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‘The blissful change’: Thomson’s Calvinist Scepticism in the Face of the Nineteenth Century Radical Progressive Agenda

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This article traces the manifold satirical and poetic manifestations of James B.V. Thomson’s questioning and sceptical attitude towards the progressivist agenda of the Victorian Britain. It presents both Thomson’s proudly blazoned ‘healthy scepticism’ from his biting satirical works, and the dark, contradictory spirit of Thomson’s most accomplished poetical work, *The City of Dreadful Night*, as two faces of the same moral attitude.

I think the only thing that’s strange
Is our illusion as to change.

James Thomson, *Vane’s Story*

INTRODUCTION

The Victorian Age in Britain witnessed some of the greatest social, economic, and political changes in a period of time unprecedentedly short. What was perhaps especially new about the cultural context in which these changes were taking place was the extreme self-awareness and preoccupation among the

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contemporary commentators for the direction into which the fast-developing world was heading. Among these commentators, the insightful position of James B.V. Thomson, a Scottish poet, essayist, and satirist, merits special attention. As I will argue, Thomson's deep-running scepticism embedded in the Calvinist distrust of the worldly order challenged some of the most progress-driven agendas of the nineteenth century.

THOMSON'S 'HEALTHY SCEPTICISM'

Pointedly drawing from Jonathan Swift, the Augustan master of the genre and 'the greatest of our divines'[1], James Thomson announces his modest proposal for a radical social change in one of his sharpest and most poignant satires. The reform expounded in *Proposals for the Speedy Extinction of Evil and Misery*, which promises to swiftly and effectively rid the humanity of all 'evil and misery, both as suffering and vice' and to ensure that 'everybody will be good and happy everywhere evermore'[2] is, in itself, very straightforward. It consists, according to the author, simply of a 'universal change to perfection of *Nature* and human nature.'[3] To this purpose the writer propounds the foundation of the Universal Perfection Company Unlimited, the leading board of which will include 'all honest Christians and genuine Christian Societies (supposing any such still extant) (...), The National Secular Society, with all Atheists, Theists, Deists, Pantheists, Pottheists, Necessitarians, Utilitarians, Positivists, etc., etc, (...) The International League of Peace and Liberty, together with all other Peace Societies and Liberal Associations, Socialists, Communists, Internationalists (...), The various Temperance Societies (...), The Vegetarians (...) all sincere politicians, radicals, republicans, conservatives, royalists' and, finally, all the 'worshipers of Mumbo Jumbo'[4] willing to contribute to the

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[1] James Thomson, *Proposals for the Speedy Extinction of Evil and Misery*, in *Essays and Phantasies*, (London: Reeves and Turner, 1881) pp. 51-103, p. 56

[2] Ibid., p. 55

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., pp.76-80

perfection creed. The author has no doubt that all the above mentioned will be interested in joining the Perfection Company, for 'every one who has faith that his own doctrine is true and his own plan of life good, must have faith that the better and wiser men become, the more will they believe his doctrine and adopt his plan of life'[5]. Once the leading board is established, The Universal Perfection Company will then proceed to convert the rest of the society and – deeply concerned for their ultimate good – eliminate the resistant elements, thereby accomplishing its first aim, the perfection of humanity.

By means of fulfilling his second proposal, the perfection of Nature, the writer sets out a clever plan for an emotional blackmail: should its demands remain unfulfilled, humanity is to menace Nature with its *decapitation* (man being rightly recognised as the *head* of Nature) by an act of universal suicide[6]. In the face of such a 'dreadful *ultimatum*'[7], The Perfection Company can rest assured that Nature will humbly yield to its demands for improvement (some of which include ridding the earth of the more *ugly*-looking insects; or abolishing sex distinctions – by either unsexing or 'androgynising' the human race – in the name of, on the one hand, absolute equality of man and woman, and, on the other, of putting an end to the indecency that may arise out of this morally doubtful subject).

Although with the Universal Perfection Company Thomson gave voice to a truly universal symbol of the perils of entrusting one's lot into the hands of a self-appointed committee of 'perfect' radical well-wishers and reformers, the vigour and sharpness of Thomson's *Proposals* (which would have been apparent

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[5] Ibid., p. 80

[6] The writer hastens to add that 'lest the fascinated reader should make away with himself hurriedly and for inappropriate reasons (while appropriate ones too surely abound), as Cleombrotus in a fine frenzy threw himself to death in the sea after studying the *Phœdo*, I call special attention to the fact that it is only our *universal* suicide which would prove a panacea for all the ills our flesh is heir to; individual suicides can do little or no good, save to the individuals themselves.' (p. 90-91)

[7] Ibid., p.92

to the nineteenth century readers) surges from a bitter reflection on the late nineteenth century political and social realities. As a regular contributor to the *National Reformer*, a liberal weekly paper which announced itself as 'the only British journal that advocates atheism'[8], and set as its target to expose the falsity of all religious systems, Thomson was at the centre of fervent political, religious and moral debates. The scope of such debates ranged from Thomson's own contributions ridiculing the notion that Swinburne's poetry is not decent enough to be read to young ladies in drawing rooms[9], to uncountable attacks on the Bible under the catchy headings: 'Was Moses Bacchus?' and 'What Has the Bible Done for Women?'[10]. Launched in 1860 by Thomson's close friend Charles Bradlaugh[11] (whose much-telling pseudonym at the time was 'Iconoclast') under his Reformer Newspaper Company Limited, the paper campaigned, on a political level, for a parliamentary reform in alliance with the Reform League (former Universal League for the Material Elevation of the Industrious Classes) In broader social terms (with Bradlaugh as the president of the National Secular Society) it aimed at promoting progress, improvement and happiness of the society by abolishing 'childish and absurd superstitions'[12] (i.e. religious 'superstitions').

That the *National Reformer* agreed to publish Thomson's *Proposals for the Speedy Extinction of Evil and Misery*, a bitterly sarcastic comment on the newspaper's own progressive, secularist, and utilitarian agenda, can perhaps be attributed to the special privileges Thomson enjoyed as Bradlaugh's intimate friend. In this capacity, he was even initially allowed to polemicise in print with the atheistic spirit of the newspaper from an openly religious stance.[13]

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[8] Cf. Tom Leonard, *Places of the Mind*, (London: Johnatan Cape, 1993), p. 66

[9] Ibid., p. 133

[10] Cf. William David Schaefer, 'The Two Cities of Dreadful Night', *PMLA*, 77:5 (Dec., 1962), 609-616, p. 52

[11] Bradlaugh remained the editor of the paper until 1863.

[12] Leonard, p. 128

[13] Thomson's first publication was a refutation of Bradlaugh's article on P. B. Shelley in which Bradlaugh claimed that Shelley was an atheist. Thomson answered with a deeply

Despite this friendship, and his close collaboration with the *National Reformer* throughout the years, though, Thomson remained deeply sceptical of the proposals of social change expounded by the National Reform League and the National Secular Society (neither of which he joined), and never failed to openly question their implicit linear reading of human history as a glorious 'march' towards progress. This 'healthy scepticism'[14], as Thomson proudly blazoned his own challenging stance deeply rooted in the Calvinist distrust of the worldly order, refuted easy answers to the moral and social dilemmas of his times. It was to remain the essential tenet in Thomson's worldview, a tenet which he was not prepared to discard even after his self-acknowledged 'conversion' from Calvinism to atheism[15]. That Thomson never missed a chance to argue against the progressivists is best attested by the fact that he even rebuked his great master, Shelley (whose middle name he adopted as the first letter of his literary pseudonym, B.V., as a tribute to his spiritual guide) for his misled faith in the perfectibility of human nature.

Thomson wittily juxtaposed such naive optimistic assumptions of human progress with his own vision of historical development: a perpetual return of humanity to its original point of departure. In another skilful satire, *A National*

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religious reading of Shelley's poetry, albeit he argued that Shelley's religious outlook was closer in spirit to Greek pantheism, rather than Christianity.

[14] James Thomson, *Bumble, Bumbledom, Bumbleism*, in *Essays and Phantasies* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1881) pp. 104-123, p. 117

[15] Schaefer draws our attention to the fact that Thomson's 'conversion' from Calvinism to atheism occurred soon after the publication of a mocking letter written by one of his readers as an answer to Thomson's passionate religious article (a refutation of a progressive vision of history based on Darwin's theory). In his article Thomson demonstrated his total lack of knowledge of Darwin. The impact that the ridiculing letter had on Thomson can be attested by the fact that he refrained from publishing in the following two years (and indeed never published a manifestly religious article or poem afterwards). So much Schaefer. Without overestimating the incident, it seems fair to surmise that it left some mark on Thomson's subsequent writing. Thomson decided he would not be mocked again.

Reformer in the Dog-Days, the author playfully refuses to write his contribution to Bradlaugh's newspaper and, by doing so, to engage in the metaphorical march of progress that he has been witnessing. He argues provocatively that by staying behind the 'improvement team' he is in fact only patiently awaiting their imminent return: 'Extremes always meet; and the farther I linger behind them, the nearer are they to overtaking me.'[16] Given the round shape of the globe, he rests calmly convinced that 'our separation is but for a brief period'[17], and that before long, the National Reformers will re-emerge behind him, even as just now he can see them disappearing in the distance.

Thomson continues to challenge the progressive schemes of his times with a satirical inversion of the Victorian doctrine of work[18] (which presented work as means of moral improvement) in yet another contribution to the *National Reformer* entitled *Indolence: A Moral Essay*. The satire bears a humorous warning to the potentially over-eager work activists: 'Calculated for a temperature of about 90° in the shade'. Setting out to praise the 'inestimable value of (...) inertia or supreme repose'[19], the essay begins with a 'humble enquiry' into the moral justification for the necessity of work, claiming provocatively that, as a matter of fact, 'in our England of to-day there is more peril to be feared from overwork than from underwork'[20]. It aptly finishes with a paean in praise of the writer's only true love, Indolence, which, however, remains unfinished on account of the author's extreme laziness.

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[16] James Thomson, *A National Reformer in the Dog-Days*, in *Essays and Phantasies*, pp. 166-176, p. 174

[17] Ibid., p. 175

[18] Thomson is particularly referring to Thomas Carlyle's 'gospel of work', first presented in Carlyle's novel *Sartor Resartus* (1833-34). Thomson was greatly influenced by Carlyle, even though here he is ostensibly parodying Carlyle's thought.

[19] James Thomson, *Indolence: A Moral* Essay, pp. 142-165, p. 150

[20] Ibid., p. 161

In between this flirtatious monologue, only cut short by the Indolence's deep kiss which puts an end to the writer's already too industrious essay by stealing his breath (or should it read 'yawn') away, Thomson manages to insert an elaborate treatise on the typology of the 'suitors of Indolence'. Most attention is devoted to the last type, the idlers by faith, further subdivided into the categories of pessimists and optimists. This last division, though, is emphatically described as inconsequential, the difference between the pessimistic and the optimistic idlers (both of whom choose wise indifference in the face of the incalculable mysteries of the universe, depositing their entire faith in Providence) being merely a question of an *intellectual nuance*, rather than of *essence*. Both worldviews evidently stem from the same spiritual root. This is significant in the light of the heavily religious language associated with the optimist group. On the other hand, the pessimist creed draws its dark tenets from an emphatically philosophical stoic stance. In stressing the similarities between both groups, Thomson suggests that the 'indolent' moral attitude runs deeper than religious and philosophic positions:

> *Let me note that the faith which is the root of indolence in this class may be of despair instead of assurance, of pessimism instead of optimism. It may be a profound and immutable belief in the absolute tyranny of blind Fate, in the utter vanity of all efforts to assuage or divert the operation of the inexorable laws of the universe. The difference, however, as regards our subject, is intellectual merely, not essential. The spiritual root is the same in both, though the one bears blossoms of mystical ravishment under the heaven of Providence, and the other dark leaves of oracular Stoicism under the iron vault of Destiny. Extremes meet; always, extremes meet.*[21]

The 'idlers by faith' are clearly yet another ironic name for Thomson's 'natural sceptics' who remain unimpressed by the Victorian urge to progress. By focusing on the discord between the progressivists and the followers of the

[21] Ibid., p. 159

creed of 'indolence', Thomson was perhaps capturing the late nineteenth century attitudes on a more profound level than that reached by many other contemporary commentators. As we shall see, the open warfare staged between those who now would be regarded as close-to-fanatical religious preachers, and their no less fervent opponents was underscored by some more fundamental assumptions about human moral development, to a large extent shared by both groups.

Thomson knew the former from his earliest memories. His mother was a zealous follower of Edward Irving's proselytising preaching. She kept his depictions in central places of the house, and followed the preacher after his dismissal from the Kirk of Scotland up to the establishment of the new sect, Holy Apostolical Congregation, commonly known as the Irvingites. Irving preached a return to the first ages of Christianity in a very literal sense. This journey back in time was, according to him, made manifest in the tangible presence of the Holy Spirit among the faithful, who experienced the miraculous 'gift of tongues' (rendered in frequent outbursts of what to an uninitiated sounded like 'unintelligible *gibberish*'[22]). Above all, Irving urged his followers to prepare for the imminent second coming of Christ and the foundation of New Jerusalem on earth. In his thorough study of James Thomson and his times, Tom Leonard[23] describes a rather comical situation in May 1832 when Irving's congregation moved to a building which at the time served as the meeting quarters for the followers of the radical social reformer Robert Owen. Leonard quotes Thomas Carlyle's incredulous remarks upon learning the news: 'Owen the Atheist, and Irving the Gift-of-Tongue-ist, time about: it is a mad world'[24]. However, as Leonard notices, the radical doctrines expounded by both leaders, were perhaps not too far from each other, in as much as they both preached the imminent end of the old ways and the establishment of the new ideal communities of followers: in Irving's case – of God's New Jerusalem, in

[22] Cf. Leonard, p. 7
[23] Leonard, *Places of the Mind*, (London: Johnatan Cape, 1993)
[24] Ibid., p. 45

the case of Owen – of new, perfect, economically self-contained communities (to give an example, Owen's doctrines led to the establishment of New Lanark in Scotland).

Such gross miscalculations of historical processes, envisioning the Promised Land of New Ideas, a utopian 'Canaan flowing with milk and honey', Thomson's 'healthy scepticism' could regard in no other way than as a 'good joke'.[25] He argued instead, at first from a religious stance, the inscrutability of God's grand plan. All attempts to explain or rationalise God's ways are seen as presumptuous and liable to God's just punishment. In his apocalyptic *Doom of a City*, the author charges the haughty patroness of the doomed metropolis (bearing a somewhat disturbing similitude to Queen Victoria) with the sin of pride: 'Thy voice throughout the world, complacently serene,/ Proclaims (...) I am rich and strong, I am wise and good and free;/ Thronèd above them, Empress sole of the earth-surrounding Sea!'[26]. The author humbly leaves her fate in God's hands, but the reader is sternly warned by the preceding ominous image of a proud Sage 'who handed on the torch of Wisdom, bright/ With growing splendour, 'thwart the billowy night/ Of shoreless Ignorance'[27] before being turned into stone by God's hand (with the liberal theses of his own composition, a symbol of his rationalist arrogance, now lying at his feet).

Reasoning from an ostensibly atheistic position, Thomson gives expression to the same hard-line scepticism in an essay published in the *Secularist* in 1876 under the title *On the Worth of Metaphysical Systems*. In it he presents all attempts at ordering and structuring the universe under man's flawed laws as laughable in the eyes of the good-natured mother Nature (who, nonetheless, fittingly sends madness on those who persist in vain attempts at confining her in the narrow strait-jackets of their ludicrous theories):

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[25] Thomson, *Bumble, Bumbledom, Bumbleism*, p. 114

[26] James Thomson, *The Doom of a City*, in *A Voice from the Nile and Other Poems* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1884), pp. 92-159, Part III: 'The Return', Section IV, p. 153

[27] Ibid., Part One: 'The City', Section XVII, p. 111

> *It is strange that we have to appeal to history to show the worthlessness of absolute systems. How can man, an infinitesimal atom in the infinite universe, embrace that infinity? How can man, whose life is an inappreciable moment in eternal time, comprehend the laws of that eternity?*[28]

The pattern of argument in the essay traces closely the reasoning of *The Doom of the City*, albeit the punishment sent by God on the presumptuous is here substituted by a no less terrible sentence of Mother Nature. As always in Thomson's worldview, 'extremes meet' and the ostensibly Godless world ruled by Nature proves to feature many religious characteristics.

DEVIL IN *THE CITY OF DREADFUL NIGHT*

The City of Dreadful Night, Thomson's best-known and most-accomplished poem, strikes the reader with its gloomy vision of a nightmarish city whose ghost-like inhabitants are imprisoned within its bounds with no hope of improving their situation. The ironic joke spelled in the poem's dark humour is that they are even refused the admittance to the hell (last means of escaping from the City), as the hell guard chooses to read literally Dante's motto – 'Leave hope behind, all ye who enter here' – and requests a payment in hope currency from each entrant. Perhaps the main problem with *The City of Dreadful Night* is that, despite such signposts of the poem's slippery, hellish surface, it has often been read too literally. When the devilish undertones permeating the body of the poem are ignored, *The City of Dreadful Night* temptingly presents itself as a Godless poem advocating atheism[29], as has been argued, and lacking in any

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[28] James Thomson, *On the Worth of Metaphysical Systems*, in *Essays and Phantasies*, pp. 296-302, p. 300

[29] Compare: ed. Simon Reynolds, *Novalis and the Poets of Pessimism*, (Norwich: Michael Russel, 1995), p. 58

ethical feeling[30]. Such interpretations, as I will show, are guilty of relinquishing Thomson's scepticism and thereby they implicitly fall into the devil's trap set for those too eager to convert to the poem's explicit anti-creed. With *The City of Dreadful Night* Thomson also reveals the dark pessimistic side of his 'healthy scepticism', which nonetheless, according to Thomson's own diagnosis, stems from the same root as his optimist take on the idea. Despite the apparent sharp contrast in tone, they both share Thomson's deep Calvinist distrust of the worldly order as the domain of the devil's activity.

The labyrinthine structure of *The City of Dreadful Night* based on the pattern of repetition and manifold mirror reflections (the poem experiments with various rhyming patterns, and its twenty-one sections folded in the middle reveal a close fit between the first and last three sections) warns its readers against any attempts at straightforward reading of its meaning. The structure mimics the unfathomable substance of the City, which is suspended between dream (or nightmare) and reality. Yet, Thomson cautions against reading the City only as a nightmare, by pointing to the oneiric quality of the reality itself:

> *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.*[31]

Thus, Thomson's *City* parallels the a-logical fragmented nature of the reality, over which man superimposes his shabby constructs thereby locking the endless process of changes under the appearance of order. The reality, though,

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[30] David Daiches, *Some Late Victorian Attitudes*, (London: Andre Deutsch, 1969), p. 49
[31] James (B. V.) Thomson, *The City of Dreadful Night*, in *'The City of Dreadful Night' and Other Poems*, (Glasgow: Kennedy & Boyd, 2008), Section I, stanza 3, p. 5

ultimately refutes all such attempts at straight-jacketing its mysterious processes. Despite the great number of causeways, piers and 'noble bridges' built as connection points between the scattered parts of the City, it remains a fragmented, labyrinthine space, and a frail human emanation mocked by such natural wonders as 'trackless wilderness', 'savannahs', and 'savage woods' which surround it threateningly (I, 5:4-5). The poem is almost too emphatic in its fragmented and constructed texture, with its twenty-one sections arranged according to the pattern of recurring (yet each time altered – according to the logic of the nightmare) themes, which implicitly encourage the reader to shuffle and rearrange them into new patterns.[32]

The poem's slippery oneiric structure mirrors the thematic tangle which presents no easy key to its readers. Although there is temptation to regard it as a mere parody of Thomson's earlier poem, *The Doom of a City*, what *The City of Dreadful Night* features instead is a complex and unclear 'nightmare' on the themes and images drawn from *The Doom of a City*. These themes are endlessly repeated, altered, and inversed, in an on-going process of a mad devilish construction. One striking difference between the two poems is the removal of God from *The City of Dreadful Night*, whose governing Voice in *The Doom of a City* (capitalised all along) announces His will, thereby 'tuning' the whole universe into one perfectly harmonious tone. However, assuming that God is absent from *The City of Dreadful Night*, the same cannot be said of the devil. The first sign of the devilish presence, is the resounding multi-voicedness of the poem, which turns the Godly harmony of Thomson's original vision into a true pandemonium of struggling sounds and 'strange voices' (among which, as we will see, the hissing tongue of a Snake can be indistinctly heard – in sharp contrast with God's clear voice in *The Doom*).

[32] Shaefer for example argues for a separate reading of the parts of the poem written in 1870 and those written in 1873, each of which, according to him, constitutes a thematic unity.

Throughout the poem, the Devil makes no appearance *in persona* and yet the poem resonates with devilish undertones. The three crucial moments permeated with his presence are all linked by the common Northern motive, alluding to the depiction of Satan in the *Old Testament* as the lord of the North.[33] We are first informed of the Devil's presence in the City by a solitary preacher-like figure, who describes a 'hillock burning with a brazen glare' on which the preparations for Devil's feast are in progress: 'A Sabbath of the Serpents, heaped pell-mell/ For Devil's roll-call and some *fête* of Hell' (IV, 4:6-7). The preparations for the Devil's celebration rather slyly lead to the anti-homily delivered in an 'anti-church' in the Section XIV of the poem. In it in a dark figure with 'intolerable' burning eyes (not a priest) preaches to the gathered congregation from the 'unillumed' pulpit an anti-homily which disconcertingly oscillates between the tones of elevated joy and ultimate despair. Presenting himself sympathetic to the sufferings of his congregation and eager to ease their pain, the preacher begins in an apocalyptic language of utter despair. He presents the inhabitants of the City as those doomed to suffer without respite within the realm of the 'unholy night', only to shift suddenly to the elevated tones of joy as he proposes to the faithful the ultimate solution to their sufferings which will guarantee their undisturbed peace – suicide:

> *And now at last authentic word I bring,*
> *Witnessed by every dead and living thing;*
> *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. (...)*
> *But if you would not this poor life fulfil,*
> *Lo, you are free to end it when you will.*
> (XIV, 6:1-6 and 11:4-5)

[33] Cf. 'I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north.' (Is, 15:13)

If the passage bears dark reminiscences of Thomson's *Proposals for the Speedy Extinction of Evil and Misery*, the devilish message is further confirmed by another Devil-inspired voice coming from the congregation. The 'vehement voice' pointedly coming from 'the northern aisle' reinstates the preacher's terrible vision while pretending to rage against it: 'Our life's a cheat, our death a black abyss:/ Hush and be mute envisaging despair' (XVI, 10:3-4).

The extortion is taken literally by the last 'mute' preacher of *The City of Dreadful Night*, the winged Melancolia, sombre Patroness and Queen of the city, who oversees her demesne from a 'northern crest' (XXI, 1:1). Thus, from the northern hillock, through the northern aisle to the northern crest, Devil's voice deliberately mistunes the messages of the three preachers in the poem, reminding the reader of Thomson's strong mistrust in preaching techniques (in Thomson's firm statement: 'I don't believe the world capable of being benefited much by having any opinion whatever preacher to it'[34]). In an appropriate conclusion to the poem, the last section re-instates this scepticism by declaring that 'all the oracles are dumb or cheat'[35]. Thomson is here engaging with Milton's nativity 'Hymn' in praise of the 'peaceful night' of Christ's birth, which brings a temporary silent pause to the world's 'hideous hum': The oracles are dumb,/ No voice or hideous hum/ Runs through the arched roof in words deceiving'[36]. Also, the Nature's guilty speeches are hushed momentarily by the appearance of the Saviour.

Unlike in Milton's 'Hymn', *The City of Dreadful Night* offers to the reader no silent pause in the 'hideous hum' of its multi-voicedness. The apparent silence of the City's Queen, Melancolia, is filled in by the narrator with a hum of his own bustling thoughts. Overlooking the City from her 'high throne in the

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[34] Cf. Leonard, p. 163

[35] Thomson is reversing a passage from Milton's nativity 'Hymn': The oracles are dumb,/ No voice or hideous hum/ Runs through the arched roof in words deceiving'

[36] John Milton, 'The Hymn', in 'Read Print, Online Books' (http://www.readprint.com/work-1241/The-Hymn-John-Milton), Accessed: 11/02/2010

north' (XXI, 11:1), Melancolia, the 'superhuman' statue of a winged-woman, is not only a clear depiction of Dürer's famous engraving of the same title, but also mimics the Queen from *The Doom of a City*. Melancolia's 'old despair' in the face of the 'dreadful mysteries of Time' is, thus, a Devil-inspired wrong answer to the intractable questions of the universe. Her 'heroic' engagement in a fight with Time (perhaps an explicit answer to the 'Devil's roll-call') is implicitly arrogant and doomed to failure. Time itself emerges as a venomous Snake (another devilish presence) incessantly circulating the Earth 'distilling poison at each painful motion,/And seems condemned to circle ever thus' (XIII, 3:6-7). In this vision, the linear movement of Time is substituted by the idea of constant return, and, in as much as Time never keeps still and continues spraying venom with its every twist, no direct return to the past is possible: 'The thing which has been, never is again'[37] (XVIII, 12:6). Thus, the endeavours to return to the Eden state of innocence of another devilish snake-like hissing figure in section XVIII, who threatens the narrator with his 'poisoned blade', are doomed to failure, because the past never returns under the same but always under altered/distorted forms.

In this world of deceit, the narrator revels in the role of an active participant in the poem's slippery multi-voicedness, presenting his role in the Proem as that of a preacher of a new anti-homily reserved only for the initiate, his Sad Fraternity. In consonance with the Devil's dreadful 'roll-call', he advocates a military vision of life, emphatically rendered in Scots, whereby man's true purpose in life is to 'dree his weird' (V, 4:4) (the phrase, which can be rendered

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[37] Although, compare also George M. Harper's notes on this snake-like figure, an image which Thomson derives from Blake's famous depiction of the Old Testament Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar. Harper points out that Thomson appears to both recognise *and* deny the value of the mystical experience of return to the state of innocence and child's simplicity untainted by venom. On the one hand, by presenting the mystic as a degraded and despicable figure, Thomson can be argued to be rather explicitly ridiculing his quest; on the other, it also seems that Thomson's own sympathy and even longings are with the mystic looking for his way back 'to Eden innocence in Eden's clime'.

as 'to endure one's fate', originally signified 'to perform military service' – from Gothic *driugan*[38]).

The Devil's presence in a rather fitting way haunts Thomson's poem, in the light of Thomson's own life-long struggle with the concept of Christian devil, whom he regarded as an offence to human intelligence, and against whom he argued fiercely.[39] In the dreadful nightmare of *The City*, the Devil returns, permeating the world of Thomson's creation, sowing the venomous seeds of doubt and deception in his wake, and revealing the mystic's scheme of return to the past, the 'blissful change' spelt in his onomatopoeic hissing tongue, as both a deceptive and an impossible dream. Thus, the Victorian dreams of moral progress undergo a Calvinist check. Judged as presumptuous, they are 'justly' turned into a ghastly nightmare in which the expected new Jerusalem upon earth becomes the 'unholy' City of never-ending night in which the Devil revels uncurbed.

CONCLUSION

On the nineteenth century cultural stage James Thomson reveals himself as profoundly engaged in the social and moral debate of his times, while he remains deeply sceptical of the predominant progressivist propaganda based on linear visions of history propagated by the radical political, religious, and social groups in the Victorian Britain. Both his biting satires and his poetical works

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[38] Oxford University Press Online Dictionary (http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50069763?query_type=word&queryword=DREE&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&result_place=3&search_id=cDXR-9a9RgU-3811&hilite=50069763) Accessed: 05/02/2010

[39] Cf. For example Thomson's *Vane's Story* (London: Reves and Turner, 1881), and his satire *The Devil in the Church of England*, in James Thomson, *Satires and Profanities* (London: Progressive Publishing Company, 1884)

challenge such simplistic visions of time-flow and the concept of humanity's development seen as a competitive race, by offering an alternative oneiric-like vision of history, in which the same motifs are doomed to endless return, yet always under altered shapes (not dissimilarly from a perpetual reoccurrence of the same patterns in a reverting nightmare). In this dangerous landscape, any utopian vision of human perfection is seen as a demonic call to a 'blissful change', tempting the readers with its hissing tongue.

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