-75). The source cited within states:

> In Egypt the arts and sciences were entangled with religion. . . .Egypt stood still, and Theology turned her into stone. . . . Egypt was no longer a nation, but an assemblage of torpid castes isolated from one another. . . . It was no longer a body animated by the same heart, fed by the same blood, but an automaton neatly pieced together, of which the head was the priesthood, and the arms the army, and the feet the working class. (qtd. in Steele 375)

Such a description could be made of England by the secularists, Steele points out (375). In such a way, the sphinx represents the unchanging history untainted by Theology, which is impotent in the face of such "Necessity Supreme." The sphinx also serves more generally as a figure of riddles and bafflement, devouring those who cannot produce answers. It is no less significant that the head of the statue—if indeed representing the priesthood, or Theology itself—rests between the sphinx's paws. The eventual collapse of Christianity is implied, itself no match for the truth of time and "infinite void space" (48). Christianity poses no threat in this poem because it has neither power, nor answers.

Perhaps the most important Christian concept complicated in this poem is that of Hell, largely accompanied with specific allusions to Dante's *Inferno*. The first instance occurs in Canto VI, in which the speaker hears two "bodiless voices in [his] waking dream" discussing their search for hope to pay the toll to enter Hell (11-2). The fact that these are "bodiless voices," coupled with their existence in the speaker's "waking dream" further detach them from the realm of "reality" (a conflicted concept in this poem); thus, the existence of a "portal to Hell"— which would confirm Christian beliefs—is safely tucked

away in pure allegory. Thomson's allegory takes the famous phrase written across the gates of Hell in Dante's Inferno—"Leave hope behind, all ye who enter here"—and turns it into an actual quest for these two figures, who have no hope to abandon, and thus cannot escape "this insufferable inane" for the "positive eternity of pain" (23-4). One of the figures recounts how he watched as others cast off their hope and successfully entered, though not looking relieved as if casting off a burden, but instead appearing as if they received a burden, becoming "infirm and cowed" (48). He begs for some morsel of hope from each that passes, but none comply. The figures decide to continue searching for hope, so that they may purchase their entrance to Hell. The fact that Hell would be preferable to mundane life is as striking, as it is counterintuitive—for Christians, no fate should be worse than that of an eternity in Hell, as it is the place of eternal suffering and damnation. In the City, however, existence is meaningless and numb. True suffering, then, is the inability to feel anything at all, as feeling pain is at least a reassurance that one can feel. The eternal fruitless search for hope is, ironically, the only false hope that the figures may have, and the only worthwhile activity they can engage in. Significantly, however, despite their sad fate, these figures are not alone—they have the companionship of one another, a fellowship in suffering.

The denial of hope mentioned above is a key theme; as the reader is presented with "dead hope," "dead faith," and "dead love" early in the poem, so too are these concepts reiterated throughout the poem itself. "Dead faith" is clearly found in the cathedral scene (among others), and "dead love" is represented as well. One such scene occurs in Canto X, in which the speaker enters a mansion and encounters a man mourning the death of his beloved—literally, "dead love." The fact that this scene takes place in a mansion is once more indicative of the lack of class divisions found in the City—suffering and despair come

to all, regardless of relative wealth or poverty. The mansion notably contains a number of religious images, as the man kneels before his beloved's bed "as at a sacred shrine" and "seemed to pray" (39-40). In love, then, is more holiness found than in any other element. The depiction of "dead love," here is not mad or raving, but controlled and tender, as the man speaks to his departed beloved: "The chambers of the mansion of my heart,/ Wherein thou ever dwellest quick or dead,/ Is black with grief eternal for thy sake" as well as the "inmost oratory of my soul" (43-5). Heart, home, and faith all are related, and all feel the pain of "dead love." Significantly, love is not obliterated in this passage, nor is companionship, for the lover vows: "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" (60-3). Though separated by death, they are ever together; though love is "dead" it has not died.

Another very different scene of "dead love" occurs in Canto IV, where the speaker encounters a figure standing in a square, proclaiming his incredible journey through a nightmarish desert, culminating in an encounter with a woman that leaves him symbolically fractured. As with the "bodiless voices" the speaker encountered, Thomson's speaker is removed from this scene, and the scene from reality, into the world of fantasy. This aspect is reinforced poetically by the repetition of an end refrain to each section, as well as the repeated lines beginning each stanza: "As I came through the desert thus it was,/ As I came through the desert." The cadence of these prefacing lines pulls the reader through the tale, not fully interrupting the narrative, but punctuating it—allowing the intensity to build with each reiteration. The seemingly nonchalant and factual nature of these lines contrasts with the growing terror of the tale, as is demonstrated by the third stanza:

As I came through the desert thus it was,

As I came through the desert: 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
Plucked at me from the bushes, tried to hold:
But I strode on austere;
No hope could have no fear. (16-24)

As each stanza begins with the same preface, it gives momentary pauses within the tale in which the reader can only anticipate the horrors to come. This section contains a number of the most striking and fantastic images in the poem, as many of Thomson's critics have pointed out. The speaker of this canto describes journeying through a terrible desert, full of Hellish visions, all sorts of apocalyptic natural disasters. Thomson's descriptions are powerful: "The sun arose and crowned a broad crag-cleft;/ There stopped and burned out black, except a rim,/ A bleeding eyeless socket, red and dim" (54-6). An eclipse can be described in many ways, but a bleeding eyeless socket as a metaphor is visually evocative and viscerally accurate. At once his language is grotesque, glorious, and perfectly exact. It is entirely surreal, with the desert simultaneously occupying space with a "wild sea-shore" where "White foambelts seethed" (45, 48). The landscape itself is alive and violent, obeying no natural law. The effect is even more profound, for the fervor and terror of the scenes fail to interrupt the calm perseverance of this section's speaker—he is undaunted in the face of truly nightmarish sights, for despite these, he repeats the refrain: "Yet I strode on austere/ No

hope could have no fear." This refrain changes, however, at the appearance of a second figure.

This figure is a woman—carrying a red lamp—to which the man reacts with trepidation: "O desolation moving with such grace!/ O anguish with such beauty in thy face!/ I fell as on my bier,/ Hope travailed with such fear" (66-9). This same man walked austere through "A Sabbath of the Serpents, heaped pell-mell/ For Devil's roll-call and some fete of Hell"; walked austere as "The ground all heaved in waves of fire that surged/ And weltered round me" (30-1, 39-40). At the sight of this woman, however, he became two selves—a fractured identity—one self watching the scene, and the other "stark in swoon" (74). This notion of fractured identity is representative of the poem as a whole. One aspect in which the poem as a whole is "fractured" is the act of utterance: Thomson speaking through a speaker, who relates the words of others; each a construct and aspect of Thomson's own poetic voice. This fractured or dual nature is also true of the City itself: at once a physical city, and an allegorical city. This quality is also true of "reality" in the City: perceptions, lived experiences, dreams, daydreams, etc. Every representation is some form of duality; every signifier is complicated. Isolation and immersion appear simultaneously. This is the truth of the City.

This was also a truth that Thomson wrote of in 1878:

> Of old I was conscious of an impenetrable veil between myself and nature: of late I have been conscious also of an impenetrable veil between my inner and outer self; I have to live, think and work with the latter, and cannot get at the former, cold and vague and dim aloof. This is a painful puzzle, to be shut out and cut off from one's very self, and conscious of the disabling separation. (qtd. in Ridler xxxiii-xxxiv)

The frustrated nature of the fractured identity of inner and outer selfhood is inarguably present in this desert scene, as both selves are rendered inactive—ineffective—in their separation: one self prostrate—"corpse-like"—on the ground; the other watching petrified, "stonebound" (100, 96). The closer she approaches, the more violent his fear becomes: "And as she came more near/ My soul grew mad with fear" (77-8). The cause of this turbulent fear is not clear, but implicit, with an apprehension of doom. As the woman draws near, a black band is visible on her breast, and the man reveals that "The lamp she held was her own burning heart,/ Whose blood-drops trickled step by step apart" (84-5). As they fall on his prone self's forehead, she attempts to cleanse them with her tears and hair, murmuring "words of pity, love, and woe" (92-3). The two of them are then carried away by the tide as his "vile" self was "left forlorn" with the knowledge that "the whole sea cannot quench that heart,/ Or cleanse that brow, or wash those two apart:/ They love; their doom is drear" (101-4). Love, for this speaker, is equated with doom—as half of him remains at sea with her. Significantly, however, the woman is not presented as a villainess or a temptress; the threat she represents is that of Love, doomed because it is already dead. Yet, even within that "doom," they remain together. The man finishes his tale, wondering "But I, what do I here?" (106). He is all that remains of a shattered self, bereft of purpose or direction.

Searching characterizes many of the figures of the City, whether searching for meaning, for hope, or for comfort. In Canto XVIII, Thomson's speaker comes into contact with a man, crawling on all fours, searching for the lost golden thread leading him back to his past, and out of the City. He desires to go back to his time of innocence as an infant "Without a past, love-cherished and secure" (63). His perpetual search echoes the search for hope in Canto VI, and his search is likewise fruitless. Significantly, however, Thomson's

narrator is not searching—he is wandering, observing, and musing, but he is not searching. Critics have noted the relatively nominal narrative role played by Thomson's speaker, in favor of the utterances of the City's other inhabitants. Dafydd Moore states: "The comprehensive representation of the city and its inhabitants involves the narrator becoming an empty signifier, lacking essential identity, an acted upon witness not a privileged observer" (123). It is true that the speaker's identity is never specified: in Canto XII, when each figure gives the nature of his background before waking "from daydreams to this real night," Thomson's speaker states only "I entered also, having given mine" (56). This functions purposefully to distance Thomson from his speaker without being separated utterly, giving the speaker a sense of indeterminacy reminiscent of the City itself. Also, arguably, the speaker serves two distinct functions throughout the poem—one as narrator in the narrative scenes, and one as speaker in the reflective passages. The speaker both relates the City (and observed experiences of the City) and explains the city to the reader, giving the speaker the important function of guide for the reader. He is simultaneously Dante exploring Hell, and a pseudo-Virgil—importantly, a poet—guiding the reader through the City. The speaker fulfills the promise of the proem: understanding and fellowship.

The final section of Thomson's poem brings the reader to the important figure of Melancholia—one Peter C. Noel-Bentley credits with "[resolving] every major theme" of the poem (193). As the culminating image of the poem, she does, indeed, present a number of representative characteristics of the City, proving a significant figure for Thomson poetically as well. Her description is inspired from the engraving *Melancholia I* by Albrecht Dürer, which Thomson alludes to within the poem itself: "all men know/ That solemn sketch the pure sad artist wrought/ Three centuries and threescore years ago/ With phantasies of his

peculiar thought" (15-7). Though inspired from art, Thomson aligns his own interpretational interests in characterizing her. She is (as shown in the engraving) a winged woman, seated with a book in her lap, leaning on her hand, surrounded by scientific instruments. Thomson characterizes her as such: "Baffled and beaten back she works on still,/ Weary and sick of soul she works the more,/ Sustained by her indomitable will" (50-3). Melancholia is indefatigable, though burdened, and such sentiments might serve as an inspiration for its citizens. William Sharpe, for one, reads this image of Melancholia as a message offered by the poem as "a way of dealing and living with the urban despair to which it at first appears to succumb" as "stoic stern endurers, like the wide-eyed Melancholia" (66, 84). To some degree, this claim is plausible, but complicated by the implicit negation afforded in the following lines:

> A sense more tragic than defeat or blight. . . .
>
> Dawns glooming in her tenebrous regard:
>
> To sense that every struggle brings defeat. . . .
>
> That none can pierce the vast black veil uncertain
>
> Because there is no light beyond the curtain
>
> That all is vanity and nothingness. (59-70)

Melancholia endures, but she endures for no reason or purpose, just as the citizens and the City itself. The lasting message afforded by Melancholia is "confirmation of the old despair" (84). Though admirable in her indomitable will, Melancholia is no God—she can give no meaning to the lives of her citizens, only the assurance of what they already know to be true.

The significance of Melancholia, like the significance of the cathedral scene, is that both provide some potential modicum of solace, but neither is altogether the "solution" to

enduring life in the city. Thomson's complex and moving poem offers "truth," but it is a specialized truth only understandable by those who share its multifaceted and often fractured vision. It is a poem of doubles, of indeterminacy, of frustrated apprehension of perceived "reality." The "reality" of the City itself is complicated by the "reality" of the poem, as the pessimistic confirmation of estrangement and despair is modified by the proem's message that one does not suffer alone. Though individual experiences and personal realities are subjective, even largely constructed, the whole of the City is held together by the people within it. The City itself may function as an entity, but it is only a "city" if it is occupied. The City is a source of community, as is *The City*. Though far from an optimistic poem, it is a step removed from Arnold's "We mortal millions live alone," if only to be "We mortal millions *all* live alone, and you are not the only one who feels this way." Thomson's message, however, is the only source of power in this poem: it is the power of its utterances and the precision of its images that make this poem truly and intensely striking. It is valuable not only as an artifact, but as a poem—an artistic encapsulation of despair and longing, offering understanding for communities of readers, and the opportunity for a fellow wanderer to say: "I, who had never seen your face, / Perhaps I knew you best."

The lasting value of *The City of Dreadful Night* rests in the fact that Thomson's poem has endured and that its purpose is still fulfilled—his offer of poetic community applies today. Any who have despaired, any who have lamented their atheism, their unfulfilled search for meaning, may find comfort that a fellow wanderer once knew and understood their position. *The City* is powerful in the same way that *In Memoriam* affects those who have lost a loved one. In terms of critical value, however, this poem deserves attention, not simply because Thomson remains a marginalized poet, but because he participates in the formation

of a “minor literature”—one which rejects the “major” demands of popular culture or canonicity and establishes another sensibility. Much work has been done in recent decades in terms of expanding the canon, particularly in the case of recovering women writers, and the “minor” figure itself can benefit from such recovery. Thomson may be included in discussion of urban poets, but also in examinations of a “minor” poetic tradition—one dissident to contemporary trends and the status quo. “Minor” does not mean “second rate,” but rather a separate community.

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ABSTRACT

ESTRANGMENT AND COMMUNITY IN JAMES "B.V." THOMSON'S *THE CITY OF DREADFUL NIGHT*

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This thesis focuses on the long poem *The City of Dreadful Night* by James "B.V." Thomson and examines the ways in which Thomson fosters community out of estrangement through the vehicle of poetry. Thomson's background, critical writings, and other poems are examined in addition to *The City* to obtain a sense of his personal (and poetic) philosophy. This examination is coupled with an exploration of Victorian representations of "the city" and the experience of the "modern" world to illustrate the ways in which Thomson's important poem is not altogether estranged from contemporary themes in poetic discourse. The culmination of the thesis is a close reading of the poem itself, which, though full of depictions of isolation and despair, offers a comfort: readers who share in the sentiments of the poem are united in their suffering; a community of the estranged, joined by poetry.